How many of you know who Parker Palmer is? Can you raise your hands?

Parker Palmer is an American author, educator, activist, and a practicing Quaker who has written eight books and scores of essays about education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change.

And he’s also one of my heroes.

In his book, Let Your Life Speak (which is subtitled Listening for the Voice of Vocation), Palmer shares the story of the time that was offered the opportunity to become the president of a small liberal arts college (which was not only his “dream” job but also one that all of his professional colleagues assured him was exactly what he was cut out to be).

Palmer visited the college, met with faculty, students, administrators, and trustees, and, before leaving, was told that he would most likely be offered the position.

For some reason, though, Palmer wasn’t entirely sure. And so, in keeping with his Quaker tradition, Palmer asked several friends to meet with him as a “clearness committee:” a process of discernment that Quakers have used for more than 300 years to seek guidance and clarity when they are facing a personal—or communal—decision, dilemma, challenge, or crisis.

The “clearness” process, Palmer writes, is based on a “simple but crucial conviction: each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems. But that inner voice is often garbled by … inward and outward interference.” And so, the purpose of a “clearness committee” is “not to give advice or ‘fix’ people from the outside in,” but rather to help a person, by asking honest, open questions, discern the right path by discovering their own wisdom from the inside out.

When Palmer met with his “clearness committee, the first few questions they asked him were routine and easy. Then one person asked: “What would you like most about being a college president?”

Palmer answered with a volley of negatives: “Well, I wouldn’t like having to give up my writing and teaching. I wouldn’t like the politics. I wouldn’t like never knowing who my real friends are. And I wouldn’t like having to glad hand people I don’t respect simply because they have money.”

Gently, but firmly, the questioner interrupted: “May I remind you, Parker, that I asked you what you would most like?”

Compelled to give an honest answer, Palmer found himself appalled as the words came out of his mouth. “Well,” he said in a quiet voice, “I guess what I’d like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word president under it.”
Palmer recalls that although his answer was laughable, not one of those present laughed. They just sat there in a long, serious silence that made Palmer extremely uncomfortable.

Finally, his questioner broke the silence: “Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?”

With that, everyone laughed, the clearness committee adjourned, and Palmer called the college to withdraw his name from consideration.

No one has ever offered me a position as president of a small, liberal arts college and I’ve never called on a Quaker “clearness committee” to help me discern what to do in the face of a personal decision, crisis, or fork in the road.

But there was a time, ten years ago, when I was forced, kicking and screaming, to engage in a process that required me to do some serious soul searching—to discern who I really was deep down in my heart and soul in the shadows of my being that I wouldn’t let anyone, not even myself, see; a process that required me to discover for myself whose I was, who and what I was called to be and become, and where I was meant to go.

I was already halfway through seminary when I met with the UUA’s Ministerial Fellowship Committee and was confident that they would grant me status as an official candidate for ministry since I was doing so well in my ministerial studies, had done so much good work as a lay leader in my home congregation, had been told by so many people that I would be such a great UU minister, and was so sure myself that becoming a minister was what I wanted (or, maybe, what I should do).

But that’s not how it went down.

They asked me some tough questions—questions that weren’t really tough but questions that were really tough for me to answer because I’d been so focused on doing what I needed to do to become a minister that I hadn’t taken the time to discern whether and how and why I was called to ministry or even what it would really mean to be called to ministry.

I’d done the work of my head and my hands, they told me, but not the work of my heart and my soul.

And so, they “suggested” that I take some time off to do some discernment, reflection, and soul searching and come back to see them the next year if I’d discovered my answers to the questions they had asked me.

I was devastated. I cried for most of the six-hour journey back home, driving alone in the darkness and rain with only my deep disappointment and feeling of failure. I almost gave up, convinced that leaving my position as a tenured (and well paid) professor at UNC to become a UU minister was not only just a crazy dream but also plain stupid: that I’d been fooling myself and trying to fool others; that I didn’t have what it took to be a minister and never would.

I almost gave up. But I didn’t. I decided, not with my head but my heart, to do the discernment and soul searching the Ministerial Fellowship Committee told me I needed to do.
And so, I took a leave of absence from my seminary studies, participated in weekly group therapy sessions, met monthly with a Quaker spiritual director, and joined a year-long spiritual “deepening” program at the Eno River UU Fellowship led by Rev. Mary Grigolia.

It was a long year-and-a-half. It was a hard year-and-a-half. But it was also a wonderful year-and-a-half.

It was a process of deep discernment and soul searching that I didn’t undertake on my own or in isolation but in the company of others who were also engaged in searching their souls to discern where life was leading them.

It was a process of asking, sitting, and struggling with deep questions, of seeking clarity but embracing uncertainty and ambiguity, of risking being open and honest and vulnerable, of acknowledging and confronting my deepest fears, of discovering and better understanding my “true” self.

It was a process that was reflected in a six-word mantra that I created and still use as part of my spiritual practice: opening, unfolding, changing, growing, expanding, encompassing.

It was a process that I depicted by drawing a picture of a small mouse who, after wandering through a maze of dark tunnels underneath the ground, finally emerged to look up at a single star twinkling brightly high above in the night-time sky.

It was a process of discernment that led me back to meet with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee with answers to the questions they had asked—a process of discernment that led me to stand before and speak to you today.

III

For Christians, “discernment” is the spiritual practice of listening for God’s voice—that still, small voice within that speaks softly beneath all of the other voices and noise in our lives—in order to discover and understand God’s will.

For Quakers, like Parker Palmer, “discernment” is the process of opening oneself, with the gentle support of others, to one’s “inner” teacher—the voice of divine truth and love within each of us that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with important decisions and challenging problems.

For the Muslim philosopher, mystic, and poet, Rumi, discernment was the practice of sitting quietly and patiently with a problem or decision and carefully “sniffing” it with the “nose” of wisdom.

For the Taoist sage, Lao Tzu, discernment was the process of seeking clarity by patiently “waiting for the mud to settle.”

The word “discernment” is derived from a Greek word meaning “to sift through.” And so, discernment is the process of “sifting through” all the voices, interference, expectations, and fears of our lives to see more clearly “what is true and what is false, ... what is primary and what is secondary, what is central and what is peripheral:” to discover what is real, what is right, what is good, and what is true.
And to do that requires stepping back, taking time out, being still, sitting quietly, listening intently, reflecting deeply, being honest and open, setting ego aside, confronting one’s fears and anxiety, and searching one’s soul to discover and understand more clearly who and what we really are, where we come from, what values we hold most true and dear, who and what we love, to whom and what we are willing to give ourselves, to whom or what we are responsible and accountable, and what promises we are willing to make to ourselves and each other to be and become the people—and the religious community—we are meant and called to be.

IV

It’s my hope, and the hope of the Fellowship’s Board of Directors, that every member and friend of this religious community will take the time—just ten hours over the course of the next nine months—to participate in a congregational discernment process that will allow us to face some of the challenges that lie ahead of us:

- Challenges that we can’t meet until we first discern more clearly who we are, individually and as a community, and who and what we’re called to be.
- Challenges that can’t be fixed by technical solutions to technical problems but only adaptive solutions, new and different ways of thinking and being, and changing at least some of the norms of our congregational culture.

The centerpiece of this discernment process will be a series of congregational conversations focusing on five “deep” questions.

First: Who are we?

- How are we alike and how are we different from one another?
- What are we? Are we a social club, a branch of the Democratic Party, a refuge from religion, or a liberal religious community?
- What are the stories that we tell ourselves about who we are and in what ways are they true or not? Are we as welcoming as we think we are? Are we as generous as we think we are? Are we as accepting, tolerant, caring, and loving as we think we are?
- What core values do we share? What is the essence of our Unitarian Universalist faith?
- What is the “heart,” “soul,” or “burning coal” of our community? What is it that makes us “us”?

Second: Whose are we?

- What is our relationship with and responsibility to that which is beyond or larger than ourselves?
- To whom or what do we “belong”? Who or what do we serve?
- Who or what do we love? For whom or what do our hearts break?
- Who are our neighbors?
- Who or what sustains us in times of despair or fear?
• How do we understand our place in the “larger life of all,” “the universe,” or “the interdependent web of existence?”
• How do we describe or name that which both “transcends” and “encompasses” our individual lives?

Third: Why are we?
• What is our “true” mission—not just the words that are part of our “official” mission statement?
• What is the purpose or reason for which this religious community exists?
• What difference are we committed to making in our lives, in the lives of others, in the wider community, and in the world?

Fourth: Where are we going?
• What are our hopes, dreams, and vision for the future of our shared community?
• Five or fifty years from now, what do we hope others will say when they talk about this community?

And fifth: How will we move forward together?
• What is our “compass”?
• What do we need to hold onto and what do we need to let go of?
• What promises and commitments will we make to each other?

The purpose of these conversations is to share, reflect, listen, and learn—not to persuade, argue, make a decision, or come up with the one “right” or “best” answer these questions.

They’ll be about talking and listening—respectfully, attentively, honestly, openly, and deeply—to each other—not me or Sasha or the Board talking to you or answering the questions for you.

And the “outcome” of the process won’t be a strategic plan, a new mission or vision statement, a proposed congregational covenant, or any other tangible “product,” but rather the process of discerning, sharing, listening, and learning itself which, if successful, will “plow the ground” or “built a foundation” that will enable us to move forward together to be and become the religious community that we want and need to be.

And, so, let me ask you: Will you join me, your staff, your lay leaders, and, most importantly, each other in a journey of discernment to discover—or rediscover—the heart and soul of this religious community, knowing that the process of discernment will transform who you are and who and what this religious community will be?

If so, please answer: “We will.”

May it be so.