

LEADING FROM WITHIN: CREATING CIRCLES OF TRUST

Course Syllabus

Instructors: David Hagstrom & Caryl Hurtig Casbon

Week of July 13-17, 2009

Monday-Friday: 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m.

Areas of Study: Functional Theology, Spirituality, and Religion & Society

Format: Seminar

Credit hours: 3 semester hours

Course description:

Based on the pioneering work of Dr. Parker Palmer, and drawn from Quaker practices, this course emphasizes the connection between identity and integrity, and aligning soul & role. Integrating theory and practice, we will explore how to develop communities of trust that support us in the midst of the demands of social action and our ministries.

This course will be held in a retreat format, where students will not only engage ideas, but will also experience, and reflect on the practices that make up circles of trust, practices that invite the voice of the soul. Students will become familiar with disciplines that support the rigors of the inner journey, as they also enrich their capacity to listen deeply in community, and maintain nonviolent practices in the face of complexity. There will be opportunities for writing, reflection, small group interaction, and inclusion of poetry and stories from various wisdom traditions; we also offer an opportunity to practice the countercultural process of the Clearness Committee. Finally, there will be consideration of how these practices may be integrated to enrich the life & vitality of the congregation.

Reading Assignments:

Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation, by Parker Palmer; The Exquisite Risk: Daring to Live an Authentic Life, by Mark Nepo; A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life, by Parker Palmer, and the March, 2009 edition of WEAVINGS: Standing in the Tragic Gap.

Course Assignments & Evaluation:

- All students will keep a journal where they record their reflections in response to seminar assignments.
- Students will prepare response papers to the reading assignments.

- Students will submit a final paper addressing how they will be integrating the learning into their ministries and their lives, due two weeks after the last class meeting.

Due to the experiential nature of this seminar, full attendance is a requirement; if you have advance knowledge of time conflicts, please do not enroll in this seminar.

Evaluation will be based on:

30% Journal and course participation
30% Reading Response papers
40% Final Paper

Plagiarism & Incomplete Policy:

This course will adhere to the printed policies for incompletes and plagiarism defined by the Pacific School of Religion.

The GTU Mission Statement:

Pacific School of Religion is committed to serving God by equipping historic and emerging faith communities for ministries of compassion and justice in a changing world. We affirm our historic mission to educate men and women for ministry and other forms of religious leadership and to be a center and resource for Christian thought in an interfaith and pluralistic context.

PSR's commitments find expression in innovative programs of scholarship and education for clergy and laity. Strong faith communities require an integration of faith and reason, theory and practice, piety and critical intellect, tradition and creativity. We seek to embody these values and disciplines in our programs and our common lives.

Day-by-Day Description & Student Outcomes

Day One: A Rope to the Barn: the Connection Between Soul & Role

On our first day of class, the emphasis will be on understanding the Quaker foundations for creating circles of trust, an innovative process of communal spiritual direction, and the philosophical basis for creating spaces for the inward journey in an interfaith and pluralistic context. Through use of a central metaphor in A Hidden Wholeness, the 'rope to the barn' students will articulate their connection between their 'soul and role,' or the importance of one's inner practices, and how these practices relate to one's ministry. There will also be an exploration of the notion of living a divided life as well as understanding birthright gifts & calling through stories that illuminate these concepts.

Student Outcomes:

Students will experience the difference between 'spaces' of intellect, emotion, ego and soul as noted in statement found in A Hidden Wholeness (copied below) and will be able to write about their understanding of the connection between their spiritual practices, their gifts, and their leadership and ministries.

- We know how to create spaces that invite the *intellect* to show up, analyzing reality, parsing logic and arguing its case: such spaces can be found, for example, in universities.
- We know how to create spaces that invite the *emotions* into play, reacting to injury, expressing anger and celebrating joy: they can be found in therapy groups.
- We know how to create spaces that invite the *will* to emerge, consolidating energy and effort on behalf of a shared goal: they can be found in task forces and committees.
- We certainly know how to invite the *ego* to put in an appearance, polishing its image, protecting its turf and demanding its rights: they can be found wherever we go!
- But we know very little about creating spaces that invite the *soul* to make itself known. Apart from the natural world, such spaces are hard to find – and we seem to place little value on preserving the soul spaces in nature.
From *A Hidden Wholeness*

Day Two: Life on the Mobius Strip: Being Alone Together

During this class session, we begin an exploration of what we mean by the soul, and how we might begin to approach it and speak its language, using the language the seasons to evoke the themes of the Spirit and soul.

“Philosophers haggle about what to call this core of our humanity, but I am no stickler for precision. Thomas Merton called it true self. Buddhists call it original nature or big self. Quakers call it the inner teacher or inner light. Hasidic Jews call it a spark of the divine. Humanists call it identity and integrity. In popular parlance, people often call it soul. And thus far in this book, I have called it all these names!”

“What we name it matters little to me, since the origins, nature and destiny of call-it-what-you-will are forever hidden from us, and no one can credibly know its true name. But that we name it matters a great deal.” Parker Palmer

Using the mobius strip as a metaphor, students decipher their ‘onstage’ behavior with their ‘backstage’ description of self, and the consequences of living behind an inner wall. We also examine how to hold the paradox of being ‘alone in community,’ and our need for both the life-giving qualities of solitude and silence, and the importance of communities that support the voice of the soul.

Student Outcomes: By the successful completion of this session, students will articulate in writing, the connection between their inner worlds, and their outward behavior. They will also reflect on the different communities they have worked and lived in, and how they were supportive to the life of the soul, and where they were destructive. Their faith communities will be reviewed through this lens.

Day Three: I Pin My Hopes

“I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place.”

Rufus Jones

On this day, we decipher the qualities that make a circle of trust possible: clear limits, open invitations, skilled leadership, common ground, and graceful ambiance. Students will consider the following questions:

In your experience of this circle of trust we are holding in this seminar, what seem to be the most important elements? What are the important touchstones of this process? What practices have been important to its success for you? In your mind, what is nonnegotiable in a circle of trust? Special emphasis will be placed on the qualities of leadership for this work. For instance: A COT needs more leadership than a hierarchy does. The authority of the leader is not power, but comes from living an undivided life. The leader participates, but his or her needs can’t take up the space of the group. We also present the use of ‘third things’ as a way of inviting the soul to speak into the circle, without scaring the shy inner self away.

Student Outcomes: After successful participation, the students will demonstrate an understanding of a ‘non-negotiables’ for designing a circle of trust, and will be able to discuss where this sort of group may be applicable in their faith communities.

Day Four: Deep Speaks to Deep: Communal Discernment Process

“We make or break the circle by the way we speak, listen, and respond to each other about a poem, a topic, a feeling, a problem.”

“When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved; you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honored. If your problem is soul deep, your soul alone knows what to do with it”

On this day we examine the topics of how we speak and listen is a circle of trust, using rules that may go against our every-day manners of speaking and listening, but that enhance our invitation to create spaces where we can hear our inner teachers, spaces where the shy soul can make itself known. Students will have an opportunity to participate in a Clearness Committee, a communal process based on this Quaker practice.

Student Outcomes: Through successful participation in this process students will practice and apply the use of open and honest questions, and will be able to describe how this process may be integrated into their own lives and faith communities; they will begin to have a grounding in, and some practice of the disciplines involved in successfully creating Clearness Committees.

Day Five: Solitude, Humor, and Nonviolence in Circles of Trust

*“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field.
I’ll meet you there.”*

Rumi

In this final session, we explore the notion of ‘living in the tragic gap’ or how we can hold complexity in our lives. How do we stand in our truth when confronted with the painful gap between what can be, and what is? How are circles of trust models of communal practices, which are nonviolent in their nature? These questions will be held in relation to our faith communities, as well as our personal lives. Students will share their own experiences of holding powerful tensions over a long period of time, and the spiritual implications for this endeavor. There will also be an opportunity to practice a conversation about a controversial topic, using story as a way of finding common ground. Finally, this day will be a time for ‘harvesting our learning’ and reviewing what has occurred during our time together.

Student Outcomes

Students will be able to articulate the concept of the ‘tragic gap’ and how to hold paradox in ways that are life giving, and nonviolent. They will write and reflect on how these concepts inform their ministries.

