

A HIDDEN WHOLENESS: The Journey toward an Undivided Life

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- The blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold and it has overturned the order of the soul. Leonard Cohen
- As we become more obsessed with succeeding, or at least surviving, in that world, we lose touch with our souls and disappear into our roles.
- A supervisor who leads from personal authenticity gets better work out of people than one who leads from a script.
- Candor is often the kind that people come to regret as they find out how transient and untrustworthy feelings “in the moment” can be. T-groups, even at their best, do not welcome the soul, which distrusts confrontation because its dynamics run so much deeper than momentary feelings.
- We can put the chairs in a circle, but as long as they are occupied by people who have an inner hierarchy, the circle itself will have a divided life, one more form of “living within the lie”: a false community.
- One side of a strip of paper represents your outer or onstage life. Here the words that describe our experience are image, influence and impact – words that name our hopes and fears as we interact with the world. Is anyone listening to me? Am I making any difference? How do I look while I’m trying?
- The other side of the strip represents your inner or backstage life. Here the vocabulary is less anxious and more reflective with words like ideas, intuitions, feelings, values, faith and deeper still, whatever words you choose to name the source from which such things come: mind, heart, spirit, true self, soul, or place-beyond all-naming.
- Whenever people come together, in numbers large or small, we create different kinds of spaces to support different purposes:
 - We know how to create spaces that invite the intellect to show up, analyzing reality, parsing logic and arguing in case; such spaces can be found, for example, in universities.
 - We know how to create spaces that invite the emotions into play, reacting to injury, expressing anger and celebrating joy; they can be found in therapy groups.
 - We know how to create spaces that invite the will to emerge, consolidating energy and effort on behalf of a shared goal; they can be found in task forces and committees.
 - We certainly know how to create spaces that invite the ego to put in an appearance, polishing its image, protecting its turf and demanding its rights; they can be found wherever we go!
 - But we know very little about creating spaces that invite the soul to make itself known. Apart from the natural world, such spaces are hard to find – and we seem to place little value on preserving the soul spaces in nature.
- And yet to invite the soul to show up in order to solve a social problem is to scare it away as surely as when we set out to fix another person.
- What exactly do we trust in a circle of trust? Four things, at least:
 - We trust the soul, its reality and power, its self-sufficiency, its capacity to speak truth, its ability to help us to listen and respond to what we hear.
 - We trust each other to have the intention, discipline and good-will to create and hold a space that is safe enough to welcome the soul.

- We trust the principles and practices that create such a space and safeguard the relationships within it, aware that the pull of conventional culture is persistent and can easily tug us toward behaviors that will scare the shy soul away.
- We trust that welcoming the soul with no “change agenda” in mind can have transforming outcomes for individuals and institutions.
- Anyone could have sized Tim up with ease, so transparent was his condition: You know what? Your problem is that you’re afraid. But if people had approached him that way, he would have done what we all do when we are invaded: he would have resisted the diagnosis with all his might while his soul truth receded deeper into the woods.
- Unfortunately, our idea of leadership has been deformed by a myth that links leadership to hierarchy, as if leaders were needed only in systems that operate from the top down. But when we are in “community” – which, at a turn of the kaleidoscope, evokes the romance of an instinctive life together – we can dispense with a designated leader, allowing the role to pass spontaneously from one person to the next. Or so goes the myth. Yet in my experience, a community requires more leadership than a hierarchy does. A hierarchy has clear goals, a well-established division of labor, and a set of policies about how things are supposed to run; if the machine is well designed and well lubricated, it can almost run itself. A community is a chaotic, emergent and creative force field that needs constant tending. And when a community’s aims are countercultural, as they are in a circle of trust, its need for tending is even greater. Lacking a leader grounded in the principles, skilled at the practices, and granted the authority to lead, a circle of trust will fail because the relational culture it requires is so rare and so fragile.
- Nothing makes the soul flee faster than being told it must sing for its supper. Employers cannot require employees to join a circle of trust.
- If the gifts that I give are mine, grown from the seed of true self, I can give them without burning out. Like the fruit of a tree, they will replenish themselves in due season.
- At first it seems odd to take notes on our own thoughts and words. We have a strange conceit that just because we have thought or said something, we understand what it means. The notes we take on our own words in such moments become a text that we can learn from long after the circle has ended.
- (Poetry) may make us...a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves. T.S. Eliot
- What projections surround me? Where do they come from? What drives them? How do they distort my sense of self? How am I dealing with them, and how might I deal with them better? How can I name and claim my own truth? Such questions, and our answers to them, are critical steps on the journey toward an undivided life.
- As a young man, I yearned for the day when, rooted in the experience that comes only with age, I could do my work fearlessly. But today, in my mid-sixties, I realize that I will feel fear from time to time for the rest of my life.
- As we explore “the work before the work” in a circle of trust, people wrestle, aloud and in silence, with many important questions about the inner journey:
- How do I guard my spirit? DO I even believe in guarding it, or have I been conditioned simply to give my spirit away?
- What fears paralyze me? Can I name them with the same liberating clarity that Khing names gain and success, praise and criticism and bodily security?

- What practices do I have that parallel Khing’s “fasting” and “forgetting” that could help me move into and through my fears for the sake of reclaiming true self?
- Circle of trust is governed by the simple but countercultural rule: No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight.
- If you take my advice, you will surely solve your problem. If you take my advice but fail to solve your problem, you did not try hard enough. If you fail to take my advice, I did the best I could. So I am covered. No matter how things come out, I no longer need to worry about your or your vexing problem. The shadow behind the “fixes” we offer for issues that we cannot fix is, ironically, the desire to hold each other at bay. It is a strategy for abandoning each other while appearing to be concerned.
- When we speak directly to others in order to achieve a goal, we feel the anxiety that comes from trying to exercise influence. But when we speak to the center of the circle – free of the need to achieve a result – we feel energized and at peace. Now we speak with no other motive than to tell the truth, and the self-affirming feelings that accompany such speech reinforce the practice.
- Receptive listening is an inward and invisible act. But in a circle of trust, it has at least three outward and visible signs:
 - Allowing brief, reflective silences to fall between speakers, rather than rushing to respond – silences that honor those who speak, give everyone time to absorb what has been said, and slow things down enough so that anyone who wishes to speak can do so.
 - Responding to the speaker not with commentary but with, honest, open questions that have no other intent than to help the speaker hear more deeply whatever he or she is saying – a demanding art that is the subject of the next chapter.
 - Honoring whatever truth-telling has been done by speaking one’s own truth openly into the center of the circle – placing it alongside prior expressions as simple personal testimony, with no intent of affirming or negating other speakers.
- Neighbors, coworkers, and even family members can live side by side for years without learning much about each other’s lives. As a result, we lose something of great value, for the more we know about another’s story, the harder it is to hate or harm that person.
- When I ask you an honest question – for example: Have you ever had an experience that felt like your current dilemma? Did you learn anything from that prior experience that feels useful to you now? There is no way for me to imagine what the right answer might be. Your soul feels welcome to speak its truth in response to questions like these because they harbor no hidden agendas. An open question is one that expands rather than restricts your arena of exploration, one that does not push or even nudge you toward a particular way of framing a situation. “How do you feel about the experience you just described? Is an open question. Why do you seem so sad? Is not.
- The more insecure I feel, the more arrogant I tend to become, and the most arrogant people I know are also the most insecure. The arrogant ego does not like it when we hold tension, fearful of losing its status if we lose the battle at hand.