

20th

Anniversary

with NEW POSTLUDE
and STUDY GUIDE

A HIDDEN WHOLENESS

•
The Journey
Toward
An Undivided Life

•
*Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community
in a Wounded World*

Parker J. PALMER

Author of *The Courage to Teach*

A
HIDDEN
WHOLENESS

20th Anniversary Edition

OTHER BOOKS BY PARKER J. PALMER

The Active Life

The Company of Strangers

The Courage to Teach

The Courage to Teach: A Guide for Reflection and Renewal

Healing the Heart of Democracy

The Heart of Higher Education

A Hidden Wholeness

On the Brink of Everything

The Promise of Paradox

To Know As We Are Known

A
HIDDEN
WHOLENESS



The Journey Toward
an
Undivided Life

Welcoming the soul
and weaving community
in a wounded world

20th Anniversary Edition

PARKER J. PALMER

J JOSSEY-BASS™

A Wiley Brand

Copyright © 2024 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights, including for text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies, are reserved.

Online Materials: Circles of Trust: The Work of Parker J. Palmer. Copyright © 2008 Center for Courage & Renewal. All rights reserved.

First edition copyright © 2004 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.

Published simultaneously in Canada.

ISBNs: 9781394235070 (Cloth), 9781394235087 (ePub), 9781394235094 (ePDF)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permission>.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates in the United States and other countries and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993. For product technical support, you can find answers to frequently asked questions or reach us via live chat at <https://support.wiley.com>.

If you believe you've found a mistake in this book, please bring it to our attention by emailing our reader support team at wileysupport@wiley.com with the subject line "Possible Book Errata Submission."

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Control Number Is Available:

COVER DESIGN: PAUL MCCARTHY

COVER IMAGE: © GETTY IMAGES | OTTOKRAUSE

Contents

GRATITUDES vii

PRELUDE: THE BLIZZARD OF THE WORLD 1

- I Images of Integrity: *Living “Divided No More”* 3
II Across the Great Divide: *Rejoining Soul and Role* 11
III Explorations in True Self: *Intimations of the Soul* 25
IV Being Alone Together: *A Community of Solitudes* 41
V Preparing for the Journey: *Creating Circles of Trust* 57
VI The Truth Told Slant: *The Power of Metaphor* 71
VII Deep Speaks to Deep: *Learning to Speak and Listen* 91
VIII Living the Questions: *Experiments with Truth* 105
IX On Laughter and Silence: *Not-So-Strange Bedfellows* 121
X The Third Way: *Nonviolence in Everyday Life* 133
-

POSTLUDE: BEYOND THE BLIZZARD OF THE WORLD 149

NOTES 161

THE AUTHOR 169

INDEX 171

CREDITS 177

BRINGING THE BOOK TO LIFE: A Guide to using
this book by Caryl Hurtig Casbon and Sally Z. Hare
is available online, along with author videos:
www.wiley.com/go/ahiddenwholeness20 OR
<https://couragerenewal.org/hidden-wholeness-hub/>

FOR MARCY JACKSON AND RICK JACKSON
WITH GRATITUDE AND LOVE

Gratitudes

This book brings together four themes I have been musing on since my mid-twenties: the shape of an integral life, the meaning of community, teaching and learning for transformation, and nonviolent social change.

As six previous books and forty years of lecturing prove, I love to think, talk, and write about these things. But—knowing how quickly words can cut loose from human reality—I love it even more when language comes to life. So I take deep satisfaction in the fact that the most important words in this book have already found embodiment, thanks to the gifted people I am privileged to call colleagues and friends.

In cities across the country, these people have created settings where others can join in “the journey toward an undivided life.” They are so numerous I cannot list them by name, but I want to point toward them with gratitude for their caring, competence, and commitment:

- The staff and board of the Fetzer Institute, who have supported so much of the work on which this book is based
- The staff and board of the Center for Courage & Renewal, who provide educators and people from many other walks of life with opportunities to deepen their personal and professional integrity¹
- The one hundred-plus people and counting in the United States and Canada who have gone through the center’s facilitator preparation program, learning how to create “circles of trust” where people can take an inner journey toward living “divided no more”
- The countless educators, philanthropists, physicians, attorneys, businesspeople, community organizers, clergy, and others who participate in such circles because they know their own need, and the world’s, for rejoining soul and role
- The staff of Jossey-Bass and John Wiley, who actively support this book, and others related to it, because they believe in the work that it advocates

Gratitudes

A few people have made special efforts to help this book and its author along. They all have my gratitude and love:

- Marcy Jackson and Rick Jackson are codirectors of the Center for Courage & Renewal. For nearly a decade they have led the effort to create circles of trust in far-flung places, doing so with skill, patience, wisdom, vision, and love. I dedicate this book to them to honor their remarkable work and to let them know again how much their friendship means to me.
- Rob Lehman is president emeritus of the Fetzer Institute and chair of its board of trustees. He has a strong and abiding vision of how vital it is to join the inner and outer life. Without his friendship and encouragement, much of the work on which this book is based might well have remained undone.
- Tom Beech is president of the Fetzer Institute. A much-valued friend since our days as college classmates, he was an early advocate of the local and national work of the Center for Courage & Renewal. As long as I have known him, he has modeled the undivided life.
- David Sluyter is a senior adviser to the Fetzer Institute, and Mickey Olivanti is a Fetzer Institute program officer. They helped me launch the teacher formation program in the early 1990s and have supported it faithfully ever since. They are good friends and colleagues whose confidence and companionship mean a great deal to me.²
- Mark Nepo, Chip Wood, and Roland Johnson are, respectively, a poet and essayist, a public school principal, and an attorney. They are also good friends and fellow travelers who gave various versions of this manuscript a thoughtful reading, and I am grateful for their generous help.
- Earlene Bond, Ann Faulkner, Guy Gooding, Sue Jones, Elaine Sullivan, and Bill Tucker are leaders in the Dallas County Community College District who have brought formation into their part of the educational world through the Center for Formation in the Community College.³ I am grateful for their friendship and support.
- David Leach, M.D., executive director of the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, and Paul Batalden, M.D., professor of pediatrics and community and family medicine at Dartmouth Medical School,

are leaders in transforming medical education and health care. They have shown me how the key ideas in this book speak to a profession that I know little about, and I value their encouragement and friendship.⁴

- Sheryl Fullerton is my editor. She is a gifted maker and marketer of books with great wisdom about that arcane craft, as well as a treasured friend who knows when I need consolation and when I need a challenge. I thank her and her talented colleagues at Jossey-Bass and John Wiley who have worked hard to bring this book into being: Joanne Clapp Fullagar, Paula Goldstein, Chandrika Madhavan, Sandy Siegle, and Bruce Emmer.
- Sharon Palmer is my best friend, my most trusted critic, and my love. She is the first reader of everything I write—and since I throw out twenty pages for every one I keep, she does a lot of reading. When I asked her what she looks for when she edits, she answered with three questions: Is it worth saying? Is it said clearly? Is it said beautifully? That should explain both my throw-out ratio and why I need to keep working on my writing.
- We are grateful to the Lilly Endowment, Inc., for their generous support of the production of this Leader’s Guide and of the Circles of Trust Online Materials.



Twenty years ago, during a summer teaching stint in England, I picked up a small volume of poetry in a Cambridge bookstore. In it was a haunting little poem by D. M. Thomas called “Stone,” which I copied and put into my briefcase, where it can be found to this day. Thomas muses on the titles of a series of books that “the poet” will write over his or her lifetime and ends with these lines:

*There is also the seventh book, perhaps, the seventh,
And called The Seventh Book because it is not published,
The one that a child thinks he could have written,
Made of the firmest stone and clearest leaves,
That a people keep alive by, keep alive.*⁵

From the moment I first read “Stone,” I sensed that it held a message for me. Last year, when I suddenly realized that *A Hidden Wholeness* would

be my seventh book, I began to wonder if the message was that I should not publish it! Some critics may wish that I had come to that conclusion, but obviously I did not.

“Stone” speaks to me, I think, about the hope that has kept me writing for forty years, the hope to find words that might somehow give someone life. I do not know if the words in this book will fulfill that hope. But I do know that the work on which this book is based—the work of bringing people together to rediscover and reclaim their wholeness—has given me more life than anything else I have done professionally. May this book allow more people to benefit as much as I have from the life-giving, world-healing power of communities that welcome the soul.

Prelude

The Blizzard of the World

*The blizzard of the world
has crossed the threshold
and it has overturned
the order of the soul.*

—LEONARD COHEN¹

There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.

Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives: they make headlines because they take so many innocents down with them.

The lost ones come from every walk of life: clergy and corporate executives, politicians and people on the street, celebrities and schoolchildren. Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some are lost at this moment and are trying to find the way home. Some are lost without knowing it. And some are using the blizzard as cover while cynically exploiting its chaos for private gain.

So it is easy to believe the poet's claim that "the blizzard of the world" has overturned "the order of the soul," easy to believe that the soul—that life-giving core of the human self, with its hunger for truth and justice, love and forgiveness—has lost all power to guide our lives.

Prelude

But my own experience of the blizzard, which includes getting lost in it more often than I like to admit, tells me that it is not so. The soul's order can never be destroyed. It may be obscured by the whiteout. We may forget, or deny, that its guidance is close at hand. And yet we are still in the soul's backyard, with chance after chance to regain our bearings.

This book is about tying a rope from the back door out to the barn so that we can find our way home again. When we catch sight of the soul, we can survive the blizzard without losing our hope or our way. When we catch sight of the soul, we can become healers in a wounded world—in the family, in the neighborhood, in the workplace, and in political life—as we are called back to our “hidden wholeness” amid the violence of the storm.

CHAPTER I



Images of Integrity

Living “Divided No More”

Jack pines . . . are not lumber trees [and they] won't win many beauty contests either. But to me this valiant old tree, solitary on its own rocky point, is as beautiful as a living thing can be. . . . In the calligraphy of its shape against the sky is written strength of character and perseverance, survival of wind, drought, cold, heat, disease. . . . In its silence it speaks of . . . wholeness . . . an integrity that comes from being what you are.

—DOUGLAS WOOD¹

❧ Into the Wilderness ❧

Every summer, I go to the Boundary Waters, a million acres of pristine wilderness along the Minnesota-Ontario border. My first trip, years ago, was a vacation, pure and simple. But as I returned time and again to that elemental world of water, rock, woods, and sky, my vacation began to feel more like a pilgrimage to me—an annual trek to holy ground driven by spiritual need. Douglas Wood’s meditation on the jack pine, a tree native to that part of the world, names what I go up north seeking: images of how life looks when it is lived with integrity.

Thomas Merton claimed that “there is in all things . . . a hidden wholeness.”² But back in the human world—where we are less self-revealing than jack pines—Merton’s words can, at times, sound like wishful thinking. Afraid that our inner light will be extinguished or our inner darkness exposed, we hide our true identities from each other. In the process, we become separated from our own souls. We end up living divided lives, so far removed from the truth we hold within that we cannot know the “integrity that comes from being what you are.”

My knowledge of the divided life comes first from personal experience: I yearn to be whole, but dividedness often seems the easier choice. A “still, small voice” speaks the truth about me, my work, or the world. I hear it and yet act as if I did not. I withhold a personal gift that might serve a good end or commit myself to a project that I do not really believe in. I keep silent on an issue I should address or actively break faith with one of my own convictions. I deny my inner darkness, giving it more power over me, or I project it onto other people, creating “enemies” where none exist.

I pay a steep price when I live a divided life—feeling fraudulent, anxious about being found out, and depressed by the fact that I am denying my own selfhood. The people around me pay a price as well, for now they walk on ground made unstable by my dividedness. How can I affirm another’s identity when I deny my own? How can I trust another’s integrity when I defy my own? A fault line runs down the middle of my life, and whenever it cracks open—divorcing my words and actions from the truth I hold within—things around me get shaky and start to fall apart.

But up north, in the wilderness, I sense the wholeness hidden “in all things.” It is in the taste of wild berries, the scent of sunbaked pine, the sight of the Northern Lights, the sound of water lapping the shore, signs of a bed-rock integrity that is eternal and beyond all doubt. And when I return to a human world that is transient and riddled with disbelief, I have new eyes for the wholeness hidden in me and my kind and a new heart for loving even our imperfections.

In fact, the wilderness constantly reminds me that wholeness is not about perfection. On July 4, 1999, a twenty-minute maelstrom of hurricane-force winds took down twenty million trees across the Boundary Waters.³ A month later, when I made my annual pilgrimage up north, I was heart-broken by the ruin and wondered whether I wanted to return. And yet on each visit since, I have been astonished to see how nature uses devastation to stimulate new growth, slowly but persistently healing her own wounds.

Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. Knowing this gives me hope that human wholeness—mine, yours, ours—need not be a utopian dream, if we can use devastation as a seedbed for new life.

Beyond Ethics

The divided life comes in many and varied forms. To cite just a few examples, it is the life we lead when

- We refuse to invest ourselves in our work, diminishing its quality and distancing ourselves from those it is meant to serve
- We make our living at jobs that violate our basic values, even when survival does not absolutely demand it
- We remain in settings or relationships that steadily kill off our spirits
- We harbor secrets to achieve personal gain at the expense of other people
- We hide our beliefs from those who disagree with us to avoid conflict, challenge, and change
- We conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned, or attacked

Dividedness is a personal pathology, but it soon becomes a problem for other people. It is a problem for students whose teachers “phone it in” while taking cover behind their podiums and their power. It is a problem for patients whose doctors practice medical indifference, hiding behind a self-protective scientific facade. It is a problem for employees whose supervisors have personnel handbooks where their hearts should be. It is a problem for citizens whose political leaders speak “with forked tongue.”

As I write, the media are filled with stories of people whose dividedness is now infamous. They worked at such places as Enron, Arthur Andersen, Merrill Lynch, WorldCom, and the Roman Catholic Church, to name a few. Surely these people heard an inner call to wholeness. But they became separated from their own souls, betraying the trust of citizens, stockholders, and the faithful—and making our democracy, our economy, and our religious institutions less trustworthy in the process.

These particular stories will soon fade from the front page, but the story of the divided life will be in the news forever. Its drama is perennial, and its social costs are immense. The poet Rumi said it with ruthless candor eight hundred years ago: “If you are here unfaithfully with us / you’re causing terrible damage.”⁴

How shall we understand the pathology of the divided life? If we approach it as a problem to be solved by “raising the ethical bar”—exhorting each other to jump higher and meting out tougher penalties to those who fall short—we may feel more virtuous for a while, but we will not address the problem at its source.

The divided life, at bottom, is not a failure of ethics. It is a failure of human wholeness. Doctors who are dismissive of patients, politicians who lie to the voters, executives who cheat retirees out of their savings, clerics who rob children of their well-being—these people, for the most part, do not lack ethical knowledge or convictions. They doubtless took courses on professional ethics and probably received top grades. They gave speeches and sermons on ethical issues and more than likely believed their own words. But they had a well-rehearsed habit of holding their own knowledge and beliefs at great remove from the living of their lives.

That habit is vividly illustrated by a story in the news as I write. The former CEO of a biotechnology firm was convicted of insider trading and sentenced to seven years in prison after putting his daughter and elderly father in legal jeopardy by having them cover for him. Asked what was on his mind

as he committed his crimes, he said, “I could sit there . . . thinking I was the most honest CEO that ever lived [and] at the same time . . . glibly do something [wrong] and rationalize it.”⁵

Those words were spoken by an expert at “compartmentalizing”—a much-prized capacity in many lines of work but at bottom no more than a six-syllable name for the divided life. Few of us may share the speaker’s fate, but many of us already share his expertise: we developed it at school, where ethics, like most subjects, tends to be taught in ways that leave our inner lives untouched.

As teenagers and young adults, we learned that self-knowledge counts for little on the road to workplace success. What counts is the “objective” knowledge that empowers us to manipulate the world. Ethics, taught in this context, becomes one more arm’s-length study of great thinkers and their thoughts, one more exercise in data collection that fails to inform our hearts.

I value ethical standards, of course. But in a culture like ours—which devalues or dismisses the reality and power of the inner life—ethics too often becomes an external code of conduct, an objective set of rules we are told to follow, a moral exoskeleton we put on hoping to prop ourselves up. The problem with exoskeletons is simple: we can slip them off as easily as we can don them.

I also value integrity. But that word means much more than adherence to a moral code: it means “the state or quality of being entire, complete, and unbroken,” as in *integer* or *integral*. Deeper still, integrity refers to something—such as a jack pine or the human self—in its “unimpaired, unadulterated, or genuine state, corresponding to its original condition.”⁶

When we understand integrity for what it is, we stop obsessing over codes of conduct and embark on the more demanding journey toward being whole. Then we learn the truth of John Middleton Murry’s remark, “For the good [person] to realize that it is better to be whole than to be good is to enter on a strait and narrow path compared to which his [or her] previous rectitude was flowery license.”⁷

Living “Divided No More”

A jack pine “solitary on its rocky point” is one of the loveliest sights I know. But lovelier still is the sight of a man or woman standing with integrity intact.