

# HEALING DEMOCRACY ACTION CIRCLES GUIDE



# INTRODUCTION

*Welcome!* We couldn't be more thrilled that you've joined what we hope is a fresh, meaningful experiment in reconnecting to our communities and rehumanizing our democracy. We hope that the crew you've assembled will become a provocative and comforting circle for these next six months, challenging you to think more deeply about your own role as a citizen and your shared vision for a better world. And if you're following along on your own, we're grateful that you've joined in, too. We believe you'll find that this process gives you an encouraging sense of connection to the many online reflection-action circles, both face-to-face and virtual, that we are creating together.

You are part of community being created all across America and around the world. Neighbors, congregants, colleagues, and students are gathering all over the country to explore the habits of the heart that Parker Palmer describes in his recently released book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. We've collaborated with author and activist Courtney E. Martin to create this guide and she'll be providing support online throughout the experience. It's going to take all of us—minds bright and hearts broken open—to restore this country back to its potential, and we think these circles can be a wonderful contribution to this effort.

Parker Palmer's work has long been an inspiration for us at the Center for Courage & Renewal, an organization that he founded. We aim to nurture personal and professional integrity and the courage to act on it through a variety of experiences and efforts—of which this Action Circle effort is the latest.



We encourage you to use this guide in whatever ways fits your particular community and context, but here's the basic set-up that we envisioned for you to play off:

- Meet six times over six months, a couple of hours each time, in a place where people are comfortable and can hear one another easily and speak freely. If possible, have a computer handy from which you can play online videos, as we include many of them in this guide as inspiration.
- In each meeting you will do two things: 1) discuss your experiences reflecting on and experimenting with the habit of the heart that was introduced in the previous meeting, and 2) discuss a new habit of the heart to focus on for the month ahead. Note that we call the activities associated with each habit “adventures.” This is not to make light of the complex and often difficult experiences so many of us have within our fractured democracy, but rather to infuse it with a renewed sense of wonder and possibility.
- In between meetings, tune into all of the inspiration that we're sending out:
  - Twitter (@couragerenewal)
  - Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Center-for-Courage-Renewal/47893474972>)
  - Our blog at the Center for Courage & Renewal (<http://www.couragerenewal.org/blog>) on the monthly theme.
- Feed your thoughts, feelings, and experiences back to us in whatever form works for you. We'd love to publish videos, poems, photographs, stories, and whatever else emerges from your individual and collective journeys.

We'd like to invite you to see your Healing Democracy Action Circle as “a space apart” from the kinds of group dynamics you are exposed to on a regular basis at work, in school, or in other institutional settings. In other spaces, you are probably expected to sound smart, to represent others, to establish your own expertise, to be efficient, to problem solve. In this space, we invite you to be open and humble, to respect the power of silence, to speak only for yourself and your own experiences, to hold tension, to be vulnerable, to have fun.

We're thrilled that you're taking on this challenge and opportunity and can't wait to learn from you along the way. Please be in touch with questions, observations, and inspiration. As Parker Palmer wrote, “The heart's dynamics and the ways in which they are shaped lack the drama and the ‘visuals’ to make the evening news...now is the time for the restoration to begin.”<sup>i</sup>

# SESSION I

## Go over group agreements.

In your first meeting together, we encourage you to take a little bit of time to get to know one another and then agree on some shared expectations for how your group will operate. This may feel a bit formal, but it's well worth it in our experience—particularly as we are all aiming to create groups that avoid the ruts of regular conversation and argument, instead striving for an interaction that is truly distinct and different.

Please see the Resource Guide for *Touchstones* that we've developed over the many years we've done our own Circle of Trust® work. Read them aloud, discuss any questions or concerns, and feel free to add some of your own. (And by all means, please let us know what you add; we're curious to learn from you.)

## Reflect on and practice listening.

One of the most endangered arts in our society is listening. Do a simple and fun exercise with your group to help set the tone of the high level listening that you'll expect from and offer to one another.



**THE EXERCISE:** split into pairs. Identify person A and person B. Person A will speak for 3 minutes about this question—*where, when, and from whom did you first learn about being a citizen?*—while Person B practices doing nothing but listening attentively. Switch. Discuss your experiences/observations as a group. Questions you might explore with the group: *Why is it so rare to be listened to in this way in our current society? How can we create more opportunities to this kind of listening in our lives? Who are our personal models of great listening?*



## Reflect on and practice asking honest, open questions.

Please read aloud our *Guidelines for Asking Honest, Open Questions* in the Resource Guide. Discuss them as a group. We then recommend repeating the exercise on citizenship above but this time explore asking each other honest, open questions.



**THE EXERCISE:** Return to your original pairs and repeat the prior exercise but this time the listener can ask honest, open questions in the spirit of the guidelines just discussed. Switch. Again, discuss your experiences of both being listened to and questioned in this manner. Questions you might explore with the group: *How was your understanding as speaker and listener enriched or deepened through this process of asking and responding to honest, open questions? How come we rarely hear these types of questions in our day-to-day lives? What can we do to create more opportunities to inquire and listen to the other in this way?*

## Reframe the word *heart*.

As your group explores the habits of the heart in these next six months, it's important that you share a foundational idea about what Parker Palmer means by heart in the first place. Please read this passage from *Healing the Heart of Democracy* aloud:

“In this book, the word *heart* reclaims its original meaning. ‘Heart’ comes from the Latin *cor* and points not merely to our emotions but to the core of the self, that center place where all of our ways of knowing converge—intellectual, emotional, sensory, intuitive, imaginative, experiential, relational, and bodily, among others. The heart is where we integrate what we know in our minds with what we know in our bones, the place where our knowledge can become more fully human. *Cor* is also the Latin root from which we get the word *courage*. When all that we understand of self and world comes together in the center place called the heart, we are more likely to find the courage to act humanely on what we know.”<sup>ii</sup>



**THE EXERCISE:** Encourage each person in your group to draw a heart—anatomical or symbolic—on a piece of paper and spend the next few minutes in silence, filling their heart with a few of the “knowings” that they’ve been realizing or wrestling with lately. Share your reflections briefly. Keep your drawings. We’ll come back to them in a later meeting.

## Introduce the five habits.

Read them aloud.

1. An understanding that we are all in this together.
2. An appreciation of the value of "otherness."
3. An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways.
4. A sense of personal voice and agency.
5. A capacity to create community.

Make clear that these are not intended to be rules; instead they are invitations. As Parker Palmer writes, "At the deepest levels of human life, we do not need techniques. We need insights into ourselves and our world that can help us understand how to learn and grow from our experiences of diversity, tension, and conflict."<sup>iii</sup>

Rather than seeing these as techniques that you are practicing over the course of these next six months together, we encourage you to see them as invitations for reflection inward and experiment outward, opportunities to grow and stretch amid the undeniable cacophony of our modern times. This should be messy and it should be fun.

## Explore the first habit.

Without further ado, get down to exploring your first habit. First, watch this short video about the habit, created by a team at the Center for Courage & Renewal, and discuss it: <http://bit.ly/zrBk1M>

Now, read Parker Palmer's description of this first habit aloud:

"An understanding that we are all in this together: Ecologists, economists, ethicists, philosophers of science and religious and secular leaders have all given voice to this theme: despite our illusions of individualism and national superiority, human beings are a profoundly interconnected species, with each other and with all forms of life, as the global economic and ecological crises reveal in vivid and frightening detail. We must understand the simple fact that we are dependent upon and accountable to one another—including the stranger, the 'alien other.' At the same time, we need to save this notion from the idealistic excesses that make it an impossible dream. Exhorting people to hold a moment-by-moment awareness of their global or even national interconnectedness is a counsel of perfection that can lead only to self-delusion or discouragement and defeat."



**DISCUSS.** Possible questions to get the conversation going: *When do you feel most aware of your interconnection to and interdependence on other people? When do you feel most disconnected? How has technology changed the nature of our interconnection in the last few years?*

Choose from some of these **interesting prompts** to discuss further:  
Author Steven Johnson discusses *Where Good Ideas Come From* come from:  
<http://bit.ly/wYfffs> (4:07)

“Wandering Around the Albuquerque Airport” by Naomi Shihab Nye:  
<http://bit.ly/xjrk6q>

Social Entrepreneur Jacqueline Novogratz talks about the central story in her book, *The Blue Sweater: Bridging the Gap between Rich and Poor in an Interconnected World*:  
<http://bit.ly/xTC9nE> (2:45)

## Send each other off with an adventure!

For the first habit, “An understanding that we are all in this together,” we invite you to do the following between now and your next meeting:

**THE ADVENTURE:** Think of someone in your life that you come into contact with on a regular basis, but know nothing about. It might be a parent in your child’s school, a maintenance worker in your office building, or the person who buys your produce at the local farmer’s market. Take some time to ask them their name and a little bit about themselves. Try to learn about one thing that is really important to them in their lives. If it feels comfortable, take a picture or video of them and write about the experience.

Don’t forget to check-in on our regular infusions of inspiration by following us on Twitter (@couragerenewal), and checking in at our Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Center-for-Courage-Renewal/47893474972>) and blog (<http://www.couragerenewal.org/blog>). And please send us your insights along the way.

*Good luck!*

# SESSION II

## Welcome each other back.

As it's been a whole month since you last gathered, you might want to do a quick go around letting everybody re-introduce themselves. Reread the *Touchstones* that you discussed last session to keep them fresh and present. Ask your group: *which, if any, touchstone stuck with you between meetings?*

## Reflect on and practice asking honest, open questions.

Please read aloud our *Guidelines for Asking Honest, Open Questions* in the Resource Guide. Discuss them as a group. Build on the exercise you did last session around listening, but this time, add in the art of questioning.



**THE EXERCISE:** split into pairs. Identify person A and person B. Person A will speak for 3 minutes about this question—*When was there a time in your life when you've felt most involved in a community?*—while Person B practices asking honest, open questions in the spirit of the guidelines just discussed. Switch. Again, discuss your experiences of both being listened to and questioned, and listening to and questioning your partner. Questions you might explore with the group: *Was it difficult for you to ask honest, open questions? Why or why not? What was it like to be asked honest, open questions? Who is your role model of great honest, open questions?*





## Show & Tell.

Now's the time for folks to report back about their adventures with the first habit:  
“An understanding that we are all in this together.”

Here are some questions that might inspire conversation: *What was most surprising about the person you spoke with? What prevents you from having these kinds of conversations on a more regular basis? How has this exchange changed your daily interactions with this person?*

With gratitude for your courage and your learnings, close this habit out with this quotation from Parker Palmer: “In the company of strangers, we can learn that we are all in this together despite our many differences; that some of our differences are enriching and those that are vexing are negotiable; that it is possible to do business amicably with one another even in the face of conflicting interests.”<sup>iv</sup>

## Explore the second habit.

Without further ado, get down to exploring your second habit. First, watch this short video about a book called *The Other Wes Moore*: <http://bit.ly/wFxZfN>.



**DISCUSS:** *what themes of “otherness” do you see in these twin stories? Wes Moore says, “The tragedy isn’t just that my story could have been his, but that his could have been mine.” Whose story could have been yours? Whose story could yours have been?*

Now, read Parker Palmer’s description of this habit aloud:

“An appreciation of the value of ‘otherness.’: Despite the fact that we are all in this together, we spend most of our lives in ‘tribes’ or lifestyle enclaves. Thinking of the world in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is one of the many limitations of the human mind that can be overcome only by continual discipline and practice. The good news is that ‘us and them’ does not need to mean ‘us versus them.’ Instead, it can take us back to the ancient tradition of hospitality to the stranger, translating it into meanings that apply to our twenty-first century lives. This is a tradition that does not blink at the fact that many people will always be strangers to us, or that we will always be the stranger to many others. But the tradition of hospitality affirms the many ways we can receive and learn from the stranger, allowing ‘otherness’ to enlarge and revitalize our lives—including the kind of otherness that seems alien and even threatening. This kind of hospitality is impossible if we are unable to see the creative possibilities inherent in diversity.”



**DISCUSS:** possible questions to get the conversation going: *Reflect back on one of your first experiences when you realized that someone considered you to be “the other.” What was that like? Has this been a common experience for you? When was a moment when you encountered someone that you had previously considered an “other”?*

Choose from some of these **interesting prompts** to discuss further:  
Spike Jonze, a filmmaker, Presents: Lil Buck, a b-boy, and Yo-Yo Ma, a classical musician:

<http://bit.ly/y6aoVo> (3:46)

Unlikely friends in an elephant sanctuary:

<http://bit.ly/xdWvqp> (2:44)

Phyllis Rodriguez and Aicha el-Wafi forged a friendship despite unthinkable loss. Rodriguez's son was killed in the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001; el-Wafi's son Zacarias Moussaoui was convicted of a role in those attacks and is serving a life sentence:

<http://http://bit.ly/zFJGVI> (9:54)

## Send each other off with an adventure!

For the second habit, “An appreciation of the value of ‘otherness,’” we invite you to do the following between now and your next meeting:

**THE ADVENTURE:** Reflect on who an “other”—whether because of religion, politics, profession, economic class etc.—might be in your life these days. Make a point of seeking out one person from that demographic group over the course of the next month and having a conversation with them. You need not talk directly about the issue that divides you, unless you’d like to. Just make a point to get to know them a little bit, to understand who they are and what they care about.

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*Good luck!*

# SESSION III

## Welcome each other back.

Go over the *Touchstones* briefly, just to refresh everyone's memories. Ask everybody to name one that they will specifically focus on during this time together.

## Show & Tell.

Now's the time for folks to report back about their adventures with the second habit: "An appreciation of the value of 'otherness.'"

Here are some questions that might inspire conversation: *What was the most surprising thing you discovered about the person you spoke with? Where did your stories converge and intersect? How has this conversation changed the way you see this person or even the ideologies you associate with them?*

With gratitude for your courage and your learnings, close this habit out with this quotation attributed to Benedictine nun Mary Lou Kownacki: "Engrave this upon your heart: there isn't anyone you couldn't love once you heard their story."



## Explore the third habit.

Now it's time for the third habit. First, listen to this segment from a This American Life episode on fatherhood called "Bring Your Child to Work Detail" relating to the habit:

<http://bit.ly/wP6ksO>



**DISCUSS:** *what kinds of tensions do you hear coming up in this story for the people described? What tensions came up for you while listening to it?*

Now, read Parker Palmer's description of this habit aloud:

"An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways: Our inner and outer lives are filled with contradictions—from the gap between our own behavior and our aspirations to the information and ideas we cannot abide because they run counter to our convictions. If we fail to hold them creatively, the non-stop contradictions of our lives will frighten and paralyze us and take us out of the action. But when we learn to hold them in a heart-opening way, they may open us to new ways of understanding ourselves and the world, enhancing our lives and allowing us to enhance the lives of others. We are imperfect and broken beings who live out our lives in an imperfect and broken world. The genius of the human heart lies in its capacity to hold tension in ways that energize and draw us forward instead of tearing us apart."



**DISCUSS:** possible questions to get the conversation going: *What is a challenge that you see your community facing that seems to bring up a lot of tension for people? What are the most successful ways you've seen people deal with that tension? Describe a moment recently when you felt like giving up on something or someone because the tension-holding was just too overwhelming. What did you do? What could you have done?*

Choose from some of these **interesting prompts** to deepen the discussion further: Suheir Hammad's poem and video, "On Egypt:"

<http://bit.ly/AuffZb> (3:00)

"Impermanence: Embracing Change," is a video installation that explores the temporal nature of life. Developed for "The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama":

<http://bit.ly/AsvdeD> (2:41)

Janice Wilberg's essay "Fury Cannot Touch Me":

<http://nyti.ms/wokio2>

## Send each other off with an adventure!

For the third habit, “An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways,” we invite you to do the following between now and your next meeting:

**THE ADVENTURE:** Reflect on a tension that you are currently holding in your life. It could be, for example, that you are struggling to think about your responsibility to respond to the violence in your community, or you are trying to find a balance between being supportive and/or invasive when it comes to your adult children’s lives. Now go to three people whom you believe to be truly wise—be sure to include someone very young and someone very old—and ask them for their wisdom on this issue. If you feel comfortable videotape their answers so you can share them.

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*Good luck!*

# SESSION IV

## Welcome each other back.

Go over the *Touchstones* briefly, just to refresh everyone's memories. Chat briefly about which one feels most challenging for folks in the group and why.

## Show & Tell.

Now's the time for folks to report back about their adventures with the third habit: "An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways":

Here are some questions that might inspire conversation: *What was the most surprising answer you heard from your three "wisdom figures"? What was the hardest to hear and why? How did these answers shift the tension you were feeling?*

With gratitude for your courage and your learnings, close this habit out with this quotation from Rainer Maria Rilke: "Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."<sup>v</sup>



## Explore the fourth habit.

Without further ado, get down to exploring your fourth habit. First, watch this music video that Sarah McLachlan made for her song, World on Fire: <http://bit.ly/A86V0B>



**DISCUSS:** *in what ways is McLachlan using this opportunity, not just to use her voice, but her agency and ingenuity to speak out? Do you think it is effective? Why or why not?*

Now, read Parker Palmer’s description of this habit aloud:

“A sense of personal voice and agency: If we are to take advantage of these energizing potentials, we need to speak and act—not only to express our truth but to allow others to check and correct it as they speak and act in response. But many Americans have little confidence in their own voices or in their power to make a difference. For many reasons—including the fact that educational and religious institutions tend to teach us how to be an audience to a performance rather than participants in a drama—we are a surprisingly passive people. But there are ways to find one’s voice and learn how to speak it—and to know how it feels to make a difference when one does. We must offer such opportunities to more and more people if we want them to be agents of democracy’s renewal.”



**DISCUSS:** possible questions to get the conversation going: *When was a time in your own life when you spoke out—either in speech, writing, or action—and saw the power of your own agency? When was a time you thought about speaking out and didn’t? When and where do you feel most “voiceless” in your day-to-day life?*

Choose from some of these **interesting prompts** to deepen the discussion further:  
Morley singing “Women of Hope”:  
<http://bit.ly/yl3c2F> (4:24)

Improv Everywhere’s “Say Something Nice” project in action:  
<http://bit.ly/wGHYFe> (3:07)

A trailer for a documentary called, “A Small Act,” which depicts the reverberations that one small woman’s gift has had:  
<http://vimeo.com/10188872> (3:51)

## Send each other off with an adventure!

For the fourth habit, “A sense of personal voice and agency,” we invite you to do the following between now and your next meeting:

**THE ADVENTURE:** For the next month, keep an “agency log” of your daily life. Notice moments when something occurs or is said that makes you want to speak out. Experiment with when you decide to say what’s on your mind and when you decide to keep your thoughts to yourself. If you’re someone who tends to let it fly, try taking a deep breath and watching instead of reacting. If you’re someone who tends to keep your opinions inside, give yourself a little nudge to say it out loud and see what happens.

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*Good luck!*



# SESSION V

## Welcome each other back.

Go over the *Touchstones* briefly, just to refresh everyone's memories. Discuss: if you could magically incorporate one of the touchstones into every encounter of your day tomorrow, which would you choose and why?

## Show & Tell.

Now's the time for folks to report back about their adventures with the fourth habit: "A sense of personal voice and agency."

Here are some questions that might inspire conversation: *When did you speak out and when did you choose, instead, to keep your feelings or thoughts to yourself? How did you make these decisions? When you spoke up, did it feel worthwhile? Why or why not? When you stayed quiet, what was the value of your silence?*

With gratitude for your courage and your learnings, close this habit out with this quotation from Audre Lorde: "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood."<sup>vi</sup>



## Explore the fifth and last habit.

It's finally time to explore your fifth habit. First, read Marge Piercy's poem "The Seven of Pentacles" aloud: <http://bit.ly/yTzY7U>



**DISCUSS:** *for you, what is this poem about? What kinds of community connections have you been tending, as Piercy describes, for awhile? How do you continue to be patient as you wait for "the harvest?"*

Now, read Parker Palmer's description of this habit aloud:

"A capacity to create community: Learning to speak and act as an individual does not contradict community but requires it: you can't have one without the other. History consistently teaches that voice and agency are nearly impossible to achieve—let alone to exercise—when there is little or no community in our lives: it takes the support and encouragement of a village to raise up a Rosa Parks. In a mass society like ours, fewer and fewer opportunities for community are ready-made in our lives. But there are many ways to plant and cultivate the seeds of community, small and large, in the places where we live and work: the companionship of two or three people can sometimes make a great difference. We must help each other become gardeners of community if we want democracy to flourish."



**DISCUSS:** possible questions to get the conversation going: *What communities do you see yourself as a part of in everyday life? Did you have to seek out those communities or did they organically evolve in your life? What are the gifts and challenges of being in community for you?*

Choose from some of these **interesting prompts** to deepen the discussion further:  
Read about "The People's Professor," Utne Reader:

<http://bit.ly/xbu4FC>

"The Conversation Exchange," a project of the Secret Society for Creative Philanthropy:

<http://bit.ly/yduRmk> (6:24)

Check out the Mapping Main Street Project, a collaborative documentary:

<http://bit.ly/wNiOXA> (1:45)

## Send each other off with an adventure!

For the fifth habit, “A capacity to create community,” we invite you to do the following between now and your next meeting:

**THE ADVENTURE:** If new people move into your neighborhood, knock on their door and introduce yourself. Tell them that you live nearby and want your neighborhood to be a place where people watch out for each other. Give them a card with your name and phone number, and tell them to give you a call if there is something you might be able help with, like keeping an eye on their house while they are gone. If no one new moves in during this month, try doing this with a long-time neighbor whom you’ve never met. As Parker Palmer writes, “A caring neighborhood is next-door democracy.”

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*Good luck!*

# SESSION VI

## Welcome each other back.

Go over the *Touchstones* briefly, just to refresh everyone's memories.

## Show & Tell.

Now's the time for folks to report back about their adventures with the fifth habit: "A capacity to create community."

Here are some questions that might inspire conversation: *What was it like to greet your neighbor and let them know that you were willing to help? If you greeted a long time neighbor, why do you guess it took you so long to introduce yourself? In what situations have you been the "new kid on the block" and what kind of welcome, or lack thereof, did you get?*

With gratitude for your courage and your learnings, close this habit out with this quotation from Parker Palmer about the potential for community in public space: "In...everyday venues, we settle into the fact that we are part of a large, diverse, and sometimes problematic but often fascinating motley crew. If we use our opportunities in these settings wisely and well, we develop habits of the heart that not only make us better citizens but help us feel more at home on the face of the earth."<sup>vii</sup>

## Consider the future.

Your group may feel that your collective work together is just getting started. If so, here are some next steps you might consider:

- Some of you might want to continue to meet for further conversations about the habits of the heart you've been exploring or tap into other resources that the Center for Courage & Renewal offers. In the latter case, please go to our website and be in touch about how we can be of service as your group continues to evolve.
- One or two of you might like to lead a new group encountering this Action Circle series for the first time. We encourage you to utilize this curriculum again and thereby help "multiply the conversations" that can help heal our democracy.

## Reflect and celebrate your time together.

Though we whole-heartedly encourage you to continue meeting, this may be your last session with one another. It's a critical time to reflect back on what you've learned through this process together and affirm one another for making the commitment for this communal adventure.

First, spend a few minutes reflecting on the quality of interaction that you've experienced over the course of these six months: *How did our agreements change the conversation we had? How might you use that experience in the future? What other areas of your life can you imagine bringing these same "touchstones" into?*

Now spend a few more minutes writing or reflecting in silence: *Which habit of the heart did I find most organic and which did I find most foreign? What were my biggest surprises from being in this group? My biggest learnings? What are three pieces of insight or wisdom that I gleaned from being here, with these people, that I really want to hold on to in the coming months?*

Now return to the heart you drew in the very first meeting.



**DISCUSS:** *in what ways have some of the "knowings" that were in your heart at that time changed, morphed, and/or evolved? What "knowings" were deepened or stayed the same?*

Finally, spend a few moments looking back through your own notes or reflecting back on your time together. Pick out one insight or story that someone else in the group said and go around the circle to express your gratitude for that gift and explain how it has affected the way you see the world or yourself.

Close out your time together by reading this quotation by Parker Palmer and taking time to let it soak in:

"We must judge ourselves by a higher standard than effectiveness, the standard called faithfulness. Are we faithful to the community on which we depend, to doing what we can in response to its pressing needs? Are we faithful to the better angels of our nature and to what they call forth from us? Are we faithful to the eternal conversation of the human race, to speaking and listening in a way that takes us closer to the truth? Are we faithful to the call of courage that summons us to witness to the common good, even against great odds? When faithfulness is our standard, we are more likely to sustain our engagement with tasks that will never end: doing justice, loving mercy, and calling the beloved community into being."<sup>viii</sup>



# RESOURCE GUIDE

## Circle of Trust Touchstones

1. Be present as fully as possible. Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.
2. Choose for yourself when and how to participate. There is always an invitation, never an invasion; always opportunity, never demand.
3. Speak for yourself, of your own truth, with respect for how that might differ from others' truths. Use "I" statements.
4. No fixing, advising, "saving," or correcting one another. Instead, learn to respond to others with honest, open questions. With such questions, we help "hear each other into deeper speech."
5. When the going gets rough, turn to wonder and curiosity. If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her to this belief?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?" Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.
6. Trust and learn from the silence. Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.
7. Observe confidentiality.

# A Primer on Honest, Open Questions

Learning to ask honest, open questions is challenging. We may slip occasionally into old “fixing” habits and need forgiveness, from others and from ourselves. As the old saw goes, “Forgive and remember!” and try not to make that particular mistake again. It helps to continually remind ourselves that our purpose in this exercise is not to show what good problem-solvers we are, but simply to support another person in listening to his or her own wisdom.

- The best single mark of an honest, open question is that the questioner could not possibly anticipate the answer to it.
- The best questions are often simple questions. Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than larding them with rationales and background materials that allow you to insert your own opinions or advice. Avoid storytelling, or behaviors that call attention to yourself.
- Ask questions aimed at helping the person explore his or her concern rather than satisfying your own curiosity.
- Try not to get ahead of the person you are listening to. “What did you mean when you said you felt sad?” is an honest, open question. “Didn’t you also feel angry?” is not.
- Allow questions to “bubble up” or emerge, rather than force them. If you aren’t sure about a particular question, sit with it for a while and wait for clarity.
- If you have an intuition that a certain question might be useful, even if it seems a bit “off the wall,” trust it—once you are reasonably certain that it is an honest, open question. E.g., “What color is this issue for you, and why?”
- Sometimes questions that invite images or metaphors can open things up in ways that more direction questions don’t.

Here are a couple of examples of a listener shifting from leading, loaded questions to honest, open questions:

Do you think your neighbor was really telling you the truth? → What did your gut tell you about what your neighbor shared?

I've totally had that experience. It was so infuriating. What did you do? → How did you feel about what you chose to do?

Sounds like this was a really defining moment for you. Is that how you think of it? → If you had to put that conversation to music, what kind of music would it be?

# References

<sup>i</sup>Palmer, Parker. *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. Jossey-Bass, 2011. 10.

<sup>ii</sup>Palmer. 6

<sup>iii</sup>Palmer. 15

<sup>iv</sup>Palmer. 99

<sup>v</sup>Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1934

<sup>vi</sup>Lorde, Audre. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in *Sister Outsider*. Crossing Press, 1984

<sup>vii</sup>Palmer. 101.

<sup>viii</sup>Palmer, 293.