



My Misgivings About Advice, by Parker Palmer

My misgivings about advice began with my first experience of clinical depression—thirty-five years ago. The people who tried to support me had good intentions. But, for the most part, what they did left me feeling more depressed.

Some went for the nature cure: “Why don’t you get outside and enjoy the sunshine and fresh air? Everything is blooming and it’s such a beautiful day!” When you’re depressed, you know intellectually that it’s beautiful out there. But you can’t feel a bit of that beauty because your feelings are dead—and being reminded of that gap is depressing.

Other would-be helpers tried to spruce up my self-image: “Why so down on yourself? You’ve helped so many people.” But when you’re depressed, the only voice you can hear is one that tells you that you’re a worthless fraud. Those compliments deepened my depression by making me feel that I’d defrauded yet another person: “If he knew what a worm I am, he’d never speak to me again.”

Here’s the deal. The human soul doesn’t want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed—to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is. When we make that kind of deep bow to the soul of a suffering person, our respect reinforces the soul’s healing resources, the only resources that can help the sufferer make it through.

Aye, there’s the rub. Many of us “helper” types are as much or more concerned with being seen as good helpers as we are with serving the soul-deep needs of the person who needs help. Witnessing and companioning take time and patience, which we often lack—especially when we’re in the presence of suffering so painful we can barely stand to be there, as if we were in danger of catching a contagious disease. We want to apply our “fix,” then cut and run, figuring we’ve done the best we can to “save” the other person.

And yet, we have something better: our gift of self in the form of personal presence and attention, the kind that invites the other’s soul to show up. As Mary Oliver has written, “This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.”

