

Hello, Woman on Fire. You are in for a treat today. I'm Debbie Phillips, and this is your Women on Fire podcast where I interview uplifting experts whose inspiration and strategies can inspire your own life.

I believe there is nothing more important than connecting to yourself at the deepest level possible. Our guest today, Parker Palmer, has spent his lifetime as a writer, teacher, and activist, encouraging us to cultivate a vital inner and outer life. He also urges us to form friendships across generations that bring new life to young and old alike. He's a role model for that. His collaboration with songwriter and musician Carrie Newcomer and their monthly delightful and engaging podcast, *The Growing Edge*, is a beautiful example of that. Parker is the founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal. He's been writing for more than 40 years. He's written 10 books, including the powerful *Let Your Life Speak* and his most recent book, *On the Brink of Everything*. It's a reflection of his eight decades of life, and he shares in it he's happy to get old. We should all be so lucky.

As we begin to wind up 2021 and move into a new year, I invited Parker to help us reflect on our own lives and dive deeper into our own souls. Parker says lately he's been working on his retirement skills. We'll have to check in with him about that and see how it's going. We know he's reduced his busy, busy schedule, and so I'm profoundly honored that he has agreed to speak with us.

Debbie: Welcome to Women on Fire, Parker Palmer!

Parker: Thank you so much, Debbie. It's a delight to be with you and your community.

Debbie: Thank you. Many, many years ago, I read about trusted circles. Women on Fire is a trusted circle, so you can actually see your work is 18 years old at this point.

Parker: Well, that's lovely to know. Thank you.

Debbie: You're so welcome. Tell us, where do we find you today? Where are you?

Parker: I live with my wife Sharon in Madison, Wisconsin, and I'm looking out from my home office at a really beautiful sunny day with lots of wonderful light and shadow going on in the trees. It's a happy place for me.

Listen Deeply, Don't Fix or Advise

Debbie: I know you have spent your lifetime traveling, speaking, teaching, writing, and leading a really, really busy life, but you've talked about looking to cut back. How is that going for you? Tell us a little bit about that process.

Parker: As you alluded to, Debbie, I've discovered that I have no retirement skills, so it's a role for which I was not well prepared. [laughter] But it's going well. As you may know from reading some of my stuff, I'm a Quaker and there's an old, old Quaker practice called the clearness committee, which is a discernment process used among Quakers. I think when I turned 65 or 70, somewhere in there, I started inviting a series of clearness committees around the collision course that I was seeing between aging and vocation. I just knew that I couldn't continue my highly active life as the natural process of aging set in. So I started early — I guess, 12, 15 years ago — to try to discern what was right for me, where those roads, aging and vocation, might intersect in a fruitful place. I think I found a pretty sweet spot.

Of course, like all of us in the world today, that's been disrupted severely by the pandemic and its horrific cost to human life and lots of other things that we value. But I have discovered the virtues of working online. Among its virtues and at a time like this, it includes the fact that I've been able to connect with an international audience in ways that simply would not have been possible for me if I had to get on an airplane and go to all those places. It's been a rough 18 months, two years. I don't need to tell any of your listeners that. But it's been a good exercise for me to try to carve out the vocation in the midst of all those challenges.

Debbie: I love your clearness committee discussions, and it was one of the things I wanted to talk to Women on Fire about today. You say your best teacher is your inner teacher, or that's the thought behind this Quaker notion of clearness committees. Could you tell us a little more about exactly how the clearness committee works? I know it's five or six people. Could you talk about choosing them and how that actually works?

Parker: Sure. I have to say upfront, without trying to make a big sales pitch here, that I wrote a book about all of this called *A Hidden Wholeness*. So people who get interested in

this very brief thumbnail description will find a lot more detail there, because the good stuff and the hard stuff is in the details. The idea is that you select half a dozen, four, five friends whom you trust. You trust them, as it were, to hold your life or to hold something very deep in your soul, in your heart, in your mind. It's often something that you're struggling with, as I was struggling with the collision course between vocation and aging. You ask them to commit to a set of rules, and I'll just mention a couple of these rules here to give folks a flavor of what we're talking about.

You sit down in a circle and the rules include the following: As long as this circle is convened — for the next two hours, normally, at the first meeting — there shall be no fixing, no saving, no advising, and no correcting. So you lay out an issue, a problem, maybe a 10-minute presentation of the thing you're wrestling with, and for the next hour and a half, the folks gathered with you are forbidden from doing any sort of fixing, saving, advising, or correcting. Of course, when I teach this at retreats, there's always someone who says, "Well, what in heaven's name are we going to do? Because you've just taken away our favorite things to do." It's a laugh line for all of us because we recognize ourselves in that. We recognize that our default position is to listen to somebody for a few minutes and then tell them what we would do under the circumstances, or what someone we knew did who faced a similar situation.

But in the language I like to use, that's a practice that drives the soul, the heart back into hiding. Somebody's trying to fix us with a solution or with something that has not come from within ourselves. What you would do or what she would do or what he would do is really irrelevant. I'm not there looking for advice. What I'm looking for is what the soul wants, and that is to be heard, to be seen, to be recognized, and to have a chance to sort things out in my own time and on my own terms. So, yes, we take away our favorite ways of responding to a person with an issue, but we do that for the purpose of creating safe space for the soul. That's the thumbnail phrase for what we're doing.

The question then becomes, "After we've listened to the presentation and we can't fix, advise, save, correct, what do we do?" And the answer is that we ask honest, open questions, slowly, thoughtfully, one at a time, each time giving the focus person an opportunity to

respond if he or she wishes. The questions are not simply to satisfy our curiosity. In fact, that can be a killer in these conversations. The questions are offered in a way that — and I’ll use a wonderful phrase from a theologian named Nelle Morton here — they’re offered in a way that helps hear the other person into speech, to hear the other person into deeper and deeper speech. We sometimes think we know the answer to a question. But if one of the ground rules is silence, slowness, and gentleness in this questioning process, we have a chance to sit with what we’ve just said, to listen to it ourselves, and then to discover that there’s a question beneath the question or there’s an answer beneath the answer.

It’s a powerful process of discovering that we really do have an inner teacher. And we have to learn and relearn that simple fact because so much of our American life anyway, Western life in general, so much of our education and our religious communities treat us as if we don’t have an inner teacher, as if we need somebody upfront telling us what the score is. The emphasis is on getting the “right answer.” Well, that’s not the way life works, at least not as I’ve lived it. These issues are complicated, and we’re complicated. We have many voices within us. We have the voice of the inner teacher, we have the voice of truth, but we also have voices of fear and of greed and of need for power, or of insufficiency, inadequacy. I’m sure these are well known to your community. I’m sure these are things you work on.

Debbie: Yes. Yes, they are.

Parker: But in this setting, each focus person, as we call the person with an issue has an opportunity to listen deeply and sort through all those voices for two full hours. Then there are some concluding rituals, as it were, that are a way of helping the focus person look back on what she or he has said and start to make even more sense of it. But I must say that every time I’ve been in a clearness committee — and I’ve been in, I reckon, hundreds by now over the years — I feel like I’ve gotten proof that people do have an inner teacher. They learn things from within themselves that take them by surprise. That’s what I deeply value about this process.

Debbie: I would think from these hundreds of sessions you’ve participated in, both as the focus person and then as someone holding the space, correct?

Parker: Correct.

Debbie: You've probably learned as much being the person holding the space as the focus person did?

Parker: Absolutely. That's a very astute observation. It's a profound privilege to be in on a situation where someone is reaching for their deepest truth, their deepest fears, their deepest hopes, etc., and to learn, among other things, how much we have in common. The particularities of these issues or problems vary, of course, but underneath that are such common human challenges as moving beyond fear, moving beyond fight-or-flight, moving beyond disbelieving in ourselves to reclaim our hearts, reclaim our souls, which are often robbed from us by all kinds of institutional and psychological forces.

What Do You Want to Give Yourself To?

Debbie: Parker, in the clearness committee when you were the focus person and working on this path toward aging, was there a question that opened the door for you, or did someone ask the right question? I'm just curious if there's anything that stood out that you really got from that session.

Parker: I do want to tell a quick story in that regard. But it reminds me to say very briefly that asking honest, open questions is not as easy as it sounds. That's one of the reasons that I hope people will take a look at the material that's out there on this practice. But my favorite example when I'm working with retreat groups is to say, "Have you thought about seeing a therapist?" is not an honest, open question.

Debbie: "You should see a therapist." [laughter]

Parker: It's a little piece of advice in disguise. We're really expert at "asking questions" that are advice in disguise. That's something to be laid down and put aside during this particular practice.

But to your question, I can't remember the exact questions that were asked of me. There were several of them that led to this story. But one of the things I was wrestling with in my clearness committees around aging and vocation was "What do I want to let go of and what do I want to hang on to?" That seems like a pretty normal question. I hear people asking

their own version of it as they get older. In the course of this clearness committee, I realized (A) that it was the wrong question, and (B), through this process, it came from within me that I was given a better question to the same end. It goes like this: Instead of asking, “What do I want to let go of and what do I want to hang on to?” I began asking, and I ask to this day, “What do I want to let go of and what do I want to give myself to?” That’s a different question, “What do I want to give myself to?” than “What do I want to hang on to?” Because the hang-onto question is a question based in scarcity and in the fear that something is going to be taken away from me as I get older. But “What do I want to give myself to?” turns me toward things that are life-giving for me as well as others.

If somebody asks me, “What’s your bottom-line litmus test for good decisions in life?” I just say, “Make decisions that choose life rather than death of any sort, shape, form, or fashion.” The simple transformation of a few words has set me on a path that I value and feel like I benefit from daily, so that most of what I’m giving myself to these days is in fact life-giving for me and, I hope, for other people.

A New Collaboration at ‘The Growing Edge’

Debbie: Thank you so much for giving yourself to us today, because this is very life-giving. It makes me wonder: Is that when you and Carrie began to collaborate on the podcast? Which is so fantastic, by the way. And are you enjoying that?

Parker: Oh, thank you. Well, I enjoy working with Carrie Newcomer immensely and have for almost 15 years now. She’s a remarkable musician, a remarkable writer, a remarkable spirit. But that friendship and collegueship began about 15 years ago when Carrie reached out to me. Having read one of the books - I think it was *Let Your Life Speak* — she was on the road thinking through things that she was wrestling with or hoping for. She thanked me for the book and then said, in this trusting act of generosity, “Would you be willing to write the liner notes for my next album?” which was an album called *Betty’s Diner*. I knew of Carrie’s music. I loved Carrie’s music, and I was deeply honored by this. I had never written liner notes before, so I had to figure out what that was all about.

I went ahead and did it, and I don't know, we both had so much fun in that process. She lives in Bloomington, Indiana. I live in Madison, Wisconsin, and we were doing this via email, and then a little later online with Zoom or whatever. We just began enjoying the conversation we were having so much and seeing these similarities, these parallels between our work, the intersections of her music with my prose and poetry. I should say her music and poetry with my prose and poetry. We decided to collaborate more closely. We were both reading the great Black theologian Howard Thurman at that time, and he has a beautiful, beautiful passage about the "growing edge" and how the growing edge is always the answer to the death that's happening around us.

It drew both of us very deeply, and we decided, "Let's put together a project called 'The Growing Edge.' Let's put up a website. Let's do retreats under that heading of helping people find the growing edges in their life as a response to whatever is dying or not working for them. Let's put together some stage shows, song and spoken word events." The guarantee that comes with these shows is that I will not sing. I'll leave that up to Carrie, but I wrote the script for the spoken-word parts. We've done two of those shows and staged each of them in front of some wonderful audiences, ranging from about 150 to 2,000 on a basketball court one time.

The first one was called "Healing the Heart of Democracy: A Gathering of Spirits for the Common Good." That's a title that has pieces of both of our work in it. The most recent one, also staged many times, is "What We Need Is Here: Hope, Hard Times, and the Human Possibility." That's been a great joy, and I even asked Carrie to help me write a song, which I did. It's online. It's on YouTube now.

Debbie: It is. It's great.

Parker: Thank you.

Debbie: Can you sing a little number for us? You can speak the words. [laughter]

Parker: Oh, if Carrie were here, I'd have her do it. No, I don't want to embarrass the family.

Debbie: It's a beautiful song and I've listened to it over and over. Parker, it's funny, I was just thinking, more than any other single person, Women on Fire will often send me links because they'll say, "Check this out. This might make a good interview." I've received either

the podcast or a Carrie song and you probably more than any other link. It's been very popular.

Parker: Oh, well, that's lovely to know. That's lovely.

Debbie: You don't hear that, but I do. That's awesome.

Parker: I think I've always believed, Debbie, that when you meet someone whom you experience as a friend, you've also met someone who in some way shares your vocation, that is your reason for being here. I think that it's a deep resonance around "Why am I here and what am I called to do?" that makes for the best friendships.

Debbie: Oh, that's a lovely way to look at it.

Choosing to Be More Fully Human

Debbie: One of the questions I wanted to ask you, and I know you hear this. I hear this a lot. I've been a coach for 25 years, and people at various ages, even I'd say 20s to 80s, will say to me, "OK, now I need to figure out what I want to be when I grow up." Do you get that? Do you get people saying that to you?

Parker: Yes.

Debbie: Right. So, Parker, what do you say to people who are trying to figure that out — "What do I want to be when I grow up?"

Parker: It's interesting. I have half a dozen grandchildren, and one of them who came along as a great gift early in my life is now 30. She's been challenged by the pandemic stoppage of normal career movements, educational opportunities, and so forth, although she's recently had some nice breakthroughs. I've been trying to help her contemplate that question, and I have to say that I keep contemplating it for myself. I don't mean to be glib about this at all, because I know when you press on the question, it gets complicated. But my goal and my hope for her is that we both choose to do things that make us more fully human.

Sometimes, those are things that you can get paid for, and sometimes you have to find paying work that doesn't totally fulfill that need, but also is not destructive work. Then find ways in the parts of your life outside of work to live into that desire to become more fully

human, to be present in the world wholeheartedly, to offer your gifts in ways to things that you want to give them.

At the same time, we can do a lot of deep drilling into what we're called to in the world of work that connects with our gifts. I think this is something that perhaps too many people don't do. In *Let Your Life Speak*, I wrote about the fact that this particular granddaughter, who's now 30, is the one that lived with me for a couple years. She and her mother lived with me when the baby was born, and I kept a journal of the baby's habits. I call them her tropisms during those early years of her life. Even as an infant, she was this kind of person rather than that or that or that. We can see it in infants if we open our eyes. I call them tropisms because she was drawn toward certain kinds of things and then she was repelled by others. And in that chronicle of her earliest tropisms after she arrived on Earth, there are distinct clues to who she is, who she truly is, who she has proven herself to be that also have to do with her vocation.

I'll give you a concrete example. There were circumstances in her early life that were pretty chaotic, and she had this amazing capacity, even as a young child, to sort of stand in the middle of that chaos, watch it whirl around her with a kind of look on her face that said, "Well, this is interesting." She was in the chaos, but she was an observer of the chaos and held her ground that way. Today, that quality, which I've tried to reinforce and to remind her about, has served her well during the pandemic, during the disappointments that come from a vocational path delayed during the complicated business of trying to find her way forward. In the last six months, she's done a lot of wonderful finding her way forward and is, in fact, happily employed in New York City right now at a job that she hadn't anticipated but that looks to be a real steppingstone to what she now thinks she really wants. All of that was rooted in this early gift that she had of being the calm eye at the center of the storm.

I know for a fact that it's a huge gift for young people to have an adult in their life who doesn't tell them what to do, but who sometimes reminds them of what I call their birthright gifts, because everybody has them. We get trained away from them in an educational system that never asks us about things like that.

Debbie: Right. What a remarkable thing for a grandfather, a parent, any adult to be able to

see these gifts in these little people, because you are so exactly right. I've certainly had that experience in my own life, seeing the gifts right from the beginning and how it carries through. But to tell them and help guide them in the way of just sharing. We can't see ourselves, and so reinforcing that with her, what a gift. You've written about your granddaughter, and I just love the relationship between the two of you. So powerful.

Parker: She's been a huge gift in my life. Chronicling her early years was a gift to me as well as to her. Just to touch briefly on this, I think one of the things we have to break through in life is that the most prominent gifts we have, the strongest gifts we have are often those that we're unaware of because we've had them all our lives. In many ways, we were born with them or we developed them early on, and we just take them for granted. I often think of these people who do heroic things in crisis circumstances. When the reporter comes to them later and asks, "How did you find the courage to do that?" they always say, "Oh, anyone would have done that." Right? Well, I'll tell you what, friend, there were 30 people around you who didn't do it. You're the one who did it. That's a person who's unaware of that gift of courage.

Debbie: That's so true. Right. Yes, we've talked here at Women on Fire, and that's one of the things about this sacred circle, this trusted sacred circle, is we are able to keep uplifting each other by showing each other what we see in each other. It seems so simple, but it's so incredibly powerful, as you teach so well.

A Greater Awareness of Mortality

Debbie: A couple of Women on Fire submitted questions, and one of them is one of our very beloved members, a writer named Sophronia Scott. Her most recent book is called *The Seeker and the Monk*. It's about someone you admire: Thomas Merton. You've quoted him often. Sophronia has this question for you, Parker. She says, "Here's the thing I'm curious about. Parker, at this time in his life, seems very careful about what he chooses to spend his time and energy. I'd like to hear how he makes those choices. Is it any easier now to do this than when he was younger? I think it may help many of us make better choices for ourselves now instead of later in life."

Parker: Oh, lovely. I know Sophronia. We've been on a line a couple of times. I admire her work very much, so it's lovely to hear from her and to get that question. I think maybe I've answered it in part by saying that I'm now asking, "What do I want to give myself to?" and I give myself to things that are life-giving. But of course, Sophronia's question goes deeper than that because there are many things that are life-giving and we really have to do a finer tuned discernment to put into action the simple truth that I can't do everything, or I will get so depleted that I won't be able to do anything.

I think what's made that easier for me in the particularities of my life is age and the deepening existential awareness of my own mortality. Of course, that's something that I wrote about in *On the Brink of Everything*, my new book about aging. Long ago, and I don't know why, even in my 20s, I was struck by a counsel that many spiritual leaders have given to people that seemed good counsel to me. The counsel is, "Daily keep your death before your eyes." I suppose in my 20s, there was a moment when I thought, "Well, that's kind of morbid. I mean, I'm full of juice. Why think about my death?" But I soon realized that if you followed that counsel in a healthy way, you would come into a deeper appreciation of life, a fuller engagement with life.

These days at age 82 — unlike, 72, 62, 52, 42 — I can't so easily evade or pretend that it's not a fact that I will die, and most likely within what I think most people would call the foreseeable future in terms of duration. Somehow, the knowledge that I can't do everything and, if I try, I won't do anything, that knowledge comes much easier to me because I'm aware of myself. I'm observant of myself. The fact is that my capacities, as I age, become more limited. I'm aware, for example, that I don't multitask nearly as well as I used to. I'm grateful for that because, as Kierkegaard said, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." And rarely in my life have I been willing one thing. But more and more these days I am.

My physical energy and capacity is limited and, of course, in the pandemic, all this insight into myself has been amplified, even exacerbated simply because the world is shut down and I've had to be shut down too. I have a couple of those underlying conditions that people talk about, which has resulted in some really important reflections for me that I won't go into right now but maybe you'll want to talk about later.

Mortality becomes a more intimate companion than it was earlier, and that makes these decisions that once were hard about where to put my energies easier to make. I simply want to make good use of the time I have and turn all of this toward a profound appreciation of life and a desire to contribute to life in places where I'm still gifted to do so.

We're All in This Together

Debbie: You were talking about the physical, the multitasking, as that wanes, I just have to say your brain is so sharp. I don't know if that's changed, but I just thank you for your wisdom here. And if it's OK with you, if there is a reflection. You were saying we could talk about the reflection later, but I'm so happy to hear about that now if there's something that is speaking to you to share.

Parker: Yes, thanks very much. When we went into the pandemic, I realized that I was one of the high-risk people, given my age and my underlying conditions, one of which involves my immune system. I felt sorry for myself for a bit. That's a pretty normal reaction.

Debbie: "Why me?"

Parker: "Why me?" Yes. Then I realized one morning in reflection that suddenly I was joined in a much more intimate way than I ever have felt before with all the people on this planet, the millions upon millions upon millions of people on this planet who are born in high risk and who go to their graves in high risk. I don't mean just the pandemic. I mean poverty. I mean misogyny. I mean racism. I mean all the things that put people at high risk. I'm a white, straight male who doesn't have material worries of any extreme sort, and I had never thought of myself that way. I cared about all the folks at high risk, but I never saw myself as so intimately joined with that vast community as I was in reflection upon my own status in the pandemic.

I don't know if folks will understand this, but it's very real to me. That did not bring me down. That lifted me up by giving me a real sense of "We're all in this together." And by "this," I don't just mean the pandemic. I mean we're all in the politics on Earth, the economics on Earth, the social challenges on Earth. We all have stakes in this, and we should

wake up and smell the coffee and engage all of that as fully as we can in whatever way we're able to do so. Sometimes, that's just with some family or friends at the Thanksgiving table. But sometimes it's getting involved in the political process, and sometimes it's using the power we have. I mean, when I use the phrase, "white, straight male who's reasonably well off," in this culture, that's power and it's privilege. I feel deeply called to use that power and privilege on behalf of folks who don't have it.

Debbie: I know you were saying this has been a recent reflection, but this is how you've really spent your life, and so I just want to remind you of that.

Parker: Well, thank you. I appreciate that. It is true that I walked away from an academic career in my late 20s and become a community organizer.

Debbie: You and Barack Obama, the most famous community organizers I know. You guys are in good company. He's in good company with you. [laughter]

Parker: Well, I wish. I wish I could have a seat at that table. But yes, he certainly has that, for me, very powerful background.

Debbie: Yes, and that didn't probably bring you the kind of money that you were expecting in academe, right?

Parker: Yes, that's true. It did not. We were raising our own money a quarter at a time in Washington D.C. for about five years. Then I lived in a Quaker community, a commune really, for the next 11 years. There wasn't a lot of money there either. But eventually, things worked out in terms of putting a financial floor under my family and me. But I guess what was missing back in those days ... While I did feel the ethical, moral call to engage the world on behalf of what Howard Thurman calls the disinherited, I didn't feel that intimate sense of personal identification, which really to me was a critical missing piece, I now realize. I did what I did. I don't regret it. I don't live with regrets about the past. Every choice right and wrong I made helped shape who I am today. For me, the wholeness is about holding, as we say in Wisconsin, the whole kielbasa. You get all of it, including the gristle, and that's what wholeness is about. But what I do feel today is an empathetic sense. Walt Whitman said, "I contain multitudes," and I'm part of the multitudes. To me, that's a critical piece of understanding that this isn't just about serving others. This is about allowing myself to be

used for the common good.

Debbie: I will certainly encourage women to read all of your books and read all about your life and how you kept doing that thing you were called to do. That's just not an easy thing because you can't put a label on it. "I'm going to go be a bookkeeper." You kept using your soul to serve. That's how I always viewed your career, and it was very, very inspiring to me. In the years that I've been coaching with people, I've had your stories to share and to learn from.

Parker: Thank you, Debbie. It's a lovely thing to be mirrored back by a person, in this case you, who knows something about me and is able to articulate it. I'll just say that that's one of the gifts of the clearness committee, because we actually end with some mirroring back where people say simply without advice to the focus person, "This is a mirror I'd like to hold up to who you are. It comes from your own words and your own actions." That's a huge blessing to people and thank you for yours.

Debbie: Thank you so much, Parker.

Make a New Year's 'Revolution'

Debbie: I promised I would let you go. I could talk to you all day, all week. I want to just ask you a couple of really quick questions. This is the end of the year, and I wondered, do you have any special holiday rituals? Do you prepare for the New Year in any sort of new way? Or any advice ... no advice, right? Any thoughts for Women on Fire? And we actually talk about that here. No advice at Women on Fire.

Parker: I'm aware of all that happens toward the end of the year, the many traditions, the many wisdom traditions that hold that transition time in different ways with rituals and symbols and ceremonies that open some new possibility for them. I try to benefit from all of that rather than fixating on my own tradition, which is Christian, which I respect. It has formed me in some wonderful ways, and it also has gotten me into a lot of trouble and gotten all of us into a lot of trouble in the world, not only as it now stands but historically. Like any of us, that's a very mixed bag.

One of the things that stays with me, Debbie, as a Quaker, a little-known branch of

Christianity which was formed almost 300 years ago in England. The old Quakers back in the day refused to celebrate Christmas on December 25th because they believed, they felt that. if they did, they would forget about the fact that new life is born every day or has an opportunity to be born every day. And this is back to Howard Thurman and the growing edge. If you want to celebrate this birth of hope, this birth of possibility, do it every day. And in the celebration, maybe you become more aware of that birthing happening all around you and in you by making Christmas Day a portable feast.

So I approach Christmas Day with something of that sentiment, and I especially look forward to being together with friends and family to the extent possible these days. This year will be with my wife and my granddaughter. I'm really looking forward to that. And then, of course, there's New Year's, which we all know is famous for the practice of making New Year's resolutions. I gave up New Year's resolutions some years ago, not simply because I kept eating bad stuff or whatever I'd do after one day of rigorous discipline, but more importantly because I just wanted to change the word a bit and commit myself to New Year *revolutions*.

Debbie: Ooh, good one, Parker.

Parker: New Year revolutions.

Debbie: Love that.

Parker: It's fun. Wordplay is so much fun. It can take you in some interesting directions. So actually, Carrie Newcomer and I, we have a pact that we share with other people about committing ourselves to New Year revolutions. These would be revolutions on behalf of saving our democracy, uplifting disenfranchised people, etc., etc., etc. The kind of revolutions to which one needs to recommit time and time again because they seem so impossible, and yet there simply isn't anything worth doing that hasn't seemed impossible at the time people commenced to do it.

In the long run, the measure, I think, of a good life is not whether you achieve such of these goals, these goals that keep moving out of reach of humankind. The measure of a good life is whether you've been as faithful as you possibly can be to those intentions and committed yourself, boots on the ground, to whatever you're able to do to move in that

direction. That seems to me to be the kind of thing I want to be lifting up for myself as the year turns.

Debbie: Well, Parker Palmer, thank you so much for being a role model of living a good life. You have been a mentor and midwife to so many of us. I just so appreciated your humor today, your love. Your love comes right through the channels, right through the aethers here. Thank you for giving us fresh eyes on looking toward the future, so thank you.

Parker: Oh, thank you so much, Debbie, and back at you and all good wishes in the season ahead to all of your community.

Debbie: Thank you so much. I really appreciate this.

After Interview

Hello, Woman on Fire. You just heard me interview the amazing teacher, writer, author Parker Palmer, and this is the After Interview. This is where we kick back and chat about what went on in the interview. My special guest today listening in is the amazing Laura Tiberi. You all love her so much and so do I. Hi, Laura!

Laura: Hi, Debbie. How are you today?

Debbie: I'm so excellent because Parker was here and you're here. I don't think it gets better than that.

Laura: Well, thank you. I can't imagine, having been a fan of Parker Palmer and read many of his works — and I think I've told you I've listened to Carrie Newcomer's songs — how difficult it was to prepare for that interview, with that large body of work and knowing you had an hour. You did a wonderful job. How do you even begin to do that?

Debbie: First of all, thank you so much for saying that. I think I have seven pages of notes here. It was true, and you followed his career in life. I have the gist of it, and then you just roll with it. He was so charming, and I didn't want to step on anything that he said. Just to be on the receiving end of listening to his wisdom. How was it for you to listen to him?

Laura: It was wonderful because of a number of things. One, he's very much — actually, you might have mentioned it — about mentoring across generations. I know that while Women

on Fire doesn't span 80 years, we do have a healthy span of people and women in different parts of their lives, dealing with children or grandchildren or anything in between. It's really nice to hear him speak and recognize that some of the work he does is some of the work we're all grappling with and helping each other get through, and all the questions that come up on your page. This is the kind of thing that people ask. Kay [Shatzer Kerr] the other day asking how to work through a relationship issue, and everybody feeds in. That's exactly the kind of thing that I think of when I think of Parker Palmer and mentoring across the ages.

I loved it when he said he had no retirement skills. Again, that's another age-appropriate thing, whether you're 45 or 65. People are grappling with, "What am I going to do and how's that going to work?" And I loved his idea of, for himself, how was he going to manage that intersection of aging and vocation. That was beautiful, and this will probably date this conversation, but again, today, one of our members posted about a huge career change and moving on to do something different and not sure what the next chapter's going to be, but this is what she's going to do. I thought, that's exactly it. That was, for her, and intersection of aging and vocation as well as parenting and everything else. So such words of wisdom.

Debbie: I know. In listening and talking and preparing for this interview, I realized how reading many, many, many years ago his original books really influenced and affected my thinking in even developing Women on Fire.

Laura: I really noticed when he started talking about the clearness committees, and four or six trusted friends to hold your heart or your soul, and the no rules. You commit to a set of rules, no fixing, advising, saving, correcting. This is exactly what makes your circles that you've done with us so powerful.

Debbie: Thank you for saying that, and I realized one of his only books that I didn't read was *The Hidden Wholeness*, which does have the ground rules for how you set up these clearness committees. But I did know that concept. It is a Quaker concept, and I did know that concept from him. But I think everything builds upon itself, and I'm just realizing that there's been a lot of things from him that I think I've built on. But isn't he just so wise in the way he was with his granddaughter? I mean, that's something any of us can do with a young

person, to help them see in them what's their special gift and mirror that back to them.

Laura: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So much.

Debbie: Well, Laura, I'm so happy that you were here today. I chose you for this because I knew you knew Parker Palmer's work well and you were excited to do that. And all of us, I want to just check in with you before we wrap up here. What are your holidays? I know given everything your limits with not having people around. How are you spending your holidays? Do you know?

Laura: I don't know.

Debbie: I don't think any of us knows.

Laura: Every day is a mystery. But I will take from Parker today the two things that will carry me forward whatever happens, is what do I want to give myself to? And to remember to ask those life-giving questions. And then he says a good life is when you're faithful as possible to your intentions. I will be as faithful as possible to the way I can celebrate, and I will remember that, every day, I have an opportunity for more life-giving choices.

Debbie: Well, Laura, we've all stood by and watched as you do that anyway. I hear you're really clear in your intention, but I just want to thank you for being such an incredibly faithful person in this circle. You make a real difference, and I want to thank you for that.

Laura: Thank you for allowing me to listen in. That was really special. I appreciate it.

Debbie: It was so special to have you here. Love you lots, Laura Tiberi. Happy New Year!

Laura: Love you, too. Happy New Year!