With

The Soul Is Like A Wild Animal, A Hidden Wholeness, Parker J Palmer, (2004)

Most of us have sat in groups that talk well and change little. Parker J. Palmer suggests why: what is truest in us is resilient but shy, and it won't appear where people are busy advising, persuading and performing.

We share this extract because it describes the conditions we try to create in every circle we hold: patience over pressure, acceptance that still invites growth, and enough quiet for something real to show up.

The soul is like a wild animal.

Like a wild animal, the soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places…

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 you 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 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 the soulful things, like respectful relationships, goodwill, and hope.

PTO.

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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. The relationships in such a group are not pushy but patient; they’re not confrontational but compassionate; they are not filled with expectations and demands but with abiding faith in the reality of the inner teacher and in each person’s capacity to learn from it.

… The people who help us grow toward true self offer unconditional love, neither judging us to be deficient nor trying to force us to change but accepting us exactly as we are. And yet this unconditional love does not lead us to rest on our laurels. Instead, it surrounds us with a charged force field that makes us want to grow from the inside out – a force field that is safe enough to take the risks and endure the failures that growth requires.

Questions for reflection

For individuals

1. Tell a story of a time when you felt safe enough for something ‘unglimpsed’ in you to come out of hiding. What made that possible?
2. What do you experience as ‘crashing through the woods’, and what feels like ‘breathing with the earth’?
3. Think of someone in your life who accepts you as you are and still makes you want to grow. Tell us about them.

For teams

1. What’s the balance in our team between asserting and proclaiming, and noticing and waiting?
2. Can you think of a time when someone brought a half-formed thought, or a tentative intuition, and we made space for it together to become something helpful?
3. How might we make more space for each person’s inner teacher in how we run meetings or one-to-ones?

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