

February 20, 2009

BILL MOYERS: It seems every soul I meet these days is experiencing some pain from the economy. People with jobs worry about keeping them. Retired friends are watching their savings and pensions shrink. Mortgage holders worry about their payments.

In Phoenix, Arizona, for example, more than half the home sales now are foreclosure sales and the median price of a house has dropped 49 percent from what it was three years ago. A taxi driver here in New York told me he's working twice as many hours for half the income of a year ago.

A reporter covering a job fair in a suburban New Jersey county wrote of men over 40 standing in line for interviews, dressed in sober suits as though they could start work today if someone would just make an offer.

These hard times prompted me to want to talk to a man whose lifelong mission has been to negotiate the difficult realities of life with the help of faith and spirit.

Parker Palmer founded the Center for Courage & Renewal. He's widely known for counseling people who chose vocations for reasons of the heart and may have lost heart because of the troubled, sometimes toxic systems in which they work.

In addition to fifteen years as senior associate of the American Association of Higher Education, Parker Palmer is also a senior adviser to the Fetzer Institute, which, coincidentally, also supports the Journal. Parker Palmer's many books include "Let Your Life Speak", "A Hidden Wholeness" and "The Courage to Teach". In a few days he will be celebrating his 70th birthday.

Parker Palmer, welcome, old friend.

PARKER PALMER: Thank you, Bill. Good to be with you.

BILL MOYERS: So you were born as America was climbing out of the Great Depression. And here you are reaching your 70s as America is descending into the great collapse. I mean, I'd say your life has been sandwiched between two great eras of adversity.

PARKER PALMER: Oh, I think that's true. And I also feel having been born in 1939 and then sort of coming to an age of awareness in the '50s and '60s that I was inculcated with a lot of illusions about what was going on in this society, which are now being punctured and vaporized before our very eyes.

BILL MOYERS: Illusions?

PARKER PALMER: Yeah, illusions I think about, first of all, about America's essential goodness as an economic system. I don't want to deny that there is

goodness in our national character or in our economy and certainly not in democracy rightly understood. But the notion that we always get it right, my country, right or wrong — that somehow America is the noblest nation in the world, these are things that I've for a long time, been unable to believe. And I think a true patriot is one who loves his country.

But as you do when you love something, you also have a lover's quarrel with it. And that means that you stand on some other ground than simply the inherent 100 percent continuing goodness and validity of that which you love.

BILL MOYERS: It's a little surprising to hear you say these illusions are being stripped away now because you were a child of World War II. You came of age in the Cold War. You lived through the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the riots in the cities. What is it peculiar to right now that strips away, as you say, those illusions?

PARKER PALMER: Well, first of all, I think the rehearsal of that history of losing our illusions is very important. It's very important because it tells us that we can lose illusions big time as we did at each of the moments you just named. And then a year or two later forget that we lost the illusions.

So I think that what's happening now is a little bit like what's often been said about — what would happen to war if Congress members had to send their kids first or the administration had to send their kids first. And that is that we would declare and fight fewer wars.

Today a lot of people are being affected by what's happening. And while that's very, very painful it does hold I think some promise for the very kind of thing we saw in the recent presidential election. By which I mean the mobilization of segments of the American population that had never gotten involved in politics before or had gotten involved in less than thoughtful ways to suddenly connect the dots and see that what was happening did have an impact on them and to vote accordingly.

BILL MOYERS: This seems to me one of those moments when the dots connect themselves. Reality can no longer be denied, right?

PARKER PALMER: Well, absolutely. Absolutely. So at the same time, I don't think that we should ever doubt our capacity to deny reality. I mean, after all, until you get to be our age, you really believe you're not going to die. That fundamental human fact of life.

And of course, that's part of our problem. I mean, I could make the same argument about the current economic collapse. Who didn't know it was coming? Who didn't know that a system that encouraged us to live beyond our means and provided all kinds of devious and ethically doubtful ways for us to do that was going to fall apart someday?

Who didn't know that housing was over-evaluated? That stocks were overpriced? Who didn't know that a system that makes the rich richer while the poor get poorer

will someday face a curtain call? We all knew that at some level, just like we know we're going to die. And yet our capacity to deny reality is huge. And I think that we don't want to know what we really know because if we did, we'd have to change our lives. And now we have to change our lives because the whole thing is crashing down around our head.

BILL MOYERS: Much of the talk today is about the middle class and what's happening in the middle class. But as both of us know, you as a teacher, I as a journalist, there are all those truly powerless people out there-

PARKER PALMER: Right.

BILL MOYERS: -who have nothing on which to hold right now.

PARKER PALMER: Right, right. Exactly. I really don't know and I don't think I ever will know what it would be like to have my home and my means of livelihood ripped away from me. So there's a strong sense in which I don't have counsel for them or deep insight into the interior of their lives. And I think that's an important thing to say.

At the same time, I have learned from the great movements that have been conducted, energized, animated by people in exactly that situation the black liberation movement in this country, the movements for liberation in Eastern Europe and Latin America, the fight against apartheid in South Africa, the women's movement itself around the world, movements that have been animated by folks who have had every external form of power taken away from them and yet have created movements, social movements that have changed the lay and the law of the land.

BILL MOYERS: Why aren't there no movements like that right now, Parker, in terms of the widespread economic the misery that has beset the country?

PARKER PALMER: Well, I think that's a very perplexing question. I've actually wondered since Vietnam why a larger movement hasn't arisen in this country against the palpable injustices of our system. I think there's a lot of anesthesia being — that's been pumped into American culture, the mass media television, various forms of entertainment, and the illusion of wealth that we now understand to be an illusion as well as the illusion that America is a world power.

I've never understood that one, the world leading power, because as far as I know, we haven't won a major significant war since World War II. And yet we've been able to pump enough anesthetic into the culture to maintain that illusion or the sleepiness that allows us to hold those illusions.

I do think that the recent presidential election is evidence of our capacity to mount a movement. And I think the Obama campaign was very skillful and not only skillful but understood something about the human heart to create the movement that it did. I'm fascinated with this, with the Camp Obama phenomenon.

BILL MOYERS: Right.

PARKER PALMER: Camp Obama, starting two and a half, three years before the election, when the Obama candidacy was a real long shot, happened around the country. Circles of people gathered together for two or three days and invited to tell three stories.

And I want to call attention to this because I think movements always begin in this very interior place in the human heart where people are asked to look at and share something of their own lives, their own experience.

And so at Camp Obama, in small groups and over a period of a couple of days, people were invited, first of all, to tell the story of self. What are the hurts and hopes that bring you to this occasion, to the possibility that this long-shot candidate might represent your interests and might actually get elected? The story of self.

The second story, very important, the story of us. How do you see your own story relating to the stories of other people you know and to the larger American story that's going on right now? I'm a Quaker. And one of my great mentors was Douglas Steere, a great Quaker teacher. And he always said the "Who am I?" question is important. But the "Whose am I?" question is equally important.

What do you mean when you say "we"? And so the story of us, so that self-story doesn't end up in narcissism but gets connected to the larger fabric of community. And then finally they were asked to tell the story of now from their point of view. What do you see going on in this moment that makes you think we have a chance to heal some of the hurts and pursue some of the hopes that you've named in those earlier stories?

Well, there's a lot to be said about that process which then rippled out through concentric circles to gather more and more people in as these folks went back home and asked other people to tell the same stories.

So that in Madison, Wisconsin, where I live, in the several days preceding the election, we probably had a dozen people knock on our door at different hours of the day and night saying, "Do you know where your polling place is? I'm deeply involved in this campaign. I hope you are, too."

BILL MOYERS: And that's where community organizing begins.

PARKER PALMER: That's where community organizing-

BILL MOYERS: The sharing of these stories-

PARKER PALMER: -begins.

BILL MOYERS: -and then the going out and knocking on the doors-

PARKER PALMER: Absolutely.

BILL MOYERS: -and asking other people to do something about it.

PARKER PALMER: It's feet on the street. And it's press the flesh. And it's ring the bell. And it's talk to each other, which is something that in a privatized affluent society you don't do.

But to me the underlying genius of what happened at Camp Obama was simply this. I don't remember until the Obama campaign a presidential campaign which we were not asked, I was not asked, to buy a presidential candidate as a commodity in a consumer culture. The Obama campaign did not ask me to buy something. It asked me to tell a story. And in that movement it turned me from being a consumer of a political commodity to being a citizen, a voice. Somebody wants to hear my story. That's why we ended up looking on TV in the wake of the election at all of these young people, these African American people, these Hispanic people, who had always felt disenfranchised, who had always felt their stories didn't count but now felt they were being heard on some significant level. And they turned out to vote as a result.

PARKER PALMER: These things don't happen overnight. They aren't easily done. They require, to use the good words of my mentor Robert Bellah, a new set of habits of the heart. But it's precisely in hard times, it seems to me, that we start to learn new habits of the heart because we don't have a choice.

BILL MOYERS: You've written that we all have to learn to live in what you call the tragic gap. Now, some people are going to find that notion very un-American then because it flies in the face of the fundamental American assumption of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What is the tragic gap? And who wants to live there?

PARKER PALMER: Well, I think the pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of reality because illusion never leaves us ultimately happy. And I think the opportunity now is for us to get real. And I think that's going to make us, in the long run, more happy. The tragic gap, and I call it tragic not because it's sad. It is. But more fundamentally because it's an inevitable part of the human condition.

Tragic in the sense that the Greeks talked about it. Tragic in the sense that Shakespeare talked about it. The tragic gap is the gap between what's really going on around us, the hard conditions in which our lives are currently immersed, and what we know to be possible from our own experience.

We don't see it every day. We may not see it very often. But we know it's a possibility among real people and real space and time. Now, what happens when we don't learn to hold the tension between what is and what we know to be possible? I think what-

BILL MOYERS: Reality and the possibility.

PARKER PALMER: The reality and the possibility.

BILL MOYERS: Right.

PARKER PALMER: I think what happens is we flip out on one side or the other. Flip out into too much reality and you get what I call corrosive cynicism. And corrosive cynicism is partly what's got us where we are. Corrosive cynicism is, "Oh, I see how the world is made. It's dog eat dog. It's whoever gets the biggest piece of the pie gets the biggest piece of the pie. So I'm going to take my share and run and let the devil take the hindmost." That's corrosive cynicism.

Flip out into too much possibility and you get irrelevant idealism. Which sounds very different from corrosive cynicism but both have the same function in our lives. Both take us out of the action. Both keep us out of the fray.

BILL MOYERS: I can see how corrosive cynicism keeps us from doing anything because we just don't believe anything signifies. But how does this idealism you talk about keep us out of the action?

PARKER PALMER: Well, I think irrelevant idealism that's not held in tension with what's really going on on the ground eventually just disappoints and drops people off the wagon. It actually...

BILL MOYERS: Because nothing does change...

PARKER PALMER: Because nothing changes. Because if you don't have a capacity to hold the tension in your heart between reality and possibility then you're just going to give up eventually.

It's actually a concern that I have and I think other people have it about the huge enthusiasm on the part of newcomers to the political process that went into the Obama campaign. Now we see that Obama is an ordinary person. He has feet of clay. He makes mistakes. He himself says, very refreshingly, "I screwed up."

The question is, are people who came into this with the enthusiasm that one attaches to a messiah and then discovers this is not our savior, are they going to fall away because they haven't learned to stand in the tragic gap? And I don't think that we, I don't think in this culture we teach very much or have very much formation around the holding of these great tensions, which is so critical to our lives.

We want instant resolution. You give us a tension. We want it to get it over with in 15 minutes. We do it in everything from microcosmic situations to what happened in this country after September 11th, which is one of the great tragedies of our time, not only September 11th but our national response to it. We had an opportunity in the weeks following September 11th to really connect in new ways

with the rest of the world, who were showing toward us compassion, which means suffering with.

They were saying today I, too, am an American, despite the fact that they knew more of this kind of suffering than we did. And we had caused some of theirs. Around the world people were saying, "Today I am an American."

Well, if we had held the tension between that attack, that horrific criminal attack, and this possibility of connecting and deepening compassion, held it not through inaction but through what Bill Coffin called the justice strategy rather than the warfare strategy. If we had done that I think we would have opened a new possibility in American life. But we couldn't. The 15 minutes elapsed and we had to hit back.

BILL MOYERS: You've also written on the politics of the broken hearted. Now, you know, I grew up to think that broken hearts are a personal matter, not a political condition. What do you mean by that?

PARKER PALMER: Well, there are two ways for the heart to break. When we hold these tensions and we don't know how to hold them, the heart explodes like a hand grenade. And we sometimes want to throw that hand grenade at the enemy. I think that's what happened after September 11th.

But a new habit of the heart would allow us to take that broken-hearted experience in a new direction, not towards the shattering into a million pieces but toward a heart that grows larger, more capacious, more open to hold both the suffering and the pain of the world. I think that's teachable stuff. I think that if our schools and our religious communities worked on that, that we would have a greater capacity individually and collectively to do it.

BILL MOYERS: I came upon this passage in one of your books over the weekend. "While writing this essay, I have been dealing with some personal heartbreak. The details are commonplace, familiar to anyone who draws breath, especially to those of a certain age, the deaths of people I love, the transitory nature of the work to which I have devoted myself for 40 years. And the impossibility of realizing some of my dreams for my life." What's behind those words?

PARKER PALMER: What's behind those words, Bill, is that my closest analogue to some of the economic suffering that's going on right now that I don't share in is my own journey with personal darkness.

BILL MOYERS: Depression?

PARKER PALMER: Three times clinical depression, which I've written about and spoken about-

BILL MOYERS: Yes.

PARKER PALMER: -most recently when I was 65 years old. I think it's a very important thing to talk about partly because it remains a subject of shame in this culture. And I think those of us who have come through to the other side and have a new appreciation for life and its realities need to talk about it on behalf of those that suffer and those who are standing with them.

I got tremendous help from a therapist at one point, in one of my depressions, who said to me, "Parker, you seem to keep treating this experience as if depression were the hand of an enemy trying to crush you. Would it be possible to re-image depression as the hand of a friend trying to press you down to ground on which it's safe to stand?"

Well, those words didn't mean much to me immediately because when you're there you can't hear that kind of counsel. But they grew on me, those words did. And I started to understand that in my case this very situational depression that I had fallen into, not the result of bad genetics or brain chemistry gone awry, but the result of getting crosswise with some of my own truth had resulted from my living at altitude.

I was living in my intellect. I was living in my ego. I was living in a kind of up, up, and away spirituality. And I was living in a set of ethics that didn't really have anything to do with what my, how I intersected with the world-

BILL MOYERS: I don't understand that.

PARKER PALMER: -rightfully and properly. Well-

BILL MOYERS: You mean you're a hypocrite?

PARKER PALMER: Yeah. I was living by oughts that weren't mine to act out. I mean, there are a million oughts in the world. There's a million ways in which I ought to be serving the world. But the ways I'm gifted to serve and the opportunities that come to me to serve are not a million. They're more like one, two, three, four dozen over the course of a 70-year journey. And so when you live at elevation and you trip and fall, as most of us do every day, you have a long way to fall. And it might kill you.

BILL MOYERS: What do you do when you hit bottom?

PARKER PALMER: Well, nothing for quite a while. And people sometimes say depression is like being lost in the dark. My experience is it's more like becoming the dark. You don't have a sense of self any longer with which you can stand back and say, "Oh, I have this disease and it, too, will pass."

The voice of depression takes over. And all you can hear is the darkness which is you. And I think what you learn at that point is a couple things. One is there's huge

virtue in simply getting out of bed in the morning, by which I mean learning to value the fact that you can take one step at a time.

The second thing you learn is that you need other people. You don't need their advice. You don't need their fixes and saves. But you need their presence. I sometimes liken standing by someone who is in depression as being like the experience of sitting at the bedside of a dying person because depression is a kind of death, as is addiction and other serious forms of mental illness.

You have to be with that person in an unafraid way. Not invading them with your fixes, not hooking them up to wires or whatever the non-medical equivalent of that is, giving them advice, but simply saying to them with your very presence, your physical presence, your psychological presence, your spiritual presence, I am not afraid of being with you on this journey of the — at the end of this road.

BILL MOYERS: There are two ways to measure the health of a society, the gross national product, the sums of the goods and services that we produce, and the gross national psychology, the sums of our hopes and fears. Is it possible to think that this depression you experienced can also affect us politically, socially, and communally as a nation?

PARKER PALMER: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I don't think it's an accident that we talk about the Great Depression and maybe the impending depression that we're going into economically and about clinical depression.

There's a lot of darkness out there. And there's a lot of lossness. And there's a lot of people feeling that their lives are over. We need to learn to be present to one another in listening ways, in compassionate ways. Do we need to be doing outside work that has to do with repairing a broken economic system and a political system that's in disrepair? Absolutely we do.

But we need to be drawing for that on an inner wisdom that isn't there when it's only fake science that's driving our reconstruction efforts, when it's only an illusion of rationality or an illusion of affluence. We need to penetrate those illusion bubbles. Thoreau said reality is fabulous. And I agree with him. It's a lot more fabulous than illusion because it won't let you down. Reality won't let you down. It is what it is. And we have to learn to deal with it. Because when you're standing on the ground of your own reality, your society's reality, you can fall down, as we do and we will continue to do, and simply get up and dust yourself off. You aren't falling from 100 feet in the air where you're likely to kill yourself.

BILL MOYERS: Is this a heartbreaking moment in American history?

PARKER PALMER: Absolutely. It's a heartbreaking moment. And part of the heartbreak is around things that never should have happened, like the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. We're seeing that in our faces now. And it's good that we are because those things never should have happened.

Part of the heartbreak is around having to give up illusions that we've carried for far too long. And it's good that that's happening, too. And the two, of course, are related. But, yes, it's a moment of heartbreak. And it's a moment for people to step up and say we have to learn to hold these tensions in a life-giving way. We have to learn that Camp Obama has to be for all of us, whether we're Democrats or Republicans or Independents. We have to learn that we need to hang together or we're going to hang separately. We have to learn a new set of habits of the heart. And I think that can happen.

BILL MOYERS: Parker Palmer, thank you for being with me on the Journal.

PARKER PALMER: Thank you, Bill.