

*This article describes the origin of faculty/staff gatherings modeled on the Circle of Trust Approach®. It outlines the structure of the meetings, offers descriptions of participant experiences, and ends with suggestions for ways of hosting similar gatherings on other college campuses.*

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Soul and Role Dialogues in Higher Education:

Healing the Divided Self

A group of faculty and staff gather in a conference room in the student union to share experiences with the soul/role divide at work and in the classroom. They sit around a table of natural wood with inlaid geometric patterns made from an eclectic assortment of colorful woods. The walls of the room are painted in earth tones and adorned with large-scale photographs of mountains. The meeting begins with a reminder of the groups conversational norms that invite deep reflection and a safe place for the soul. The facilitator reviews the topic for the meeting by telling a brief personal story relevant to the theme. A poem, with accompanying journal prompts, is distributed and read out loud. Several minutes of silence follow as each participant underlines words, circles passages, or writes margin notes on the poem, as everyone moves into a familiar and comfortable sense of being present with each other. The facilitator opens with a question inviting participants to share stories of personal meaning emerging from the poem. For the next hour the discussion moves back and forth between the poem, shared examples of personal meaning, and increased understanding of the depth and productive power of the soul/role divide in higher education. The purpose of the meeting is exploring the deep heart-felt and heart-broken nature of work in academia, developing a sense of the shared journey, and examining ways of

working productively in the tension between soul and role in higher education.

This essay describes the origin of these staff/faculty gatherings, outlines the structure of the meetings, offers descriptions of participant experiences, and ends with suggestions for ways of hosting similar gatherings on other college campuses. In September of 2008, Parker Palmer, the noted author and educational reformer, visited our campus to speak on the topic of K-12 school reform. Both authors of this paper were active members of the planning committee that hosted an array of small group discussions, formal presentations, and lectures by Parker Palmer. Throughout the length of his stay it became increasingly clear to us that there was more we could do to engage the campus community in continued dialogue around personal meaning and purpose for staff, faculty and administrators. To that end, in the winter and spring of 2009 we invited a group of faculty and staff to attend a monthly discussion called "soul/role dialogues". The meetings were sponsored by the Chaplain's Office, under the leadership of Gary Brower and designed by Paul Michalec, a trained Courage to Teach facilitator and faculty member. Both Gary and Paul facilitated the discussion throughout the academic year.

Our planning was informed by the energy that Parker Palmer's visit brought to campus as well as the existing literature on spirituality in higher education (Chickering, 2005; Astin & Astin, 2007; and Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). What we noticed in the literature on spiritual development in higher education, particularly the Astin & Astin (2007) report, was the divide between personal commitments to spiritual development and the limited visible presence of spirituality on campus. As noted by Astin and Astin, "more than half (56%) of the students in the survey say that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Similarly, nearly two-thirds (62%) say professors never encourage discussion of spiritual or religious matters." Meanwhile, in the same survey reports that,

"nearly half of today's faculty (47%) believe that "integrating spirituality in my life" is an essential or very important life goal." Palmer and Zajonc (2010) trace this separation of the personal and the role of professor to an "incorrect conceptual map of the academy and the place of spirituality within it" (p. 118). In particular the ways the map sets "science and religion in opposition to each other" (p. 118). One antidote to this flawed theoretical framework for organizing knowledge is to convene what Parker Palmer (2009) describes as "circles of trust" where groups of faculty come together, under skilled leadership, to share stories of teaching that reveal the inner wisdom of the teacher through community. And it is often during these conversations that a sense of "hidden wholeness" emerges that rejoins soul and role.

By "soul" we mean a sense of deep calling to the work of higher education, an abiding presence of inner calm and passion for the work, and a universal sense of longing to belong to the communal pursuit of some ideal or concept greater than oneself. This call to holism, we believe, is one of the driving forces behind the liberal arts tradition in higher education, and on our campus it is evident in the college motto: "Start from a higher place". By "role" we mean the institutional niche or niches that a person fits.

Both halves (soul and role), when they are present in the daily work world of individuals, are best perceived as separate but equal elements of a person's institutional identity. But when they are at odds with each other or conflicted the more visible and demanding institutional role often quiets the voice of the less evident and more humble soul. The tension between soul and role, if left unattended, can lead to a loss of personal integrity and authenticity resulting in what Parker Palmer (2007) calls the "divided self". If the soul/role divide continues for an extended period of time the work environment can begin to take on qualities of disenchantment, loss of heart, and burnout.

It was our hope that the soul/role dialogues would temper the caustic nature of the divided self and reposition the soul and role as necessary equals in the institutional life of faculty, staff, and administrators. We structured the monthly meetings, over the course of the year, around a theme generated from our wider sense of the challenges of academic life, the metaphor of the seasons in the natural/professional world (Palmer, 2007), or particular concepts gleaned from the previous monthly soul/role dialogue. The types of themes we examined included: identity, preparing for the work, winter's dormancy at work, and abundance.

Each monthly meeting was bounded by ground rules for interaction, a poem selected to invite deep meaning and conversation around a particular theme, and journal prompts to encourage personal understanding of the soul/role conflict at work. The norms were open enough to invite meaningful sharing around soul/role conflicts and structured enough to keep the discussion moving toward sources of inner wisdom rather than wondering off into the terrain of professional griping and discontent about work. Drawing on Paul's work as a nationally prepared Courage to Teach facilitator we offered the group the set of guidelines for discussion outlined in Appendix A.

Poetry was ideal for the task of opening up the self to inner wisdom because of its ability to raise universal themes while also supporting personal meaning making. Parker Palmer (2007) refers to this aspect of poetry as a poetic Rorschach test, where each reader sees and hears unique words, images, and phrases that resonate with the personal condition of the soul. In this way, we had a text that everyone read through the lens of a common theme, while also paying close attention to questions of personal meaning.

In addition to the norms and the poem, we also included three to four journal prompts as intellectual/heart starters for conversation. The prompts were intended to draw the attention of participants to particular sub-themes

in the poem, rather than to be directive and suggestive of a "right" way to respond to the challenges of productively holding the tension between soul and role.

A week before each gathering we emailed the participants the norms, the meeting agenda including a brief description of the theme, the poem, and journal prompts (See Appendix A for an example). At the start of our meeting we typically sat in silence for several minutes, waiting for the busyness of the mind and ego to calm and quiet, a sort of emotional/intellectual settling. The silence is followed by a reminder of our the norms for being together and a short framing of the theme, typically in the form of a personal story that exemplifies in concrete terms elements of the soul/role conflict for the month. The poem is read out loud and a general invitation is extended to share words, images, or phrases that captured the heart's attention. If warranted, the facilitator might ask participants to journal on one or more of the prompts.

In the following section of this paper we offer vignettes of five different participants highlighting their experience and outcomes with the soul/role conversations. The five stories feature the voices of an administrator, a staff person, a pre-tenured faculty, an adjunct faculty, and a tenured faculty member of the university. All five stories were fact checked with participants for accuracy and meaning. By telling these stories it is possible to see the potential for wider impact of soul/role conversations on other campuses. Later in the paper we will offer our analysis of the vignettes and suggest ways that soul/role dialogues could enhance campus climate and collegiality across many campuses.

Vignette one: university administrator

Dave participated in the soul/role dialogues because he feels that some "privacy and legal barriers" in higher education "create a perception that there are things that can't be spoken of openly". For Dave, one of the taboo topics is spirituality, a subject he would like to more fully engage his students around. But he holds back because the norms of academia encourage him to "bracket his identity" and interaction with students, which "creates a problem of authenticity".

He attended the soul/role conversations because they "provided an opportunity to explore authenticity on a person to person level". Dave found the dialogues so valuable to his personal/professional growth that he "made space in his calendar" even though he felt constrained by the "busy" feeling of the campus and his "immediate work load". To that end, the dialogues "took the pressure off of the pressure cooker of work" by creating for Dave a "structure that was safe and private which created a sense of liberty and freedom" to talk about things that were harder to share in other areas of Dave's professional life. Key to this outcome were the poems which he found "very compelling and invited me to dig deeper."

For Dave, the long-term impact of participation was a sense of being "opened up to be more hospitable to other people" in his role as an administrator. He "hopes" that there will be a "continuation of these conversations and exploration of how to encourage openness on campus". Dave believes that "there is too much stridency and polarization on campus", and he senses that "broader" participation in soul/role dialogues might defuse this polarization and create a more open campus climate.

Vignette two: program staff

Where Dave's soul feels less welcome at work, Jasmine feels that "there are not a lot of things that violate my soul". In her work life she "feels blessed that [her] soul isn't often compromised" as a staff person. Although living divided was less prevalent for Jasmine, she was drawn to the soul/role dialogues for "three reasons: one, an opportunity to meet others since I'm isolated on campus within my building; two, I've always been interested in poetry and this approach to understanding poetry; and three, an opportunity for deep meaningful conversations with colleagues". For Jasmine the dialogues were "a refreshing and safe space in the middle of the day." She felt strongly that "the process spoke right to [her]".

Given her reasons for attending it is not surprising that Jasmine connected with poetry as a tool for meaning making, which she describes as a "chance to explore the themes I was working on personally/professionally". And true to the power of poetry to open up new ways of seeing truth, the poems provided language and structure "to experience what is inexpressible". Four poems had particular meaning for Jasmine: Old Maps, Seven of Pentacles, Sweet Darkness, and The Woodcarver.

In addition to the poems, the soul/role dialogues supported a communal space where "the rich interactions with others opened up avenues of understanding that wouldn't have otherwise been possible". She marveled that the collegial nature of the dialogue created "the opportunity to see different perspectives and sharing ideas". And that this type of discourse could be achieved in an academic setting "without the discussion being threatening or conflict ridden." True to her sense that the soul/role dialogues were about building new relationships on campus, Jasmine felt that she would "come away from the meetings being connected to others and enriched in ways that typically don't happen on campus."

Although she made a personal commitment to attend all the dialogues she experienced challenges fulfilling her intention, including: "personal

challenges, feeling intensely introverted, and sometimes [she] didn't have a work related tension to share or one that [she] didn't want to share at that time".

Vignette three: pre-tenured faculty

Of high priority to Erin in this stage of her career is assembling her tenure file. Given the tensions and challenges she currently experiences as pre-tenured faculty, it is little wonder that she defined soul/role conflicts as "mostly related to trying to find a way to succeed in my career while feeling connected to my larger 'vocation' and not losing my soul to the institution's demands and constant press of tasks." For Erin, one strategy for blunting the institutional impulse to divide the soul from the role is "building a community here that has some sort of spiritual connection". The soul/role dialogues were an important aspect of nurturing her soul with the help of colleagues while also attending to the demands of tenure at the university.

Like Dave and Jasmine, Erin found that she "got something out of [the poems] and she "saved 'Rebus' as I found it very enriching and I also remember the Mary Oliver poem on geese." The poetry provided a center of meaning for Erin in the midst of the challenges and uncertainties of her pre-tenure review: "the greatest impacts were the few moments of sanity and deep conversation with other souls here at the university. I loved musing together on something and just getting away from the constant stress I feel as a pre-tenure person." The shared dialogues supported Erin's sense of personal wholeness as they "pulled two aspects of my life together: my spiritual life, which I pursue at a church and in meditation and prayer, and my teaching/writing life here at the university."

Erin was renewed from the "few moments of sanity and deep conversation with other souls" that the soul/role dialogues provided. But like Jasmine, she too was challenged by other time commitments: "when do we ever have

'extra' time? I often thought I could make it and then had something 'more pressing' come up."

#### Vignette four: tenured faculty

Beth, as a senior faculty and program coordinator, experiences many of the soul dividing institutional pressures that Erin, as a junior faculty, also faces: "I got interested [in the soul\role dialogues] because I felt a split [in my work]. I knew how to do parts of my job but other parts were more difficult. I couldn't write. I was frozen, tapped, and I didn't know what to do." Her struggles with writing, a defining craft skill for a professor, fueled an emerging sense of wonder around the potential of "being a failed academic." Beth gravitated toward the communal nature of the soul/role dialogue as a way to help rekindle for love of academia and unite her divided self, "I loved the idea of talking about the soul/role conflict at my work place where my role is split." And like other participants in the dialogues she "had hopes for a new community where I could meet new people."

For Beth, the dialogues seemed to lessen the impulse of work to divide soul from role in her daily life as a professor: "these gatherings helped me gain perspective, to not get so caught up in my stuff. They helped me see the university as a place to get nourished and not just work like a dog. And they helped me remember to pay attention to the seasons. I started gardening again to be in touch with theseasons: birth, death, growth and it begins all again." For Beth, her work now contained moments of healing instead of being only a source of uncertainty and personal divisiveness.

Poetry was an important voice of wisdom and role model for responding to the soul/role conflicts in Beth's professional life. Mary Oliver's poem, Wild Geese, seemed to offer Beth a way forward through her soul/role troubles: "Wild Geese really spoke to me. It gave me permission not to walk on my knees and to open up and enjoy life, holding it as a beautiful thing to

be part of the connection to nature and the larger world. It was a model of the expansiveness of a good poem."

The soul/role dialogues were an important element in Beth's process for understanding her writer's block and reengaging her scholarship in meaningful ways. Yet her work demands could be so de-energizing that one more task, even a meeting that fostered healing, was sometimes one task too many for Beth: "when faced with the choice of staying later or going home, the choice was easy". And even when she was energized enough to attend she found it challenging to bridge the contrasting nature of the soul opening space of the dialogues with the role demanding nature of work: "it was hard to switch gears from work mode to being more open and vulnerable". And finally, even though she gained personally from the dialogues, she found "it was hard to take time for self, to go and allow myself to be more open. It is like going to the gym. It was hard to open up but once I was there, at the meeting, it was great."

Many of the soul/role participants, including Beth, experienced institutional demands that could push against the nurturing, affirming, and healing nature of the dialogues. Yet, Beth and her colleagues kept coming back for the "spiritual nourishment and sense that I had done something at work that was good for me and refreshed my spirit. Outside of my classroom teaching, work is not so nourishing. It is a lot of labor with little reward. The fact that these meetings were a source of renewal while at work was great."

Vignette five: adjunct faculty

Clare was attracted to the idea of the soul/role dialogues after hearing Parker Palmer's address to the University. Her interest led to her involvement in the planning team for the dialogues and she regularly attended meetings until she left her position at the University. For Clare, the soul/role dialogues provided an opportunity to discern whether her personal values

were in sync with her position or if the separation of soul and role would limit her ability to be fully present and authentic to herself and others at work. As an adjunct faculty, her ties to the University were more tenuous than the other participants in this study. Yet the soul/role dialogues were life giving and offered enough potential for self-growth that she committed energy both to starting the dialogues and attending meetings throughout her employment at the university.

As Clare wrestled with the question of staying or leaving her position, the soul/role dialogues provided support and safety as she considered her next steps. This was the case, even though she never shared the depth of her internal struggles with the group. Just being present in the dialogues, without the pressure of having to contribute, brought a deep richness to her internal process of meaning making. The Marge Piercy poem, "The Seven of Pentacles" offered the greatest insight on her challenges. The image of a gardener tilling the soil and being patient for the outcome helped frame her thinking about her position and her decision to leave and till a new professional field.

The five soul/role participants featured in this essay share many similar experiences and rewards, even though they represent a wide range of institutional roles. All experienced some aspect of the divided self as the institutional pressures they faced drove a wedge between their soul and role. Sometimes the split was easily mended and at other times the divide seemed to threaten their institutional life and sense of well being, even to the point of deciding to leave the university. Common themes across all four participants included: an interest in finding ways of infusing spirituality more fully into institutional roles; a desire to build community through the sharing of stories of the divided self; embracing poetry as a useful tool for

seeing truth where deep uncertainty once stood; and the unexpected challenges of fitting the heart-mending soul/role dialogues into their busy academic and professional schedules.

What the soul/role dialogues clearly provided for all of these individuals was an opportunity to explore, and, perhaps, breach the wall of separation that our contemporary society and university life has erected between what we do and who we are. Such a divide—albeit in a different context—is documented in Donna Freitas' book, *Sex and the Soul*. Freitas describes how college students negotiate the tensions between their religious beliefs and their relationship struggles, specifically their sexual behavior. And she points out that, for many, those two aspects of their lives are completely compartmentalized, illustrating one example of ways that "soul" and "role" are seen as separate not integral conversation partners.

For faculty, there is often a hesitancy to "reveal" their passion (soul) about their subject-matter in the classroom, for fear of violating the supposed "objective" nature of a university education. Yet students often want and need that kind of perspective to make full sense of the course material. Students understanding is often bound up in knowing the answering a few simple questions: "why would an instructor devote herself to such an arcane subject? What drives her to study it?"

If students do not see passion, and its counterpart integration, among their intellectual elders, how will they learn to practice it and become more fully authentic, present, and whole as learners? As the five vignettes of soul/role dialogue participants suggest, such authenticity (soul/role integration), is rarely encouraged or pursued in higher education. Given the potential for soul-role healing we witnessed on our campus, we will continue the dialogues and look for ways to blunt the institutional demands that often limit participation. This paper suggests that it is possible, in a few hours

each month, to foster healthier individuals and institutional life through poetry and silent-communal reflection around original purposes and current tensions.

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