

GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATING CLARNESS COMMITTEES:

Based on “The Clearness Committee:
A Communal Approach To Discernment in Retreats”

by Parker J. Palmer

Modified by John C. Bangs

1. Recruit a group of trusted, mature individuals to assist you in a process of discernment around Parker Palmer’s model of the Clearness Committee. Most of these people should be Christians and should show marks of both personal and spiritual maturity. They should be people of insight and should possess better than average listening skills. The group should be no fewer than three and no more than five, plus yourself, the *focus person*. Discernment should be exercised regarding the question of whether a spouse or other family member should play a part in this group. Avoid having more than one family member in the group. Close personal familiarity is *not* a requirement for participation in the group and may be either a benefit or a detriment to effective participation. One group member will be asked to serve the role of *facilitator*. This person must be willing to review the process outlined in this sheet in advance of the meeting, and should be prepared to gently lead the rest of the group through the process. Make sure that all members have this document in advance of the Clearness Committee session and that they have read it and understood it prior to the session.
2. In advance of the Clearness Committee Meeting provide a one-page synopsis reflecting on the following three areas:
 - A concise statement of the challenge and topic on which you are seeking discernment, even if it is not clear. This process can work as well with murky issues as well as with clear ones;
 - A recounting of relevant background factors that may bear on the challenge;
 - An exploration of any hunches you may have about what’s on the horizon regarding the problem.
3. This is done so that you can present your challenge orally to the committee at the start of the session in a concise but helpful way, ten or fifteen minutes maximum.
4. Clearness Committees last two hours. A detailed schedule is provided to all committee members before the process begins. When fifteen, and then five minutes remain, the facilitator needs to notify the others, for reasons explained in note 9 below. Committee members for whom note-taking enhances attentiveness may take notes, turning them over to you as the focus person before leaving the room. This helps guarantee confidentiality and is a great gift to you, helping you remember the questions and answers in the hours, days, and months to come.

5. The meeting begins when you break the silence and give a brief summary of the issue at hand. Then the committee members may speak—but everything they say is governed by one rule, a simple rule, and yet one that most people find difficult and demanding: members are forbidden to speak to you (as focus person) in any way except to ask honest, open questions. This means *absolutely no advice* and *no amateur psychoanalysis*. It means no, “Why don’t you...?” It means no, “That happened to me one time, and here’s what I did...” It means no, “There’s a book/therapist/exercise/diet that would help you a lot.” Nothing is allowed except real questions, honest and open questions, questions that will help you remove the blocks to your inner truth without becoming burdened by the personal agendas of committee members. I may think I know the answer to your problem, and on rare occasions I may be right. But my answer is absolutely no value to you. The only answer that counts is one that arises from your own inner truth. The discipline of the Clearness Committee is to give you greater access to that truth and allow you to have a personal dialogue with it—while the rest of the group members refrain from trying to define that truth for you or guide that dialogue.

6. What is an honest, open question? It is important to reflect on this, since we are so skilled at asking questions that are advice or analysis in disguise; e.g., “Have you ever thought that it might be your mother’s fault?” The best single mark of an honest, open question is that the questioner could not possibly anticipate the answer to it; e.g., “Did you ever feel like this before?” There are other guidelines for good questioning. Try not to get ahead of the focus person’s language; e.g., “What did you mean when you said ‘frustrated’?” is a good question, but “Didn’t you feel angry?” is not. Ask questions aimed at helping the focus person rather than at satisfying your curiosity. Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than larding them with background considerations and rationale—which make the question into a speech. Ask questions that go to the person as well as the problem—for example, questions about feelings as well as about facts. Trust your intuition in asking questions, even if your instinct seems off the wall; e.g., “What color is your present job, and what color is the one you have been offered?”

7. Normally, you as the focus person will respond to questions as they are asked, in the presence of the group, and those responses generate more, and deeper, questions. Though the responses should be full, they should not be terribly long—resist the temptation to tell your life story in response to every question! It is important that there be time for more and more questions and responses, thus deepening the process for everyone. The more often a focus person is willing to answer aloud, the more material the person—and the committee—will have to work with. But this should never happen at the expense of the focus person’s need to protect vulnerable feelings or to maintain privacy. It is vital that the focus person assume total

power to set the limits of the process. So everyone must understand that the focus person at all times has the right not to answer a question. The unanswered question is not necessarily lost—indeed, it may be the question that is so important that it keeps working on the focus person long after the Clearness Committee has ended.

8. The Clearness Committee must not become a grilling or cross-examination. The pace of the questioning is crucial—it should be relaxed, gentle, humane. A machine-gun volley of questions makes reflection impossible and leaves the focus person feeling attacked rather than evoked. Do not be afraid of silence in the group—trust it and treasure it. If silence falls, it does not mean that nothing is happening or that the process has broken down. It may well mean that the most important thing of all is happening: new insights are emerging from within people, from their deepest sources of guidance.
9. From beginning to end of the Clearness Committee, it is important that everyone work hard to remain totally attentive to the focus person and his or her needs. This means suspending the normal rules of social gathering—no chitchat, no responding to other people’s questions or to the focus person’s answers, no joking to break the tension, no noisy and nervous laughter. We are simply to surround the focus person with quiet, loving space, resisting even the temptation to comfort or reassure or encourage this person, but simply being present with our attention and our questions and our care. If a committee member damages this ambiance with advice, leading questions, or rapid-fire inquisition, other members, including the focus person, have the right to remind the offender of the rules—and the offender is not at liberty to mount a defense or argue the point. The Clearness Committee is for the sake of the focus person, and the rest of us need to get our egos to recede.
10. The Clearness Committee should run for the full time allotted. Don’t end early for fear that the group has “run out of questions”—patient waiting will be rewarded with deeper questions than have yet been asked. About fifteen minutes before the end of the meeting, someone should ask the focus person if he or she wants to suspend the “questions only” rule and invite committee members to mirror back what they have heard the focus person saying. If the focus person says no, the questions continue, but if he or she says yes, mirroring can begin, along with more questions if they should arise. Mirroring does not provide an excuse to give advice or fix the person—that sort of invasiveness is still prohibited. Mirroring simply means exactly what the word suggests: reflecting the focus person’s language—and body language—giving him or her a chance to say, “Yes, that’s me” or “No, that’s not,” though no response is required. In the final five minutes of the meeting, the clerk should invite members to celebrate and affirm the focus person and his

or her strengths. This is an important time, since the focus person has just spent a couple of hours being very vulnerable. And there is always much to celebrate, for in the course of a Clearness Committee, people reveal the gifts and graces that characterize human beings at their deepest and best.

11. Remember, the Clearness Committee is not intended to fix the focus person, so there should be no sense of letdown if the focus person does not have his or her problems “solved” when the process ends. A good clearness process does not end—it keeps working within the focus person long after the meeting is over. The rest of us need simply to keep holding that person in the light, trusting the wisdom of his or her inner teacher.

The Clearness Committee is not a cure-all. It is not for extremely fragile people or for extremely delicate problems. But for the right person, with the right issue, it is a powerful way to rally the strength of community around a struggling soul, to draw deeply from the wisdom within all of us. It teaches us to abandon the pretense that we know what is best for another person and instead to ask those honest and open questions that can help that person find his or her own answers. It teaches us to give up the arrogant assumption that we are obliged to “save” each other and learn, through simple listening, to create the conditions that allow a person to find his or her wholeness within. If the spiritual discipline behind the Clearness Committee is understood and practiced, the process can become a way to renew community in our individualistic times; a way to free people from their isolation without threatening their integrity; a way to counteract the unhelpful excesses to which we sometimes take “caring;” and a way to create space for the spirit to move among us with healing and with power.