



# Chalice Circles

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## Participant Guide

Revised 2020

Online Version

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**I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles.**  
*- Rufus Jones, Quaker theologian*

**Through others we become ourselves.**  
*- Lev S. Vygotsky*

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# WELCOME

Welcome to Chalice Circles and the adventures of small groups! This guide is a roadmap to the journey ahead. It covers how Chalice Circles work, but it also steps back and talks about the gifts you will receive, and give. Small groups are not just about exchanging ideas; they are most fundamentally a means of offering sacred space to each other. This sacred “gift giving” sits at the center of this guide. It will prepare you to participate effectively, but more importantly, it is here to welcome you as a gift to others.

We begin by sharing the deeper purpose of Chalice Circles. While much of this guide covers the “how” of the Chalice Circle process, we also want you grounded in the deeper “why.” Groups succeed when everyone is clear about the ground rules; they thrive when members are clear about the deeper transformation small groups offer.

We then get into the nuts and bolts, from creating a group covenant, to participating in meetings, to the work we do before we arrive.

Finally, you’ll find some readings and quotes about why small groups matter so much. Think of them as additional companions for the journey ahead.

This guide, along with the first monthly Chalice Circle packet, will help prepare you for your first meeting which is a kick-off session and will be a bit different from your regular monthly meetings.

Let the journey begin!

# PURPOSE

## Why Join a Chalice Circle?

Before we talk about the how to run a Chalice Circles group, let's be clear about why they matter. Facilitation requires good technique; it thrives when leaders are clear about the deeper transformation they are supporting.

**Simply put, Chalice Circles offer the gift of spiritual connection.** Around us swirls a shallow, frantic and materialistic culture that can leave us cut off from our deepest selves and life's gifts and needs only discovered in community with others. Many of us come to church hungry to mend these sacred connections that get frayed and torn. Chalice Circles exist to support this journey of reconnection to life, others and ourselves.

We do that by listening. Fundamentally, that's what Chalice Circles offer: an invitation to listen more deeply and intentionally, in three distinct ways. (Listening is not dependent on hearing; it is a quality of attention, using any of our senses to do so.)

**First, we listen to each other.** It's a gift some of us only rarely experience. We might more often feel like we are "talked at." Many of us are bombarded daily with information and demands that can drown out our own voice. Being listened to by trusted companions helps us hear our own voice again. And more than that: It gives us our story back. Theologian, Rebecca Parker, puts it this way:

*There is a quality of listening that is possible among a circle of human beings, who by their attentiveness to one another create a space in which each person is able to give voice to the truth of his or her life. There is the miracle of authentic narrative, made possible by listening that holds still long enough to let our truth be told.*

The Chalice Circle process is an invitation "to hold still long enough to let our truth be told."

**Second, we listen to our lives.** This can also be challenging to do. Directly or indirectly, we might have been taught to see life as a challenge not a companion. In this worldview, the goal is to conquer life, not listen to it. Whether that is our habitual stance or not, Chalice Circles invite us to dance with life rather than fighting it. Through spiritual practices and questions focused on our daily living, we engage the world not as an obstacle course but as a host of holy voices calling us to greater loving and living. Christian novelist, Frederick Buechner captures this sacred way of engaging the world:

*You never know what may cause them. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it.... You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not [the Sacred] is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where you should go next.*

**Finally, we listen to our deepest selves.** Introspection is most often understood as solitary work, but small group practice teaches us that going inward can be enhanced by others who witness our sharing. Ironically, we sometimes hear that “still, small voice inside” best when the voices of friends speak and offer their presence in a disciplined way. Quaker teacher Parker Palmer explains:

*So what do we do in a circle of trust? We speak our own truth; we listen receptively to the truth of others; we ask each other honest, open questions instead of giving counsel; and we offer each other the healing and empowering gifts of silence and laughter... Our purpose is not to teach anyone anything but to give the inner teacher a chance to teach us.*

Together, these three sacred practices of listening – to each other, the world and our deepest selves – add up to a more intentional and authentic life. It's a journey back to connection, and ultimately a journey back home. Again, we turn to Parker Palmer. Here's how he describes the path:

*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 of their house 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.*

*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 of us*

*are lost at this moment and are trying to find our way home. Some are lost without knowing it. And some are using the blizzard as cover while cynically exploiting its chaos for private gain...*

*My own experience of the blizzard, which includes getting lost in it more often than I like to admit, tells me that... 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. (From A Hidden Wholeness)*

Realizing we are in the soul's backyard. Grasping again the rope that leads us back home.

This, ultimately, is why one joins a Chalice Circle. This is what your role as facilitator is ultimately all about. You are not just ensuring good process; you are offering the gift of wholeness and home.

# APPROACH

## What makes Chalice Circles different?

We've already begun to answer this question. Chalice Circles' distinguishing characteristic is a focus on deep listening that helps us heal spiritual disconnection. But the way Chalice Circles go about that is also unique. Here's how:

**Chalice Circles invite us to listen to each other deeply *and with discipline.***

There is nothing passive about deep listening. It requires effort and intentionality. Chalice Circles invite group members to practice three distinct disciplines of deep listening during their meeting time, captured simply in this three-part mantra:

- Hold still – *the practice of offering space*
- Hold at bay – *the practice of offering presence*
- Hold out and hold up – *the practice of offering gratitude and noting meaningful connections*

“Hold still” is about offering each other the gift of space. It is what Rebecca Parker calls “a listening that holds still long enough to let others’ truths be told.” In practice, this means responding to a person’s sharing with silence rather than words. In our groups, each member takes a turn sharing before any group discussion or reactions occur. We “hold” each other’s sharing, rather than react to it with comments or questions. Responding to each other with silence can feel awkward, but makes room for the one speaking to hear themselves. It’s about offering a spaciousness that allows one’s sharing to wander in safety and new insights to emerge. Parker Palmer refers to this as the practice of “honoring the shy soul”:

“The soul is shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out... A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly "in the woods" with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up.”

“Hold at bay” is about offering presence rather than advice. It involves keeping our often unhelpful reactions in check. It’s natural to analyze and assess when listening. It’s understandable that we want to offer advice and try to help people solve the problems they are struggling with. It’s also often

not what the person sharing needs. So in the Chalice Circle, listeners hold responses at bay by following the rule of “No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.” Christine Robinson & Alicia Hawkins explain our discipline of “holding at bay” this way:

*It's hard work to listen with an open heart rather than an analyzing mind. It requires putting aside judgment, categorization, and evaluation and instead just hearing the story that is told, and the feelings behind it... Even the most experienced listeners repeatedly will slip into judging and analyzing. When you realize that this has happened, gently set aside your thinking for later and open your heart. Buddhist meditators, who face the same problem, speak of treating the mind like a beloved but sometimes inappropriate child who wants to show off to guests. 'Not now, sweetie,' says the kind parent. 'You go and play and we will join you in a bit.' Similarly, when we are listening and notice that we are commenting to ourselves about what is being said, we can tell our minds, 'This is not the time for analysis. I just need to hear this story.'... In time, we discover that to be listened to is a way of being loved, and that listening is a way of being loving. (Heart to Heart)*

“Hold out and hold up” is about what we say when we do talk and react to each other’s sharing. After a round of sitting in silence and listening to each group member share, the group then opens itself to a time of sharing reactions. But instead of responding to each other with “fixing, advising or saving,” we *hold out* gratitude for one thing that struck us in particular as we listened and *hold up* how it connected to our lives and helped us clarify something about our own situation. This requires a different kind of listening from the start. Instead of analyzing or judging what people are saying, we listen for sharing that connects with us personally and feels like a personal gift. In other words, we don’t just “sit quietly” while others are talking; we actively listen for those precious moments when another’s story or experience takes us more deeply into our own.

**Chalice Circles invite us to experience the themes, not just analyze them.**

Spiritual analysis without spiritual practice leaves us unchanged. This is why we make spiritual exercises a central part of each monthly packet. These spiritual practices take us beyond the question of “What do you think?” and invite us into the deeper one of “Where are you willing to let your faith take you?”



For instance, when we wrestled with the concept of grace, we didn't just share what theologians had to say about it. The packet also challenged group members to find a way to bring grace (a gift one doesn't expect, earn or even deserve) into another person's life. The goal was to "be grace," not just talk about it. Another example is how we handled the theme of prayer. The packets included theories and perspectives on prayer, but they also invited members to find a new way to pray (or even try prayer for the first time!).

Two or more spiritual practices are suggested each month. This allows people to pick the one that meets them where they are. Some exercises are intense; others are playful. Some involve a lot of time and commitment; others can be done in one sitting. The experiences are diverse as well. Some members report having "the most moving experience of my life." Others come in and say "I'm not sure that worked for me, but it did make me realize..." No matter what, the experience of "doing" opens us up in a way that just can't be accomplished through sitting and thinking.

The goal is to get us out of our heads and into our lives. This is not to say we leave thinking behind. Instead, the aim of the spiritual exercises is to challenge our tendency to use "objective analysis" as an escape. As Parker Palmer puts it,

*Instead of telling our valuable stories, we seek safety in abstractions, speaking to each other about our opinions, ideas, and beliefs rather than about what is really going on in our lives. Academic culture blesses this practice by insisting that the more abstract our speech, the more likely we are to touch the universal truths that unite us. But what happens is exactly the reverse: as our discourse becomes more abstract, the less connected we feel. There is less sense of community among intellectuals than in the most 'primitive' society of storytellers. (A Hidden Wholeness)*

By pushing us to engage and talk about "what is really going on in our lives," our spiritual exercises shake things up. A holy crack takes root in our entrenched narratives. Suddenly we find ourselves challenged not just to think differently but to live differently.

### **Chalice Circles offer questions that walk with you rather than quiz you.**

Chalice Circles also take a unique approach to discussion questions. In traditional small groups, questions are an opportunity for the group to think together. Chalice Circles treat them as tools for individual exploration. Instead of having small groups to go through a list of questions

and discuss them one by one, Chalice Circles participants are asked to read all the questions ahead of time and find one question that “hooks them” — one that speaks to and challenges them personally. Participants then live with -- or “walk with” -- that question for a couple weeks leading up to the group, coming to their meeting, not with an answer to that question or others on the list, but with a story about how this one particular question led them to a new and personal insight. This technique leads us away from abstraction and intellectualizing and instead invites us into a deeper focus on daily living.

It also invites us to listen to our own inner voice. By asking participants to pick which question is “theirs,” the packets invite a mindset of spiritual discernment. The packet invites us to figure out which question our deepest self is asking us. In this way, our approach to questions doesn’t just foster good conversation; it also introduces people to the spiritual practice of “living the question.”

### **Chalice Circles offer conversation partners throughout the entire month**

Our monthly group conversations are a gift, but we know that spiritual development is not a once-a-month thing. Honoring this, Chalice Circles give participants the experience of a month-long conversation with multiple conversation partners. The packets contain extensive recommended readings, poetry, quotes and multimedia on the theme, keeping members engaged with numerous voices throughout the entire month. (You can also encourage circle members to be in conversation with each other between meetings, if they choose.)

Engaging the different voices in the packets is another way of encouraging participants to “listen to life.” As Unitarian Universalists, we honor the way the holy speaks through sacred texts, but we also see the world itself as a holy text. Additionally, our belief in ongoing revelation calls us to listen to *new & current* voices. For us, this means taking the voices of bloggers, musicians and “ordinary people” as seriously as those of philosophers, theologians and academics. Treating blogs, YouTube videos, movies and music videos as “sacred texts” is not just an attempt to “be current.” It is most deeply an effort to remind us that the voice of the Holy is all around us, even in the most unlikely of places. The goal is to help us remain always open and always listening!

**Chalice Circles remind us that Unitarian Universalism is a distinctive community of faith, not a religion of “anything goes.”**

Our monthly themes are not just interesting topics. Rather, they focus us on a spiritual value that our UU faith has historically honored and today calls us to embody in our lives. In other words, at each meeting, we are reminded that our faith promotes a preferred way for us to be in the world. This is why each monthly theme is framed with the question: “What does it mean to live faithfully \_\_\_\_\_?” It is our way of remembering that our faith asks something specific of us.

This frame also honors the fact that we need each other to become who we most deeply want to be. We talk about being a *people* of faith, not just a *person* of faith because, for Unitarian Universalists, spirituality is not a solo journey. It is something that emerges in the context of covenanted community. We hold each other accountable. We offer each other the gift of deep listening. We share our various perspectives so all of us can see the greater whole. Through this we grow. Through others, we become ourselves.

# PROCESS

## Meeting Format & Process

### Prior to the Meeting

- Members make time to engage the monthly packets at least 1-2 weeks prior to each meeting.
- Members select and complete one of the spiritual exercises.
- Members make time to reflect on the list of questions and pick the one that speaks most directly to them. They then “live with” that question for a week or two. Some make the question a part of their meditative practice. Others print it out and pin it somewhere they can see it each day. Some just pull it into awareness in a more informal way.

### At the Meeting (modified for Zoom gatherings)

*Meetings are usually 1 ½ hours long and follow this format:*

#### **Logging on in the Zoom Room** – 5-10 minutes *before the meeting start time*

Members log on using the Zoom Room link provided by the facilitator to assure sound and video are working properly

#### **Centering** – *around 2-5 minutes*

Begin with a chalice lighting and centering words. Most often the facilitator or a group member shares a favorite quote, poem or video from the recommended resource section of the packet or other sources. Some leaders offer a prayer or lead the group in a guided meditation to bring members into the present moment.

#### **Brief Check-In** – *around 20-30 minutes*

Members briefly participate in a focused check-in. The goal is to avoid involved reports about all that has happened since the group last met. Each member takes 2-4 minutes to share. The group listens quietly as each person shares rather than engaging in cross-talk. This part of the meeting typically takes no more 30 minutes.

#### **Spiritual Exercises or Questions** – *around 40 minutes*

Members share either their experience of doing one spiritual exercise or carrying one question for the previous week or two. The sharing is newly combined this year, to create a shorter (more Zoom friendly) format. You might reflect on why you made the choice you did (why the question or practice spoke to you) and where it led you. Did it lead to any unexpected feelings or insights? Did it challenge, change or deepen your understanding of this month’s theme or of your faith?

Members listen quietly as each one takes a turn sharing. After each person shares, the group might pause for a short silence until another member is ready to begin.

**Engaging the Questions** – *around 20 minutes*

After everyone has had a chance to share, the facilitator opens the floor and invites members into a time of reflective conversation. Members are asked to speak from their own experience, holding up gratitude for a comment or two that particularly spoke to them and how it connected to or helped clarify something in their own lives. The group continues to follow the “holding at bay” rule: “No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.” This makes room for a conversation of appreciation.

**Check-Out** – *around 5 minutes*

Meetings end by each member briefly sharing a statement of gratitude. Facilitators ask participants to think about all that was shared and experienced during the meeting and then lift up one comment or experience for which they are particularly grateful.

**Closing Words**

The meeting ends by extinguishing the chalice and sharing a closing reading, prayer or blessing.

## Group Covenant

A covenant is a list of the ways we agree to be together as a group. It includes the promises, practices and behaviors that guide our time together. The idea of covenant is central to Unitarian Universalism. We are a covenantal religion rather than a creedal religion. In other words, we are bound by the way we promise to treat each other, rather than by common beliefs and creeds. Forming a covenant isn't just about good group process, it is a core Unitarian Universalist practice. It is the means by which we are held together in community.

When starting a new group, a group covenant is one of the first things discussed and affirmed. Facilitators promise to help the group revisit and re-affirm the covenant at least once a year.

The below covenant captures the core promises and practices of the Chalice Circles approach. Groups can use it as is, but it is often helpful for groups to add additional commitments or put the commitments into their own words.

### **Proposed Covenant for Online Chalice Circles**

#### ***Before our meetings, we agree to:***

- Make meetings a priority, including being on time, setting up and testing our on-line connections before the meeting begins.
- Contact the facilitator(s) ahead of time if we are unable to attend.
- Engage the packet ahead of time: reading the material, reflecting on one of the questions and doing one of the spiritual exercises.

#### ***During our meetings, we agree to:***

- Practice deep listening, offering each other time to share without interruption.
- Honor the rule of “no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!” during times of discussion and cross-talk.
- Monitor the length and frequency of our own participation so all members have opportunities to speak, *and to mute our connection when not speaking.*
- Speak for ourselves and offer reactions rooted in gratitude and connected to our own experience.
- Not to expect perfection in use of technology! If technical problems develop, to be patient and nonjudgmental of self and others.

#### ***After our meetings, we agree to:***

- Respect the privacy of group members by keeping personal sharing confidential.
- Keep each other in our prayers and thoughts.

### **Facilitator Covenant**

Your facilitator also makes a commitment to Circle members to:

- Make every effort to start and end meetings on time.
- Make sure all voices are heard.
- Remind the group about our covenant, process and practices.
- Help the group be a circle of caring and concern.
- Follow up with members who miss a meeting without notice to make sure they are okay.
- Recruit another group member to facilitate if I cannot attend.
- Ensure that the group periodically revisits and re-affirms this covenant, especially when a new member joins.
- Include the group in decisions about new members joining.
- Welcome new members with intentionality by personally meeting with them to go over the Participant Guide to make sure they are comfortable with and agree to our process and practices.
- Ensure the Circle makes time for the group to say good-bye to members who leave.
- Not to expect perfection in use of technology! If technical problems develop, to be patient and nonjudgmental of self and others.

# GOING DEEPER

## On the Power of Listening

The following readings and quotes offer inspiration for the journey.

### **Listening to Each Other and Offering the Gift of Presence**

I took comfort and strength from those few people who neither fled from me nor tried to save me but were simply present to me. Their willingness to be present revealed their faith that I had the inner resources to make this treacherous trek -- quietly bolstering my faltering faith.

- *Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness*

Instead of telling our valuable stories, we seek safety in abstractions, speaking to each other about our opinions, ideas, and beliefs rather than about our lives. Academic culture blesses this practice by insisting that the more abstract our speech, the more likely we are to touch the universal truths that unite us. But what happens is exactly the reverse: as our discourse becomes more abstract, the less connected we feel. There is less sense of community among intellectuals than in the most 'primitive' society of storytellers.

- *Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness*

To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept... Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you. - *Henry Nouwen*

It's not about what you say. It's about creating a space where every person can hear, discover and listen to their own voice.

- *Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness*

What does it mean to listen to a voice before it is spoken? It means making space for the other, being aware of the other, paying attention to the other, honoring the other. It means not rushing to fill their silences with fearful speech of our own and not trying to coerce them into saying the things that



we want to hear. It means entering empathetically into their world so that he or she perceives you as someone who has the promise of being able to hear another person's truth.

- *Parker J. Palmer, The Courage to Teach*

Deep listening is the kind of listening that can help relieve the suffering of another person. You can call it compassionate listening. You listen with only one purpose: to help him or her to empty his heart. Even if he says things that are full of wrong perceptions, full of bitterness, you are still capable of listening with compassion. Because you know that listening like that, you give the person a chance to suffer less. If you want to help him to correct his perception, you wait for another time. For now, you don't interrupt. You don't argue. If you do, he loses his chance. You just listen with compassion and help him to suffer less. One hour like that can bring compassion and healing.

- *Thich Nhat Hanh*

Listening is not passive. It's hard work to listen with an open heart rather than an analyzing mind. It requires putting aside judgment, categorization, and evaluation and instead just hearing the story that is told, and the feelings behind it. Some people say they can feel themselves shift from their minds to hearts when they are listening. Some describe deep listening as a sacred experience.

It is the mind's nature to think, and so even the most experienced listeners repeatedly will slip into judging and analyzing. When you realize that this has happened, gently set aside your thinking for later and open your heart. Buddhist meditators, who face the same problem, speak of treating the mind like a beloved but sometimes inappropriate child who wants to show off to guests. 'Not now, sweetie,' says the kind parent. 'You go and play and we will join you in a bit.' Similarly, when we are listening and notice that we are commenting to ourselves about what is being said, we can tell our minds, 'This is not the time for analysis. I just need to hear this story.'

Most people need a few experiences of simply being listened to before they can really believe that just listening is enough. In time, we discover that to be listened to is a way of being loved, and that listening is a way of being loving.

- *Christine Robinson & Alicia Hawkins, Heart to Heart*

The first duty of love is to listen.

- *Paul Tillich*

Listening is the oldest and perhaps the most powerful tool of healing. It is often through the quality of our listening and not the wisdom of our words that we are able to effect the most profound changes in the people around

us. When we listen, we offer with our attention an opportunity for wholeness. Our listening creates sanctuary for the homeless parts within the other person. That which has been denied, unloved, devalued by themselves and others. That which is hidden. In this culture the soul and the heart too often go homeless. Listening creates a holy silence. When you listen generously to people, they can hear the truth in themselves, often for the first time. And in the silence of listening, you can know yourself in everyone. Eventually you may be able to hear, in everyone and beyond everyone, the unseen singing softly to itself and to you.

- *Rachel Naomi Remen, My Grandfather's Blessings*

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving me advice, you have not done what I asked. When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings. When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problems, you have failed me, strange as that may seem. Listen! All I asked was that you listen, not talk or do. . . just hear me. And I can do for myself. I'm not helpless. Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless. When you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy. But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I can quit trying to convince you and can get about this business of understanding what's behind this irrational feeling. And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and I don't need advice. Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what's behind them. Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometimes, for some people. . . because God is mute and doesn't give advice or try to fix things. God just listens and lets you work it out for yourself.

- *unattributed*

## **Listening to your Life**

There is no event so commonplace but that [the Holy] is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize [it] or not recognize [it], but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly... Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

- *Frederick Buechner, Now and Then*

Literature, painting, music — the most basic lesson that all art teaches us is to stop, look, and listen to life on this planet, including our own lives, as a

vastly richer, deeper, more mysterious business than most of the time it ever occurs to us to suspect as we bumble along from day to day on automatic pilot... Pay attention to the frog. Pay attention to the west wind. Pay attention to the boy on the raft, the lady in the tower, the old man on the train. In sum, pay attention to the world and all that dwells therein and thereby learn at last to pay attention to yourself and all that dwells therein.  
- *Frederick Buechner, Beyond Words: Daily Readings in The ABC's of Faith*

We begin our lives listening to the many sounds surrounding us in the womb. When we are dying, the last faculty to shut down is usually hearing. In between, there is so much to see that we seldom take the time to cultivate the art of listening. Listening uses other practices: attention, being present, openness. It is holy work, involving in the inventive phrase of W.A. Mathieu, a Sufi musician, "making an altar out of our ears."  
- *Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat*

### **The Way It Is, by William Stafford**

There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.

### **Listening to Your Deeper Self**

We all have an inner teacher whose guidance is more reliable than anything we can get from a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution, or leader.  
- *Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness*

Like a wild animal, the soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. I learned about these qualities during my bouts with depression. In that deadly darkness, the faculties I had always depended on collapsed. My intellect was useless; my emotions were dead; my will was impotent; my ego was shattered. But from time to time, deep in the thickets of my inner wilderness, I could sense the presence of something that knew how to stay alive even when the rest of me wanted to die. That something was my tough and tenacious soul.

Yet despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of an eye - but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself.

Unfortunately, community in our culture too often means a group of people who go crashing through the woods together, scaring the soul away. In spaces ranging from congregations to classrooms, we preach and teach, assert and argue, claim and proclaim, admonish and advise, and generally behave in ways that drive everything original and wild into hiding. Under these conditions, the intellect, emotions, will and ego may emerge, but not the soul: we scare off all the soulful things, like respectful relationships, goodwill, and hope.

A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly "in the woods" with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up... In such a space, we are freed to hear our own truth, touch what brings us joy, become self critical about our faults, and take risky steps toward change - knowing that we will be accepted no matter what the outcome.

- *Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness*

If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. If we want to see and hear a person's soul, there is another truth we must remember: the soul is like a wild animal -- tough, resilient, and yet shy. When we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding. But if we are willing to sit quietly and wait for a while, the soul may show itself.

- *Parker J. Palmer*

This guide was created based on the Soul Matters Sharing Circle model of small groups.

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