

# The “Flow of Gratitude”: Conversations with a “Non-violent Spiritual Warrior”

## Amir Freimann’s interview with Parker J Palmer October 2019

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### Abstract

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**Parker J. Palmer** is a writer, speaker, activist, and founder and Senior Partner Emeritus of the Center for Courage & Renewal. His wisdom has reached millions worldwide through his ten books, including the best-selling *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Courage to Teach*, and *A Hidden Wholeness*. His latest bestseller is *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity and Getting Old* (2018). Palmer holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, and 13 honorary doctorates. In 1998, the Leadership Project, a national survey of 10,000 educators, named him one of the 30 “most influential senior leaders” in higher education and one of the 10 key “agenda-setters” of the past decade. In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. For twenty years, the Accrediting Commission for Graduate Medical Education has given annual Parker J. Palmer “Courage to Teach” and “Courage to Lead” Awards to directors of exemplary medical residency programs. *Living the Questions: Essays Inspired by the Work and Life of Parker J. Palmer*, was published in 2005. A member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker), Dr. Palmer and his wife, Sharon L. Palmer, live in Madison, Wisconsin.

**Amir Freimann** was born (1958) in a kibbutz and grew up in a small village in Israel. At the age of 17 he became deeply interested in spiritual-existential questions about the nature of consciousness, freedom, self and the Whole. He served in the Israeli army and became a pacifist after participating in the 1982 Lebanon War. He then studied medicine but at the end of the 5th year of his studies decided to devote his life to spiritual awakening. He spent 2 years in a Zen monastery in Japan and over 20 years doing intense spiritual practice and engaged in philosophical-spiritual exploration in the community of EnlightenNext in the USA. In 2009 he left the community and moved back to Israel, where he created, with a group of prominent educators, the Education Spirit Movement, and co-edited two books about the connection between spiritual seeking, philosophical inquiry and education. In 2018, his book *Spiritual Transmission*, based on over 100 interviews with spiritual teachers of different traditions and their students, was published. He is currently a doctoral student at the University of Haifa, Israel, completing a research on *Living Transcendence: A phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars*.

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Amir Freimann: To sync my vocabulary and terminology with yours, how would you describe what I call living

1(1), May 2021

transcendence or spiritual high plateau? What would that be in your vocabulary?

Parker Palmer: A quick summary of what I want to say is that I don't see my own spiritual journey in terms of ascent. In fact, there's a lot in me that came over the years to resist the idea of 'up, up, and away.'

Instead, I see my journey as a coming to ground, in the sense of being grounded in my life rather than floating around in my head, my ego, my ethics, or some high-flying spirituality.

I can tell a story about this from my experience with clinical depression, which has been a very formative part of my life. Or, I can talk about it conceptually. I don't know if you want to go there, but maybe it would help at this moment...

Amir Freimann: No, we can start with the conceptual.

Parker Palmer: I think of "coming to ground" in terms of what Paul Tillich wrote about "the ground of our being." In the first part of my life—where I was living a lot in my head or in an ethic that wasn't really mine—I had inherited a sense that spirituality always meant 'up.'

But depression taught me that 'up there' is a dangerous place to be. If you live at elevation and you trip and fall—which we do all the time—you have a long way to fall and you might kill yourself. During depression, I had several long passages of suicidal ideation. But if you live on the ground, you can fall a dozen times a day and just curse, get up, dust yourself off, and proceed.

That's the source of my resistance to the idea of transcendence as elevation. I'd prefer to think in terms of getting rooted deeper down in the ground of my being.

As you know, after a long journey from mainline Protestantism, I became a Quaker. That tradition became a very congenial spiritual setting for me, but at first it was very unsettling in terms of getting grounded.

I spent 11 years living at Pendle Hill, a living-learning community of about 80 people that was radically egalitarian and practiced all the core Quaker values. Every morning, we came together for a meeting for worship rooted in a deep silence, out of which people sometimes spoke as they were "moved by the spirit." But in my first year there, I spent a lot of time getting angry, because in that silence, my received faith was falling apart around my ears—it was no longer getting propped up each day by preaching and teaching.

The silence forced me to my own ground, with the realization that the faith I'd been living with for 30-plus years wasn't really mine. So my first move was defensive: I took to

criticizing Quaker worship itself, as in, "This silence is fraudulent. It has nothing to do with worship."

Well, there were wise Quaker elders in that community, and in typical Quaker style, didn't try to convert me. They simply said "Tell us more about what's going on for you," and they helped me examine my experience via asking honest, open questions, that got me into a deeper dialogue with myself.

They made safe space for me, so safe I could realize that the silence was revealing the emptiness of my faith. I could talk with anyone about Tillich or Niebuhr or Bultmann or any sort of academic theology. But the classic Quaker question is "What dost thou know experientially or experimentally? What can you testify to out of your own experience?", and to that, I had no good answer.

So that was a big step for me "toward the ground of my being." But I want to stress that the Quaker way doesn't mean that you abandoned your intellect. On the contrary. Quakers are big on the value of the intellect when rightly understood. They put into practice the words of a Russian Orthodox theologian who urged people to "learn to think with their minds descended into their hearts".

I love that image. It means "get your mind down from the top of the tower—get it down into the heart-place of the self, where it can do some good, grounded, relational work." If you keep it up at the top of the tower, you're more likely to suffer the illusion that intellect rules and that you can think your way out of any problem all by yourself. One of the great gifts that the horror of depression gave me was to drive home the lesson that "There are some problems you can't think your way out of. You just have to walk into that darkness and find some way through it, and out the other side. It's a full-body immersion.

One more thing about Quakerism which has been important to me. Quakers don't have any ordained leaders, no priests or ministers or pastors or rabbis. Over the years they have created forms of community that allow us to do together things that the designated leader usually does—counseling, spiritual discernment, etc. are all communal activities. That's what was happening when those elders sat with me about my anger at meeting for worship, saying, "Let's talk about it. We won't try to persuade you of anything. We'll just ask you questions that allow you to think out loud and see where you go with it".

The Quakers say there are two loci of authority in anyone's life. One is the inner teacher, or the inner light. The other is the gathered community that practices certain disciplines that give you a chance to sort out what you think your inner teacher is saying in a communal context. It's not a community that tells you you're right or wrong, but a

1(1), May 2021

community that helps you discern between the many voices that we all carry inside of us.

Amir Freimann: So, let's look at this movement toward the ground of being or depth or realness. Were there any formative or transformative experiences in your life that you could say, like, "This really took me to another level or a new chapter in my journey toward depth"?

Parker Palmer: Twice in my 40s, and once again in my 60s, I fell into a profound clinical depression, each of them lasting 6-8 months, each requiring medication which I was able to get off of after a few months.

There's a backstory for all of that, of course, and the backstory is my life! Like most of us, I'm a complicated person to describe, and there's no way to do it without some distortion. For starters, I was the first person in my family to go to college. My grandparents were blue collar workers. My dad was a businessman in Chicago who had only a high school degree. So I came from no grand tradition of higher education. My family valued education, but I was the first person in my family to get a college degree, and the only one who got a PhD.

I went to a good college, Carlton College in Minnesota. Then I spent a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr had been teaching, and it was a pretty high-powered place. Then I went to Berkeley, which had the best sociology program in the United States at the PhD level, and I did a degree there during the 1960s. As you can imagine, I learned a lot during that decade, a lot of it outside the classroom.

Despite the fact that I felt like a fish out of water in all those places, I did well academically. I was one of 100 people from across the U.S. selected for a Danforth Graduate Fellowship that year—a fellowship that took you all the way through a Ph.D. program—room and board and tuition—and would throw in a theological education if it were related to your doctoral field of study.

That's why I tried a year at Union, during which I learned that seminary wasn't really for me. I was living in my head at that time, but Union made faith feel more intellectualized than even I could abide. The seminaries, in this country at least, never engage directly in spirituality, at least they didn't back in the day.

During my student years, I attracted some really remarkable mentors who were well-known in the academy. Looking back, I think one of the reasons I attracted these people—and they were all wonderful, kind, generous people who helped me hugely—was because I was probably the son they wished they had but didn't have, which is sometimes what happens in a mentor-mentee relationship. I'm sure that can be a bad

thing. But in my case, it was a good thing—I had some wonderful father figures.

So, because of whatever gift I had for thinking and writing—which of course developed slowly over time—and because of these mentors who really believed in me, saw more in me than I saw in myself—which I think is a classic trait of good mentors—because of them, I just shot up the academic ladder.

And, at 29, I was appointed a trustee of a prestigious college because the president wanted somebody like me, fresh from Berkeley, who understood social change and radicalism—all of which was happening on his campus—to represent all that to a board of people, all of whom were over 60.

I was 29, the only one with a beard. And I remember that Carleton's student newspaper published an article after my first board meeting, with a picture taken during the meeting. It's me sitting there with a suit and tie and a beard, I'm studying the agenda, and the caption was, "This is a trustee? [Laughing] Whoa, something new has come into town!"

I still felt insecure and out of place in the academy. But in terms of academic performance, I was knocking the ball out of the park. Carleton's president said, in effect, "We've got you figured for a young college dean or president, and soon, and this trusteeship will give you important experience on the governance side of an academic institution". I never thought of myself that way, and certainly never asked for that, but it became part of my story.

But the story gets a little more complicated here, because by the time I finished my Ph.D. I realized that I really didn't feel at home in the academy, even though I'd done very well. I felt alien, "other," marginal, even fraudulent.

It was 1969, the cities were burning in this country, Black Panthers had risen up in Oakland, the Vietnam war was raging, and all kinds of things were happening that made me feel deeply called to using my sociology in the streets rather than in the classroom.

So I walked away from higher education. The day I got my Ph.D., I began heading toward becoming a community organizer in Washington, D.C. working on racial justice. It really felt like a calling, something I couldn't not do. It was that kind of deep discernment of the spirit, even though I didn't have spiritual language for it at the time.

It wasn't the easiest route to choose because it wasn't well funded, it offered no tenure, advancement, or promotion opportunities—and by now, my wife and I had three kids. The story of my D.C. years doesn't quite fit here. Suffice it to say that it was very hard work for someone with skin as thin as mine, but I'm very grateful for the education I got "in the

streets”, especially about race in America. But after five years I was deep in burnout and needed a year off.

So, my wife and I found a Quaker intentional community called Pendle Hill, near Philadelphia, where we could spend a sabbatical year as adult students. During that year, I learned a lot, and both my wife and I felt called to this new way of “life together” with about 80 people. Despite the fact that I would take a deeper further economic hit with Pendle Hill’s “everyone who works here make the same amount of money” policy, I signed on as Dean of Studies, left my work in D.C., and spent the next decade supervising a residential adult study program focused on the inner life and engagement in nonviolent social change.

Life in a community of that sort teaches you a lot about “deep equality.” I will never say that a decade there took my sense of entitlement away. You can’t be an educated white male in a society that’s rigged for you to succeed and not have a full measure of white privilege and some residual sense of entitlement. But a decade of working at Pendle Hill ground a lot of my “entitlement” away, and it became something I think about a lot, and try to act consciously on.

Henri Nouwen, who became a friend and mentor—a Catholic priest, writer, and spiritual virtuoso—called it “Downward Mobility.” I like that phrase because it suggests the struggle that came with my sojourn at Pendle Hill. Though I plunged into this alternative life style, I was still holding a lot of tensions and anxieties about what I felt was my calling, versus the fact that it felt like I was falling off the professional radar.

My descent into depression may well have been triggered in part by the anxieties I was holding, but I think more than that was in play. I think it was the ‘dark night of the soul’ that the mystics talk about, a spiritual crisis that sometimes comes to people who want to get off the main road, go into the woods, and try to live closer to some source they can’t be altogether sure about...

With hindsight, I can see the irony in my fear that “taking the path less chosen” might lead to me falling off the professional radar. I wasn’t making much money during those years, so to supplement my income, I started writing. I’m not sure I would have started writing if I hadn’t thought to then.

I’d been writing from my mid-20s onward, but didn’t really imagine that I’d ever publish a book. But writing became something of a financial need. At first, the money didn’t come directly from writing, but from the speaking invitations the writing generated. Then the books started coming, and sold very modestly for many years. As my work became

better known, the sales increased, and today I’ve now sold nearly two million copies all together.

By now, I’ve realized that if I had remained a professor of sociology, few would be interested in my work. But I’ve had a vocational journey that looks strange from the outside, and that has made my work more intriguing to my readers, I think. And maybe it has given me more to write about.

Amir Freimann: So, you are describing, it sounds like, being truthful to some inner guidance that took you against social norms but somehow, in the end, turned out to be a good idea, although economically and socially different and requiring a really deep commitment to something which is not what society expects of you, necessarily.

Parker Palmer: Yeah, that’s a very accurate summary, Amir. Thank you for that. I mean, if I ask myself an honest question, like “Did you do everything you could in terms of following your inner guidance?”, the answer would have to be “No”. But one of the things that I’ve learned is that the quest for perfection is idiotic, and I have to cut myself, and other people, a lot of slack for not getting everything exactly right.

So ever since my early 50s, I’ve been working independently in this home office. And at age 81, I’m very happy about it.

Years ago, it came to me, this way: “Parker, you know you don’t work well with authority, and you know that every place you’ve ever worked where you had a boss, you spent about a quarter of your time being conflicted with your boss, and that’s a real waste of time and energy. So why don’t you work independently where you have nothing but yourself to blame, no one but yourself to blame?” And that’s worked very well.

But I’ll tell you this little secret that not everybody knows. I decided I needed a staff to blame for my screw-up, so I bought a walking stick that I call “my staff.” I keep it in the closet here in my office.

Amir Freimann: What do you use it for?

Parker Palmer: Well, when a deadline that I set for myself and now really regret some up, or I have to make a trip that I really don’t want to take but am committed to, I walk over that closet. I pull out that staff and I give it a chewing out: “Hey, listen up, staff! Do this kind of thing to me again, I’m going to fire you!” That qualifies me for a mental institution, I know, but it’s fun to have someone to blame for my own screw-ups.

Amir Freimann: I’ll use that, it’s a good one. I have a question that may sound like coming from left field, but you tell me if it makes sense...

1(1), May 2021

Parker Palmer: Okay.

Amir Freimann: When you look at your life or at your spiritual life—it's up to you—do you find that there is something which is constantly unchanging and other aspects that fluctuate and change? Does it make sense to you, that description?

Parker Palmer: Yeah, it does, and I think I know the honest answer to that, Amir. At a very deep and intuitive level, I'm quite certain that throughout my life, throughout our lives, there's something constant that never changes. But my ability to see that or to feel that, and to name it, has changed a lot over time.

For example, we're in a hard period here in the U.S. for all kinds of reasons, including this terrible, terrible human being that we put into office and that we have to free ourselves from. It's not all together clear that we'll be able to do that, though it's looking pretty good right now. It's a dark time in terms of massive COVID deaths, racial injustice, and economic suffering, along with anxiety about the upcoming election. We're faced with the fact that maybe 40% of the American people are consciously or unconsciously buying into some sort of neo-fascism. All of this is very, very troubling to me, so troubling that I lose sleep over it and sometimes have a little trouble facing a new day.

But I get up in the morning at age 81, very aware that I don't have as nearly as much future as I have past. I look out our second story bathroom window into the backyard where we have this lovely little tree which glows in every season, if there's just a little light, and I feel so happy to be alive. So, gratitude—which a lot of people have named as one of the core elements of spiritual life—is there for me much more than it was 40 years ago when I would get up in the morning and not even notice that tree and obsess over the worries of the day.

The gratitude is about something that I can't name—it's not just that tree, but it's about some kind of constancy in nature. If you learn to look at autumn in the right way you'll see that those leaves and seeds that are falling off the trees, robbing us of autumn's beauty, are actually leaves turning to compost to nourish a new round of life, and seeds being planted, which will hunker down, winter through, then emerge green and glorious in the spring.

So, what I'm being grateful for is not just that tree, which is a great thing in and of itself. It's the evidence it offers of a cycle of life and death that's utterly reliable, life and death, shadow and light, falling down and getting up, all of these metaphors that speak of some kind of constancy of the sort you asked about.

How to name it beyond that? Some people will say amid all the changes of life, God's love is constant, and I believe that. But that language for me is a little too vaporous, a little too removed from my direct experience, to express what I'm trying to say here.

When I get up in the morning and look at that tree, my feelings and the words that come to mind are not "God loves me". The words that come to mind are looking at where we are in this amazing eternal cycle of life and death and recognizing I'm part of that cycle too.

As I wrote in *On the Brink of Everything*, my favorite thing in life is to go to the pristine wilderness places that I love in the U.S., the far north woods for example. The most I know about "life after death" is that I will return to the Earth. There may be more, I don't know. Maybe I'll be surprised. But at this moment, what I can attest to is that I will return to the Earth. And since I love going to the most earthy places I can find in this life, why would I have any problem with returning to the earth for eternity?

That's the feeling I have. To me, that's a more grounded way of saying what my experience is about things that other people translate as "God is always love, no matter what". I don't argue with them, I don't disagree with that. But it's just not how the experience comes to me in its most fundamental form.

Amir Freimann: Yes. Well, if you look back, because you compared your experience nowadays to when you were 40, would you say that on some level your awareness of that which is constant and eternal was there but maybe not as conscious, or not at the forefront of your awareness, as it is now?

Parker Palmer: Yeah, I would say that. And I think what I meant to say earlier is that I didn't have the language for it, and I wasn't as attentive to it as I am now. But let me just tell a quick story which actually, when I got your email, was the first story that came to mind.

Sometime in my mid-to-late 40s I was leading a retreat group in New Mexico, out on the high desert. During an afternoon break, I needed to be by myself for a while. So I went for a walk in the desert at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains—an interesting name, I thought, the blood of Christ Mountains. I'm walking out there being very attentive to landmarks and directions, because I could see no human-made structures and no other people. It's so easy to get lost out there.

Suddenly, as I walked along at the foot of these mountains, I had what I think of as one of the maybe two or three true mystical experiences I've ever had. I'm not prone to classic mystical experiences. but in this moment, I suddenly

1(1), May 2021

understood—I suddenly had a deep apprehension—that the cosmos, whatever that may mean, is utterly indifferent to me and simultaneously utterly accepting and forgiving of me. Those were the words that came with that moment. I was in the middle of a very hard period of my life, barely post-divorce, so I remember standing there and trying to hold that experience as long as I could.

Of course, eventually it went away, I mean, my immediate consciousness of it went away. But I'll never forget the words that came to describe it. At that moment in my late 40s, I was more prepared, and more consciously needy for that experience. I needed both the sense that cosmos is indifferent to me—which translates into “Why would these rocks care about your divorce? They've seen everything, and they've seen a lot worse.”—and on the other hand, I needed that sense of acceptance and forgiveness to deal with my own struggle around that fact.

So, what you're asking about, and what I'm trying to describe, is always there, but we aren't always the best receptors for it. I think that “signal” is constant, but we always have to work on the tuning of our own receiver.

Amir Freimann: So, what in your experience makes possible that tuning or bringing it more into conscious awareness and gratitude and appreciation?

Parker Palmer: Well, here's another thing that I've written about that you need to know about me. I've known a lot of people who were contemplatives by intention, but I'm not one of them. I'm a...

Amir Freimann: Oh yeah, I read that you're a “contemplative by catastrophe”.

Parker Palmer: There you go. I was in the middle of a catastrophe when that desert experience happened. For me, getting knocked down has been one of the biggest “tuners” of my receiver. With the mental illness called depression, once I got a modicum of mental health back, I was able to do some serious work on tuning my receiver.

But tuning doesn't hold, and a receiver has to be re-tuned. These days, aging is the tuning agent for me. It's a classic tuning device, right? It's called coming to terms with your mortality. And I think that's what's happening to me.

Years ago, I was in my 20s maybe, and I was reading *The Rule of Benedict*, that fourth century guide to the monastic life. One of the rules is, “daily keep your death before your eyes”.

I remember my initial resistance. “Wait a minute, I'm in my 20s, I'm full of juice, what's this about? I'm not going to go there. That's morbid”. And then I realized, no, it's not morbid. If I can daily keep my death before my eyes, I will

see more of life, I will feel more gratitude. I will get in tune with stuff that is fundamental, and be more likely to see the eternal secrets hidden in plain sight. But that slips away when you're young, and your death seems not only distant, but somehow improbable or even impossible. Of course, the “impossibility” is you dealing with it, confronting it, acknowledging it.

But as one grows older, that resistance becomes more clearly futile. And so, I think aging has been a big “tuning” thing for me as I live more constantly in that state of receptiveness. I feel a little more like those rocks out in the desert. I haven't seen it all, but I've seen a lot in my life, both in myself and in other people and in the world around me. The fascism I see these days doesn't surprise me. It appalls me, but it doesn't surprise me. It can happen here. And so, I think there's just a lot of things that for me come with age that I could not have taken in earlier in my life. So that's a big tuning thing for me—just being able to take in hard realities.

Amir Freimann: I don't think this necessarily happens automatically with age, does it? There must be another element that transforms aging into tuning.

Parker Palmer: I agree. So I'll go back to another big influence in my life and that's the work of Rainer Maria Rilke. Years and years ago, I read his *Letters to a Young Poet*, where there's a frequently-quoted line. This young poet asked question, after question, after question, about “How can I have a life like yours?” And Rilke finally says, you know, you're asking big important questions. But they are too big to have answers like, “What's two plus two?” Stop looking for answers. What you must do is “live the questions,” until some distant day you find that you've “lived your way into an answer.”

And so early on, poetry and other works by poets became real sources of spiritual guidance for me, as is true to this day. Early on, I understood the truth of what Rilke said about living the questions. I realized I had important decisions to make about what questions I wrapped my life around—and I wanted to wrap it around the questions that would yield real payoff if I could “live into them some distant day.”

So I've never wrapped my life around questions like “How can I become famous?” or “How can I make a lot of money?” or “How can I sell a lot of books?” Once I understood that not asking how I can be the best of this or win at that, I wrapped my life around questions of meaning and purpose. I think that's also the way to prepare for growing old and dying. I mean, people grow old and die on the same terms as those by which they've lived—though we always have a chance to change course as long as we draw breath.

1(1), May 2021

One more thing I'm aware of as we go along in this conversation: one of the tools in my toolkit as a non-violent spiritual warrior is humor. I love laughing, especially laughing with people. I don't laugh at people, but I love laughing at myself and my pretensions and my fallibilities. It really lightens the load.

I once wrote a line that said something like "any spiritual bread of life that's unleavened by humor gives people a bellyache." I really believe that. If there's one thing I hate, it's a retreat where the level of piety or piousness is so thick you can cut it with a knife. And nobody ever smiles, nobody ever laughs, it's as if God doesn't like that stuff. Well, I think God laughs a lot.

Amir Freimann: I'm completely with you and I'd love to talk with you about self-irony for a few minutes if you like. To me, I also feel this is one of the highest spiritual accomplishments. Or, you could say a characteristic of the high spiritual plateau.

Parker Palmer: I think that's right. I think it's about being on the ground, being at home in your own skin, which is another way to describe how I felt coming out of depression. When you are at home in your own skin, you have no need to defend yourself. You can laugh at and about yourself. And it's critical that you do. G.K. Chesterton once said, "Angels fly because they take themselves lightly."

But my Dad, who was this blue-collar kid who made it in Chicago business, raised me and my sisters around blue-collar values. And one of those values—though he never used the word in any didactic way—was modesty, or humility. And as men in that generation often did, he taught with aphorisms.

And I'll tell you a couple of his favorites that I often heard at the breakfast or dinner table, especially when I was getting a little inflated about how well I was doing at this or that. Dad would say something like, "Just remember, Park, there's only one letter's difference between hero and zero". Or he'd repeat my favorite, "Park, I want you to remember that today's peacock is tomorrow's feather duster."

Amir Freimann: That makes the point.

Parker Palmer: As a blue collar kid who made it in the big world, Dad never ever liked the pretensions that came with apparent success. He wanted his kids to have grounded blue collar values. Because of his business dealings, he knew a lot about people in our affluent community who were pretending to be wealthy when they weren't. He knew this because they owed his company tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars and weren't able to pay it off.

He used to drive my sisters and me around our hometown of Wilmette, Illinois, and take us down to Lake Michigan where there were all these mansions. And he'd say, "You see that castle over there with seven cars in the driveway? You probably think those people are rich". And we'd say, "Well, yeah Dad, they have to be, they own all that stuff".

And he'd say, "Well, the truth is, they're up to their necks in debt, relying on credit for things they can't afford. I know because they can't pay my company the bill that they owe me for the business they run. It's been overdue for five years. Not a good way to live.". Dad not only wanted me to be humble and honest in my life, he wanted me to have x-ray vision into all the pretensions and illusions of wealth and power. And that's served me well over the years, I think.

Amir Freimann: You spoke earlier about gratitude and said it's gratitude for something that you cannot name. But you also then referred to it as constancy and I'd love to go back to that. You described to me, I think, an experience you had of walking out in nature. Maybe you could choose another example of a moment recently when you were most aware of that constancy or sense of gratitude for that which we could say is endless?

Parker Palmer: Well, there's probably a variety of them. I remember telling you about that moment in the high desert of New Mexico where I simultaneously realized that cosmos is indifferent to me and that it accepts and forgives me. But here's the latest example of gratitude and it's a spontaneous arising of gratitude within me.

I feel led to begin with the line in a once-famous song that went, "Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got to until you've lost it". I can trace my life that way. I mean, I had this very blessed childhood and I had no way of knowing how blessed it was, so I didn't feel the fullness of gratitude for that.

When I got into my 30s, and especially my 40s, and started experiencing depression and a lot of struggle around vocational issues, struggling to keep the faith with the countercultural direction I had taken, I started feeling, "Why did I want more? I was not grateful enough for all the blessings that I'd been given." But at the same time, I realized that I had been given the trust and the strength to stay the course, including those moments in depression when I felt on the edge of self-annihilation.

Put that all together and you've got a guy who, at age 81, feels deep gratitude for my unmerited gifts—unmerited as all gifts are—and that gratitude has grown and grown in me over the years.

Right now, I'm grateful for the simple details of a normal day, because my friends and colleagues are beginning to

1(1), May 2021

disappear from the face of the earth. This morning I thought about the fact that Charlie—an age mate and one of my best friends over the years—is not getting up this morning and enjoying his first cup of coffee as I am, because he died at age 78”.

Another small but important example is this: I love the early autumn here in the American Midwest. The leaves on the trees get gorgeous. We say that they change color, but they're actually reverting to their original color because the chlorophyll dies off. I find that fascinating. It's like “Okay, as things die, they reveal their true face”. I like that a lot.

Amir Freimann: Yes, their true color.

Parker Palmer: Yeah, it's beautiful. It's as if the trees are saying, “As the fullness of spring and summer starts to give way to winter, I'm showing you who I really am”. As my clergy friends say, “That'll preach.”

I've never been a tree-hugger, but now I'm in love with trees! In our backyard, we have a tree called a tri-floral maple which, in the fall, starts to reveal its bright orange leaves. The tree is beautifully shaped, and when the sun comes through it, it glows orange. I can see it from our second floor bathroom window, which is where I often am at 5 AM to start my morning of writing. In the late summer and early fall, I spend time first thing in the morning just looking at that tree with just a little light in it, glowing in the dark, this kind of beacon in the dark and feeling so grateful for this example of God's handiwork.

Then the inevitable happens. The leaves began to fade and fall. Not very long ago, all the leaves came down in a big wind. And I watched it happen, and just felt sad at the disappearance of those beautiful leaves—“I won't get to see that sight again for many months.”

A couple days after the windstorm. I looked out my bathroom window and the light that was illuminating that tree was now showing off the skeletal structure of the tree, not a leaf in sight. And because the bark of that tree is an alternation of smooth and rough, what was revealed in the light was as gorgeous as the leaves in fall, in its own way. It's like a sculpture out there and I felt the gratitude all over again. I thought, “Oh, it didn't end, that tree was just accessorizing itself for a while. But it doesn't need the jewelry to be beautiful, nor do I need it to be accessorized in order to see its beauty.”

It's a tree for all seasons, and that relates to the continuity you're asking about—that which is always here, God's work manifested in the natural world. My inner work as a human being is to open my receptors to it in every season, to be able to see that which is always there.

The question is, “Am I in a state to receive it?” If I'm not, I'll feel cut off. I'll feel despair. I'll feel destroyed by the winter to come. But if I can receive it, I will always see it. And so, a spiritual discipline for me is cultivating gratitude in the simple sense of opening my heart, and my mind, and my eyes, and my hands, my whole body, to the beautiful in our world.

And I'm not talking about big nature, like the Grand Canyon. I live in a suburban neighborhood, packed with neighbors, a small shopping mall just a block away on the corner of a busy street. So, it's not like I live in the wilderness, where it's easy to find this beauty. But even here, it's easy to find it here once I open my eyes in this small backyard that we've got.

I used to joke, “Our backyard is the place where trees come to die”, because we planted some and they didn't make it. But this trifloral maple made it. So, it's no longer like an elephant graveyard for me, which is nice—and there I am, laughing at myself again!

And that's where I see the constancy. That power of creation is always at work. And there's really only one question, “Am I cultivating the faculties that allow me to receive it?” Because it's always there. The problem is never with the signal sender. The problem is always with us receivers, and I think that's what spiritual discipline is all about.

The natural world of creation is perfect. But here I need to play with the words a little and revert back to my own definition of human wholeness—because I feel the same way about nature. Wholeness does not mean perfection. Wholeness means embracing your imperfections as part of the whole. A lot of people who set out on the spiritual quest for wholeness feel like they fall off the wagon many times a day and they have to start over: “Oh my God, I'm so flawed, so I'll lay the quest down for a while and just try to get back on the track”.

No, what you are is human. This is where I say “Welcome to the human race.” Here's the deal: You're going to fall down a lot, just try not to fall into the same pothole every time. Take a different street next time you go out! But there are potholes everywhere, and where there aren't any, we make them. So understand that that's part of the deal. You'll grow by embracing that knowledge, and folding it into your sense of who you are.

For successful white men in this society, it's been regarded as a really bad career move to acknowledge profound depression, as if it were something shameful. For me, it's been a way of being at home in my own skin, and in this world, where I'm surrounded by people who experience depression, where the whole culture of “success” is



1(1), May 2021

depressing. And if I can speak the truth of my life, then I light up a little part of that world. Then I have the satisfaction of being able to feel that when I die, I can say that to the best of my ability, I showed up in this world as I really am, and offered my experience in service of others.

I can't imagine a sadder way of dying than to realize I spent 80 plus years on Earth and never showed up with my true self. Don't leave anything on the field, as the athletes say. Play the game full-on and don't leave anything out there.

I want to add another word about the "perfection" of the natural world. The natural world is full of death and suffering just like the human world is. There's a food chain. There's a reason we talk about Darwinian economics or whatever. So nature is not like this Disney fantasy...

Amir Freimann: No, it's a different kind of perfection.

Parker Palmer: It's a holy mess of living and dying and everything in between! I've always been a neatnik; I can't work in my office if it's disordered. I've often have had the experience of walking through the forest where, if I were the dad, I'd say "Clean up your room! I've told you a thousand times, clean up your room!". But all I have to do is shift my perception ever so slightly to see that this mess is beautiful. It's the beauty of life being lived fully and well, and life on the decline and dying in ways that contribute to new life.

I've been doing work that I love for 50 years. I'm increasingly getting to the point where I won't be able to do it, either fully or maybe at all. My job is to help raise up that next generation of seedlings that can grow into people who can walk this same path, in their own way, long after I'm gone. That's why I'm working and mentoring younger people as I go.

So the parallels between the natural world and my world are very close to me. It's not like it's two separate realms. Part of my job is to realize how deeply embedded I am in that world for the sake of my own wholeness.

Amir Freimann: So, you see, I have a question about whether there is a connection between one's spiritual maturation and development process and one's emotional life. And a lot of people think that there must be a direct connection, that the more evolved spiritually or mature spiritually you are, then you should have less of the unpleasant so-called...

Parker Palmer: Yeah, fewer perturbations. Not such a jagged emotional life, right? That's what they think.

Amir Freimann: And I'm not sure also because that's not actually my experience. My experience is that hopefully, as I become more mature, I have more freedom of choice and

ability to do the right thing regardless of how I feel. But my emotional experience is not necessarily very different from how it used to be 30-40 years ago. So that's what I'm...

Parker Palmer: No, I do not agree that if you're on a genuine spiritual journey you ought to become a person who no longer experiences emotional ups and downs. I don't see it that way. That's not true for me and I'm not even sure it's healthy. I think that one of the most common phenomena in self-conscious spiritual communities is people repressing normal human emotions which then come out in things like sexual affairs that shouldn't happen, and pedophilia, and self-abuse with alcohol, or whatever and abusive...

Amir Freimann: And aggressive righteousness.

Parker Palmer: Exactly. So, I think it's dangerous. I mean, for me, that jagged line—if you think of it in terms of being hooked up to a monitor in a hospital—that means you're alive. If you're flatlining, you're dead. I have no interest in emotionally flatlining. Instead, I'm more of a Rumi guy at this point. The poet Rumi, who has that great poem called "The Guest House". Do you know that poem? Yes, so that's me...

Amir Freimann: "Invite in all guests..." Yes.

Parker Palmer: Every day, we're visited by these "unwanted people," and "unwanted emotions." "Welcome them," he says, "they all have something to teach you." They may sweep your house clean, but at least it's swept!

Emotions have something to teach us, and I don't understand a spirituality that says "Yeah, yeah, but get rid of them". I mean, to me, that's a spirituality that says don't keep learning from all that's going on in you. So, a very live example for me is that this morning, as we talk, is an exciting moment in America, because it seems pretty clear that Biden is going to beat Trump. And I have no intention of sitting on that feeling.

I've been in a state of anger and emotional turmoil for the last five years because I-and a lot of other Americans-saw Trump for who he was long before he declared for the presidency. I wouldn't have bought a used car from him. He's always been such a toxic force, as in his promotion of the "birther conspiracy" against our first Black president.

Amir Freimann: I know.

Parker Palmer: I have Christian friends—maybe a-little-too-pious-for-me Christian friends—who said, "Parker, I hope you're praying for our president". And I've said, "Are you kidding? I'm praying against him!". One friend

1(1), May 2021

really pressed me on that and said, “Come on, you know that forgiveness is part of the Christian deal.”

I said, “As a Christian, I believe that there is forgiveness in the world for people who seek it, and it comes directly from God. There are some tasks that I’m just going to leave up to God because I’m not capable of them. So no, I will not pray for this #@\$%&'s forgiveness, because he hasn't asked for it himself. He himself said that he has nothing to ask forgiveness for. Maybe God will forgive him, I have no idea. Not my job. My job is to resist and overcome him and the dark forces he’s rallied.”

One of my biggest jobs for the past five years has been to deal creatively with my anger. As you know, I wrote about that in my 2018 book, *On the Brink of Everything*, in a chapter called “What’s an Angry Quaker to Do?” I understand my anger partly in light of the Psalms, where you can find a lot of anger, as in “Lord, smash my enemy’s teeth...”. That’s not sweet Christian stuff, but for me, it’s very understandable and very real. It’s about a wrestling match with reality that I think is part of the human equation. It’s about me, as a human being, taking that emotion called anger and asking a very simple question about this form of energy: “Where do I want to aim it? What do I want to ride this energy toward?”

For me, this alchemy has been a non-stop experience on a daily, weekly, monthly basis of taking the latest thing that Trump has done that’s worthy of anger, and harnessing it toward a worthy goal, instead of just blating about it.

I don't for a moment believe that the God who created me wanted me to smother any part of my natural creation, even when my life gets as messy as things are in the natural world. My task is not to embrace an ethic that “fences me in” in the name of God. I have a million ways of busting out of that fence, and I’ll do it because I’m tenacious and I don't let things defeat me easily.

So, if I have an emotional impulse that might do harm, the deal is not to grow an ethical “exoskeleton” that tries to rein it in. I need to grow an ethical “endoskeleton” that allows me to take this impulse toward the shape of a good life—and I need to keep doing the inner work that allows such growth to occur.

The only skeleton I will never be able to smash is the one that grows within me, that supports me, and that is supported by who I really am. So that's where I am with that!