



Preface by

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Foreword and Afterword by

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TRANSFORMATIVE CONVERSATIONS

A Guide to Mentoring Communities
Among Colleagues in Higher Education



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Table of Contents

[More Praise for Transformative Conversations](#)

[Other Titles of Interest](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Preface](#)

[Foreword: Remembering what the Ancients Knew](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Notes](#)

[Interlude: Finding the Time and Space for a More Meaningful Professional Life](#)

[Chapter 1: What Is a Formation Mentoring Community?](#)

[Formation](#)

[Mentoring](#)

[Community](#)

[Contrasting FMCs with Other Groups](#)

[The Lineage of FMCs](#)
[Notes](#)

[Interlude: Message in a Bottle](#)
[Notes](#)

[Chapter 2: Cultivating Growth:](#)
[Conversation in Community](#)

[Hospitality](#)
[Safety](#)
[Courage](#)
[Honesty](#)
[Trust](#)
[Diversity](#)
[Humility](#)
[Accountability](#)
[Friendship](#)
[Notes](#)

[Interlude: Is There a Place for Me in a](#)
[Formation Mentoring Community?](#)

[Chapter 3: The Basics of Creating](#)
[Formation Mentoring Communities on Your](#)
[Campus](#)

[Addressing Obstacles](#)
[Starting an FMC](#)
[The Structure of an FMC](#)

[Creating the Container for Your Formation](#)
[Mentoring Communities](#)
[In Conclusion](#)
[Notes](#)

[Chapter 4: Collaborative Stewardship: Facilitating a Formation Mentoring Community](#)

[Facilitating an FMC](#)
[Shared Facilitation](#)
[Creating a Level Playing Field](#)
[The Opening Session](#)
[Tending the Container](#)
[The Life Cycles of FMCs](#)
[When a Member Leaves an FMC](#)
[Changing the Size and Makeup of an FMC](#)
[Inviting a New Member](#)
[Priming the Pump: Openings and Closings](#)
[Readings](#)
[Topics and Themes for Discussion](#)
[Notes](#)

[Chapter 5: From Individual to Institutional Change: Ripples of Transformation](#)

[FMC Ripples at the University of Washington](#)
[FMC Ripples at Elon University](#)
[FMC Ripples at Gallaudet University](#)
[FMC Ripples at the University of California Irvine](#)
[In Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Afterword: Beyond the Small Group](#)

[Notes](#)

[Recommended Resources](#)

[Gratitudes](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Index](#)

More Praise for Transformative Conversations

“Despite the ideal of the ‘academic community,’ far too many of us live within the silos of our own programs or disciplines and long for a deeper connection with our colleagues to share our passions and heart and soul along with our intellect. *Transformative Conversations* is a book that is both visionary and intensely practical about how to create formation mentoring communities to break through the silos and create authentic community. This book is exceptionally timely as all of us face the stresses of budget constraints, dynamic change, and disruptive forces. Formation mentoring communities offer incredible hope drawn from the experiences of the four authors. Their stories and interludes are inspiring, and the book is a veritable toolkit for getting started. After reading an advance copy of the book, I intend to go out and form an FMC myself. The authors were challenged to write a book to start a movement, and this book just might do it.”

— Ralph A. Wolff, president, Senior College Commission, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)

“This brief, beautiful, lucid book demonstrates how people meeting in small peer groups to explore themselves and what matters most to them can nourish, deepen, and transform themselves, each other, and eventually their larger community.”

— Roger Walsh MD, Ph.D, University of California Medical School; author, *Essential Spirituality: The Seven Central Practices*

“This is a radical story about how to create a more intimate and relational culture inside the halls of higher education—which is no small accomplishment. This movement is occurring without a budget, a curriculum, or management approval. It is a great story of the power of intimacy and the small group as a positive revolutionary force. A must-read for those who long for higher education to return from the abyss of siloed isolation to its original charter as a cooperative learning institution committed to developing the whole person in service of the common good.”

— Peter Block, author, *Flawless Consulting* and *Abundant Community*

“As a mediator who has assisted in settling dozens of cases involving institutions of higher learning, I only wish for the parties involved that this book had been available before differences devolved into wasteful lawsuits. This book provides practical guidance on how to create the space that can hold differences and transform the energy around them into creative rather than destructive forces, and it provides specific ways to avoid miscommunications that lead to needless conflict.”

— Hon. Rebecca Westerfield (Ret.), JAMS: Judicial Arbitration and Mediation Services

“This book is filled with wisdom. While it addresses formation mentoring communities in academia, the lessons are applicable to any setting. The notion that ‘hard to change’ cultures, so resistant to expert intervention, are susceptible to transformation and renewal from within is heartening. The blueprint for transformation that this book provides is invaluable.”

— Patrick O'Neill, president, Extraordinary Conversations Inc.

“In the ‘superstorm’ of writings about the crisis in higher education, this little gem of a book stands out like a mindfulness bell. It calls us back to the only thing that truly matters, the energy and wisdom buried in the minds and hearts of dedicated educators. Forget MOOCs and start organizing grassroots FMCs—countercultural, profoundly humanistic conversation groups. Watch deep truths emerge. After that, who knows what? Perhaps a twenty-first-century liberal education attuned to the coming generation’s global imperatives: interdependence, sustainability, and mutual cooperation. Now there’s a radical thought. Read this book please. It’s all here.”

— Diana Chapman Walsh, president emerita, Wellesley College; trustee emerita, Amherst College; member of the MIT Corporation.

Other Titles of Interest

Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*

Jeanie Cockell and Joan MacArthur-Blair, *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force*

Laurent A. Daloz, *Mentor, Guiding the Journey of Adult Learners, Second Edition (with new Foreword, Preface, and Afterword)*

Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, *Teaching with Fire: Poetry That Sustains the Courage to Teach*

Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*

Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajonc, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal*

Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith, Revised Tenth Anniversary Edition*

Daniel Wheeler, *Servant Leadership in Higher Education: Principles and Practices*



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Excerpt from “The Water Wheel” in Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi*. San Francisco, Harper San Francisco, 2004.

Preface

Margaret Mead famously said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Clearly, Mead overstated her point. Some social change has come from small groups of cunning, malevolent people whose commitments have ranged across the continuum of evil.

Still, Mead's point stands. Every movement for positive social change that I know anything about has been initiated by groups of the sort she describes. Of course, successful movements find ways to rally more and more people around their flag, consolidating and deploying collective forms of “people power” to make an impact on institutions and societies. But even as movements for social change expand, the effective ones continue to depend on small group “base communities,” not merely to make decisions about strategies and tactics but to sustain the energy and morale of their adherents in the midst of arduous struggles.

Transformative Conversations: A Guide to Mentoring Communities Among Colleagues in Higher Education focuses on the development of small groups called formation mentoring communities (FMCs) on college and university campuses. FMCs differ from professional meetings of the kind that normally fill our days. An FMC would not be a planning meeting, a task force, or a problem-solving session. Nor would it be a gathering to develop a joint professional project. The group's “project,” so to speak, would be the group's members themselves. The agenda would consist of reflecting on our work and life, remembering our callings, exploring meaning and purpose, clarifying personal values, and realigning our lives with them. The goal of an FMC would be to use meaningful

conversations to reinvigorate ourselves, our work, and, by extension, the academy.

Anyone who knows even a little bit about academic culture knows that gatherings such as this are, to say the least, countercultural. So it is important to know that the authors of this book are four accomplished educators who serve in four very different academic settings. They not only believe that it is possible for faculty and staff to gather for these personal and professional purposes; they know it is possible because they have convened and hosted such groups on their own campuses. Their book draws on lessons learned as they experimented with bringing colleagues together and discovered both the potentials and the limits of their on-the-ground efforts to create FMCs.

It is common knowledge that universities are highly resistant to transformation. As the old saw has it, “Changing a university is like moving a cemetery. You don’t get much help from the inhabitants.” But FMCs have the potential to create transformational energies, as they help faculty and staff reclaim the values that brought them into the profession in the first place and help them find ways to bring those values to life amid the increasingly challenging conditions of twenty-first-century academic life.

I am convinced that the greatest threat to the highest values of any of our professions is the institution in which that profession is practiced. Attorneys who go into the law because they want to serve the cause of justice must constantly resist the deformations of the justice system. Physicians who go into medicine because they want to help people achieve wholeness, even those who are terminally ill, must resist the deformations of the health care system. And teachers who go into the public schools or professors who go into the university to help educate young people must resist the deformations of educational institutions.

Because the threat to professional values comes not from without but from within, transformation must come from within as well. The institutions that house our professions are too complex and opaque for outsiders to know where the levers for change can be found. Insiders alone have the necessary knowledge and access. But insiders who have been co-opted by the self-protective and self-serving logic of institutions—or who have simply given up in the face of all those discouragements—will never be agents of institutional change. The energy and thoughtfulness for transformation will come only from insiders who have reclaimed the commitments that brought them into their profession in the first place and have found the courage that comes from saying, “I’m not going to let anything or anyone rob me of my core values.”

Formation mentoring communities have great potential for laying the groundwork for institutional transformation by helping educators help each other engage in self-examination, discuss challenging circumstances, and remember and explore personal values, meaning, purpose, and calling. I hope this book will be read and put into practice by enough academics that the green shoots of change will begin to spring up in places where its principles and practices are embraced and embodied.

Parker J. Palmer
Madison, Wisconsin
November 2012

Founder and senior partner, Center for Courage and
Renewal

Author of *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, *The Courage to Teach*, *A Hidden Wholeness*, and *Let Your Life Speak*

Foreword: Remembering what the Ancients Knew

What catalyzes deep change for human beings is always an appeal to the heart. The heart is the seat of our courage to remember and live by what matters most profoundly. It has been at the center of all sustainable personal transformation and at the foundation of all social movements throughout time.

Sometimes a simple invitation is an unexpected appeal to the heart. It was through such an invitation that this book, *Transformative Conversations: A Guide to Mentoring Communities Among Colleagues in Higher Education*, began. Four years ago, we both said yes to an invitation from the Fetzer Institute to join a group of peers and explore the concept of intergenerational mentoring in the hopes of learning what this approach might contribute to revitalizing the innate values of higher education. Originally we joined this process as senior mentors, along with others of our generation known to us—people whose company we enjoyed over the years and whose scholarship we respected. Collectively we all shared the hope of passing on what had been learned in the course of a lifetime of teaching to others who were younger.

What we encountered was something far different: an experience of intense personal and professional learning and growth in the company of four young men who themselves were learning and growing. Through this project, we two women in our seventies, who had known each other for thirty years, met four brilliant, gifted, and competent men in their thirties and forties and entered into a mutual relationship that was new to us. Despite our years of mentoring experience, we were completely unprepared for

the initiatory process that would be galvanized for all six of us or how profoundly we would reshape, stretch, and amplify each other individually and collectively.

Over the three years of the project, all six of us became more than we were at the beginning. We discovered we each had within ourselves certain core values that were like seeds dropped into soil: when exposed to acceptance, honesty, trust, and genuine friendship, they could sprout and blossom into change in ourselves and in our work.

Over time each of us was mentored by all the others, sometimes formally but often in quiet moments over a meal or a cup of tea. We seniors both became convinced that we were learning as much from the four young men as they were learning from us. As with most of our senior colleagues in higher education, we two who had known each other for decades and had long admired and supported each other's work had never mentored one another before. Indeed, most academics of our age and stage have not been mentored by anyone for many years.

Gradually, over time, we became a true formation mentoring community. The six of us catalyzed and called forth new aspects and dimensions from each other, and at different times and in different ways, we discovered in the relationship between us the heart of higher education. Within our relationships to one another, whether working, writing, or in weekly phone conversations, we experienced the grace and ease of a steady, nonconceptual wisdom that existed within and among us that was subtle, palatable, and contagious. This innate wisdom allowed us to explore together what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called "the dearest freshness deep down things." We discovered that those deep-down wisdom things are profoundly valuable, transformative, replicable, and inextinguishable. We all experienced the ability to develop fresh capacities and grow.