

The Clearness Committee: A Communal Approach to Discernment *

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. . . .”

“Clearness Committees,” dating from the Quakers in the 1660’s, are based on the simple but crucial conviction: each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems. But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. Clearness Committees are not intended to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in but rather to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out.

Clearness Committees take the form of having a small group of trusted folks ask the “focus person” a series of “honest open questions.” The Committee’s work is guided by some simple but crucial rules and understandings, summarized below.

- Confidentiality is essential, both during and after the process
- Normally the focus person chooses his or her committee of 5-6 trusted people
- The focus person writes up his or her issue in 3-5 pages, a statement of the problem, relevant background factors, and any hunches about what’s on the horizon regarding the problem
- Clearness Committees meet for 3 hours (and maybe for a later 2nd or 3rd meeting), and a recording secretary is named
- The meeting begins with a time of centering silence and an invitation for the focus person to break the silence when ready with a brief summary of the issue at hand. Then committee members may speak following 1 rule: *members are forbidden to speak to the focus person in any way except to ask honest, open questions.*
- Normally the focus person responds to the questions as they are asked, generating more, and deeper questions. The focus person at all times has the right not to answer a question.
- The Clearness Committee must not become a grilling or cross-examination. Pacing should be relaxed, gentle, humane, and all must work to remain totally attentive to the focus person and his or her needs.
- The Committee should run for the full time allotted, ending with either using the last 20 minutes for additional questions, or for “mirroring” back what members heard the focus person say. 5 minutes of affirmation of the focus person follow.

* Clearness Committees are described in detail in Chapter 8 of Parker Palmer’s book, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*, 2004