

Leadership and the Inner Journey

AN INTERVIEW WITH PARKER PALMER, BY L. J. RITTENHOUSE

Readers of past issues of Leader to Leader will know Frances Hesselbein's phrase "leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do." It captures the essence of the most effective leaders—those who show that values and character in action carry the day. "How to be" leaders pay attention to their inner growth, knowing that they must fully develop themselves as human beings if they are to develop as leaders.

Parker Palmer, one of the country's foremost educators, has inspired a national movement to reform teaching and education. Here, in conversation with L. J. Rittenhouse, an executive consultant who tracks the connection between CEO language and financial performance, Palmer explains why the inner journey is a prerequisite to authentic leadership.

Rittenhouse: Why must leaders take an inner journey?

Palmer: Because the inner world is a source of reality and power, at least as much as the outer world. Our culture attributes reality and power almost exclusively to externals—territory, property, wealth, and political access. We've created institutions that aim to shape the external world in ways we find desirable. But we're learning that we're not very good at this. The external world is in a serious state of depletion and distortion as a result of our manipulations.

The other thing we're learning is that there is another world, an inner world, in which there is also reality and power. This is not something I learned in a hot tub in California. I learned it from oppressed people who have no power except inner power—and yet have created great social change. In our time we've seen the impact of people like Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, and Vaclav Havel, who found the courage to lead from their own deepest truths.

And I learned it from a liberal arts education where I encountered a guy named Socrates who said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Education at its best calls us to

take an inner journey, not only so we can live better lives, but also to have greater life-giving impact on the world around us. Today's leaders have the potential to make decisions that affect the course of history, but seldom are they invited to examine what animates them inwardly. History is full of tragedies created when leaders act from a place of inner darkness. When I speak with leaders, I sometimes expand on Socrates: If you must live an unexamined life, please don't inflict it on others.

Rittenhouse: Examining one's life requires one to pay attention to emotions and feelings, as well as to one's thoughts and intellect. Aren't leaders supposed to restrain their personal realities to be effective?

Palmer: No, the best leaders work from a place of integrity in themselves, from their hearts. If they don't, they can't inspire trustful relationships. In the absence of trust, organizations fall apart.

Rittenhouse: I'm not sure I agree with your observation. I've seen plenty of businesses where leaders are not endowed with the ability to inspire trust and their organizations aren't falling apart.

Palmer: As the great jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker said, "If it ain't in your heart, it ain't in your horn." We can hear the horns everywhere, but if they're not being played from the heart, then certain negative consequences follow.

I know from experience inside corporations and large-scale organizations that everybody is sizing up the leader and asking, "Is this a divided person or a person

of integrity? Is what we see what we get? Is he or she the same on the inside as on the outside?"

Students ask this about teachers in the classroom. Employees ask it about their bosses. Citizens ask it about their politicians. When the answer is, "No, what we see on the outside is not the same as who they are on the inside," then things start to fall apart.

I have just described an unsafe situation: when leaders with the power to call the tune and shape the dance are perceived as lacking congruence or integrity, they create unsafe situations. And what do people do in unsafe situations? They start hiding out. They start faking it. They start giving less than what they have to give. They start playing it close to the vest. An organization may "work" under these conditions but simply cannot function at anywhere near full effectiveness. And there's a lot of this going around.

Rittenhouse: I don't know of any business or management school that offers a course in leading from the heart. Doesn't that concept limit what we expect from our leaders?

Palmer: I'm using the word *heart* as they did in ancient times, when it didn't merely mean the emotions, as it tends to mean today. It meant that center in the human self where everything comes together—where will and intellect and values and feeling and intuition and vision all converge. It meant the source of one's integrity.

It takes courage to lead from the heart because you're putting your own identity and integrity into the public



Parker J. Palmer—writer, traveling teacher, and activist—is author of six books (most recently "Let Your Life Speak" and "The Courage to Teach") and working on a new book, "An Undivided Life: Seeking Integrity in Circles of Trust." In 1998, The Leadership Project named him one of the thirty most influential senior leaders in higher education and one of the ten key agenda-setters of the past decade.

arena. You're standing for things you believe in. You're professing values that are important to you—and in the public arena you will always draw slings and arrows for doing that. But you will also have the best chance of creating something of true and lasting value. If business schools aren't teaching these things, they aren't reaching very deeply into the dynamics of leadership.

Rittenhouse: So, even if I accept this expanded view of the heart, what do you say to those who see power resulting from control and domination?

Palmer: Look at history. Think for a moment about the lives of oppressed people around the world. These people have had no access to the tools of control and domination—like money, status, or political clout—to work for change. The only power they have access to is inward.

But history shows time and again how people who might be regarded as “weak” have used the power of the human heart. History shows how they have taken hope and vision on the one hand and anger and fury on the other to create real and massive transformation. Whether we're talking about people of color or women or any other minority, no form of injustice would ever have been righted or transformed if it weren't for the fact that the human heart is a source of great power in the real world.

As people draw nearer to that place within themselves, they start to feel the painful consequences that can come from leading from their hearts. But they also see that the consequences of not doing so are even more painful. Not doing so results in leading a divided life—

behaving one way on the outside while believing or affirming something completely different on the inside. In human terms, that is a recipe for disaster.

How did Mandela, Havel, and Parks decide to live “divided no more”—especially when they knew they would be severely punished if they acted from their deepest truths? I believe they all came to understand that no external punishment could possibly be greater than the punishment we impose on ourselves by conspiring in our own diminishment.

Rittenhouse: You just described the painful consequences of looking inward. Is that why many people choose not to go inward?

Palmer: There's a lot of fear connected with the inner journey because it penetrates our illusions. Taking the inner journey will lead you into some very shadowy places. You're going to learn things about yourself that you'll wish you didn't know. There are monsters in there—monsters you can't control—but

trying to keep them hidden will only give them greater power.

If we can convince ourselves that the world we live in is simply a world of objects over which we can gain mastery, then we can pretend we're in charge. This allows us to pretend to have no fears. But when history, nature, and human nature throw things at us that are beyond our control, then fear kicks up.

Anyone who's been in personal pain—who has suffered depression, for example, as I have—has to learn that the

■
*No external punishment
could be greater than the
punishment we impose on
ourselves by conspiring in
our own diminishment.*
■

only way out of inner darkness is to go down into it and find out what's there. You have to come to terms with what's in the darkness before you can come through to the other side.

I can make a pretty good case that our culture is in a state of depression, which is a hard and unpleasant place to be. But it is also a place from which the courage to change can start to emerge. This requires the guts to go into the darkness instead of pretending it isn't there.

Rittenhouse: What evidence do you have for stating that our culture is in a state of depression?

Palmer: When I talk to young people about what they think of the future, and look at the data on the rate of youthful suicides, it's a pretty dismal picture. Young people live with the depressing idea that the older generation is no longer looking out for the future of the young. This isn't paranoid. I think we elders are in a state of depression that leads us to be self-absorbed and not nearly as caring about the rising generation as we should be.

We ought to be looking at our young people as the canaries in the coal mine and realize there's some very toxic stuff in the air. We may be in the process of inventing a new culture, but some days all any of us can feel is the destruction of the old and the despair that comes with that process. We have to work our way through the despair and find a new way of being in the world, a way of partnering and co-creating and simply being companions—with the young, with each other, and with nature herself.

To do that, we have to relearn the arts of community. We also have to shake off the illusion that facts and logic will give us such leverage over the world that we can do without community. We have to see that scientism limits our power.

Rittenhouse: What do you mean by "scientism"?

Palmer: I mean a narrow mode of knowing that assumes that only the external world is real and that the inner world is an illusion. Scientism means believing that only logic and data can give us power over the world.

■
*We may be
in the process
of inventing a
new culture*
■

It's like walking into the forest with a shoebox and saying to people, "I'm going to be in there for a while. When I come out, I'll tell you what's in there by showing you all I can find that fits into this shoebox." When that shoebox defines the limits of your inquiry, you won't be able to report on the giant redwood you saw, or the moose, or the complex interactions within the ecosystem. In fact, you might not even have seen those things because you were ob-

essed with looking for stuff that would fit in your shoebox—a few pine cones, some plants, some rocks and dirt.

To limit yourself to such a pinched mode of knowing is to narrow your vision and constrain your capacity to know what's real and what's powerful in the world. And what happens to the forest if you make policy recommendations based exclusively on the information in the shoebox? This is more than metaphor. Politicians do exactly this when they make key decisions solely on the basis of public opinion polls rather than using other modes of knowing, like reading contemporary novels,

listening to popular music, attending to what the poets and artists are saying, or listening to their own inner teacher—to discern the deeper dimensions of what is going on in our culture.

Rittenhouse: But science and scientists have made significant contributions to improving our quality of life. Are you saying that science is antithetical to progress?

Palmer: No. Real science is not the enemy here. Scientism is the enemy because it puts blinders on us. To be a good, let alone a great, scientist, you must use much more than logic and data. No great scientist has ever operated with such a narrow model of knowing. Just read biographies of people like Barbara McClintock, the Nobel Prize-winning geneticist, or Niels Bohr, the great particle physicist, to say nothing of Einstein, who is often quoted on these points. There are bean counters who help advance our knowledge by testing the hypotheses of people who “think outside the box.” But no one would know what to count, or why to count it, or what the numbers mean, if someone had not thrown the shoe-box away and entered the forest with a wide-open heart and mind.

Rittenhouse: But leaders usually don’t have the luxury of spending lots of time trying to understand things. Leaders have to act based on limited information. How can this view of inner reality help leaders today?

Palmer: One of the most important things to say about the inner life is that it is not an escape from the

world. Instead, it is a way to reengage the world more perceptively, more creatively, more honestly, and ultimately more effectively.

We think we see things more clearly these days because we have access to such incredible amounts of information. But we don’t have clear sight; we have information overload.

Rittenhouse: Why does information overload drive leaders to the inner life?

Palmer: Because with information overload you either go nuts or realize that you need to discern what really matters and what doesn’t, what is powerful and what is not. We have endless amounts of data within easy reach at every instant of every day from all parts of the globe, and indeed from the universe. We’re even sending space probes out to beam back photos as though the cosmos itself was one big Kodak moment! That’s great. I love information. But the media give us more data than our minds can possibly process. They also create the illusion that we’ve been someplace, and done something, when in fact we haven’t.

For example, television portrayals of suffering in places like the Congo or Bosnia or Appalachia actually dull us to the human pain involved. People who’ve been to such places will tell you that being present to such suffering engages you with it, while seeing it presented in our highly stylized and framed media allows you to turn your back on it. We have to detach ourselves from the media in order to find out what’s real and powerful.

■
*The inner life
is a way to
reengage the world
more perceptively.*
■

Rittenhouse: You've just described two paradoxes: that we need to detach from the world to know it better, and that distortion and pain can result in greater clarity. Is this ability to see and live with paradoxes required by our leaders today?

Palmer: Absolutely. E. F. Schumacher said, "Good mothers and good teachers work every day with children who have to be held in a paradoxical relationship between discipline and freedom. No good mother or no good teacher can write you a formula about how to hold their child in that paradox. They just do it. A child grows up healthy and whole when that paradox between discipline and freedom is held together in the person of the mother and teacher."

I think that's a brilliant insight because we can all identify with it. Do children need discipline to grow? Yes, absolutely. Do children need freedom to grow? Yes, absolutely. You cannot choose one or the other. You have to provide both.

Most of us don't like paradox because we want to resolve tension instantly. This is why we have meetings in which first somebody proposes one side of the question and then somebody else proposes the other side. After the tension has mounted for a little while, maybe ten or fifteen minutes, a third person calls for a vote to get the tension over with. Then we vote, and 51 percent of the people win by telling the other 49 percent where to get off, and the 49 percent proceed to spend the next decade undermining the decision we thought we had made, and all because we don't know how to hold the tension.

Rittenhouse: So these abilities to hold tension and to live with paradox are examples of what you consider to be discernment skills. How can leaders practice discernment?

Palmer: Discernment is the ability to see what is and what is not real based on the knowledge of our hearts as well as of our minds. The principles I'm thinking about are ones that some would call spiritual practices. They come from wisdom traditions that teach us not to turn our backs on the world or to forget the news of the world. Instead, they teach us how to get the news from within. When leaders can do that, they can better filter and assess the news from without.

Rittenhouse: You've often talked about the ability of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and writer, to see things that others couldn't see.

Palmer: Merton lived in the hills of Kentucky in a medieval monastic environment throughout the '40s, '50s and '60s. He

had no radio or newspapers or TV, yet he understood the "news" about war and peace and race relations in his time better than did most of his contemporaries in the '50s. He wrote that race relations in this country were deteriorating to the point where the cities would be burning by the end of the '60s. Activists on the front lines in the cities angrily denied his view and mocked Merton for propounding it. They believed that their work would avert such calamities. Later, some apologized to him.

How could Thomas Merton come up with these prophetic insights? He availed himself of alternative

■
*Most of us don't
like paradox because
we want to resolve
tension instantly.*
■

modes of knowing. When he listened to tapes of the black jazz artists, he could hear the anger and anguish in their music. He knew this would lead society to some very painful places. He read the poetry of Langston Hughes and James Baldwin and found that same pain. He took this as data.

Rittenhouse: Are there other principles of discernment besides the ability to be alert to illusions and to avail ourselves of different modes of learning?

Palmer: Let's call this next one "a capacity for connectedness." The capacity to enter into relationships or community with "the other" is very important. In my work in higher education, I'm constantly arguing that, along with a capacity for critical thinking or for tolerating ambiguity, a capacity for connectedness should be one of the great fruits of being educated. This capacity allows you to enter into meaningful relationships not only with living people and with the world around you, but also with a world of ideas, the world of people long gone, the world of nature, and the world of spirit.

Rittenhouse: A lot of people see leaders as disconnected, because to survive they need large egos. If leaders are caught up within their own egos, how can they be open to differences in people and in their world?

Palmer: I don't think they can. Having a big ego is actually antithetical to both leadership and survival. I think a particular kind of vulnerability makes relationships possible—especially with otherness. Paradoxically,

it also gives us the breadth of knowledge necessary to survive.

Great leaders make themselves vulnerable to a wide range of voices, especially to those that don't fit their own preconceptions. Poets and novelists, young people and elders, great scientists and spiritual leaders all can more fully open the windows of our perceptions. But this requires inner work.

When I'm sitting with someone whose worldview isn't familiar to me and who therefore feels threatening to my ego because I don't get it, there's a lot of inner work to be done simply to calm myself and say, "Stay open, listen, don't rush to judgment, and ask good questions that will evoke this person further. Try to understand."

■
*It takes inner work
to be open to someone
whose worldview
is unfamiliar.*
■

We sometimes think of spiritual disciplines as sitting cross-legged and chanting a mantra. These devices don't interest me nearly as much as the discipline of sitting with someone who seems to be talking to you from another planet and doing this inner

work of telling yourself, "Let go of defensiveness and judgmentalism, get into an inquiry mode, and try to learn. There's something here that will expand my sense of reality if I'm willing to let it."

That's spiritual discipline. It has nothing to do with floating off into some other dimension. It has a lot to do with getting your feet more firmly on the ground in the real world.

Rittenhouse: So are you saying that these disciplines of discernment define the "spiritual dimension" of leadership?

Palmer: Yes. I sometimes define spirituality as the eternal quest to be connected with something larger than one's own ego. I can say the same thing in different words by defining spirituality as the eternal quest to find ground on which to stand—ground that is more solid than fluctuations of the stock market, or how successful I am at the moment, or my standing in the polls. When we aren't seeking solid ground on which to stand, we are on sand that keeps shifting—and while the beach may beguile us for a while, it is ultimately a very depressing place for most people to remain.

In the course of the life journey, most of us find that the firmest ground we have to stand on, outside of our own soul, is in relationships of integrity into which we have entered. A lot of things will fall away in our lives, but if we're in possession of our own soul and can claim a few relationships of integrity, we have a place to stand.

Rittenhouse: What are relationships of integrity?

Palmer: Relationships of integrity are based on values. But when we use the word *values*, we should be careful about its meaning. A value is a norm for relationships of one sort or another—with people, with nature, with ideas—and involves not just what I say I believe but also what I embody in my being and doing as I conduct those relationships. Whether we know it or not, we embody our values all the time—for better or for worse.

One of the great illusions in Western culture is that we can be trained to leave our values behind when we do our work. That's a great illusion in the training of fac-

ulty, for example. I do workshops on pedagogy in which professors tell me, "I can't possibly take my values into the classroom!" I reply, "So who else are you going to send in there, then?" If you're there, your values are there. If you don't think your students are actively engaged in figuring out what your values are and discovering who the real person is behind the teacher's mask, you haven't been paying attention!

The other thing to say about values is that they never stand alone, like cut flowers—or if they do, they die. Values are always rooted in an underground system of convictions about what is real and powerful in life—which takes us back to the disciplines of discernment. For example, you can't hold ecological values about how human beings should relate to the natural world without discerning the invisible ecosystem of nature itself and seeing that we are embedded in it.

Rittenhouse: Do you believe these principles of discernment are expanding among our leaders and throughout our culture?

Palmer: Well, we have a long way to go, but I do see a shift occurring. If you look at history, scientism—the assumption that only the external world is real—has been a short blip on the screen. For eons people have known the power of the inner life and have crafted ways of bringing that power to the external world. The seeds of understanding the importance of the inner life have been around as long as we humans have. The best leaders today are beginning to understand that we must do whatever is necessary to allow those seeds to grow and flower. ■

■

*Whether we know
it or not, we embody our
values all the time.*

■