



Preface by  
**PARKER J. PALMER**

Foreword and Afterword by  
**RACHEL NAOMI REMEN & ANGELES ARRIEN**

# TRANSFORMATIVE CONVERSATIONS

*A Guide to Mentoring Communities  
Among Colleagues in Higher Education*



**Peter Felten • H-Dirksen L. Bauman**  
**Aaron Kheriaty • Edward Taylor**



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## More Praise for *Transformative Conversations*

“Despite the ideal of the ‘academic community,’ far too many of us live within the silos of our own programs or disciplines and long for a deeper connection with our colleagues to share our passions and heart and soul along with our intellect. *Transformative Conversations* is a book that is both visionary and intensely practical about how to create formation mentoring communities to break through the silos and create authentic community. This book is exceptionally timely as all of us face the stresses of budget constraints, dynamic change, and disruptive forces. Formation mentoring communities offer incredible hope drawn from the experiences of the four authors. Their stories and interludes are inspiring, and the book is a veritable toolkit for getting started. After reading an advance copy of the book, I intend to go out and form an FMC myself. The authors were challenged to write a book to start a movement, and this book just might do it.”

—Ralph A. Wolff, president, Senior College Commission, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)

“This brief, beautiful, lucid book demonstrates how people meeting in small peer groups to explore themselves and what matters most to them can nourish, deepen, and transform themselves, each other, and eventually their larger community.”

—Roger Walsh MD, Ph.D, University of California Medical School; author, *Essential Spirituality: The Seven Central Practices*

“This is a radical story about how to create a more intimate and relational culture inside the halls of higher education—which is no small accomplishment. This movement is occurring without a budget, a curriculum, or management approval. It is a great story of the power of intimacy and the small group as a positive revolutionary force. A must-read for those who long for higher education to return from the abyss of siloed isolation to its original charter as a cooperative learning institution committed to developing the whole person in service of the common good.”

—Peter Block, author, *Flawless Consulting* and *Abundant Community*

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“As a mediator who has assisted in settling dozens of cases involving institutions of higher learning, I only wish for the parties involved that this book had been available before differences devolved into wasteful lawsuits. This book provides practical guidance on how to create the space that can hold differences and transform the energy around them into creative rather than destructive forces, and it provides specific ways to avoid miscommunications that lead to needless conflict.”

—Hon. Rebecca Westerfield (Ret.), JAMS: Judicial Arbitration and Mediation Services

“This book is filled with wisdom. While it addresses formation mentoring communities in academia, the lessons are applicable to any setting. The notion that ‘hard to change’ cultures, so resistant to expert intervention, are susceptible to transformation and renewal from within is heartening. The blueprint for transformation that this book provides is invaluable.”

—Patrick O’Neill, president, Extraordinary Conversations Inc.

“In the ‘superstorm’ of writings about the crisis in higher education, this little gem of a book stands out like a mindfulness bell. It calls us back to the only thing that truly matters, the energy and wisdom buried in the minds and hearts of dedicated educators. Forget MOOCs and start organizing grassroots FMCs—countercultural, profoundly humanistic conversation groups. Watch deep truths emerge. After that, who knows what? Perhaps a twenty-first-century liberal education attuned to the coming generation’s global imperatives: interdependence, sustainability, and mutual cooperation. Now there’s a radical thought. Read this book please. It’s all here.”

—Diana Chapman Walsh, president emerita, Wellesley College; trustee emerita, Amherst College; member of the MIT Corporation.

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# Transformative Conversations

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**WILEY**

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## PREFACE

Margaret Mead famously said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Clearly, Mead overstated her point. Some social change has come from small groups of cunning, malevolent people whose commitments have ranged across the continuum of evil.

Still, Mead’s point stands. Every movement for positive social change that I know anything about has been initiated by groups of the sort she describes. Of course, successful movements find ways to rally more and more people around their flag, consolidating and deploying collective forms of “people power” to make an impact on institutions and societies. But even as movements for social change expand, the effective ones continue to depend on small group “base communities,” not merely to make decisions about strategies and tactics but to sustain the energy and morale of their adherents in the midst of arduous struggles.

*Transformative Conversations: A Guide to Mentoring Communities Among Colleagues in Higher Education* focuses on the development of small groups called formation mentoring communities (FMCs) on college and university campuses. FMCs differ from professional meetings of the kind that normally fill our days. An FMC would not be a planning meeting, a task force, or a problem-solving session. Nor would it be a gathering to develop

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a joint professional project. The group's "project," so to speak, would be the group's members themselves. The agenda would consist of reflecting on our work and life, remembering our callings, exploring meaning and purpose, clarifying personal values, and realigning our lives with them. The goal of an FMC would be to use meaningful conversations to reinvigorate ourselves, our work, and, by extension, the academy.

Anyone who knows even a little bit about academic culture knows that gatherings such as this are, to say the least, counter-cultural. So it is important to know that the authors of this book are four accomplished educators who serve in four very different academic settings. They not only believe that it is possible for faculty and staff to gather for these personal and professional purposes; they know it is possible because they have convened and hosted such groups on their own campuses. Their book draws on lessons learned as they experimented with bringing colleagues together and discovered both the potentials and the limits of their on-the-ground efforts to create FMCs.

It is common knowledge that universities are highly resistant to transformation. As the old saw has it, "Changing a university is like moving a cemetery. You don't get much help from the inhabitants." But FMCs have the potential to create transformational energies, as they help faculty and staff reclaim the values that brought them into the profession in the first place and help them find ways to bring those values to life amid the increasingly challenging conditions of twenty-first-century academic life.

I am convinced that the greatest threat to the highest values of any of our professions is the institution in which that profession is practiced. Attorneys who go into the law because they want to serve the cause of justice must constantly resist the deformations of the justice system. Physicians who go into medicine because they want to help people achieve wholeness, even those who are terminally

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PREFACE

ill, must resist the deformations of the health care system. And teachers who go into the public schools or professors who go into the university to help educate young people must resist the deformations of educational institutions.

Because the threat to professional values comes not from without but from within, transformation must come from within as well. The institutions that house our professions are too complex and opaque for outsiders to know where the levers for change can be found. Insiders alone have the necessary knowledge and access. But insiders who have been co-opted by the self-protective and self-serving logic of institutions—or who have simply given up in the face of all those discouragements—will never be agents of institutional change. The energy and thoughtfulness for transformation will come only from insiders who have reclaimed the commitments that brought them into their profession in the first place and have found the courage that comes from saying, “I’m not going to let anything or anyone rob me of my core values.”

Formation mentoring communities have great potential for laying the groundwork for institutional transformation by helping educators help each other engage in self-examination, discuss challenging circumstances, and remember and explore personal values, meaning, purpose, and calling. I hope this book will be read and put into practice by enough academics that the green shoots of change will begin to spring up in places where its principles and practices are embraced and embodied.

Parker J. Palmer  
Madison, Wisconsin  
November 2012

Founder and senior partner, Center for Courage and Renewal  
Author of *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, *The Courage to Teach*,  
*A Hidden Wholeness*, and *Let Your Life Speak*



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FOREWORD:  
REMEMBERING  
WHAT THE ANCIENTS KNEW

What catalyzes deep change for human beings is always an appeal to the heart. The heart is the seat of our courage to remember and live by what matters most profoundly. It has been at the center of all sustainable personal transformation and at the foundation of all social movements throughout time.

Sometimes a simple invitation is an unexpected appeal to the heart. It was through such an invitation that this book, *Transformative Conversations: A Guide to Mentoring Communities Among Colleagues in Higher Education*, began. Four years ago, we both said yes to an invitation from the Fetzer Institute to join a group of peers and explore the concept of intergenerational mentoring in the hopes of learning what this approach might contribute to revitalizing the innate values of higher education. Originally we joined this process as senior mentors, along with others of our generation known to us—people whose company we enjoyed over the years and whose scholarship we respected. Collectively we all shared the hope of passing on what had been learned in the course of a lifetime of teaching to others who were younger.

What we encountered was something far different: an experience of intense personal and professional learning and growth in

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the company of four young men who themselves were learning and growing. Through this project, we two women in our seventies, who had known each other for thirty years, met four brilliant, gifted, and competent men in their thirties and forties and entered into a mutual relationship that was new to us. Despite our years of mentoring experience, we were completely unprepared for the initiatory process that would be galvanized for all six of us or how profoundly we would reshape, stretch, and amplify each other individually and collectively.

Over the three years of the project, all six of us became more than we were at the beginning. We discovered we each had within ourselves certain core values that were like seeds dropped into soil: when exposed to acceptance, honesty, trust, and genuine friendship, they could sprout and blossom into change in ourselves and in our work.

Over time each of us was mentored by all the others, sometimes formally but often in quiet moments over a meal or a cup of tea. We seniors both became convinced that we were learning as much from the four young men as they were learning from us. As with most of our senior colleagues in higher education, we two who had known each other for decades and had long admired and supported each other's work had never mentored one another before. Indeed, most academics of our age and stage have not been mentored by anyone for many years.

Gradually, over time, we became a true formation mentoring community. The six of us catalyzed and called forth new aspects and dimensions from each other, and at different times and in different ways, we discovered in the relationship between us the heart of higher education. Within our relationships to one another, whether working, writing, or in weekly phone conversations, we experienced the grace and ease of a steady, nonconceptual wisdom that existed within and among us that was subtle, palatable,



and contagious. This innate wisdom allowed us to explore together what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called “the dearest freshness deep down things.” We discovered that those deep-down wisdom things are profoundly valuable, transformative, replicable, and inextinguishable. We all experienced the ability to develop fresh capacities and grow. We brought out the best in one another, and we continue to do so.

What we collectively experienced and discovered is a dimension of human nature that indigenous people everywhere embrace and honor: the power of community to evoke and nurture the perennial wisdom that resides in each of us and simply awaits our engagement. All genuine learning involves a radical remembering of this timeless providence of who we already are and what our intrinsic nature intends to bring to life through us. Within this hidden and unifying continuity of perennial wisdom, we are brought back again and again to ourselves and each other, to our deeper remembering of our humanity and its highest ideals.

Remembering ourselves and our original values is not something that we can do alone. Much in today’s world separates us from our core values and makes it difficult for us to remember ourselves. We need others to befriend the hidden wholeness within us, to see it even before we can, to believe in it and reflect it back to us so that we can recognize it as our own. Relationship allows us to find our way home together, to reown our hopes, our promise, and our calling. For most of the world’s oldest cultures, mentoring in the perennial wisdom is a natural lifelong process both personally and professionally. Intergenerational community supports it by initiatory rites, apprenticeships, meaningful conversations, and guidance from individuals of all ages. In traditional cultures, wisdom is not age bound. It is considered a mutual learning process that occurs naturally between all people. It is through learning from those both older and younger than ourselves and reflecting

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our deepest values back to one another that we begin to live up to our full human potential. What we experienced in the three-year journey the six of us took together was the immediate relevance of this ancient approach to the challenges of higher education and the modern world.

This experience has been so profound that it seemed important to share it with others. Ultimately it was the four young men who became the torch-bearers to ignite the transformative flame of formation mentoring communities on their respective campuses. This is their book, “a deep-down thing” that is accessible to everyone and can evoke the wisdom within us all. What is inextinguishable in the human spirit is connected to the heart, the place of self-remembering that allows us each to commit ourselves; to care enough to act; to contribute, create, and serve the greater whole; to learn to become better human beings; and to pass our wisdom on to future generations. This commitment is at the core of all meaningful and relevant education.

We are grateful to have participated in the process by which this book came into being and to have met the four remarkable, courageous men who now offer it as a gift to all educators and academics. Those who feel the need to grow and live closer to their authentic values on a daily basis can take this book and create a place of refuge and self remembering, a place to befriend the dream of a better world in themselves and in all others.

Angeles Arrien  
Rachel Naomi Remen

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# Transformative Conversations



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## INTRODUCTION

In the interest of full disclosure, perhaps we should begin by saying that we are an unlikely group of authors. We are all midcareer academics who under ordinary circumstances would have found little in common to talk about—and indeed would never have even met. But in early 2009, each of us received a written invitation to become part of an experimental project on intergenerational mentoring communities sponsored by the Fetzer Institute. From the start, this felt unfamiliar yet important. The list of senior mentors and visiting elders read like a who’s who in their respective and diverse fields.<sup>1</sup> The thought of working with such distinguished and insightful leaders in higher education was enticing and humbling, but we were also intrigued by the questions at the heart of the project: *Could the mission of the academy expand beyond the development of intellect to the cultivation of the whole human being? Is it possible to create a “new university” with an expanded focus to better prepare students to respond to the unmet needs of today’s world?*

Accepting this invitation meant making a three-year commitment to participate in seven retreats in various parts of the country and work together to create and implement a yet-to-be-determined project. This was not a commitment to be taken lightly. There were many good reasons to politely refuse this opportunity. All of us were busy, focused on our careers, and facing the challenges of balancing work, family, and additional projects to which we

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had already overcommitted ourselves. In addition, we all lived in different parts of the country, adding to the logistical challenge of working together. Yet we all found that we could not easily dismiss the questions posed in the invitation. These questions followed us as we went about our lives and nagged us in the spaces between our obligations. Whatever our individual reasons, eventually we all said yes to the invitation.

Twelve other midcareer academics from varied backgrounds and diverse academic disciplines accepted the invitation as well. At our first retreat meeting at the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, we were asked to self-select into groups of four junior faculty and two senior mentors around one of four areas that would define the scope of our three years of work: Leadership, Pedagogy, Ethics, and Formation. After a rather lengthy and uncomfortable period of indecision, the four of us eventually found ourselves in the least coveted corner of the room: the one under the banner of “Formation.”

This was not a moment of instant recognition and collegiality. It was more evident what we did not have in common than what we did. Our university contexts, roles, and disciplines did not immediately unite us in common conversation. Two of us are from large research universities and two from smaller liberal arts colleges, and we hail from psychiatry, education, history, and cultural studies. More specifically:

- Dirksen Bauman is chair and professor of American Sign Language and Deaf Studies and coordinator for the Office of Bilingual Teaching and Learning at Gallaudet University.
- Peter Felten is assistant provost for teaching and learning, director of the Center for Engaged Learning, executive director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, and associate professor of history at Elon University.

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## INTRODUCTION

- Aaron Kheriaty is the director of residency training and medical education in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California (UC), Irvine.
- Ed Taylor is a professor of education and vice provost and dean of undergraduate academic affairs at the University of Washington.

We were very fortunate to be joined by Angeles Arrien and Rachel Naomi Remen as our two senior mentors. It was evident that their wisdom, rich experiences, and varied backgrounds would greatly add to the group:

- Angeles Arrien is a cultural anthropologist, author, educator, and president of the Foundation for Cross-Cultural Education and Research who lectures and conducts workshops worldwide.
- Rachel Naomi Remen is a physician, author, and medical educator who is a clinical professor at the University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine. She is a pioneer of relationship-centered care and relationship-centered medical education, and her formation course for medical students is taught in more than half of America's medical schools and seven countries abroad.

At the beginning it wasn't clear how we would fit and work together, we had all connected with the idea of formation in higher education, so we tentatively began to explore what formation meant to each of us. We wondered if a concept like formation, which is at home in disciplines far outside of academia, could find a place in our educational institutions. We wondered if formation could become a dimension of our relationship to our students and what it might mean for academics to attend to each student as a whole person (formation) rather than just a person of

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*Introduction*

intellect (education). We also began to reflect on how we as faculty were changed (formed or de-formed) by the various institutional pressures of higher education. We began to wonder what formation would look like for us. Eventually we saw that we were as much in need of formation as anyone else. And that was the beginning.

Through e-mails and weekly phone calls, we began to reflect on the conditions that foster growth (formation) and envision a specific sort of conversation designed to generate these conditions. Could such a conversation in small communities become an incubator for the growth of all who participate? Could this growth be some form of mentoring, a concept familiar to academics yet usually seen in a more limited way? We began to expand our ideas of mentoring and envision a mentoring beyond professional competency—a mentoring of the whole person. We looked at existing models of mentoring and thought about what mentoring might look like in a group context. Gradually our concept of mentoring expanded past the usual understanding and practice of mentoring the youngest among us, students and junior faculty, to include the entire academy, from the most senior to the most junior and all administrators and staff.

We ultimately envisioned small intergenerational groups or minicommunities where the fundamental orientation of each member would be to support the aspirations of every other member, where we would help each other uncover, strengthen, and manifest our deepest values in all our relationships, including those with our colleagues as well as with our students. Where we would engage in an ongoing conversation with a small group of colleagues about our desires for a richer life and more fulfilling work and find the support and encouragement to move toward transforming those desires into daily practice.



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