

Quotes to think about

“They remind me of moments when it is clear-if I have eyes to see-that the life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me” [p. 2].

“I had simply found a “noble” way to live a life that was not my own, a life spent imitating heroes instead of listening to my heart” [p. 3].

“Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, 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 to embody, what values you represent” [p. 3].

“There may be moments in life when we are so unformed that we need to use values like an exoskeleton to keep us from collapsing” [p. 4].

“Vocation, the way I was seeking it, becomes an act of will, a grim determination that one’s life will go this way or that whether it wants to or not” [p. 4].

“Vocation does not come from willfulness...That insight is hidden in the word vocation itself, which is rooted in the Latin for “voice.” Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear” [p.4].

“We have a strange conceit in our culture that simply because we have said something, we understand what it means!” [p. 6]

“Verbalizing is not the only way our lives speak, of course. They speak through our actions and reactions, our intuitions and instincts, our feelings and bodily states of being, perhaps more profoundly than through our words” [p. 6].

“My life is not only about my strengths and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and my limits, my trespasses and my shadow” [p. 6].

Questions for Reflection

During which moments/activities do you feel most alive?

What are your feelings about someone doing the right thing for the wrong reason?

In what ways do you hear from God?

What kinds of things most drain you? Stress you?

What activities give you the space to reflect on what is going on inside you? How often do you do them?

Consider the aphorism “Your greatest strength can also be your greatest weakness.” What is the connection between your strengths and your limits?

Suggested Activity

Pray through St. Ignatius’ Prayer of Examen.

See www.marshall.org/groups/hc/ Select the link titled Prayer of Examen in the Practices section.

Parker Palmer

Let Your Life Speak

Chapter 2-Now I Become Myself

Quotes to think about

“What a long time it can take to become the person one has always been. How often in the process *we mask ourselves in faces that are not our own*” [p. 9].

“We ourselves, driven by fear, too often betray true self to gain the approval of others” [p. 12].

“But inspected through the lens of paradox, my desire to become an aviator and an advertiser contain clues to the core of true self...clues, by definition, are coded and must be deciphered” [p. 13].

“If you seek vocation without understanding the material you are working with, what you build with your life will be ungainly and may well put lives in peril, your own and some of those around you” [p. 16].

“In the tradition of pilgrimage...hardships are seen not as accidental but as integral to the journey itself” [p. 18].

“I saw that as an organizer I had never stopped being a teacher-I was simply teaching in a classroom without walls. Make me a cleric or a CEO, a poet or a politico, and teaching is what I will do” [p. 21].

“People like me are raised to live autonomously, not interdependently. I had been trained to compete and win, and I had developed a taste for the prizes” [p. 22].

“Because I could not acknowledge my fear, I had to disguise it as the white horse of judgment and self-righteousness” [p. 28].

“Self care is never a selfish act-it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on the earth to offer to others” [p. 30].

“They decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside” [p. 32].

“Some journeys are direct, and some are circuitous; some are heroic, and some are fearful and muddled. But every journey, honestly undertaken, stands a chance of taking us toward the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need” [p. 36].

Questions for reflection

What role does gaining the approval of others play in how you live your life?

As Palmer recalls his childhood, he is able to uncover clues to his true self. Parents, siblings, and even spouses are great sources of information to find out what you were like when you were younger.

What were your childhood fascinations? Were you an artist? Were you building forts in the woods? What sorts of things held your attention?

Are there connections between the things that fascinated you then and the life that you want to live now?

Half-truths go hand in hand with fear. In our fear, it is much easier to look at another person, institution, or situation and point out shortcomings than it is to look at our own. Fear may motivate us to do the right thing for the wrong reasons.

What are some of the fears that “trigger” you to lash out at others?

Palmer says that “self care is good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift that I was placed on earth to offer others.” He goes on to say that a lack of self care hurts not only the individual but others as well.

What does “self care” look like for you? What restores you?

What are the things in your life that make your soul tired?

Who are the Martin Luther King Jr.’s, the Rosa Parks’, and Gandhis: of your life?
Who are the people that you admire so much that you seek to model aspects of your life after them? Why these people?

Learning who you are doesn’t simply mean learning your strengths but also your limitations. “Who are you?” is a very broad and difficult question to answer. I may not be able to tell you “who I am,” but I’ve got a list of stories to tell you who I am not!

Finish the sentence “I could never_____ it’s just not me.”

Suggested Activity

Palmer says that “clues are coded and must be deciphered.” Turn a blank sheet of paper on its side and draw a straight line from the left side to the right side. The line will serve as a chronological timeline of your life from birth until now. Place significant experiences and events that have shaped who you are today on the timeline. **Examples: family of origin, deaths, births, school and work experiences, relationships, spiritual journey, great moments of joy, or great moments of sadness.**

Take time to share with one another about what is on your timeline and why it is significant.

Parker Palmer
Let Your Life Speak
Chapter 3-When Way Closes

Quotes to think about

“There is as much guidance in what does not and cannot happen in my life as there is in what can and does-maybe more” [p. 39].

“If you are like me and don’t readily admit your limits, embarrassment may be the only way to get your attention” [p. 42].

“As Americans...we resist the very idea of limits, regarding limits of all sorts as temporary and regrettable impositions on our lives...We refuse to take no for an answer” [p. 42].

“When I consistently refuse to take no for an answer, I miss the vital clues to my identity that arise when way closes-and I am more likely both to exceed my limits and to do harm to others in the process” [p. 43].

“There are some roles and relationships in which we thrive and others in which we wither and die” [p. 44].

“It took me a long time to understand that although everyone needs to be loved, I cannot be the source of that gift to everyone who asks me for it” [p. 48].

“When I give something I do not possess, I give a false and dangerous gift, a gift that looks like love but is, in reality, loveless-a gift given more from my need to prove myself than from the other’s need to be cared for” [p. 48].

“Our strongest gifts are usually those we are barely aware of possessing. They are a part of our God given nature, with us from the moment we drew first breath, and we are no more conscious of having them than we are of breathing” [p. 52].

“Limitations and liabilities are the flip side of our gifts...a particular weakness is the inevitable trade-off for a particular strength. We will become better teachers not by trying to fill the potholes in our souls but by knowing them so well that we can avoid falling into them” [p. 52].

“If we are to live our lives fully and well, we must learn to embrace the opposites, to live in a creative tension between our limits and our potentials. We must honor our limitations in ways that do not distort our nature, and we must trust and use our gifts in ways that fulfill the potentials God gave us” [p. 55].

Questions for reflection

Can you identify a moment in your life when God used a “closed door” instead of an “open door” to guide your life in the direction it needed to go? Discuss your experience.

Palmer says that embarrassment is sometimes the only way we become aware of our limitations. Identify and discuss an embarrassing moment that helped you become aware of your limitations.

How does humor get used to avoid dealing with our shortcomings?

In American culture, weaknesses and limitations are often viewed as things that need to be turned into strengths. Palmer seems to argue that in trying to turn our weaknesses into strengths we become something that we are not and end up living outside of ourselves. How does the idea that weaknesses should be identified and honored rather than turned into strengths strike you?

If our strongest gifts are usually the ones that we are most unaware of, what types of things do people tell you are your strengths that you feel unaware of?

Suggested Activity

Identify and write down two recent moments in your life. 1. A moment when things went so well that you felt confident that you were born to do whatever you were doing at the time. 2. A moment when something went so poorly that you never wanted to repeat the experience again.

Break into groups of two or three people and share these moments. In the groups, begin by helping one another see the strengths that made the great moment possible. After doing that, reflect with one another about the moment that went poorly. Instead of offering critiques, think about the strengths discussed in the first moment. Knowing that our strengths and weaknesses are often opposites, help each other identify if there is a connection between the strength of the first moment and the weakness of the second moment. How are they two sides of the same coin?

When everyone has finished gather back together as one group and discuss what you discovered.

Parker Palmer

Let Your Life Speak

Chapter 4: All the Way Down

*Before your discussion of chapter 4, it is very important to lay a framework for your discussion. Anytime people are discussing their brokenness, it must be done in a place of safety and confidentiality. Ask the group to be attentive to not try to “fix” one another as you interact. If you sense this beginning to happen, remind everyone that you are not trying to fix one another but to help one another hear. Also, be sure to communicate how important it is that what is discussed remains confidential.

Quotes to think about

“I had no choice but to write about my own deepest wound...I rarely spoke to him about my own darkness; even in his gracious presence, I felt too ashamed” [p. 57].

“Second, depression demands that we reject simplistic answers, both “religious” and “scientific,” and learn to embrace mystery, something our culture resists” [p. 60].

“I do not like to speak ungratefully of my visitors. They all meant well, and they were among the few who did not avoid me altogether” [p. 61].

“Depression is the ultimate state of disconnection, not just between people but between one’s mind and one’s feelings. To be reminded of that disconnection only deepened my despair” [p. 62].

“I heard nothing beyond their opening words, because I knew they were peddling a falsehood: no one can fully experience another person’s mystery” [p. 62].

“One of the hardest things we must do sometimes is to be present to another person’s pain without trying to “fix” it, to simply stand respectfully at the edge of that person’s mystery and misery” [p. 63].

“Functional atheism-saying pious words about God’s presence in our lives but believing, on the contrary, that nothing good is going to happen unless we make it happen” [p. 64].

“First, I had been trained as an intellectual not only to think-an activity I greatly value-but also to live largely in my head...” [p. 67].

“I had to be forced underground before I could understand that the way to God is not up but down” [p. 69].

“One of the most painful discoveries I made in the midst of the dark woods of depression was that a part of me wanted to stay depressed. As long as I clung to this living death, life became easier; little was expected of me, certainly not serving others” [p. 71].

Questions for reflection

Identifying our wounds is a critical part of the inward journey. Think back to the timeline you drew in the Chapter 2 activity. What are the wounds you have suffered?

In what ways does shame cause you to hide who you are from others?

Discuss the following statement: Sometimes not having answers to some of life's questions can be comforting. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Do you feel it is important to "show up" when others experience hardship or tragedy? Why or why not?

Discuss Palmer's suggestion that no one can fully experience another person's mystery and misery.

How is the phrase "I know exactly how you feel" a positive statement between two people? How is it a negative statement?

How do you see "functional atheism" in the world around you? In your life?

What does "the way to God is down" mean to you?

Palmer says "part of me wanted to stay depressed." Why do you think we hold onto our pain despite the fact that we want it to stop?

Suggested Activity

Have someone read Job 2:9-13.

What can we learn about how Job's friends respond in these few verses?

Read Job 4:8 and then Job 13:5.

What is Eliphaz suggesting about Job in 4:8? What can be learned from Job's response in 13:5?

Parker Palmer Let Your Life Speak Chapter 5-Leading from Within

Quotes to think about

"I lead by word and deed simply because I am here doing what I do. If you are also here, doing what you do, then you also exercise leadership of some sort" [p. 74].

“Why must we go in and down? Because as we do so, we will meet the darkness that we carry within ourselves—the ultimate shadows that we project onto other people. If we do not understand that the enemy is within, we will find a thousand ways of making someone “out there” into the enemy, becoming leaders who oppress rather than liberate others” [p. 80].

“But why would anybody want to take a journey of that sort, with its multiple difficulties and dangers? Everything in us cries out against it—which is why we externalize everything. It is so much easier to deal with the external world, to spend our lives manipulating materials and institutions and other people instead of dealing with our own souls” [p. 82].

“Why would anyone want to embark on the daunting inner journey about which Annie Dillard writes? Because there is no way out of one’s inner life, so one had better get into it. On the inward and downward spiritual journey, the only way out is in and through” [p. 85].

“But extroversion sometimes develops as a way to cope with self-doubt: we plunge into external activity to prove that we are worthy—or simply to evade the question” [p. 86].

“the knowledge that identity does not depend on the role we play or the power it gives us over others. It depends only on the simple fact that we are children of God, valued in and for ourselves” [p. 87].

“A few people found ways to be present to me without violating my soul’s integrity. Because they were not driven by their own fears, the fears that lead us either to “fix” or abandon each other...” [p. 93].

Questions for reflection

Palmer suggests that anyone who is alive is a leader. He broadens the typical definition of leadership to include things like family dynamics and relationships. Discuss your thoughts on this.

What monsters do you need to “ride all the way down?” What might that look like?

What activities have you been part of in order to prove your worth or value?

Palmer finishes the chapter by saying that it *is* possible for communities to be with one another in a way that is safe and honoring. What do you think makes communities feel unsafe?

We are meant to support and journey with one another. What alternatives are there for journeying together beyond “fixing or abandoning?”

Suggested Activity

Read Matthew 15:2,10, and 11.

Have someone wrap an empty box as you would a birthday or Christmas gift. Decorate the exterior with ribbons, bows, and other gift decorations. Set the gift in the middle of the room and ask people to make observations about the wrapping: What can we tell about the person who wrapped the box based on the wrapping? After several minutes of observation, have someone open the gift to reveal the empty box. Jesus observes that the Pharisees are so concerned with the exterior that they neglect what is inside. How is this true in our lives?

Parker Palmer Let Your Life Speak Chapter 6-There Is a Season

Quotes to think about

“Animated by the imagination, one of the most vital powers we possess, our metaphors often become reality, transmuting themselves from language into the living of our lives” [p. 96].

“We do not believe that we “grow” our lives-we believe that we “make” them” [p. 97].

“We are here not only to transform the world but also to be transformed” [p. 97].

“In my own experience of autumn, I am rarely aware that seeds are being planted” [p. 98].

“In retrospect, I can see in my own life what I could not see at the time-how the job I lost helped me find work I needed to do, how the “road closed” sign turned me toward terrain I needed to travel, how losses that felt irredeemable forced me to discern meanings I needed to know” [p. 99].

“There is in all visible things...a hidden wholeness” [p. 99].

“Until we enter boldly into the fears we most want to avoid, those fears will dominate our lives” [p. 103].

“If you receive a gift, you keep it alive not by clinging to it but by passing it along...If we want to save our lives, we cannot cling to them but must spend them with abandon” [p. 105].

“Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them-and receive them from others when we are in need” [p. 108].

“Community doesn’t just create abundance-community is abundance. If we could learn that equation from the world of nature, the human world might be transformed” [p. 108].

Questions for reflection

What season do you feel that you are currently in? Why?

In your mind, what is the weirdest most obscure animal in all of God’s good creation? Why do you suppose God is so detailed and extravagant with his creation?

What things contribute to the loss of imagination?

In what ways do you “make your life” rather than listen for what God desires to make of your life?

God asks that his people join him in redeeming and restoring the world. How are you joining God to redeem and restore the world? Remember that God is about details and extravagance. We can sometimes feel that the way we join God is small and insignificant compared to the way others do. But it isn’t. God created you to be a gift to Him and to the world and you have something to offer. What is it?

How is this process transforming you?

The way of Jesus, which is the way of the cross, compels us to use our freedom and abundance for the benefit of others. What does it look like for you to live for the benefit of others?

What does it look like for your community?

Suggested Activity

After discussing what it might look like for your community to live for the benefit of others, finish by holding hands in a circle and reciting the Lord's Prayer. [Matthew 6:9-13].