

Michael Dadson – Wednesday August 20th

“Inside, outside – nowhere is home”

Pete Townshend – 5.15 (Quadrophenia)

This whole presentation is intended to present the thinking of

Parker J. Palmer

regarding the danger of living ‘divided lives’,

and the need to reunite ‘soul and role’.

It draws extensively on the contents of his book:-

‘A Hidden Wholeness – the Journey Toward An Undivided Life’

Prelude

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

Leonard Cohen

There was a time when the farmers on the Great Plains of America would, at the first sign of a blizzard, run a rope from their 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 backyard.

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 sufferings 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; some 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 this very moment, and are trying to find their 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.

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 neighbourhood, in the workplace, and in political life (and I would very definitely include the need to work as healers in our congregations and spiritual communities). Yes, we can become healers in all manner of wounded settings as we are called back to our 'hidden wholeness' amid the violence of the storm.

Thomas Merton claimed that “there is in all things . . . a hidden wholeness.

*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 – of an integrity that comes from being what you are.*

Douglas Wood

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 . . . can we name any such ? . . . Speak such names, picture such people, and you catch a glimpse of the beauty that arises when people refuse to live divided lives.

Of course, wholeness comes more easily to jack pines than to human beings: *Pinus banksiana* is incapable of thinking itself into trouble! We are cursed with the blessing of consciousness and choice; a two-edged sword that both divides us and can help us become whole.

Out there with Jack Pine, says PJP, I sense the wholeness hidden “in all things”. It is in the taste of wild berries, the scent of sun-baked pine, the sight of the Northern Lights, the sound of water lapping the shore; signs of a bedrock 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.

~~~~~

### Excursion *Questioning True / Authentic Self*

*All of us arrive on earth with souls in perfect form – the starting-point for PJP . . . do we accept this, I wonder?*

Two streams in our culture raise a fundamental doubt as to the nature, even the existence, of a True Self: Secularism and Moralism.

Secularism holds that we arrive in the world not as unique individuals but as malleable raw material which then receives the imprint of the gender, class, and race we are born into. We have an inherited nature, of course, a set of potentials and limits received as a result of our roll of the genetic dice. But from a secular standpoint, it is nonsense to believe that we are born with an inviolable soul, an ontological identity, a core of selfhood.

Moralism wishes us to banish the word Self from our vocabulary altogether. Self equates with selfishness; the whole problem with our society, the moralists claim, is that too many people are out for themselves, at the expense of everyone else. This New Age emphasis on self-fulfilment, this cult of 'Me', is the root cause of the fragmentation of community that we see all around us.

A strong community helps people recognise, remember, develop a sense of true selfhood. Only in community can the self exercise and fulfil its nature: giving and taking, listening and speaking, being and doing.

The secularist suggests there isn't an authentic self, but in community we are able to identify and celebrate the selfhood of one another. When things fall apart for some we know, we lament "That's not like him", "She's just not herself" – or when things come together for them we exult: "Oh isn't that just *her*?" or "He's really has come into his own"

The moralist see individualism as the cause of the decline of community, but PJP sees an opposite dynamic: as community is torn apart by various political and economic forces, more and more people suffer from a sense of emptiness – empty self syndrome: Who Am I? What Am I? What impact and effect can I have?

When community unravels, and we lack opportunities to be ourselves in a web of relationships, not only do we lose touch with one another, but our sense of self atrophies and we lose touch with ourselves.

I repeat PJP's words from little earlier:- "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."

This is surely something of a call to be the kind of compassionate people, the kind of healers, the kind of community – healing both self and one another – that are so badly needed in this wounded world?

### Condition and Response

If, then, we are willing to accept the notion of the True Self – or the soul – let's look at Palmer's concern over people becoming separated from their own souls and living what he calls divided lives.

Yes, 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 – creating boundaries and separations which can result in us living divided lives.

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' does speak the truth about me, my work, or the world; I hear it . . . and act as if I did not.

I withhold a personal gift that might serve a good end, or I commit myself to a project I don't really believe in. I keep silent on an issue I should address, or I actively break faith with one of my own convictions. I try to deny my inner darkness – thereby giving it more power over me – or I project onto other people, creating what I perceive to be enemies where none exists.

I pay a steep price for living in this fractured way – feeling fraudulent, anxious about being found out, depressed by the fact that I am denying my own selfhood.

The people around me pay a price as well, for now they are on ground made unstable by my dividedness. How can I affirm someone else's identity when I deny my own? How can I trust someone else's integrity when I defy my own?

A fault line runs down the middle of my life, and whenever it cracks open – exposing the divorce between my actual living and the truth I hold within – things around me get shaky and start to fall apart.

Pretty dire stuff. By what process does he suggest that this all comes about?

~~~~~

Stage 1

'All of us arrive on earth with souls in perfect form . . .'

When 'true self' is the topic, children are the best source, because they live so close to their innate gifts.

When my first grandchild was born, I saw something in her that I had missed in my own children some twenty-five years earlier, when I was too young and self-absorbed to see anyone, including myself, very well. What I saw was clear and simple: my granddaughter has arrived on earth as *this* kind of person, rather than *that, that, or that*.

In my granddaughter I actually observed something I could once take only on faith: we are born with a seed of selfhood that contains the spiritual DNA of our uniqueness – an encoded birthright knowledge of who we are why we are here, and how we are related to others.

We may abandon that knowledge, but it never abandons us. Isn't it fascinating that the very old, who often forget a great deal, may recover vivid memories of childhood – of that time in their lives when they were most like themselves? They are brought back to their birthright nature by the abiding core of selfhood they carry within – a core made visible, perhaps by the way ageing can strip away whatever is not truly of us.

Philosophers haggle over what to call the core of our humanity; Thomas Merton called it true self; Buddhists call it original nature or big self; Quakers call it the inner teacher of the 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.

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 claim to know its true name. But *that* we name it matters a great deal. For “it” is the objective, ontological reality of selfhood that keeps us from reducing ourselves, or each other, to biological mechanisms, psychological projections, sociological constructs, or raw material to be manufactured into whatever society needs – diminishment of our humanity that constantly threaten the quality of our lives.

“When true self / authentic self is the topic, children are the best source” . . . and we’ve sent them away! What shall we do? Why, we’ll turn to all the children still in the room, residing within each of us!

I’m going to ask you to think for a couple of moments, in such a way as to access, remember, tap into the spiritual DNA Palmer talked about; the simple, core, untainted person you were born as, and still are at heart.

Please allow yourself to recall a time and place of simple complete happiness – let it spring to mind. Something unalloyed and uncomplicated that leaves you thinking – and feeling – “*Oh Yes!*”

- Take a slip of paper, the length of an A4 sheet, but only ½ an inch wide

Please write on one side of your slip a key word or phrase to identify the memory, and write any of the feelings associated with the memory.

I’m going to ask you to think quietly again, this time not about an event in your life, but about an attribute or characteristic that others have seen in you, that you know to be true – no matter how abashed or embarrassed you might feel in owning it.

Perhaps imagine someone saying ‘I really value this about you . . .’ or ‘I always know that you will be . . .’ or ‘You’re just SO . . .’ or ‘Thank-you for being . . .’

Or maybe look back to the activity on the back of Jane's Theme Talk booklet – where you were asked to identify some of your own virtues . . . what she called ‘bidding yourself up’, and what the embracing Benediction of this week calls speaking well of yourself . . .

Now please add those words to your slip of paper, still on the same side.

PJP wants us to see this strip of paper as representing our inner life, our true self, the person we know ourselves to be at heart

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Stage 2

‘All of us arrive on earth with souls in perfect form . . .’ but from the moment of birth onward, the soul or true self is assailed by deforming forces from without *and* within: by racism, sexism, economic injustice, and other social cancers; by jealousy,

resentment self-doubt, fear, and other demons of the inner life.

PJP remembers: I was blessed with a family where it felt safe to be myself . . . but I did not feel so safe at school, where I played the role of a successful and popular student – but in truth that persona felt fraudulent to me. While I played that onstage part, my true self hid out backstage, fearful that that someone might see behind the curtains and see who I really was; fearful that the world would mock and crush my deepest values and beliefs, my fragile hopes and yearnings.

That's not to say that home and family is necessarily a context where the true self feels safe enough to be completely itself, with no need to adopt external roles.

I recently read an intriguing novel called *The Last Days of California*, by Mary Miller, in which a family makes a journey across the US to be present for The Rapture – the End of Days – predicted to take place on a certain date in California. That journey is recounted through the eyes of the younger of two teenage daughters.

At one point she is at the table with her parents having recently sneaked – or snuck – a couple of illicit alcoholic beverages, egged on by her older sister, and desperate not to be found out.

“I avoided my mother’s eyes; she would be angry and disappointed if she found out what I’d done, and I didn’t want her to look at me differently. If I wasn’t the good daughter, I wouldn’t know who I was.

I wasn’t popular or a cheerleader, or a straight-A student. I wasn’t on the dance team. I wasn’t a member of the Student Council or even the Key Club.

There were so many things I wasn’t that I had difficulty defining myself, especially in relation to my sister, who was so many things.”

We develop outer clothing, if you like: ways of being seen so that we will feel accepted and valued, ways of being seen which will deflect the observer from seeing within to the true and vulnerable self.

Look at the other side of the paper strip now. This will represent our outer life as opposed to the inner life; what Palmer refers to as the Onstage rather than the Backstage life.

Can you identify for yourself any roles and behaviours you know you have adopted, or been assigned, and perhaps still do, or still are, to be perceived as valid, as real, as welcome? What key words will capture this outer persona of yours?

At first this is good news, in fact. We need outer clothing of course, if we are to venture outdoors – if we are to discover our abilities to interact with others and our surroundings, if we are to evolve purposeful and worthwhile activity in the external world. It is the soul which animates the secret lives that many of us led as children, the roles we adopt or invent to be accepted, in an effort to shield our vulnerable selfhood from the threats of the world . . . but we can see that as the outer world becomes more and more demanding this gentle and self-preserving feature of childhood disappears, to be replaced by an adult pathology.

PJP acknowledges: My outer behaviours became not so much a curtain but a wall – a wall built to hide and protect my vulnerabilities from the assaults of the world.

Palmer talks of his need to reinforce the wall in later education:

In graduate school, especially, my emotional and spiritual survival seemed to depend on keeping my truth tucked away. When I did my doctoral work in the sociology of religion, I was, as I still am, a person of religious convictions (he is an active and proud Quaker in the U.S.). I did not expect my professors to share my religious beliefs, or even to hold any beliefs that might be called religious. But I did assume that they would give religious phenomena the same kind of scholarly respect that historians give to primary texts or geneticists give to DNA.

I soon learned that such was not always the case: some sociologists of religion are driven by a desire to debunk all things religious. Intimidated by professors who took this approach, I did my best during graduate school to keep my beliefs under cover – all the while, I do confess, taking secret solace from W. H. Auden’s witty Eleventh Commandment: “Thou shalt not . . . commit a social science.”

At first, perhaps, a wall is needed in order to hide our vulnerabilities from the assaults of the world. but selfhood hidden from strangers can become hidden from intimates as well: the wall built to protect ourselves at work can become harder to dismantle in the company of family and friends. We can begin, without even noticing, to keep true self partitioned off in our personal lives as well as our outer living.

Here, according to Palmer, is the ultimate irony of the divided life: live behind a wall long enough, and the true self you tried to hide from the world disappears from your own view! The wall itself and the world outside it become all that you know. Eventually, you even forget that the wall is there – and that hidden behind it is someone called ‘you.’

Living behind such a wall has at least three consequences:

- 1. The inner light cannot illuminate the work we do in the world**
- 2. Our inner darkness cannot be illuminated by the light of the world – indeed we become gradually convinced that there is no light out there; all is darkness**
- 3. People close to us become wary of the gap between our onstage performance and the backstage reality; as distrust grows they keep us at arm’s length and we lose the very relationships which could keep us open.**

~~~~~

*Let’s pause at that point for an appropriate poem:-*

### Mending Wall – Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have gone after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs.  
The gaps I mean,  
No-one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk along the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says "Good fences make good neighbours."  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
"Why do they make good neighbours?  
Isn't it where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down."  
I could say "Elves" to him, but it's not elves exactly,  
And I'd rather he said it for himself. I see him there,  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
Ho moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well

He says again "Good fences make good neighbours."

To wall or not to wall appears to be the question; don't we love polarities?!

Perhaps the easy answer is to tear it down, to dispense with any differentiation between those inner and outer clothings – to go commando – let it all hang out?!

Perhaps the answer is to set about re-ordering, re-shaping our outer, onstage, lives around our inner, backstage values and virtues. (*Hold strip as closed ring*)

"I want my inner truth to be the focus from which flow the choices I make about my life – about the work I do and how I do it; about the relationships I enter into and how I conduct them."

We can persuade ourselves, sincerely believe, that what we're doing here is a spiritual process – a laudable phase in our personal growth journey.

We can perceive it as seeking to be cloaked in our inner life, to be centred in our truth . . . 'centered' being one of the most frequently occurring words in the spiritual literature of recent decades.

The desire to be centred is a step towards integrity, of course, but – as you can see – this has a shadow side. Hold the strip closed as a ring, and you will see that getting centred could also be described as getting the wagons in a circle, moving into a gated community, or joining an exclusive and triumphalist religious group; shut off from the world.

Whatever the rationale – self-definition, self-preservation, spiritual self-nurture and exclusivism – shutting ourselves in and away like this has two negative consequences: we fall short of the open-hearted engagement with the world that all the great spiritual traditions advise, and we deny ourselves the possibility of being integrated human beings . . . setting up a division – inside v outside – that militates against the joy and peace of wholeness.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

### What are we to do? (Stage 3) - The Twist

All those great traditions want to awaken us to the fact that we co-create the reality in which we live, asking us two fundamental questions about our living:

1. What are we sending from within ourselves out into the world, and what effect is it having 'out there'?
2. What is the world sending back at us, and what impact is it having 'in here'?

How can we answer these questions if we are carefully, sensibly, hermetically sealed off, so that there is no congress or communication between out there and in here?

Is the solution to demolish the wall, tear down the curtain, the boundary between inner truth and outer reality? No, it is not. And here is the twist to this tale:-

Try this:- hold your strip of paper end to end, give one end of it a half twist, and bring the two ends together . . . Fasten them together with a sticky label, or “sticky-backed plastic” (for Blue Peter fans!), and run it between your thumb and forefinger, noticing how both thumb and forefinger have just as much contact with what were the two sides of the paper – you never have to let go of either to be in touch with both.

The bright side and the white side are no longer separate entities, alternative realities, but are now connected, and flow into one another

Now you have continuity between the Onstage and Backstage, the Protected and the Projected, and this is the vital message to us today. The Mobius Strip reminds us that whatever is inside us continually flows outward to help form, or deform, the world in which we live, and whatever is outside us continually flows inward to help form, or deform, our lives.

In other words, both the inner and the outer realities of ourselves are essential components in our living – a balanced relationship of action and reflection, a mature expression of integration.

Sing the hymn: When I was a child  
*(Hymns for Living no. 290)*

Conclusion – It’s All There! *(A fuller ending than was possible on the day)*

Genesis 25:7 speaks of Abraham’s long, long life:

These are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived,  
one hundred and seventy-five years.  
Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age,  
an old man and satisfied with life;

One sixteenth century commentator, Rabbi Moses Alshech (d. circa 1593, in Safed), remarked on the inner meaning contained in these words. In his commentary on the Book of Genesis, he reads the passage in this most creative way:

*“And Abraham was old, well advanced in age [literally, coming along in the days] . . .”*  
*He came with all his days - all were complete,*  
*without defect or lack, full of content and life.*  
*“These are the days of the years of Abraham’s life. . . ”*  
*- that is, that he lived with all of his days”*

PJP reminds us that wholeness does not mean perfection; it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.

Way back on page 2 of this talk I read about Palmer returning from sitting with the jack pines:- “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.” He goes on to expand the point:-

The wilderness itself teaches this message plainly. One summer, I went up to Boundary Waters just a month after a hurricane had taken down 20 million trees across the area. I was heartbroken by the ruin and wondered whether I could ever bear to return again. And yet on each visit since I have been astonished to see how nature uses devastation to stimulate new growth – slowly but persistently using her wounds for healing and life.

In the life of our community in Macclesfield – in our conversations and group work particularly – we are finding that we come back increasingly to saying, about whatever the proposition or challenge may be: it's not either or, it's both and. And I suggest that's what this talk boils down to; it's not either inner self or projected self, inner truth or outer living . . . it's both realities interwoven and interweaving – with us doing the weaving.

It's about coming to our every day with all of our days, all of our truth, all of ourselves. And yes that means the flawed and frail bits, the broken and disappointing bits too; Abraham must have racked up plenty of those after 175 years!

Let the inner and the outer be connected – a dynamic flow of energy – and let the wholeness of you be seen and known . . . and loved . . . for by your very clarity and transparency can you show love, and truth, and soul to others

Ralph Waldo Emerson – A Dream too Wild  
*(Spiritual Laws)*

The object of us . . . is to make daylight shine through us; to suffer the light of nature to traverse our whole being without obstruction, so that, on what point soever of our doing that light falls, it shall report truly of our character; whether it be your diet, your house, your religious forms, your society, your mirth, your vote, your opposition, it shall speak your truth to the beholder.

While ever we are not homogeneous, but heterogeneous, and the ray does not traverse, then there is no through light: the eye of the beholder is puzzled, detecting many unlike tendencies, and a life not yet at one.