

Best Practice in Leading
for
The Common Good

2007 Higher Learning
Commission Conference

Dr. Larry Litecky & Dr. Cynthia Heelan

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Welcome!

Thank you for joining us to explore ways we can encourage people to speak from their hearts. Speaking from the heart, dialogue, allows us to truly seek common ground and serve the common good in a way that supports and fosters creativity and productivity in our colleges. We encourage people to speak from their hearts by allowing them opportunities to speak their truth, not to defend themselves from or to critique another, but to speak their own truth.

The Higher Learning Commission in creating a mission statement, established for itself the priority of serving the common good, not just serving the membership. This framework challenges leaders in higher education to do the same. Along with the Commission, we invite you, in this session, to speak your truth...to share your values around the common good. We invite you to share your programs, processes and perspectives so we can share best practices in serving the common good.

Our time together this afternoon will raise our awareness of ways in which dialogue can truly enhance our service to the common good and ultimately allow us to co-create vibrant organizations.

Our guide book includes an overview of this session, today's agenda, the conversations guides we will be using, as well as additional information and resources that might interest you.

Thank you for sharing this learning opportunity with us. We trust if we work together, we can begin to expand the potential that our colleges possess for creativity and productivity.

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About the Session Leaders

Dr. Cynthia Heelan is currently serving as an adjunct faculty member for Fielding Graduate University and as a consultant assisting community colleges to lead and plan for institutions in ways that engage the entire institution's voice and heart. She serves as a distinguished advocate for the Center for Formation in Higher Education based in the Dallas County Community College District. She was President at Colorado Mountain College from July, 1993 to November, 2002. She is a Past Chair for the American Association of Community College Board of Directors and past Board member of the North Central Accrediting Association - The Higher Learning Commission, and chair and member of numerous state, regional and local boards and advisory groups in both Colorado and Minnesota. Cynthia holds an M.A. in Adult Learning and Ph.D in Policy Analysis and Administration from the University of Minnesota , and she received her Bachelor of Arts Degree from Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, WI.

Dr. Larry Litecky is entering his eighth year as president of Century College, a community and technical college, in the Twin Cities. He serves as a distinguished advocate for the Center for Formation in Higher Education based in the Dallas County Community College District. Prior to his current presidency, Larry was elected to four terms of two years each as president of the Minnesota Community College Faculty Association from 1990-1998. He taught humanities and American Studies at Minneapolis Community College from 1974-1990. In addition, Larry taught at Whitehorse College in Melbourne, Australia. He has served as an officer and member of many state, regional, national and local boards and committees over the years. Larry holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Minnesota where he also did post-doctoral work in higher education policy. He received his B.A. in English and philosophy from the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN.

A G E N D A

Welcome/Introductions/Touchstones/Concepts about dialogue and the common good
10 Minutes

Conversation 1: Experiencing our basic truth in dialogue
60 Minutes

Conversation 2: Sharing experiences of dialogue and serving the common good in our colleges
55 Minutes

Conversation 3: Creating an action plan for serving the common good in our colleges at home
40 Minutes

Conversation 1: Experiencing our Basic Truth

Spring teaches me to look more carefully for the green stems of possibility: for the intuitive hunch that may turn into a larger insight, for the glance or touch that may thaw a frozen relationship, for the stranger's act of kindness that makes the world seem hospitable again.

Parker Palmer

Purpose: Participants will experience a time when they lived in their own truth and will dialogue together about the grounding it can provide to support them in their leading roles.

Timing: 60 Minutes

Process:

1. Read Parker Palmer's Essay, Spring (5 minutes)
2. Where, what, whom am I from? Create a timeline of your life period. Identify five key decision points ("green stems of possibility") you have made in your life. How have these made you who you are? (10 minutes – notes, brainstorming)
3. Select one of these decisions to write about and share in a group of three. How has this decision-making experience ("green stem of possibility") prepared you to speak your truth? How does it manifest your gifts and talents? How does this relate to the common good? (10 minutes)
4. Share your story about that experience with two other persons near you in the circle. (8 minutes each)
5. Dialogue with the entire group about the meaning of this experience in the context of speaking from our hearts in search of the common good. (10 minutes)

Conversation 2: Experiencing Dialogue and Serving the Common Good

Late spring is a potlatch time in the natural world, a great giveaway of blooming beyond all necessity and reason-done, it would appear, for no reason other than the sheer joy of it. The gift of life, which seemed to be withdrawn in winter, has been given once again, and nature, rather than hoarding it, gives it all away. There is another paradox here, known in all the wisdom traditions: if you receive a gift, you keep it alive not by clinging to it but by passing it along.

Parker Palmer

Purpose: To recollect a time at our college when the basic truth of many was honored and validated, and the result was a great ‘giveaway’ in the sense that a group was able to dialogue until they found common ground.

Timeframe: 55 minutes

Process:

1. Take a few minutes to write about a time at your college when “blooming beyond all necessity” occurred, when innovation flourished, when community building and inclusivity took place. After listening to their own and others’ truths, people were able to ‘give it all away’ in an effort to serve the common good. Describe the circumstances surrounding your story: the people involved, the resources available, the setting of the story, the role of leadership and the outcome of the experience. (8 minutes).
2. Share your story with two other conversation partners in the circle. (5 minutes each).
3. Once your partner has told a story, identify with that person the conditions and gifts which promoted that blooming. Think of gifts that come from a basic truth of that person, the truth you would want to nourish in a dialogue so they would be able to seek, with you, the common good. (4 minutes each)
4. Share insights gained from this experience with the entire group, including themes in the stories. Identify how to promote those conditions and gifts needed to seek the common good. Post themes on newsprint. (30 minutes)
5. Conversation will include learning from other colleges like Richland College, Century College, and others, ways in which individual truth can

result in initiatives which engage others in dialogue for the common good. Outcomes at colleges will be highlighted.

Conversation Guide 3: Creating an Action Plan

Purpose: To explore ways to serve the common good at individual colleges in ways that support and sustain speaking individual truths and enhancing institutional creativity, inclusivity and community building.

Timeframe: 40 minutes

1. If you could build on one of the listed themes/initiatives/opportunities at your college, what would it be? Jot down thoughts about this theme. How could you use your gifts to invite colleagues from across the college, into a dialogue about this theme/initiative/opportunity that could serve the common good. How can you highlight the gifts of your colleagues? (5 minutes)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

2. Dialogue with your table your thoughts and share your opportunities and ideas. As you hear good ideas from other session participants, jot them down here: Then select the single most important opportunity/theme/initiative for dialogue that could truly result in serving the common good. (15 minutes)

3. Each table share your most important initiative/opportunity/theme with the entire group. Discuss together, the concept of the common good as represented by this dialogue. Apply to the 'back home' situation, including ways to implement this initiative/opportunity/theme relative to the common good. (15 minutes)

Spring

by Parker J. Palmer

I will wax romantic about spring and its splendors 'in a moment, but first there is a hard truth to be told: before spring becomes beautiful, it is plug ugly, nothing but mud and muck. I have walked in the early spring through fields that will suck your boots off, a world so wet and woeful it makes you yearn for the return of ice. But in that muddy mess, the conditions for rebirth are being created.

I love the fact that the word "humus"-the decayed vegetable matter that feeds the roots of plants-comes from the same word root that gives rise to the word "humility." It is a blessed etymology. It helps me understand that the humiliating events of life, the events that leave "mud on my face" or that "make my name mud" may create the fertile soil in which something new can grow.

Though spring begins slowly and tentatively, it grows with a tenacity that never fails to touch me. The smallest and most tender shoots insist on having their way, coming up through ground that looked, only a few weeks earlier, as if it would never grow anything again. The crocuses and snowdrops do not bloom for long. But their mere appearance, however brief, is always a harbinger of hope, and from those small beginnings, hope grows at a geometric rate. The days get longer, the winds get warmer, and the world grows green again.

In my own life, as my winters segue into spring, I not only find it hard to cope with mud but hard to credit the small harbingers of larger life to come, hard to hope until the outcome is secure. Spring teaches me to look more carefully for the green stems of possibility: for the intuitive hunch that may turn into a larger insight, for the glance or touch that may thaw a frozen relationship, for the stranger's act of kindness that makes the world seem hospitable again.

Spring in its fullness is not easy to write about. Late spring is so flamboyant that it caricatures itself, which is why it has long been the province of poets with more passion than skill. But perhaps those poets have a point. Perhaps we are meant to yield to this flamboyance, to understand that life is not always to be measured and meted as winter compels us to do but to be spent from time to time in a riot of color and growth.

Late spring is a potlatch time in the natural world, a great giveaway of blooming beyond all necessity and reason-done, it would appear, for no reason other than the sheer joy of it. The gift of life, which seemed to be withdrawn in winter, has been given once again, and nature, rather than hoarding it, gives it all away. There is another paradox here, known in all the wisdom traditions: if you receive a gift, you keep it alive not by clinging to it but by passing it along.

Of course, the realists will tell us that nature's profligacy always has some practical function, and that may well be so. But ever since I read Annie Dillard on the immoderation of trees, I have had to wonder. She begins with a mental exercise to help us understand how superfluous in design an ordinary tree can be-if you doubt it, she suggests, try to make a faithful scale model of the next tree you see. Then, taunting the realists, she writes: "You are God. You want to make a forest, something to hold the soil, lock up solar energy, and give off oxygen. Wouldn't it be simpler just to rough in a slab of chemicals, a green acre of goo?"

From autumn's profligate seedings to the great spring giveaway, nature teaches a steady lesson: if we want to save our lives, we cannot cling to them but must spend them with abandon. When we are obsessed with bottom lines and productivity, with efficiency of

time and *motion*, with the rational relation of means and ends, with projecting reasonable goals and making a beeline toward them, it seems unlikely that our work will ever bear full fruit, unlikely that we will ever know the fullness of spring in our lives.

And when did we start to misuse that beeline metaphor? Just watch the bees work in the spring. They flit all over the place, flirting with both the flowers and their fates. Obviously, the bees are practical and productive, but no science can persuade me that they are not pleasuring themselves as well.

Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation.
San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000. 103-106.

TOUCHSTONES

Ideas that increase the likelihood of our working together productively

1. **Be 100% present, extending and presuming welcome.** Set aside the usual distractions of things undone from yesterday, things to do tomorrow. Bring all of yourself to the work. We all learn most effectively in spaces that welcome us. Welcome others to this place and this work, and presume that you are welcomed as well.
2. **Listen deeply.** Listen intently to what is said; listen to the feelings beneath the words. As Quaker writer Douglas Steere puts it, “Holy listening—to ‘listen’ another’s soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery—may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.” Listen to yourself as well as to others. Strive to achieve a balance between listening and reflecting, speaking and acting.
3. **It is never “share or die.”** You will be invited to share in pairs, small groups, and in the large group. The invitation is completely open. *You* determine the extent to which you want to participate in our discussions and activities.
4. **No fixing.** Each of us is here to discover our own truths, to listen to our own inner teacher, to take our own inner journey. We are *not* here to set someone else straight, or to help right another’s wrong, to “fix” what we perceive as broken in another member of the group.
5. **Suspend judgment.** Set aside your judgments. By creating a space between judgments and reactions, we can listen to the other, and to ourselves, more fully.
6. **Identify assumptions.** Our assumptions are usually transparent to us, yet they undergird our worldview. By identifying our assumptions, we can then set them aside and open our viewpoints to greater possibilities.
7. **Speak your truth.** You are invited to say what is in your heart, trusting that your voice will be heard and your contribution respected. Your truth may be different from, even the opposite of, what another person in the circle has said. Yet speaking your truth is simply that—it is not debating with, or correcting, or interpreting what another has said. Respond from *your* center, not *to* another’s center. This behavior honors the previous speaker’s comments without passing judgment. It also avoids introducing defensive feelings that distract from the listening.
8. **Respect silence.** Silence is a rare gift in our busy world. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words. This applies to the speaker as well—be comfortable leaving your words to resound in the silence, without refining or elaborating on what you have just said. This process allows others time to fully listen before reflecting on their own reactions.
9. **Maintain confidentiality.** Create a safe space by respecting the confidential nature and content of discussions held in the formation circle. Allow what is said in the circle to remain there.
10. **When things get difficult, turn to wonder.** If you find yourself disagreeing with another, becoming judgmental, or shutting down in defense, try turning to wonder: “I wonder what brought her to this place?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me?” “I wonder what he’s feeling right now

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Journal Space

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