

Let Your Life Speak:
Listening for the Voice of Vocation
Study Resource

Compiled by: Retina Dick, MAE, Spiritual Director



Overview

Parker J. Palmer is an American author, educator, and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change. He has published ten books and numerous essays and poems and is founder and Senior Partner Emeritus of the Center for Courage and Renewal <http://CourageRenewal.org>. His work has been recognized with major foundation grants, several national awards, and thirteen honorary doctorates.ⁱ

From the front cover: “Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live in me?” With this searching question, Parker Palmer begins an insightful and moving meditation on finding one’s true calling. *Let Your Life Speak* is an openhearted gift to anyone who seeks to live authentically.

The book’s title is a time-honored Quaker admonition, usually taken to mean “Let the highest truths and values guide everything you do.” But Palmer reinterprets those words, drawing on his own search for selfhood. “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it,” he writes, “listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.”

Vocation does not come from willingness, no matter how noble one’s intentions. It comes from listening to and accepting “true self” with its limits as well as its potentials. Sharing stories of frailty and strength, of darkness and light, Palmer shows that vocation is not a goal to be achieved but a gift to be received.

As we live more deeply into the selfhood that is our birthright gift, we find not only personal fulfillment. We find communion with others and ways of serving the world’s deepest needs.

This Resource Guide

This resource guide offers questions to assist you in your journey to discover your own “birthright gift.” Readings are divided into four weeks as follows: (1) Chapter 1; (2) Chapter 2; (3) Chapters 3 and 4; (4) Chapters 5 and 6. There are questions and suggestions to encourage inner work that may help you discover God’s unique plan for you (Jer. 29:11), and to distinguish the voices, thoughts, desires, and influences that draw you towards a whole and abundant life from those that rob you of this life.

This guide can be used by individuals or small groups. Each week there is an opening prayer and set of discussion or reflection questions. A weekly “Practice” encourages engagement with the material throughout the week and includes the Examen, a resource from Ignatian spirituality. The sessions each conclude with a parting prayer. Additional exercises for Weeks 1 and 2 can be found in the appendix.

I encourage you to set aside time each day to spend in conversation with God around these questions. It is also helpful to use a journal to assist you in following your conversations. My prayer is that you will find freedom to grow from the seed which God planted in you at your making to live the life that wants to live in you, that the Holy One draws you toward. If you have questions about this study, I am available for conversation. Contact: tadick63@gmail.com

Peace and Blessings to you,

Tina

Retina Dick, MAE, Spiritual Director

*“But sometimes the ‘shoulds’
do not work because the life
one is living runs crosswise to
the grain of one’s soul.”
Parker Palmer*

Let Your Life Speak
Week One
Chapter 1

Welcome: I am excited to learn with you more about vocation and how to live from the inside out. If you do not already have it, you will need to procure the book *Let Your Life Speak* by Parker Palmer. ISBN 0-7879-4735-0

Prayer:

May you recognize in your life the presence,
power, and light of your soul.

May you realize that you are never alone,
that your soul in its brightness and belonging
connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.

May you have respect for your individuality and
difference.

May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique,
That you have a special destiny here,
That behind the façade of your life
There is something beautiful and eternal happening.

May you learn to see your self
With the same delight,
Pride, and expectation
With which God sees you in every moment.

John O’Donohueⁱⁱ

Discussion:

1. Think about your life story through the concept of vocation – including lessons learned from disappointments and failures as well as successes. Some things Palmer points out from his own life include the impulse to imitate heroes and to live the life expected of him rather than listening to his own heart. What comes up for you as you think about your life?

What has led you to where you are? Think about five stepping-stones that took you from where you were to where you are, and write a word or sentence on each stone. See Appendix Week 1, “Stepping Stones,” for this activity.

- Palmer says, “For a self that is seeking wholeness, the willful pursuit of vocation is an act of violence toward ourselves—violence in the name of vision that, however lofty, is forced on the self from without rather than grown from within” (4).

What do you think he means by violence toward ourselves that it is forced on the self from without rather than grown from within?

- Palmer goes on to say the true meaning of vocation is not a goal I pursue, but a calling I hear, and that it comes from *listening* rather than *willfulness*. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.

What or who tells you who you are? Where do these voices come from? Do you like hearing from that voice?

- Palmer states, “How we are to listen to our lives is a question worth exploring. In our culture we tend to gather information in ways that do not work very well when the source is the human soul: the soul is not responsive to subpoenas or cross-examinations . . . the soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions” (p. 7).

How are you listening to your soul, your life? What practices do you or have you used to listen from within? What noise prevents you from listening well and faithfully to your soul?

The apostle Paul says the one completely absorbed in self ignores God and can't see who God is and what God is doing (Romans 8:5-6, The Message). There is a great gulf between the way my ego wants to identify me and my true self (pg. 5). As you listen, are you differentiating your ego (your self-absorbed false self) from your true self?

Practice: Notice any invitations you sense from God as you practice the Examen this week. Spend a few minutes at the end of each day with the following questions.

Examen –

- What do you notice about today or throughout your life that drew you closer to God and Christlikeness? Reflect on your actions and reactions, intuitions and instincts, feelings, and bodily states of being (p.6)
- What do you notice about today or throughout your life that pulls you away you from God or Christlikeness? Reflect on actions and reactions, intuitions and instincts, feelings, and bodily states of being.
- What do you notice about your soul through these reflections? What draws you towards the light? What pulls you away from God?

Parting Prayer: Holy One, we pray your grace on each of us so that we may grow up in You. (Eph. 4:13)

“The world still waits for truth that will set us free—my truth, your truth, our truth—the truth that was seeded in the earth when each of us arrived here formed in the image of God.”
Parker Palmer

Let Your Life Speak
Week Two
Chapter 2

Prayer: Lord, you desire truth in the innermost being
You teach me wisdom in the inmost place.
Here’s my Heart Lord
Speak what is True! –Psalm 51:6

“If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, in detail, ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for.” — **Thomas Merton**

Discussion:

1. Palmer says, “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God” (p.10). Offer 2-3 sentences to describe what this statement means to you. Can you differentiate a voice from “out there” from one calling from “in here”? How?

2. We’re told we can find clues to our true self in stories from our younger years, years when we lived closer to our birthright years (p.13). Take a couple minutes to think back to your younger years, do any stories come to mind that give you clues to the person God created you to be? Is there a time you remember that you first became aware of the Holy Presence? Are there early childhood experiences that may have complicated your access to the person God created you to be?

3. The deepest vocation question is not “What ought I do with my life?” but “Who am I? What is my nature?” How does the question “Who am I?” sit with you? How do you come to know your nature?

Take a few minutes to think about people, situations, and things that give you joy and draw you closer to God. Then think about things that bring up more negative emotions and move you away from God. Journal for a few minutes about what you notice.

Do your noticings give you clues to who you are and your nature? To “whom or possibly what do you belong?” (p.17)

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” – John 10:10

Practice: Palmer gives several examples of living a divided life: battles between ethics and the heart, Palmer’s own struggles, and avoiding vulnerability by keeping personal truth apart from public life. See Appendix Week 2 for more information on a divided life.

During the following week, pay attention, notice any areas in which your examen clues you into where you may be living a divided life. Ask, “What about this day brought me abundant life?” and then ask, “What about this day steals life from me?”

How will you let your life speak this week?

Parting Blessing: Write your own closing prayer. What word or phrase stuck out for you that you want to bring to God for conversation?

“True self is the self planted in us by the God who made us in God’s own image—the self that wants nothing more, or less, than for us to be who we were created to be.”

Parker Palmer

**Let Your Life Speak
Week Three
Chapters 3 & 4**

Prayer: “With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ” (Ephesians 8b-9). Holy One, guide us to understand the mystery of your will in your creation of each of us.

Discussion:

1. On page 41 Palmer talks about the work he had done as “meaningless to him and feeling fraudulent doing it” because, as he goes on to say, “I had no feeling for the grain of my soul and no sense of which way was crosswise.” 1) What has God revealed to you about your own soul through our work so far? 2) Do you have a sense of the grain of your soul? 3) Can you identify your own limitations or pathways that have closed? Reflect for a time and write your response.

2. Complete the exercise from page 51. Write brief descriptions of two recent moments: a moment when things went so well that you knew you were born to be _____ *and* a moment when things went so poorly that you wished you had never been born!

God-given nature - gifts	Flip-side – limitations and liabilities

In the first column notice the gifts you possess that made the good moment possible. If you have trouble identifying them, sit with God in silence and ask that they be revealed to you. You may also ask someone who knows you well to help you. These gifts are part of your God-given nature.

Without being overly critical, notice how the limitations and liabilities listed in the second column are the flip side of your gifts and how a particular weakness is the inevitable trade-off for a particular strength. If needed, ask someone to help you.

As Palmer states (54), “There is as much guidance in way that closes behind us as there is in way that opens ahead of us.” 1) What insight do you gain from this exercise? 2) How can this knowledge help you live a more fruitful and abundant life?

3. Through his own experience with depression Palmer understands his journey downward as a journey toward God and realizes that “the self is not set apart, special, or superior but is a common mix of good and evil, darkness and light; a place where we can finally embrace the humanity we share with others” (69). He goes on to say, “When I started attending to my own truth, more of that truth became available in my work and my relationships. I now know that anything one can do on behalf of true self is done ultimately in the service of others” (71). How do you attend to your own truth? How do you best navigate your life experience in a healthy way?

Spend some time in silence with God to attend to your own truth. Journal about what surfaces for you and share with your group.

Practice: Our author talked about his experience with depression. He states, “Embracing the mystery of depression does not mean passivity or resignation. It means moving into a field of forces that seems alien but is in fact one’s deepest self. It means waiting, watching, listening, suffering, and gathering whatever self-knowledge we can—and then making choices based on that knowledge” (60).

Our work with the practice of the Examen can help us here, not only if we happen to experience depression but in all life’s choices. 1) What self-knowledge have you gained as you’ve practiced the Examen these last 2-3 weeks? 2) Has this knowledge influenced your choices? 3) How?

Parting Blessing: “For it was you who formed my inward parts:
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and
wonderfully made.” – Psalm 139:13-14

“Go far enough on the inner journey, the great wisdom traditions tell us—go past the ego toward the true self—and you end up not lost in narcissism but returning to the world, bearing more gracefully the responsibilities that come with being human.”
Parker Palmer

Let Your Life Speak
Week Four
Chapters 5-6

Prayer: Give me a candle of the Spirit, O God, as I go down into the depths of my being. Show me the hidden things, the creatures of my dreams, the storehouse of forgotten memories and hurts. Take me down to the spring of my life and tell me my nature and my name. Give me freedom to grow, so that I may become that self, the seed of which You planted in me at my making. Out of the depths I cry to You. . . ~George Appletonⁱⁱⁱ

Discussion:

1. On page 80-81 Palmer says, “Good leadership comes from people who have penetrated their own inner darkness and arrived at the place where we are at one with one another, people who can lead the rest of us to a place of ‘hidden wholeness’ because they have been there and know the way.” Do you know someone like this? How has understanding their limits/liabilities (darkness) impacted their leadership in positive ways?

2. The motto from Palmer’s Outward Bound experience is, “If you can’t get out of it, get into it!” Applied to one’s inner life, there is no way out of it, so we had better get into it. On pages 86-90, Palmer explores five monsters that are part of the shadows we create. Reflect on your own experiences with these shadows and the gifts we receive when we’ve taken the inward journey. Reflect on where you are in your own journey. As you notice any monsters, bring them to God, listen for any guidance you may receive. Describe one of those monster, and write about what this experience is like for you.

3. Have you experienced anything like the Quaker clearness committee where a personal issue is taken to a small group of people who are prohibited from suggesting “fixes” or giving advice? What was that experience like? How about an experience with a group that focused on “setting you straight”? Compare and contrast these experiences, which is more helpful and why?

4. Palmer uses metaphor throughout the book to look at selfhood and vocation, and he ends with a seasonal look at life. As you reflect on his words about the seasons of life, what resonates with you? Do you have other metaphors that are helpful for you?

Practice: Reflect on the impact this book has had on your own story and how it relates to your vocation and/or spiritual life. Notice not only your thoughts but feelings as well. What has given you joy? What has been difficult and/or draining? Going forward how will you “Let Your Life Speak?” Consider whether you would like to continuing using the Daily Examen as part of your spiritual practice.

Parting Blessing: Awaken to the mystery of being here
and enter the quiet immensity of your own presence.

Have joy and peace in the temple of your senses.

Receive encouragement when new frontiers beckon.

Respond to the call of our gift and the courage to
follow its path.

Let the flame of anger free you of all falsity.

May warmth of heart keep your presence aflame.

May anxiety never linger about you.

May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of
soul.

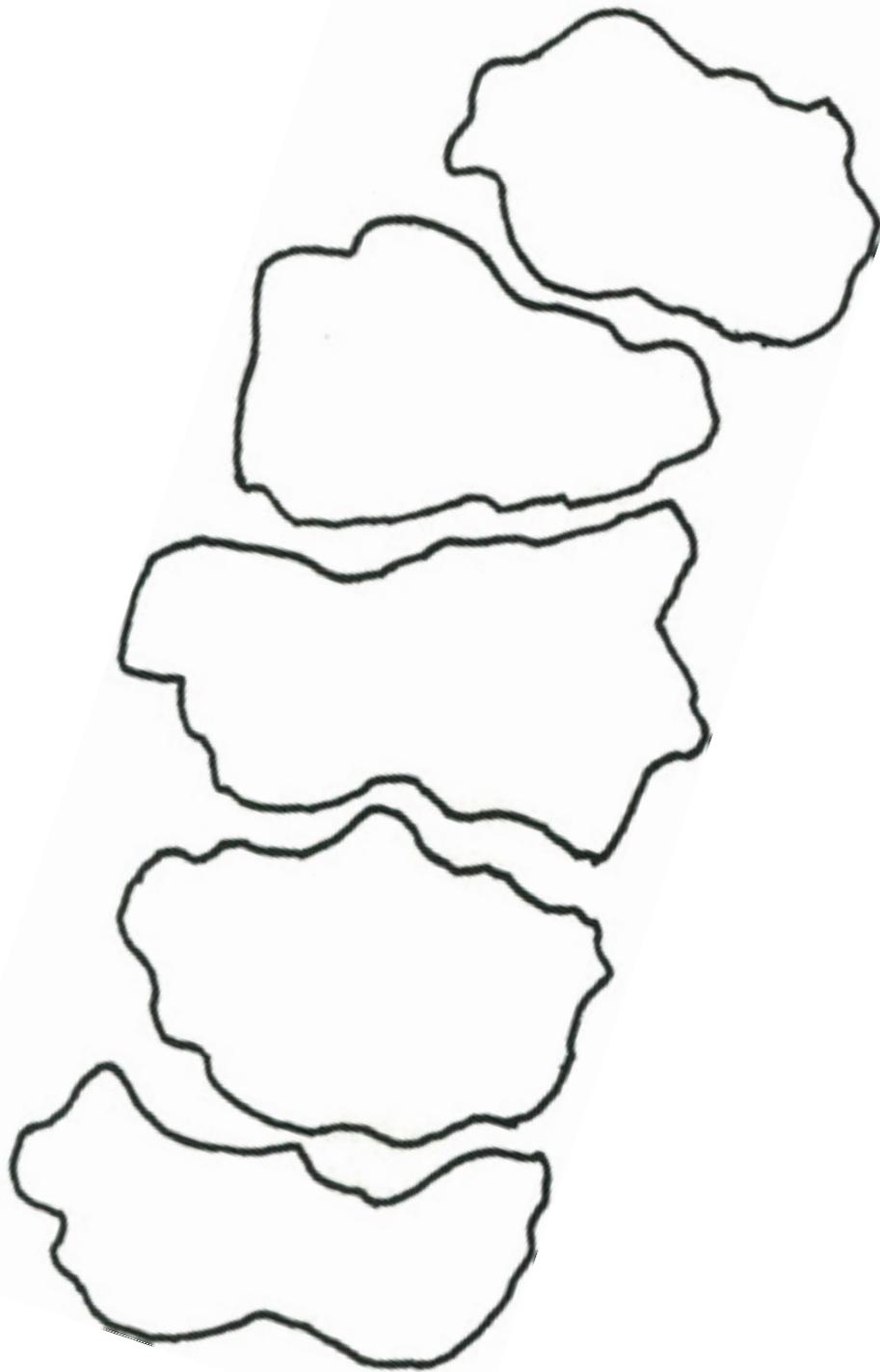
Take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek
no attention.

Be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul.

May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven
around the heart of wonder. ^{iv}

Appendix

Week 1: Stepping
Stones

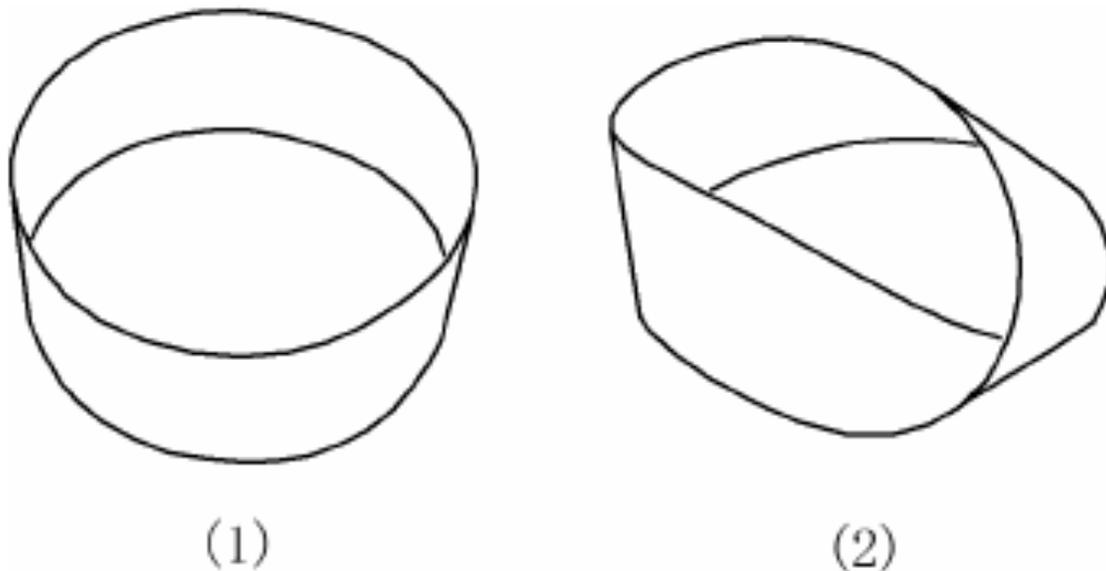


Week 2: The Divided Life

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker gives more explanation and illustration of a 'divided life.' He states, the divided life is pathological, so it always gives rise to symptoms. If we acknowledge the symptoms, we may be able to treat the disease. In Palmer's case, he experienced depression; however, some people start feeling aimless or anxious or angry. It is pain from being alienated from our own truth. If we are willing to feel it and name it instead of trying to numb it, this pain will force us out from behind the wall toward healing.

We reach for integration by reordering our onstage lives around our backstage values and beliefs. Palmer uses a Möbius Strip to illustrate: Figure 1 represents the yearning that drives us: "I want my inner truth to be the plumb line for 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." This is a yearning to be "centered." As you see, "getting centered" could also be described as getting the wagons in a circle or moving into a gated community or creating a secret garden where we welcome only those with whom we feel at ease. The shadow side arises when we use inner truth as a filter to exclude anyone or anything we find challenging.

Figure 2 The Möbius strip where the two apparent sides keep co-creating each other, whatever is inside us continually flows outward to help form, or deform, our lives.



Palmer goes on to say that we may fool ourselves into believing that we are hiding our truth behind a wall or using our truth to screen out what is alien to us. But whether we know it or not, like it or not, we all live on the Möbius strip all the time: there is no place to hide. We are constantly engaged in a seamless exchange between whatever is "out there" and whatever is "in here," co-creating reality, for better or for worse. We have only one choice: either we walk the Möbius strip wide awake to its continual interchanges, learning to co-create in ways that are life-giving for ourselves and others, or we sleep-walk on the Möbius strip, unconsciously co-creating in ways that are dangerous and often death-dealing to relationships, to good work, and to hope.†

Resources

- ⁱ Wikipedia contributors, "Parker Palmer," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Parker_Palmer&oldid=1065838403 (accessed May 13, 2022).
- ⁱⁱ O'Donohue, John. *To Bless the Space between Us: A Book of Blessings*. New York: Convergent Books, 2008, p. 112.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Community, N. (2015). *Celtic Daily Prayer: Book one - the journey begins (northumbria community)*. Harpercollins Publishers.
- ^{iv} O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, p. 42.
- ^v Palmer, Parker. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004, p. 45-49.