



PARKER PALMER ON SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

—INTERVIEWED BY MICHAEL LIEBERMAN CAREY,
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The following transcript is excerpted from an interview with Parker Palmer conducted for the Gonzaga University online Servant-Leadership Mentor Gallery. Questions have been removed for freedom of content flow.

Parker Palmer:

What really fascinates me is how visible our brokenness is. A rational person would think nobody needs to be led toward seeing it or understanding it; it's all around us all the time. It's on the nightly news and it's in the morning newspaper and it's in the self-reports that people give of their own lives. So I think we're talking about a network of mythologies or illusions that we maintain in order to try to convince ourselves that things aren't as bad as they seem, maybe in the manner of a dysfunctional family which keeps pretending that everything is fine here even though Dad is drinking way too much and hitting people way too often. The way that leaders can help people see their brokenness, I think, is by acknowledging their own. I don't think we are willing to trust anybody on the issue of how broken we are until that person has acknowledged his or her own brokenness. And I understand that that's a tricky business for leaders. There's a strange dance that goes on between leaders and followers where followers want leaders to pretend that they're totally together and totally in charge, and then they resent them for acting as if they were superhuman, making all the rest of us feel like dorks. So we do this sort of strange dance in which we project on leaders our need for the very thing nobody has, we don't have, so we need somebody to pretend that they have it. But I don't think ultimately that



that's a dance that people really want to do. The problem is that a leader has to take his or her community, or his or her organization, or his or her group, through a rough passage, through whitewater, to get to the other side, to get to the place where we can all acknowledge that God ain't finished with any of us yet, that we're all broken, we are all works in progress, and we need each other to help put the pieces together, to help make something better happen.

I mean I think for example concretely about congregations, in say the Protestant or the Catholic community, which are the ones that I'm most familiar with. There's this tremendous need in most congregations on the part of laypeople to have the priest or the pastor be a godly person in some illusory way, and a lot of priests and pastors feel the falsehood of that. They know themselves well enough to know that they're sinners, that they're broken, that they're struggling along with everybody else. Moving a congregation from that place of shared illusions to a place of reality, where people feel safer because the leader has acknowledged his or her brokenness, is a struggling period of time. Sometimes the people rise up and say, "Well you may be broken, but that means we should get a new leader," and that's a price the leaders sometimes have to pay. This question, like a lot of questions, the question comes down, if I'm the leader in question, it comes down to a matter of how much I value my own integrity. And I have to say for myself, at age 65, that I no longer have much interest in putting on a show for anybody, for a very simple reason: I've understood something about my own mortality in recent years, in a way I wasn't capable of understanding it ten or twenty or thirty years ago. And I've realized that at the end of the road I'm not going to be asking, "Did I put on a good enough show?" I'm going to be asking, "How real was I? Was I really there? Did I really do that? Did I live my real life?", and I find that a very salutary question, a very bracing question. In any given moment when I'm tempted to pull my punches or hedge the truth or slip away from something difficult that I feel called to, it's helpful to ask, "How am I going to feel about this moment as I'm drawing my last breath?" And I'm pretty clear at this point



that I'm not going to be asking, "How much did they like me?", but I'm going to be asking, "Did I live it by my own best lights?" I think that's why St. Benedict, in his rule for monks, says, "Daily keep your death before your eyes"—not because it's a counsel of morbidness, but because it's very life-giving advice. If you daily keep your death before your eyes, you're likely to live more fully in the moment than you would otherwise.

That's a very interesting question, because if you put this, as I did in *The Courage to Teach*, in terms of academic disciplines it's fairly easy to see what the great thing is. I mean for the physicist it's the mystery of a subatomic particle, or for a literary scholar it's the mind of Dostoevsky or Melville; for a historian it's the dynamics of the Holocaust or the Third Reich—this profoundly important and engaging subject that draws the scholar's work forward. So what's the equivalent of that in organizational life? Well, two things come to mind. One is that *we* are the equivalent of that. I think it's absolutely critical that we see organizations as habitats for human beings. The workplace is where people spend an incredible number of hours of their lives. And in fact I've been doing a lot of thinking lately about how our workplaces do not treat the people in them as great things worthy of reverence and respect, just as a great scholar extends reverence and respect to whatever he or she is studying. I think in fact that the workplace has become the battlefield of many people's lives—the place where they feel violence done to their identity and integrity as they become cogs in a machine, or deployable and replaceable resources used simply on behalf of some organizational goal or ulterior motive, and that's not a nice way to be in the world. That's a way that murders the spirit—and actually, if you translate it in terms of organizational bottom line, gets worse work out of people than you would if you extended them respect at least, if not full reverence. So I think that step one is that a leader has to understand that the great thing in organizational life is the people who inhabit that organization, and that the organization, in order to serve its own mission, has to serve its people well. I think that good leaders in corporate life understand that, but not everyone by a long shot does.



But there's another thing that I'd like to say, for which I'll give a homey example. And that has to do with the products that organizations put out, or put on the market in the world of business. My dad was a businessman in Chicago for 55 years and he eventually became president and owner of the major Midwest distributor of Syracuse china, Reed and Barton silverware, and Fostoria glass for restaurants—usually pretty good restaurants in Chicago and other major Midwestern cities. So I grew up in a household where one of the great things was a piece of Syracuse china. My dad would hold one of these plates up to the light and he'd say, "This is fine china, because you can see your hand right through it. Now look at this piece of dime-store china. You can't see your hand. The light doesn't—it's not translucent." And we learned all of these marks of what good china and good silverware looked like, as opposed to their cheap imitations. And what I started to learn, slowly on, was that my dad had a reverence and a respect for quality in the product he was selling. And the reason he would not sell anything that in his judgement did not have quality, was that to do so would be to dishonor the people he was selling to. He wanted to sell a product that he believed in. And it's very interesting, as an academic person, as an intellectual, as a person who spent his whole adult life hanging around folks who have really very little appreciation for things—they have appreciation for ideas, or for art, or music—but they don't have appreciation for objects; in fact among intellectuals, objects, unless they're folk art or something, are often thought of somewhat pejoratively; they have a diminished view. It was very interesting to grow up with a man, my father, for whom I had immense respect, best man I ever knew, who had respect for a piece of china or a piece of silverware, and linked that in his mind to good service to a customer, to putting on the table at a restaurant something that would enhance the dining experience for everybody concerned. So I think one of the questions we have to ask ourselves in organizational life is, Are we selling, marketing, something of real quality, or is this a sham? Is this a shell game? Is this one of those products that, as my grandfather used to say, was made for buying and not for using? And if so, that crucial great



thing is then lacking at the center of organizational life. So I think it's people, and I think it's things as well. Great thing literally in that case.

The commonest image of what it means to hold these tensions is that I'm gonna have my heart broken. That happens sometimes. People's hearts end up in little shards on the floor and putting it back together is a long process of reconstruction which maybe never gets accomplished, I mean there's some people who die heartbroken. It came to me some years ago that there's this other way of imaging the breaking of the heart, which is not that it's going to end up in shards on the floor, but that it's being broken open to greater capacity. While that's just wordplay on one level, it's actually, for me, life experience; I mean, I believe in that difference. The whole question of how you turn it from one thing to the other, from the shards on the floor to this tight little thing called my heart being open to a larger capacity to hold more of the world's pain and more of the world's suffering. The whole question of how that happens is very mysterious, and I don't have a formula for it. I can tell you a couple things that have been important to me, I guess things that I've written about because they've been important to me. One is that I don't know anybody who has taken that journey towards—from the heartbreak to the being broken open—without having gone through profound personal struggles. In my case it was two really devastating bouts with clinical depression, where I just came to question everything about myself and my world, to the point that I wasn't sure that I could keep on living in this society, in this world. There are lots of people who know exactly what I mean, that kind of journey into personal devastation, where you really feel, "I'm not living anyway; why should I maintain the pretense?" I don't know how I exactly came through to the other side to kind of reclaim my life with new clarity and new gratefulness and new vitality. I can tell you that I found a good therapist. I can tell you that I spent a lot of time just in the dark. I can name some pieces of that journey, but *how* ultimately it came together I really don't know. I think there's a mystery about that that we shouldn't mess with.

But I also know that in the midst of that very solitary experience, it



was very important to have people, just a few people really, who knew how to stand at the border of that solitude, respecting the mystery, not trying either to invade it or to evade it, but simply to be present to me in a way that helped make the grace happen. It's really interesting in this culture. Most people either want to invade you—at that moment they want to say, “Oh, here's a fix. If you'd only read this book, if you'd only go on this diet, if you'd only take this herbal preparation or pop this pill from the pharmaceutical company, all will be well.” So they want to invade you with fixes, which kind of gets them off the hook; now they can walk away feeling, “Well, he may kill himself, but I did the best I could,” and they can kind of check you off their to-do list—or they want to evade you. They want to turn their eyes away and pretend this isn't happening. They never saw it and they don't want to look your way again. So it was pretty rare to find people who were willing to stand on the border of my solitude and honor it without fleeing from it—reminding me, just by the quality of their presence, that I was still part of the human community, and that there were people who understood without ever saying that they understood. I knew they understood, because the first sign that someone doesn't understand is when someone says, “I understand exactly what's happening to you.” That's the clearest clue that they don't. What fascinates me is that I think it's possible—I not only think, I *know* it's possible—to teach people that way of being together. We have this project now around the country, the Courage to Teach project or the teacher formation project, that has been going on now for ten years in thirty cities, which has gathered groups of public school educators—we're now working with physicians, lawyers, nonprofit leaders, and a mixed group of other folk, gather a group of twenty-five folks, take them on a two-year journey through eight retreats, and during that time teach them how to be together without either invading each other's souls or evading each other's struggles. It's doable. I've seen it happen to thousands of people. But it's a form of community that's very rare in our culture and that we need to get very intentional about if we want it to happen. When it does happen, the results are amazing, because it allows the person to draw deeply on their inner resources and to hear, or to understand,



what those inner resources are, to attend to the inner teacher, in a way they don't do when they're just sitting alone in their room. But there's something about the electricity of being in a respectful, watchful, observant community that makes a difference for folks.

I actually sometimes liken it to the experience that some of us have had of sitting at the bedside of a dying person. I've talked with lots of people who've had that experience, and I hear people talking about two important things that they learned in that experience. One is that the person that they were sitting with did not have a problem that they could fix. And so for the first time in your life you realize, "I cannot be in this room as a fixer of this problem, because this is not a problem that has a solution; this is dying, and nobody has a solution for that. So I have to learn a different way of being here." And I've asked lots of people, "Well what were you doing? What is that different way? You know you were doing more than just taking up space in the room. What *were* you doing?" And the only answer I've ever gotten is something like, "I was just being present. I was being fully present. I was trying to be there with my whole self, even if wordlessly." So you learn not to invade, but to be present to this very solitary journey called dying. And the second thing that you learn is, you know how disrespectful it would be to avert your eyes from this, to say this is too ugly to watch, this is too problematic to watch, this is too fearsome to watch. Instead I need to turn toward it and just hold it in my attentiveness without either invading it or evading it. So we have some human scale experience of what it means to be present to another person this way. I sometimes find myself saying to myself or others, "You know what, we're all dying all the time anyway. Wouldn't it be good to learn to be present this way to each other before the last couple of hours?" And no one's ever argued with me about that.

That's a question that I think about a lot, actually, because we're just constantly surrounded by so much evidence of evil in our lives, from the children that are starving at this very moment in places where there should be plenty of food to go around—there's more than enough in this house, I



know that, and in this country; or economic arrangements are made in ways that seem indifferent to massive suffering. It's a challenging question: What keeps hope alive in the face of all that? And then the question that immediately follows on it: What do you do with that hope, how do you engage with the world in the face of that evil? I think that for me what keeps hope alive is really fairly simple. It's seeing people who haven't been done in by the way the world is. It's seeing people who model hope in their actions, and realizing that I too could do that if I could find a place to stand that's as solid as where those folks are standing. So I think for me what keeps hope alive is the modeling of hope by others, and it's why the whole notion of community is so critical to me, community in the sense of being connected with generative lives of folks who, in whatever arena it is they care about, and it might be anything from the world of business to the world of early child care, early care of young children, people who are keeping hope alive in their very actions, in their own embodiments. I think staying close to people like that is so important in a world where the media are, minute by minute, hour by hour, bringing us modeling of a very different sort, a modeling of frenzy, a modeling of banality, a modeling of cheap commercialism, a modeling that says really the most important thing in the world is to be a consumer. I guess what I'm saying is, we get along with a little help from our friends. And I've needed friends in my life that I actively seek out because they're walking a different path, and they constantly remind me just by the fact that they're walking it that I could walk that way too.

I think there's something besides community though that is necessary to keep hope alive, and I guess it would be the paradoxical opposite of community: solitude. Because if I stop and look at what kills hope in so many people's lives, the answer, I think, is frenzy—the drivenness of our culture, that wants us always to be active, always to be engaged, always to be producing, always to be getting ourselves noticed. And so solitude, in which all of that noise and all of that kerfluffle can settle down—the water can become still, the silt can go to the bottom and you can see with some clarity what's really there—because what's really there is not the propa-



ganda of our own government or the madness of war, I mean that's there; but what's underneath that and behind that is I think what Thomas Merton called "the hidden wholeness." You can only see it, however, when you get quiet enough in heart and mind and eye to let it come into view through the blizzard. So I think it's probably the modeling of other people, and my own willingness to take an inner journey in which I get very quiet and more perceptive than I usually am, to that hidden wholeness that lies beneath the broken surface of our lives. I think for me those are the things that keep hope alive.

I think the first thing I have to say about the decision whether to stay in a system or bail out is that I personally realized at some point in my mid-30s that in order to pursue my vocation, I had to really liberate myself from large-scale organizations. And starting in my mid-30s, which is now thirty years ago, I began walking a much more independent path, to the point where for the past almost twenty years I've worked completely independently, not on anybody's payroll, not on any organization's payroll. But what's important to say about that is that that's not a piece of advice for other people. It's about vocational discernment; it's about the struggle to know who one is and what one's gifts are and how those gifts are best deployed in the world. At age almost 65 I can speak fairly clearly about the decision I made thirty years ago in a way I couldn't at the time. I started to realize as time went by that given the way I'm made, I was spending a lot of time in organizational life getting conflicted with the way power was being used in that organization—I think the slang phrase for it is "getting my undies in a bunch"—rather than using all of that energy in deploying my gifts towards good ends in the world. So I was picking fights with my boss or picking fights with the way the organization was structured, and it was like the devil made me do it. I couldn't see my way out of that until one day, as it were, I said to myself, "Parker, if you ever want to use a maximum amount of your energy towards worthwhile ends and a minimum amount of energy picking fights with organizations, you need to find a way of making a living that's largely outside of organizational life." And what's



been fascinating to me is that having done that, I have found my work over the last thirty years coming more and more back to serving those institutions. As it turns out it wasn't that I hated those institutions; I actually love schools and religious organizations and corporations rightly understood, because I love their proper missions, I love their honest truthful missions. I just don't belong *in* them. I can be more help outside them than I can within. And so I found my way back, especially in education, to being a person who's tried to support the best possibilities in education with and for those who have stayed within the institution.

Parker Palmer is known for his work in education, spirituality and social change in institutions including schools, community organizations, primary, secondary and higher education, and business and corporations. He is author of numerous books, including *A Hidden Wholeness* (2004), *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation* (2000), and *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (1990). Palmer's writing has earned numerous awards and citations and has been translated into several languages. His work has been cited in the major voices in the media, including the *New York Times*, *National Public Radio* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. He travels extensively as a speaker, facilitator and workshop and retreat leader. A native of Chicago and graduate of Carleton College and the University of California at Berkeley, where he received a doctorate in sociology, Palmer serves as a senior associate of the American Association of Higher Education, a senior advisor to the Fetzer Institute and the founder of Courage to Teach, for k-12 teachers nationwide.

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