



BY DENNIS SPARKS

## Leaders Cultivate Solitude and Community

**Self-change is the key to organizational change. The real issues in any organization are not the problems in the systems and processes. The real problem is human commitment and courage.**

—Robert Quinn

**When I don't write enough, I get a growing sense of disease. . . . I become lonely for my soul.**

—Julia Cameron

**P**rofessional truth-telling, even under the best of circumstances, can be a courageous act. And many education leaders report that instead of welcoming and celebrating courageous conversations, the organizations in which they are employed shoot the messenger. But the cost to leaders of withholding their truths can be a slow death spiral—a loss of vitality, cynicism, stress, physical illness, and premature departure from the profession. In other words, it's a diminishment of soul.

If leaders are to cultivate the collective soul of the organization, (Read more about this in [Vol. 2, No. 11.](#)) they begin by nourishing their own souls—the deep, sustaining part of themselves that provides a compelling purpose for their work and is the ultimate source of their identity and integrity. Yet many leaders say that they feel estranged from that inner source of knowing and suffer in its absence.

Once they become aware of that estrangement, many leaders experience an epiphany that

Parker Palmer describes in *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*: “When you realize that you can no longer collaborate in something that violates your own integrity, your understanding of punishment is suddenly transformed. . . . No punishment anyone lays on you could possibly be worse than the punishment you lay on yourself by conspiring in your own diminishment.”

Palmer offers two ways out of this dilemma—going within yourself in solitude to find guidance and moving toward community to promote discernment. “First, we all have an inner teacher,” he writes, “whose guidance is more reliable than anything we can get from a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution, or leader. Second, we all need other people to invite, amplify, and help us discern the inner teacher’s voice. . . .”

Leaders’ inward journeys toward intimacy with their deepest selves are aided by silence and solitude, meditation, and journal writing, among other methods that connect them to their inner teacher and ultimately to their integrity. Leaders then move into community with others to hone and test those truths through their candor and careful listening to the views of others. Through these processes leaders are enabled to put the collective good above self-interest and to tell their truths in ever expanding circles of influence. And when leaders tell their truths, they inspire truth telling by others in their organizations.

When leaders attend to their own souls they are better able to nurture the collective soul of the school community, and when they do so, they lead through learning.

*Dennis Sparks*

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