

## Turning to Face the Dark by Ariel Burger, Parker Palmer

In May of 2019, Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger sat down with educator and writer Parker J. Palmer for an unscripted conversation. What emerged was a wide-ranging contemplative dialogue on suffering, healing, and joy. Parker is the author of “Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy”, *The Courage to Teach*, *Let Your Life Speak*, *On the Brink of Everything*, and seven other life-changing books. Ariel is the author of “Teaching and Learning from the Heart in Troubled Times” and *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel’s Classroom*.

Ariel Burger: Parker, thank you for making the time to have this conversation.

Parker Palmer: Thank you, Ariel, for making possible this wonderful visit in our home.

AB: I thought we could talk a little bit about the suffering that you and I witness as we’re on the road—on the faces of people whom we’re connecting with. To begin, how might we cultivate the inner qualities to hold people’s suffering, to respond to it, and perhaps even to transform it?

PP: Yes, it’s a big subject nowadays, isn’t it? We were talking about how both of us see it in people’s lives and feel it in our own lives. If you can’t feel it yourself, you probably can’t see it in others. And I have to say, I’m baffled and I’m deeply troubled by what seems to me to be a decline of empathy in our society, where people are not translating their own suffering into an openhearted awareness of other people’s suffering. Instead, I think, they are being manipulated by “divide and conquer” politicians, into blaming their suffering on other people, migrants for example, who are such handy scapegoats.

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### Broken Hearts And Hand Grenades

AB: Where do we look for purchase in responding to this?

PP: I think so much of the answer to this issue starts with ways of helping people get in touch with their own suffering. One of the big problems of our time is that people are being encouraged by manipulative leaders to turn their heartbreak into anger. We’ve seen this before in history. It often is a direct path to fascism where a leader identifies a problem that is widespread in the society, such as economic problems, and blames that on a scapegoat, such as immigrants, or, in the case of the Holocaust, Jews. That leader then promises to eliminate the scapegoat as a way of eliminating the problem.

We need a counter-movement that can help people develop a truer understanding of where their heartbreak is coming from and discover alternatives to violence. The great wisdom traditions of the world, including secular humanism, are all about this question: what else can you do with your suffering than turn it toward violence?

AB: What have you distilled from your studies of these traditions?

PP: I think there are two ways for the heart to break. It can break into a thousand shards and explode like a fragment grenade, often getting hurled at the ostensible source of the pain as it explodes. Or it can break into largeness. You can take your heartbreak and use it to become a bigger, better person.

I don't think that this is just wordplay. In fact, I know this is possible. At age 80 I see it happening around me as people in my decade of life lose the dearest person in their lives. These people go into a long period of grieving. But slowly, slowly they emerge and wake up to the fact that their hearts have actually grown larger and more compassionate, more understanding, more forgiving, more embracing of the world—not in spite of their suffering, but because of it.

So I've come to ask myself what has become a central question: How do I keep my heart from becoming so brittle that it becomes one of those exploding fragment grenades, but instead becomes a supple heart that I exercise on a daily basis, the way a runner exercises muscles in order to keep those muscles from straining and spraining and snapping under stress? So that when the big hits come along, my heart can open instead of explode?

I think the answer is that daily life presents us with all kinds of little deaths. There's the death of a friendship, the death of a dream, the death of a positive feeling, the death of a sense of hope itself. Instead of yielding to the cultural temptation, to try to pretend that this little death isn't happening, or to anesthetize ourselves against it with some drug of choice, whether that be a substance or overwork or just noise and entertainment, we choose to embrace those little deaths and experience them as fully as we can in a way that exercises the heart muscle and keeps it supple, so that when the big deaths come along, we become larger people.

AB: That all resonates so much. My mantra this year has been the Hebrew words, *Lev Basar*, which means "a heart of flesh," from the biblical verse, "I will take from you a heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." I think it's exactly what you're describing. And there's a Hasidic teaching, from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, "There's nothing as whole as a broken heart." In these traditions, you cultivate a broken heart which is very different from depression or sadness. It's the kind of vulnerability, openness, and acute sensitivity to your own suffering and the suffering of others that becomes an opportunity for connection.

PP: Yes. And you just reminded me, Ariel, of what I think is another Hasidic teaching, in which the disciple asks the Rabbi, "Why does Torah say to 'lay these words upon our hearts,' rather than take them into our hearts?" And the Rabbi's response is, "Because your heart as it is is too hard to let those words in. But someday, that heart will break open, and if the words are laid upon your heart, they will then fall into your heart." That's always spoken to me as one of the great reasons to try to hold on to teachings that you're not ready to understand, let alone embody, because someday something will happen and you will hear yourself saying, "Aha, I now understand

why I needed to hear those words."

AB: That's one of my favorite teachings also, from the Hasidic master of Kotzk. This conversation reminds me about something very central to Elie Wiesel's life, which were questions that he walked around with after his experience of the Holocaust, ones that he articulated for himself and for other survivors: What will we do with our suffering? Will it make us bitter, cause us to seek revenge, and turn us into violent forces in the world? Or can we somehow transform this suffering into some kind of blessing? Whenever I thought about this in regard to him, I thought that he made his suffering into an incredible source of blessing, not only for his own people, but for people around the world. And if he could do that with suffering that I can't fathom, then maybe it's possible for me to do that with my more modest suffering, however daunting that sometimes feels.

What will we do with our suffering?

PP: Yes, yes. I feel exactly the same way about figures like Elie Wiesel, with his message of hope. I've always felt that those words coming from some mouths would be hollow piety. But if they come from the mouth of someone like Elie Wiesel, who has known, as you said, suffering that I can't imagine enduring, then there's something profoundly trustworthy about it, and it emboldens people like you and me to look at our own suffering and to take it more seriously as a school of the spirit—not just as an unhappy accident in our lives, but as a place from which learning is possible, if we are willing and able to embrace it in a reflective way.

Becoming The Dark

PP: I'll give you an example from my own life. And in no way am I comparing what I'm about to tell you to the Holocaust experience or Elie Wiesel's experience in a concentration camp, but rather in the spirit of trying to unpack my own suffering and turn it into some form of learning. As you know from my writing and from our conversations, I've suffered in my life from three deep dives into clinical depression. I used to talk about those experiences as being lost in the dark, but in recent years I've come upon what I think is a more accurate description. It's not so much like being lost in the dark, it's like having become the dark. And that has a very specific meaning for me. If you're lost in the dark, there's still a distinction between you and the darkness, still a "you" to find its way around in the darkness. But if you've become the dark, there is no distinction. You can't stand back from your experience and say, Where am I? What's going on here? And that's a more accurate way of naming the experience, because part of severe depression is the destruction of a sense of self.

The mystery to ponder, when it comes to depression, is not why some people eventually take their lives. I know the answer to that question: depression is terminally exhausting, and they need the rest. The real mystery is why some people come through that experience and not only survive but thrive on the other side. I'm one of the lucky ones who was able to make that journey. Well, how can that possibly make depression a school of the spirit for me?

For me the answer is simple. I can't run away from this experience of darkness, or it's going to chase me for the rest of my life. But what I can do is turn around and face it and relive it with someone holding my hand until it becomes manageable. It never goes away. But I can manage it. I can keep it from shutting me down. I can use this experience to engage life more deeply, to enhance the life I now have, to increase my

gratitude for it because I now know what it's like not to have it. One of my most vivid memories of depression is just saying to myself, "God, I would give anything just to have the most tedious, boring, ordinary day." When you realize what a blessing an ordinary day is, you're changed forever.

AB: Suffering can open us to real gratitude, not just the idea of it, but the consistent feeling of thankfulness. But so many people don't get there, their suffering doesn't lead them to gratitude. What do you think makes the difference?

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PP: So much here depends on being able to frame these hard experiences in a way that doesn't lead one into shame, into a sense that I have to hide this away from my friends and my colleagues so that they won't think poorly of me or think me weak. All these cultural ways of framing things that are so life-denying and so crushing for people. I'm sure that one of the common experiences of Holocaust survivors must be the people who approach them and don't know what to say.

They don't know how to hold a conversation with a person who's been swimming in horror. And again, there's a very modest parallel with being in the middle of clinical depression; people approach you as if you had a contagious disease. They want to get in and out as quickly as possible. It's like, "I'm really, really sorry you're feeling bad. Bye!" Because this person doesn't want to "catch it." People have often asked me, "So who were the most helpful people to you?" And my answer has always been—those few people who weren't afraid of "catching depression" from me.

AB: I think it's true with survivors and also more generally. I've been getting asked a lot of questions about Holocaust fatigue and the lack of interest in Holocaust literature in certain circles. And the amnesia that recent surveys have shown among younger people particularly about the Holocaust. It's almost as if by approaching that material we're going to, as you said, be infected somehow by the darkness. I remember when I discovered that Elie Wiesel only taught one course in his entire career about the Holocaust. Does that mean he didn't talk about it every day? No, but he did it obliquely, through the study of literature and philosophy. I asked him why and he said, "It's not my job to bring my students to despair." It's a very difficult thing to do, to walk with people and help them encounter darkness. Even in our own lives, it's very difficult to face suffering in a way that can lead somewhere.

I think about Elie Wiesel after the war, taking a vow of silence; he did not write about his experience for 10 years. There's something very mysterious about that. Part of it I think was that he was looking for a language to communicate his experience in words, which was not really possible. But, he felt the responsibility to do so.

By communicating about darkness, you give permission for other people to speak about their darkness, which many other survivors began to do.

Even now, listening to you talk about your experience, there's something liberating in hearing your story spoken aloud. It raises up the possibility of vulnerability as a strength and as a shared practice. There's something very hopeful about that.

PP: Yes, I agree. I didn't know that Elie Wiesel didn't speak for 10 years about

his Holocaust experiences. It took me exactly 10 years to speak or write about my depression. I can't tell you why. But, I had this gut instinct that I should not speak about the darkness until I had it so fully integrated into my sense of self that I wouldn't speak about it in a way that made people feel like they had to take care of me. I knew that if I wasn't safe within myself with my own depression, I wasn't ready to go public with it. I needed to be able to look at myself and say, in public, "I am all of the above. I am my gifts and my strengths and my light. I am also my weaknesses and my liabilities. I am my darkness and I'm not ashamed of an ounce of it. What you see is what you get." Until I got to that point, I had no business writing or teaching about something as profound and life-threatening as clinical depression.

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AB: How did you get to that point of being able to claim all of that?

PP: I think your task in life is to embrace and become comfortable with who you really are. As another Hasidic tale tells us, when I get to heaven, they won't ask me "why was I not more like Moses?" They'll ask me, "why was I not more like Parker," right? I love the tales that take us down that path. You are who you are and whatever that may be, that's a God-given gift.

A moment ago, you touched on what I call "compassion fatigue," especially when you were referencing studies that show that a lot of younger people today don't know about the Holocaust. They can't tell you when it happened. They can't tell you what it was. It sometimes occurs to me that as human beings one of our safeguards against having to feel compassionate is to claim we don't know about it. That, of course, is what a lot of Germans did in relation to the camp just down the road and around the corner, even though they clearly did know about it from all kinds of evidence.

Compassion fatigue is intimately related to how we understand compassion. Sadly, in this western culture, we believe that it is our obligation to have the answer to find the solution to everything. We distort compassion into some sort of do-it-yourself, fix-it model.

So you come to me with a serious personal, non-technical problem, and my inner response is, "Oh my God, alright, Ariel wants me to solve his problem for him!" There are only two things wrong with this. One is that's not really what you want. What you really want is to be heard, to be witnessed, to be seen. The second thing that's wrong is that I can't possibly have the fix. I've got no conceivable way of getting inside of your mind and heart and repairing what is not a repairable problem at all. That's the wrong way to frame it.

If I could understand that you're not coming to me for a fix... If I could learn the discipline of simply bearing witness, simply listening to you, simply asking you those honest open questions, questions that aren't advice in disguise, that actually hear you into deeper speech about whatever it is that you're wrestling with... If I could learn all of that, I wouldn't be sitting here burdened by the notion that I'm supposed to fix you—and you wouldn't be sitting there burdened by the notion that I'm going to try to fix you. It's a very simple decoding, but we don't do it very often and we don't help people learn how to do it.

Redefining compassion as an act of witness and being fully present to another

person—and helping that person understand that someone sees them, hears them, and knows who they are—would relieve a lot of compassion fatigue. The words that I have most wanted to hear whenever I’ve taken a serious problem to some other person—after listening, after asking me good questions, after helping me feel really seen and heard—I have yearned to hear the person say “welcome to the human race.” That’s a nice way of saying, “What else is new?”

AB: The challenge I see in much of this is that some of these questions are bigger than any one generation or human life. And so if we lose our memory, we’re starting from scratch every generation. We really have to think about the transmission of memory, not just the facts and historical information, but the kind of impact other people’s stories who came before us can have on our moral clarity.

This conversation is a great example of an expression of the deep connection, which is often overlooked, between inner and outer work. We started talking about the suffering on people’s faces and in response to world events and we ended up talking about the inner life and dealing with the darkness, and learning how to be with others with compassion. We touched on a new understanding of compassion, not running away, not distracting, but also not trying to fix and then back out to the political reality. I think that’s a beautiful place to bring it full circle.

PP: You’re making this inner-outer connection the way it’s made on a Mobius Strip, where the inner and outer surfaces segue into and co-create each other. That’s a way of thinking I admire, one that you and Elie Wiesel represent. It’s been wonderful to move through all of these inner and outer questions in such an organic way.

AB: Thank you so much for this, Parker.

PP: Thank you for visiting us, Ariel.

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