

Six Pillars of the Wholehearted Life by Maria Popova

Parker Palmer's Spectacular Commencement Address on the Six Pillars of the Wholehearted Life

"Take everything that's bright and beautiful in you and introduce it to the shadow side of yourself... When you are able to say, 'I am ... my shadow as well as my light,' the shadow's power is put in service of the good."

In 1974, the Tibetan Buddhist teacher and Oxford alumnus Chögyam Trungpa founded Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado — a most unusual and emboldening not-for-profit educational institution named after the eleventh-century Indian Buddhist sage Naropa and intended as a 100-year experiment of combining the best methodologies of Western scholarship with the most timeless tenets of Eastern wisdom, fusing academic and experiential learning with contemplative practice. Under the auspices of its Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, founded by Allen Ginsberg, the university hosted a number of lectures and readings by such luminaries as John Cage, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac himself, for all of whom Buddhism was a major influence.

In 2015, Naropa University awarded its first-ever honorary degree of Doctor of Contemplative Education to author, educator, and Center for Courage & Renewal founder Parker Palmer — one of the most luminous and hope-giving minds of our time, whose beautiful writings on inner wholeness and the art of letting your soul speak spring from a spirit of embodied poetics. In May of 2015, he took the podium before the university's graduating class and delivered one of the greatest commencement addresses of all time — a beam of shimmering wisdom illuminating the six pillars of a meaningful human existence, experience-tested and honestly earned in the course of a long life fully lived.

Annotated highlights below — please enjoy.

In his first piece of advice, Palmer calls for living with wholeheartedness, inherent to which — as Seth Godin has memorably argued — is an active surrender to vulnerability. Echoing Donald Barthelme's exquisite case for the art of not-knowing, he urges:

Be reckless when it comes to affairs of the heart.

[...]

What I really mean ... is be passionate, fall madly in love with life. Be passionate about some part of the natural and/or human worlds and take risks on its behalf, no matter how vulnerable they make you. No one ever died saying, "I'm sure glad for the self-centered, self-serving and self-protective life I lived."

Offer yourself to the world — your energies, your gifts, your visions, your heart — with open-hearted generosity. But understand that when you live that way you will soon learn how little you know and how easy it is to fail.

To grow in love and service, you — I, all of us — must value ignorance as much as knowledge and failure as much as success... Clinging to what you already know and do well is the path to an unlived life. So, cultivate beginner's mind, walk straight into your not-knowing, and take the risk of failing and falling again and again, then getting up again and again to learn — that's the path to a life lived large, in service of love, truth, and justice.

Palmer's second point of counsel speaks to the difficult art of living with opposing truths and channels his longtime advocacy for inner wholeness:

As you integrate ignorance and failure into your knowledge and success, do the same with all the alien parts of yourself. Take everything that's bright and beautiful in you and introduce it to the shadow side of yourself. Let your altruism meet your egotism, let your generosity meet your greed, let your joy meet your grief. Everyone has a shadow... But when you are able to say, "I am all of the above, my shadow as well as my light," the shadow's power is put in service of the good. Wholeness is the goal, but wholeness does not mean perfection, it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of your life.

As a person who ... has made three deep dives into depression along the way, I do not speak lightly of this. I simply know that it is true.

As you acknowledge and embrace all that you are, you give yourself a gift that will benefit the rest of us as well. Our world is in desperate need of leaders who live what Socrates called "an examined life." In critical areas like politics, religion, business, and the mass media, too many leaders refuse to name and claim their shadows because they don't want to look weak. With shadows that go unexamined and unchecked, they use power heedlessly in ways that harm countless people and undermine public trust in our major institutions.

In his third piece of advice, Palmer calls for extending this courtesy to others and treating their shadowy otherness with the same kindness that we do our own:

As you welcome whatever you find alien within yourself, extend that same welcome to whatever you find alien in the outer world. I don't know any virtue more important these days than hospitality to the stranger, to those we perceive as "other" than us.

In a sentiment that calls to mind Margaret Mead and James Baldwin's timeless, immeasurably timely conversation on race and difference, Palmer adds:

The old majority in this society, people who look like me, is on its way out. By 2045 the majority of Americans will be people of color... Many in the old majority fear that fact, and their fear, shamelessly manipulated by too many politicians, is bringing us down. The renewal this nation needs will not come from people who are afraid of otherness in race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.

His fourth piece of advice pierces the heart of something I myself worry about daily as I witness the great tasks of human culture reduced to small-minded lists and unimaginative standards that measure all the wrong metrics of "productivity" and "progress." Palmer urges:

Take on big jobs worth doing — jobs like the spread of love, peace, and justice. That means refusing to be seduced by our cultural obsession with being effective as measured by short-term results. We all want our work to make a difference — but if we take on the big jobs and our only measure of success is next quarter's bottom line, we'll end up disappointed, dropping out, and in despair.

[...]

Our heroes take on impossible jobs and stay with them for the long haul because they live by a standard that trumps effectiveness. The name of that standard, I think, is faithfulness — faithfulness to your gifts, faithfulness to your perception of the needs of the world, and faithfulness to offering your gifts to whatever needs are within your reach.

The tighter we cling to the norm of effectiveness the smaller the tasks we'll take on, because they are the only ones that get short-term results... Care about being effective, of course, but care even more about being faithful ... to your calling, and to the true needs of those entrusted to your care.

You won't get the big jobs done in your lifetime, but if at the end of the day you can say, "I was faithful," I think you'll be okay.

In his fifth point of counsel, Palmer echoes Tolstoy's letters to Gandhi on why we hurt each other and offers:

Since suffering as well as joy comes with being human, I urge you to remember this: Violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering.

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Sometimes we aim that violence at ourselves, as in overwork that leads to burnout or worse, or in the many forms of substance abuse; sometimes we aim that violence at other people — racism, sexism, and homophobia often come from people trying to relieve their suffering by claiming superiority over others.

The good news is that suffering can be transformed into something that brings life, not death. It happens every day. I'm 76 years old, I now know many people who've suffered the loss of the dearest person in their lives. At first they go into deep grief, certain that their lives will never again be worth living. But then they slowly awaken to the fact that not in spite of their loss, but because of it, they've become bigger, more compassionate people, with more capacity of heart to take in other people's sorrows and joys. These are broken-hearted people, but their hearts have been broken open, rather than broken apart.

So, every day, exercise your heart by taking in life's little pains and joys — that kind of exercise will make your heart supple, the way a runner makes a muscle supple, so that when it breaks, (and it surely will,) it will break not into a fragment grenade, but into a greater capacity for love.

In his sixth and final piece of wisdom, Palmer quotes the immortal words of Saint Benedict — “daily, keep your death before your eyes” — and, echoing Rilke's view of mortality, counsels:

If you hold a healthy awareness of your own mortality, your eyes will be opened to the grandeur and glory of life, and that will evoke all of the virtues I've named, as well as those I haven't, such as hope, generosity, and gratitude. If the unexamined life is not worth living, it's equally true that the un-lived life is not worth examining.

He closes, to my great delight, with Diane Ackerman's exquisite words on the true measure of our liveness.

Palmer delves deeper into these pillars of the wholly lived life in his excellent book *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (public library).

Complement his spiritually invigorating speech with other masterworks of the commencement address genre:

- Joseph Brodsky's six rules for winning at the game of life (University of Michigan, 1988)
- Toni Morrison on the rewards of true adulthood (Wesleyan, 2004)
- George Saunders on the power of kindness (Syracuse University, 2013)
- Teresita Fernandez on what it really means to be an artist (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013)
- Debbie Millman on courage and the creative life (San Jose State University, 2013)
- Kurt Vonnegut on boredom, belonging, and our human responsibility (Fredonia College, 1978)
- Bill Watterson on creative integrity (Kenyon College, 1990)
- Patti Smith on learning to count on yourself (Pratt University, 2010)

-- John Waters on creative rebellion (RISD, 2015)