“Found poetry” illustrates how an experimental series of reflective audio teleconference retreats became a transforming experience.

Dialing in to a Circle of Trust: A “Medium” Tech Experiment and Poetic Evaluation

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A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly “in the woods” with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up. The relationships in such a group are not pushy but patient, they are not confrontational but compassionate; they are filled not with expectations and demands but an abiding faith in the reality of the inner teacher and in each person’s capacity to learn from it … The people who help us grow toward true self offer unconditional love, neither judging us to be deficient nor trying to force us to change but accepting us exactly as we are. And yet this unconditional love does not lead us to rest on our laurels. Instead, it surrounds us with a charged force field that makes us want to grow from the inside out—a force field that is safe enough to take the risks and endure the failures that growth requires.

—Palmer, 2004, pp. 59-60

Creating Circles of Trust

In his 2004 book *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer makes explicit the unique qualities of the transformational “circle of trust.” He describes a group of people embracing the paradox of “being alone together” (p. 54), where the only goal of the group is to invite the emergence of the soul of each individual, through journaling and carefully constructed small and large group work—or simply, through silence (p.54). Circle of Trust touchstones gently welcome into the
circle compassion, a sense of invitation to participate, unconditional love, and faith in each participant’s “inner teacher”—all qualities that nurture the “shy soul” to emerge. At the same time, these guiding tenets prohibit behaviors that stunt the growth of soul: communicating expectations or judgment, confrontation, or the “fixing” of others. In these ways, every circle of trust launches an educational journey toward the discovery of each participant’s authentic self.

A key tool that participants from teachers to pastors and other serving professionals are taught to carry on this journey is the gently and spaciously paced “honest open question.” Palmer (2004) describes it as a “countercultural” invitation to someone who has spoken of a vocational or personal issue to say more “about the matter at hand…free of the static we create by imposing our own predilections on each other” (p. 130). Honest and open questions are the exact opposite of leading questions: they do not suggest answers or try to fix another who has shared a challenge. Their sole goal is to open rather than restrict the sharer’s exploration of his or her concern.

Circles of Trust offer ample opportunity for facilitators to model and teach honest open questions—and for participants to practice this form of questioning that intentionally goes against the grain of advice giving. These questions inform the participants’ discussion of how “third things”—typically poems, other short pieces of literature, music, or visual art—intersect with their personal and professional lives. Journaling prompts or suggestions are also typically honest open questions, and participants learn to use their own gentle questions to invite small-group partners into deeper sharing—not to satisfy the asker’s curiosity but to serve the answerer’s further inner exploration. In clearness committees, the heart of every retreat, the honest open questions of a small group also invite a focus person to think deeply into a concern shared in the strictest confidence. Aimed at supporting the focus person in communicating “with true self, not with other people” (Palmer, 2004, p. 140), honest open questions help a clearness committee “to create and protect a space occupied only by the focus person. For the focus person and the committee alike, the questions asked and answers that emerge can be transforming” (p. 144) Another way that circles of trust stand outside of popular cultural norms is that they are the essence of “low tech.” Facilitators have historically excluded technology from their circles, wishing to create a more peaceful alternative environment to participants’ complex everyday lives. Traditionally circles of trust were also unique in-person gatherings experienced by a cohort of professionals convening for a series of seasonal sessions—preferably in retreat settings surrounded by nature. Microphones, laptops, and cell phones were not welcome. Gathering in a simple circle of chairs was not only a signal characteristic of a Circle of Trust, it was originally—and to some, still is—a given that they be convened this way. A number of higher education facilitators made forays into offering Courage to Teach® courses through distance learning (Love, 2010), but for almost two decades most Circle of Trust facilitators literally moved chairs into circles in retreat centers all over the country.
An Experiment Addresses Rural Montana Challenges

Participants from large, rural states like Montana who might wish to take their seats in a Circle of Trust find in this scenario a significant challenge: distance. For some Montanans, experiencing a Circle of Trust retreat means driving up to a thousand-mile round trip. And what low population scattered across wide distances makes challenging, low professional salaries make nearly impossible. These realities were top-of-mind when Montana Courage to Lead proposed a Courage to Lead for Clergy and Congregational Leaders pilot project in 2008. Several denominations—Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist—participated as sponsors from the outset, and the series was eventually opened to leaders of all faiths. With relatively low incomes and minimal staff, many Montana pastors could not afford to attend a traditional seasonal retreat series halfway across the state. At the same time, neither Montana Courage to Lead nor its denominational partners had access to sophisticated technological support that might support distance learning. Therefore from the outset, project partners were forced to confront several central questions:

- Could technologically supported retreat experiences successfully supplement an in-person retreat experience to make a series of Circle of Trust opportunities accessible and affordable?
- Could participants build community and develop trust in technologically supported virtual retreat experiences?
- Would participants resist the notion of a “distance retreat”? Would they participate?

And perhaps most important:

- Could technology be used in a way that would not compromise the transformational learning experience that characterizes the in-person Circle of Trust?

These questions had to be taken into consideration in determining how technology might support a retreat series. Videoconferencing, an obvious high-tech option, was soon discarded because it was too expensive and would still require participants travel to a limited number of videoconference sites. Nor was on-line interface considered optimal, as it did not allow the intimacy of voice connection and required computer access. Skype was eliminated because at the time it could not accommodate up to eight participants. Finally, the Montana project decided on a “medium” tech solution. The plan was to offer pastors an introductory in-person circle of trust followed by a series of four to five monthly audio teleconference book groups, each two hours in length. Cell phones and landlines made this more modest option affordable and accessible to all—for the cost of a long distance call. A free conference call system would provide the bridge.

The planned retreat sequence, gathering in-person first, then by audio teleconference sessions, is supported by both virtual team (Willett, 2002) and on-line learning experience (Lawrence, 1999). Both suggest that initial face-to-face trust building can be critical to the success of a distance group experience. Keeping this wisdom in mind, facilitators convened the first retreat in person and then invited participants to participate in the teleconference series.
Participation was voluntary, and forty-three of fifty-nine participants in three separate introductory retreats chose to participate in teleconference retreats. Divided into groups of six to eight, participants were encouraged to read two chapters of Parker J. Palmer’s *A Hidden Wholeness* before each monthly session—and to participate in calls even if they had not done the reading. To join a call, each participant dialed a free conference call number set up in advance.

Every effort was made to create a retreat atmosphere during the calls, so in-person retreat practices were followed as closely as possible. A brief silence convened the groups. Then forty-five minutes were devoted to pastor check-ins around a central honest open question, and initial calls included a review of touchstones and honest open questions. Then, as they would in person, participants read a poem or other short selection from one of the assigned chapters for the call. After discussion, the facilitator provided open-ended journal prompts and grouped participants into one of three triads or dyads, each group with a separate call-in number for reconvening after a period of personal journaling. Then all participants hung up and journaled for twenty minutes. Afterward, using different conference call lines, they reconvened in small groups for forty-five minutes. Here, as in the face-to-face retreat, participants one by one shared what they wished from their journals, and their partners offered a few gently paced honest open questions. At the end of small group time, all callers reconvened once more on the original conference call number for a short debriefing on their small-group experiences and setting the next meeting time and chapters assigned. Despite the various on- and off-call steps and numbers involved, participants quickly “got it,” and in all various clergy participated in fourteen different sessions following three introductory retreats without a significant hitch.

Orally during the calls and afterward in writing, participants provided feedback and personal anecdotes on the use of technology and retreat practice, and their anonymous responses were collated around the themes that informed the experiment’s central questions:

- Participant response to the use of teleconference technology in a retreat series
- Whether participants perceived that a “hybrid” in-person-teleconference retreat series could build the trust and community so essential to Circles of Trust
- Whether participants could experience transformational learning in this mixed learning environment

**“Found Poetry” Project Evaluation**

Courage & Renewal founding facilitator and research leader Sally Hare encouraged maximum creativity in sharing results of this pilot project. The facilitator selected “pure found poems,” a qualitative reporting medium that weaves selected words and phrases from participants’ research responses into poetry. Format only is provided by the researcher (hence the “purity” of the format). A key appeal of this medium is that it engages the power of poetry to communicate the essence of participants’ affective and behavioral responses to central research questions.
The American Academy of Poets website (www.Poets.org) offers the following description of found poems:

Found poems take existing texts and refashion them, reorder them, and present them as poems. The literary equivalent of a collage…A pure found poem consists exclusively of outside texts: the words of the poem remain as they were found, with few additions or omissions. Decisions of form, such as where to break a line, are left to the poet.

Monica Prendergast (2009) of Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a leader in the use of “poetic inquiry,” describes found poetry as a way “to artistically present the work of theorists and or practitioners.”

This poetic medium also seemed especially appropriate for reporting on an experiment involving a retreat practice that makes much use of poetry. Further, poetry is increasingly being recognized by the social sciences and humanities as a creative way to both gather and report research results. The found poems that follow share the highlights of participant responses. Most include multiple speakers’ words and phrases, whereas a few capture the thoughts of just one person. In all cases, the researcher chose poetic themes and words and crafted poems to reflect accurately the tenor and content of response strands that characterized overall research feedback.

The teleconference call experiment was not without its pitfalls, and three poems illustrate participants’ challenges with the design and execution of these calls as a retreat medium. Each expresses an individual view. “Downside” focuses on frustration with small group size and the loss of face-to-face clues to a speaker’s feelings, and “Lament” shows the frustration a technical glitch can cause.

**Downside**

Four people is too many—
not enough silence.

Lack of time
to ask reflective questions.
When the person speaking
may be struggling,
I depend
on body cues.
It would be great
to be in the same room.

**Lament**

The access code
(wasn’t) working.
The technology’s hard for me—
always some glitch
that blocks out meaning.
The sole speaker in “Time Together” shows appreciation for the value of the teleconference call sessions but despairs their lack of frequency. In the poignant last lines, the speaker owns the challenge of loneliness.

### Time Together

Those not involved at all thought that there would not be a lot of value to these phone calls. There was much more value than I expected. Once a month is not frequent enough. We had just begun to “click” at the retreat—but for friendships to develop, one needs to spend time together: They didn't have the opportunity to grow in the once-a-month format. But then, loneliness, not overwork, is my main stressor.

“Failure of Logistics,” reveals that blending two different teleconference groups during summer when attendance was low had the unintended consequence of shutting the speaker down: the combined group did not feel safe.

### Failure of Logistics

Setting up the groups, you asked if there was someone we would rather not be with. I indicated that there was, and then, when the groups were reformed the last time, that person was in my group. It was off-putting: I did not prioritize
to be part of that session,
and I backed off
in sharing.

I understand
logistics are difficult,
and it probably could not
have been done any other way --
so I should receive it
as a challenge to open up,
but on that day
I was just not able
to do it.

Fortunately, despite heavy initial skepticism, most pastors affirmed that the teleconference experience worked for them as a retreat medium. Four collective poems show that repeating practice from the in-person retreat, as well the trust developed there, supported achieving deep communication in teleconference—despite participants’ original skepticism.

**Wednesday Morning**

I was really skeptical
about this format.
Leery of
the conference call.
Mixed emotions.
But I’m glad I’ve come:
Journaling, sharing, listening.
The book and open-ended questions.
The technology did not interfere.
I am surprised
how much I enjoy it,
how easy to fall back
into retreat:
A basis to build on,
something familiar we have not lost.
I’m grateful for gifts
of communication
and compassion—
a good way to spend Wednesday morning.
This feeds my soul.
Out of the Blizzard

This has worked well for me
to step out
of the blizzard,
back into retreat:
I know all of you.
What we did
in retreat
makes it easier:
We set the stage
for depth.

Upside

A time of great support,
giving and receiving—
nurturing.
A time for silence
as well as questions.
Time off the phone
to be
with our thoughts.
The sense that I am not alone
in this great big cosmos.
It felt good
to share the heart
of who I am.

Irony

I miss eye contact—
that I do miss.
Visual cues
are so important
that I was kind of
hesitant.
I was surprised
(the calls)
were as effective
as they were.
I was surprised
the phone
could be used to get away.
Wonderful irony
that this little
bane of our existence
could become
a way in(to) retreat.

Another poem, “Over Many Miles That Separate” speaks directly to the depth of spiritual
connection that pastors achieved in teleconference.

**Over Many Miles That Separate**

Good to talk to other pastors—
that seldom happens for me.
Reinforce what was done at the retreat,
continue to work with the concepts in the book.
Personal connection,
insights about myself.
Doing spiritual work with colleagues
at a deeper level than
just politics of the nation,
or the church.
Keep(s) relationships alive
over many miles
that separate me
from others.

During the course of the series, pastors discovered both the power and challenge of using
honest open questions, not only among themselves, but also in their relationships with
parishioners. “Loving the Questions” articulates both the challenge and wonder they found in
this practice.

**Loving the Questions**

Sometimes it’s hard
to ask questions
about feelings
that are open and honest.
to keep the focus
on their concerns—
rather than my curiosity.
I often fall
into the trap
of asking “why?”
and not “how?”
It’s hard not to tell
my story.
I have a spotlight image:
It’s easy to shift
the spotlight to the listener.
It’s like learning a language:
The logic of syntax is reversed.
A lot of this process
is counterintuitive.
I am not resisting:
I love it.

The poem “Before” begins the powerful story a pastor told about using honest open questions to help a suicidal parishioner. She related that one day a member of her congregation called in desperation, telling her, “I don’t want to live. I can’t fight the system. Everybody hates me.” The poem tells the story of what happened before she remembered to stop “fixing” and ask honest open questions.

**Before**

I had a parishioner
in
suicidal mode:
I was asking
questions,
and when I got
too aggressive,
_____ cried,
“You’re not
helping me!”
I reflect on
my past ministry:
I was naturally
curious and aggressive,
and it makes me
want
to cringe.

The pastor, relating the whole story at another time, explained how using honest open questions transformed the call and may have saved her parishioner’s life:

At this point I knew I was not in the right place, and I invited _____ to breathe with me. As I sat with _____ in silence over the phone, my training in spiritual direction and honest open questions came back. I realized my spirit was already trying to have a conversation. I needed to get out of my judgmental head. I began to slowly ask ______ honest open questions that invited him to explore what _____ really needed. As I did, the situation on the phone deescalated.

Today _____ is still here. When _____ calls, I just listen … listen for feelings. Using the new skill caused me to look back on my old way of working with parishioners in crisis… The honest open questions and the whole book [A Hidden
Wholeness really help you get a feel for where you need to be. The most important thing I get out of it is that I can’t fix anyone.

Two more collective poems affirmed that the teleconference circle of trust series was transformational for pastors themselves—and that the transformation brought both joy and challenge. “Struggle” and “Joy” describe the two poles of a paradox that may emerge for a pastor who embraces a commitment to authentic self.

**Joy**

Instead of telling the family answers,  
I was more willing to just sit with them.  
Instead of feeling like I have to answer their questions, I make observations  
or ask questions to get them  
to think more deeply  
into  
their own questions.  
I am not pulling.  
It is empowering,  
a fascinating process—  
applications to many areas  
of our lives.  
I’ve tried to balance  
boundaries and vulnerability,  
not being responsible for the world.  
As a pastor, I feel the joy  
of seeing us all as equals.  
The spirit in you is in us all.  
I am looking at giving  
my self  
more than my skills.  
This takes the monkey off my back.

**Struggle**

My struggle is  
to have the courage to lead  
as a spiritual leader.  
I struggle with  
steward leadership.  
Since the retreat  
I’ve taken small steps  
toward my role as pastor.  
I am mindful about inner life  
and outer life  
and whether they coincide
or not.
A little bit of sadness:
I feel my inner life, if revealed too much,
is not acceptable.
It is also difficult
to rewire and reprogram
our minds and our thinking
to ask open and honest questions,
especially in occupations
routinely expected to have
the answers and the information.

“Occupational Transformation,” the voice of a single pastor, and “Paying Attention,” a collective poem, amplify pastors’ growing awareness that their participation in this teleconference experience has altered both their interaction with peers and their own individual awareness.

**Occupational Transformation**

I keep myself out:
At a conference,
doing a lot more listening than in the past,
being shaped by this process,
changing the tone,
or helping a conversation
be shaped
in a different way:
Difficult when
working with 16 other folks
using another approach.

**Paying Attention**

What I am paying
attention to
is what
I clutter my life with
that keeps me
insulated
from my soul.
Paying Attention
What I am paying
attention to
are my responses
as I listen to others—and where
those are coming from.
And to what
people
are really saying, instead of what the words are saying. I am paying attention to my need for solitude, to expectations. Grace or love comes not when you expect it, but when you don’t. I am looking for unexpected moments of grace. and life.

Two final collective poems, “In Need of Circles” and “Resource” affirm that the combined in-person-teleconference retreat experience has initiated very difficult journeys toward personal and professional change for these pastors—and also that they see Circles of Trust as critical sources of support to continue these journeys.

**In Need of Circles**

Captive to everyone’s time.
High expectations for myself and others.
Not healthy functioning for myself and my church.
Guilt that I can’t do it all.

Scared to tell what I need.
Scared of my own fragility, to admit I can’t do it all.
Scared of their reaction: They might reject me or be angry.

To be exposed, ashamed.
So much of what people want me to be—over-functioning—bad for me and for them.
My inner life,
if revealed, is not acceptable.
Some places where I can risk,
Some places where I can’t.

Are some able to claim sole and role?
What is the risk?

Hoping for some place
where I can feel
a sense of community
and belonging,
I am in need of circles
that will help me
go forth with integrity
concerning
vocation.

Resource

In pondering
soul and role,
I have drawn
strength
from the Circle of Trust.
It was helpful
to have
my inner working come out.
It helped
confidence grow in me,
calms me down,
helps me put things in perspective:
Images, phrases
to guide me, to come back to.
When things get
wild and hectic,
the retreat reminds me
to slow down
and center.

This collection of poems answers the questions that informed the Montana Courage to Lead® pilot program for pastors. The poems suggest that, despite challenges, the teleconference medium can support and deepen an in-person retreat experience. They reveal the importance of an initial face-to-face retreat to establish the trust essential to the success of a distance retreat. The poems also illustrate the value of the practice of honest, open-ended questions to pastors’ own inner work—and to their practice of their profession. Finally, the poetry suggests that a series of teleconference circles can supplement in-person Circle of Trust in transforming pastors’ professional lives.
The success of this experiment led Montana Courage to Lead® and its denominational sponsors to offer a seasonal retreat series: two in-person retreats were held in spring and fall 2011, interspersed with two teleconference retreats in the summer of 2011 and winter of 2012. To round out the series in person, a final in-person gathering will occur in late spring 2012. Thanks to the positive response to the teleconference retreat experience, this mixed medium seasonal series is well underway.

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