

Practices for Individual Discernment:

As we explore individual discernment practices that include the elements that Bruce has described, we've decided to draw examples from the Quaker tradition.

Participation in “circles of trust” is described in Parker Palmer’s book “*A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life.*” *I want to share the nature of what Palmer calls “circles of trust” and “clearness committees” as means of individual discernment, and then involve you in practice in the asking of “honest open questions” that are so key to helping individuals discern their inner self.

- **Defines a “circle of trust” as “a space between us that honors the soul,” a space to practice the paradox of “being alone together,” “solitude in community.”**

Circles of trust are a rare form of community rooted in two basic beliefs:

- **First, “*each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems.*” That guidance is more reliable than anything we can get from a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution or leader. But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference.**
- **Second, we all need other people to invite, amplify, and help us discern the inner teacher’s voice .**
- **Palmer writes that “many of us face a dilemma when trying to deal with a personal problem, question, or decision.**

On the one hand, we know that the issue is ours alone to resolve and that we have the inner resources to resolve it, but access to our own resources is often blocked by layers of inner “stuff” – confusion, habitual thinking, fear, despair.

On the other hand, we know that friends might help us uncover our inner resources and find our way, but by exposing our problem to others, we run the risk of being invaded and overwhelmed by their assumptions, judgments, and advice – a common and alienating experience.

As a result, we often privatize these vital questions in our lives; at the very moment when we need all the help we can get. . . .”

- **So a circle of trust has no agenda except to help people listen to their own souls and discern their own truth. A circle of trust can form wherever two or three are gathered. Ironically, solitude is essential to personal integration and discernment, but Palmer suggests that we also need the support of others because we are communal creatures (we need to avoid both self-absorption and self-deception, and also the pressures of a group to conform).**

(We need others to help us discern the inner teacher's voice for at least three reasons:

- 1) the journey toward inner truth is too taxing to be made solo; without support, we become weary or fearful and may quit the road;**
 - 2) the path is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company; finding our way requires the kind of discernment that can happen only in dialogue**
 - 3) the destination is too daunting to be achieved alone; we need community to find the courage to venture to that to which the inner teacher may call us)**
- Clearness Committees are a structured process, often used within circles of trust, that call on a small group of folks ask to help an individual who is the "focus person." This process is described in the handout we've provided.**
 - Common to both circles of trust and the more structured "clearness committees" are the use of "honest open questions" as the group gathered helps individuals discover their own wisdom from the inside out.**

*** Palmer, Parker. A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2004.**