

Circle of Trust[®] Touchstones

CENTER FOR
**Courage
& Renewal**

Give and receive welcome.

People learn best in hospitable spaces. In this circle we support each other's learning by giving and receiving hospitality.

Be present as fully as possible.

Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.

What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand.

This is not a "share or die" event! During this retreat, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.

Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth.

Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using "I" statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.

No fixing, saving, advising or correcting each other.

This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us in the "helping professions." But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.

**Learn to respond to others
with honest, open questions...**

instead of counsel, corrections, etc.
With such questions, we help “hear each other into deeper speech.”

When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.

If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself,
“I wonder what brought her to this belief?”
“I wonder what he’s feeling right now?”
“I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?”
Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.

Attend to your own inner teacher.

We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.

Trust and learn from the silence.

Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.

Observe deep confidentiality.

Nothing said in a circle of trust will ever be repeated to other people.

Know that it’s possible...

to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

What is a Circle of Trust?

The Circle of Trust® approach is based on the work of Parker Palmer and the Center for Courage and Renewal. It is distinguished by principles and practices intended to create a process of shared exploration—in retreats, programs and other settings—where people can find safe space to nurture personal and professional integrity and the courage to act on it. In the hands of knowledgeable and skilled facilitators, this approach has the power to transform individuals, families, workplaces and communities.

Principles of the Circle of Trust Approach

If we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole, we cannot embrace it alone—at least, not for long: we need trustworthy relationships to sustain us, tenacious communities of support, to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. Taking an inner journey toward rejoining soul and role requires a rare but real form of community that I call a “circle of trust.”

—Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness* (adapted)

1. Everyone has an inner teacher.

Every person has access to an inner source of truth, named in various wisdom traditions as identity, true self, heart, spirit or soul. The inner teacher is a source of guidance and strength that helps us find our way through life’s complexities and challenges. Circles of Trust give people a chance to listen to this source, learn from it and discover its imperatives for their work and their lives.

2. Inner work requires solitude and community.

In Circles of Trust we make space for the solitude that allows us to learn from within, while supporting that solitude with the resources of community. Participants take an inner journey in community where we learn how to evoke and challenge each other without being judgmental, directive or invasive.

3. Inner work must be invitational.

Circles of Trust are never “share or die” events, but times and places where people have the freedom within a purposeful process to learn and grow in their own way, on their own schedule and at their own level of need. From start to finish, this approach invites participation rather than insisting upon it because the inner teacher speaks by choice, not on command.

4. Our lives move in cycles like the seasons.

By using metaphors drawn from various seasons and climates to frame our exploration of the inner life, we create a hospitable space that allows people of diverse backgrounds

and perspectives to engage in a respectful dialogue. These metaphors represent cycles of life—such as the alternation of darkness and light, death and new life—shared by everyone in a secular, pluralistic society regardless of philosophical, religious or spiritual differences.

5. An appreciation of paradox enriches our lives and helps us hold greater complexity.

The journey we take in a Circle of Trust teaches us to approach the many polarities that come with being human as “both–ands” rather than “either–ors,” holding them in ways that open us to new insights and possibilities. We listen to the inner teacher and to the voices in the circle, letting our own insights and the wisdom that can emerge in conversation check and balance each other. We trust both our intellects and the knowledge that comes through our bodies, intuitions and emotions.

6. We live with greater integrity when we see ourselves whole.

Integrity means integrating all that we are into our sense of self, embracing our shadows and limitations as well as our light and our gifts. As we deepen the congruence between our inner and outer lives we show up more fully in the key relationships and events of our lives, increasing our capacity to be authentic and courageous in life and work.

7. A “hidden wholeness” underlies our lives.

Whatever brokenness we experience in ourselves and in the world, a “hidden wholeness” can be found just beneath the surface. The capacity to stand and act with integrity in the tragic gap between what is and what could be or should be—resisting both the corrosive cynicism that comes from seeing only what is broken and the irrelevant idealism that comes from seeing only what is not—has been key to every life-giving movement and is among the fruits of the Circle of Trust approach.



Chris Johnson, PhD
Facilitator, Thinking Partner, Traveling Teacher, Listener

My work as Founder & Principal of the Milkweed Group grows out of a nearly 30-year career in teaching, speaking, writing, discernment companioning/coaching, leading workshops, and facilitating retreats with a wide range of audiences in higher education, civic and faith-based organizations, and the business, not-for-profit, and social change communities. Milkweed's mission is to create and hold safe, courageous spaces that nourish inner wisdom, sharpen clarity of purpose, and fuel capacity to live and lead for a better world.



An important springboard into this work is my 13 years as the founding Director of the Center for Vocational Reflection, Director for Vocation and Integrative Learning, and Associate Director of the Center for Servant Leadership at Gustavus Adolphus College, in Saint Peter, Minnesota, where I also taught courses in ethics. Before that, I taught at Buena Vista University in Storm Lake, Iowa, where I also served as Director of Service-Learning. Along the way, I earned my BA from Gustavus, a Master of Arts from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and a PhD (in "theology, ethics, and culture") from the University of Iowa.

I work extensively with state, regional, and national projects around issues of calling and purpose, leadership development, social and ecological justice, experiential learning and civic engagement, life transitions, and spirituality in life and work. I'm a Circles of Trust® facilitator in association with Parker J. Palmer and the Center for Courage and Renewal. My wife Kim and I are co-founders of Prairie Oaks Institute (POI), a nonprofit educational retreat center dedicated to nourishing expansive imagination, bold thinking, wise action, and cross-sector solutions to the unprecedented environmental and social challenges of our time. POI, just a short drive from the Twin Cities metro area, is one of the places where Milkweed Group programs take place. Kim and I are proud parents of three adult children.