Jerry Colonna:
I feel like I hit the jackpot. Two of my most favorite people in the world in conversation right now, Parker J Palmer, which I've had to train myself to start including the J, Mr. Palmer, and Sharon Salzberg. Welcome to the podcast. Thanks for coming on this show, and you know, as we talked about a little bit beforehand, I'm seeing this episode as really a continuation of a conversation that Sharon and I have already begun on a simple to say but complicated to pull off concept of the end of suffering.

And in that first conversation that Sharon and I talked about, we sort of unpacked, broadly speaking, just like what is suffering, which is different than, say, pain. And then how do we relate to that? And Sharon was kind enough to give some guidance using concepts like wise hope as a way to combat suffering.

But in this conversation, I really want to tap into what I think is the sort of second half of that question. If the first conversation was about, let's say, our inner relationship to suffering or inner relationship to pain that might cause our own suffering, a question I have is, what is our responsibility to the suffering in the world? And our own, but more importantly in some ways, each other's? How do we respond to a world that just feels so fractured and in pain?

So Parker, what do we do about this?

Parker J. Palmer:
Well, first of all, thank you for inviting me into this conversation that you and Sharon have been having. It's such an important topic. And I think it's been on my mind more and more as I've aged, and I think that's one of the things that comes with our elder years, maybe for some of us, and I'm one of those people, a closer experience of our own suffering. And in my case, a deeper and deeper sense of identification with the suffering going on in the world. What I know for sure is that when I ignore the suffering going on in the world, or when I prioritize my own suffering against the suffering I can see in the news every day of the year, I suffer some more.

I suffer from a sense of irresponsibility. I suffer from a sense of detachment. It somehow becomes a kind of loneliness, or a deepening of loneliness, when I realize that I'm disengaged, that I have disengaged myself from the suffering in the world around me. I'm a person of privilege, a person with resources, a person who has always wanted to be a net positive in the world without disregarding my shadow or pretending that I don't have it or that I haven't done damage and made other people suffer. And it's very, very hard when the world is so overwhelmed with suffering as it is right now. And I suspect as it always has been.

The nature of media these days means that if we open ourselves to the flow of information at all, we're suddenly aware of forms of suffering in very intimate, graphic terms that my parents and grandparents were unaware of. For them, it was a much more local phenomenon. And so I'm holding big, big questions around how I hold all of that.

I'm also aware of my own limits. I'm aware of the fact that I can't contain in any meaningful sense of that word, the world's suffering. I might be able to become some kind of conduit to it and let that flow inform my daily responses to the world.

I remember years ago reading a Christian ethicist, think it was H. Richard Niebuhr, who said, " Responsibility is simple, it's the ability to respond." And when I become aware of something that needs a response from people who have the wherewithal to make a creative response, then it becomes irresponsible not to do so. So that conduit image that, that image of suffering as a flow that I somehow have to allow to move through me, rather than trying to divert it around me or get high on a mountain where it won't affect me, is the best clue I have at the moment metaphorically about how to hold or recognize, acknowledge, be responsible about the suffering in the world.

Jerry Colonna:
I think Sharon and I are both sort of sitting back and feeling the connection to everything that you just said, Parker. I mean, Sharon, am I crazy? Does he sound like a Buddhist or what? So Buddhist.

Sharon Salzberg:
He sounds so Buddhist, and speaking as someone who has gone to a mountaintop, the suffering seems to kind of follow you in some way, you know, the personal suffering at any rate. And especially, you know, with the opportunity to include Parker in this conversation, I keep going back to the reference someone gave me to the work of John Rogers, who's a social scientist at UC Berkeley who described two forms of suffering in the world. The first, that which is endemic. It's inevitable. We get ill, or we have an injury, or we have a loss. Of course, Buddhism has a lot to say about how to address that so that we don't make it worse. That's a lot of what we talked about in the earlier conversation.

And the other forms of suffering are not sort of inevitable to human experience. They're created by systems, by policies, by choices that design our world. I think it behooves us to look at that form of suffering as well and understand, in some ways, some of the root causes. The choices we make because of how we regard one another, or who is the stranger? Who belongs? Who's left out? Who should have a chance? Who doesn't deserve it? And that, I think, is a whole arena that really needs to be explored.

Jerry Colonna:
It feels to me that that last arena that you were just speaking to, Sharon, maybe what we're all responding to is this sense of an increased amount of suffering. You know, I'm always reluctant to say it's worse now than say it was in the past, right?

And yet there is something afoot right now in the world, something about the way we systemically other, something in which we start to challenge in this broad way across multiple ethnicities, across multiple identities, the other's right to exist that feels particularly painful.

I was thinking in response to some of the things you were both saying, you know, in my religious upbringing, in which I grew up as a Christian, I was always taught that sin could be seen as anything that moved us away from God, anything that moved us away from the divine. In some ways, I'm sitting here thinking anything that moves us away from connectedness, interdependence, and reliance upon each other is suffering.

Does that resonate at all?

Parker J. Palmer:
It sure does for me, Jerry, and somehow at an even more basic level. The suffering begins with our refusal to recognize the fact of our connectedness and the fact, as every practitioner of nonviolent social change in history has preached, that in an interconnected system, what happens to one of us happens to all of us.

And somehow the root of suffering is pretending that that's not true, which to me then becomes a double whammy. I mean, somebody suffers, and I don't care because I'm pretending that that doesn't bounce back on me. And at the same time, it alienates me from the connectedness that would otherwise be available to hold me up in my own life of getting up and falling down, it deprives me of that kind of social safety net, which isn't something funded by the federal government. It's something built into the nature of reality that I am a member of a vast, intertwined community of being.

And to the extent I recognize that it offers me amazing support, including an interesting kind of promise of new life as one's life comes to an end. That is the life of the whole, the life of the great chain of being, the tapestry of being. And when I fail to recognize all that and to live in light of it, sort of suspending secular disbelief as if it were true, as it were, then I suffer that sense of alienation that we were talking about earlier. So yeah, that makes huge sense to me.

Sharon Salzberg:
Yeah, I think that moving away from connection leads to suffering because it's moving away from that which is true, as Parker was just saying. It's moving from truth into delusion or ignorance, and that never works. I don't have the right mug in this room, and this is an audio experience anyway. You know, during the… height of the pandemic, when I was teaching constantly on the internet. Apparently, I was saying the same thing over and over again, fairly often, because people started making me mugs and sending them to me, which had those sayings on it. And so one of my favorites is “banging your head against the wall is never fun,” which apparently I said often. And it's a little bit like that when we live divorced or alienated from that, which is true. Of course, it's painful.

It's like banging your head against the wall, thinking, it's going to feel different this time. But it never does, because moving from truth into illusion or delusion is moving from connection to separation. It's almost like no matter how much we want to deny it, we want to refute it. We

insist that it can't be the truth. It is the truth that we live in a world of interconnection. And, you know, there's there…What interests me, too, is the structures that we have in place to keep us apart. The structures that say if you're frightened or you're in pain, you should hide, you know, or if others are frightened or in pain, that's displeasing. Let's just tuck them away somewhere. But it's all based on that kind of profound alienation from that, which is true.

Jerry Colonna:
I keep thinking of that Howard Thurman quote in one of his sermons in which he says, “Outside the walls of separation death stalks.”

Why are we drawn? I mean, we must be trying to avoid a kind of pain when we see the other as separate, when we deny that interconnectedness that we're talking about. What is it about the human condition that is drawn to doing that?

Parker J. Palmer:
You know, I think in life we sort of learn the ropes in the situation that we're given, and we become very comfortable with knowing the ropes in that situation. And the sort of fundamental question that arises if we open ourselves to a much larger, and as Sharon was saying, truer view of life, is the very simple question of what in God's name am I going to do now?

I don't know the ropes out there. You know, I don't know the moves. I've succeeded in my little patch of turf playing by the rules of this or that organization, corporation, culture…

Jerry Colonna:
Or tribe.

Parker J. Palmer:
… or tribe. Exactly. I've figured out how to be a quite straight, reasonably well-off male with some degree of what people call success. So why should I go outside of that where I get scared to death that I'm going to not know what to do, and I'm gonna be found wanting? I think the only antidote to that is also, I think, fortunately built into the nature of reality if we can tap into it. And that is the desire to grow.

I mean, you know, all living things desire to grow. They desire fuller life. And if I can start to understand that fuller life means taking risks, that fuller life means opening myself to more, not closing down in fear, then I'm tapping into another natural impulse, which is precisely that impulse that I'm starting to see spring up in the winter landscape around me, which is the green shoots of new growth coming up through the ice and snow, as they do every spring, because that's real. That's the natural world. That's the way this interconnected system works.

I don't want to interrupt this stream of conversation because I think it's very valuable. But let me just flag one thing that you said, Jerry, a while back that I don't want to lose. And that is the fact that we live in an era where some people are actively saying to other kinds of people, you don't

have a right to exist, which is different from ignoring. That's death talk. You know, that's you need to die for me to be comfortable.

You trans people, whoever you may be, you need to die for me to be comfortable. You need to stop asserting a right to life. I'm not going to let you. I'm going to create new structures that prohibit you in ways that perhaps informal cultural structures used to prohibit you. We're gonna make it the law now, and we're going to deprive you of every form of support because you scared the crap out of me. I think, I mean, that's what I hear. The life, the buzzing, booming confusion of life that every infant faces into at birth in all of its diverse glory and its raucous energy, that life is frightening to these people, can be managed only by actively depriving some elements of it of life.

And yet I realize some people cannot live until they feel they have that under control. It's that old human deal of wanting to be in charge of every piece of the cosmos we can get our hands on.

Sharon Salzberg:
Sometimes I wonder if it doesn't go back to you know that in Buddhism there's this belief as they put it that all beings want to be happy and it's not happy in a frivolous sense of you know endless pleasure or endless consumption or something like that, but it's a deep sense of belonging of finding a home somewhere in this body, in this mind, with one another on this planet and it's the force of ignorance.

Because listening to Parker, I was thinking, maybe it's like a learned behavior. It's what we've been taught, and it gets reinforced because of our fear, certainly. If we look at the culture in the United States, at least as I was growing up, the premium placed on the idea of control, we have to be in control of everything, and ultimately everyone, and anything that seems outside of our control runs smack against that belief system. And it's very hard to shake because when we see something that seems different than what we have come to believe and insist is the only truth, then it's frightening and it seems alien and needs to be excised or whatever it is.

I'm not, you know, my mind is also going over and over. Is it worse? You know, which I think was also implied, Jerry, and something that you had said, you know, because like when I was looking back at my life, not just the personal suffering of my family, but I thought like I'm a child of the sixties, you know, I lived through the assassination of JFK and RFK, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. And this is what I was taught the world was in a way, or watching monks in Vietnam, which is one of my first exposures to Buddhism on TV, immolating themselves because of the war, watching boys I knew, young men I knew coming back from Vietnam having been drafted. And they were so different and so harmed in so many ways. You know, were we more connected to one another in those times? I don't know.

Parker J. Palmer:
I agree, Sharon. I think the temporal comparisons are difficult to make. I mean, we all know that that media today make a huge difference in how much we know and the rapidity with which

things can get shared and the speed at which lies can become truth, at which illusions, as you said earlier, can become, quote, reality. And there's way too much of that going around. But the fear that's at the root of all this, you mentioned fear as a driver of our desire to control. I think that really deserves close examination and conversation about antidotes to fear. There are probably some upstream things that need to end before we can come to the end of suffering.

Jerry Colonna:
You know, put simplistically but usefully, a necessary component to the end of suffering is what I'm hearing is our capacity to be with our own fear and to not give in to it, and to put another way, the end of suffering requires us to be brave, which, you know, maybe it's not so shocking, but it kind of shocks me because there's a part of me that thinks, okay, well, if suffering goes away, then I can be brave, but it actually works the other way around, doesn't it?

Parker J. Palmer:
You know, and when I asked myself, so how did I learn not to be afraid of this or that? I'm not sitting here claiming that I have no fears, but there are things that a lot of people are afraid of that I'm not afraid of, and I'm thinking about those particular things. For example, I'm not afraid of LGBTQ folks, just to take an example that we were talking about recently. And when I asked myself, how did I overcome fear in those instances? The answer is pretty simple. I walked toward what I feared and into what I feared rather than running away from it. I had an experience of humanity among people that some folks are afraid of, and I simply came to realize that underneath these surface differences, we have so much in common that I could feel utterly at home without having to be courageous at all. That I was simply glad for compassionate company among people who strike fear in folks who haven't had that personal experience.

So, you know, I feel like a very privileged person to have done a work and lived a life that has partnered me in so many ways with people who are Othered by the larger society or by the mainstream culture, to realize there's no Other. It's just all us chickens, you know.

Sharon Salzberg:
Mm-hmm. Well, I think a lot about that kind of recognition of ourselves in one another and ways that might come about. I remember years and years ago, I was talking to somebody who was talking about his mother. And he said, " My mother watches Oprah's television show all the time, and it's just opened up her world. She said, I never knew there were people who were lesbian mothers. I never knew."

And to see, just as Parker's describing, we're kind of the same on a certain level. Are we so locked in that we can't, through acquaintance, learning, maybe it's learning how to listen, and not just have those rigid filters come up right away, that we can't find one another?

I also remember watching that movie made about Harvey Milk. And he was talking to this group of pretty well closeted gay people in San Francisco. And he saw the next evolution of the movement was, he said, everyone has to come out. Everyone has to come out of the closet.

And you could see, I mean this is a movie, and people are like trembling as they're calling their mother, you know, something. But it was just like, oh maybe it's not the Other, it's my cousin Joe, or you know, look at that. It's my firefighter friend or something like that. Hopefully, those moments are not beyond us anymore.

Parker J. Palmer:
And I think at a deep level, part of the experience that we're talking about of encountering Otherness and finding that it's not Other at all. We are the same at some of the deeper levels of life. Part of it is having your self-image flipped on its head and realizing that they are, until the encounter happens, they are as afraid of you as you are afraid of them. And this desire to decode fear sets in, my gosh, look at what we're doing to each other. Look at the way we're scaring the daylights out of each other, all the while imagining this is a one-way street, that those people are scary, and I'm not.

But, you know, one of my earliest experiences of being with folks who are Othered by our larger society, either in terms of gender identity or sexual orientation or race, has been that moment of truth when they say, well, when you walked into the room, Parker, truth is things got unsafe for us. Good Lord, how could that happen? I'm just a nice Christian boy from near the North Shore of Chicago, you know. But that self-recognition in the mirror of the person you think of as Other and the sudden recognition that we Other each other in a way that brings no good to anyone whatsoever, where we can liberate each other almost in an instant, at least on the face-to-face level. We need teachers along the line to address that issue of fear.

We need stories about fear being overcome. If you have a moment for a quick story, a teaching story that involves my father, I'll tell you.

So, Dad was a Chicago businessman. When he and Mom got married, they lived on the South Side of Chicago in an area that was already becoming a black ghetto. And I was born there and lived there for the first couple of years of my life.

So when I was a teenager, dad put me in the car one day and took me to the South Side. And we walked around that neighborhood for a while, my old neighborhood, of which I had very few memories. And it was kind of a scary experience because we were the only white people on the sidewalks. And as we drove back to the loop, back to Dad's office on Michigan Avenue. He asked me about that. How did that feel? Well, truth be told, it was kind of scary. You know, that's in my community that when I grew up in Wilmette, Illinois, there were no black people. So that was a different and frightening experience for me.

So we get to Dad's office on Michigan Avenue, and across the street from his office was the YMCA College of Chicago. And dad was on the board of the YMCA Hotel. And so he said, "You see that over there, that YMCA College? Do you see all those young black men in suits and ties walking in to take their courses? And I said, yeah. And he said, well, you need to understand something, Parker. They are as afraid of being here on Michigan Avenue among all of us white,

well-off white people as you were afraid of being among them on the South Side."

And I never forgot that lesson, that flipping, that relativization of experience, that direct address to fear, which I think is one of the upstream things that we have to stop in order to stop suffering.

Jerry Colonna:
It's like, if I could knit it together from our first conversation, Sharon, where we talked about really coming to understand our own relationship with pain and suffering and really trying to understand who we are and what suffering is to moving outward and really trying to see what is my responsibility, my ability to respond, if you will, into a world filled with suffering, that in doing so we move towards the alleviation of our own suffering and that the jiu-jitsu move, if you will, turning the energy against itself is turning towards the fear, turning towards the Other, turning towards the thing that we have been taught is dangerous. And there's a risk in that.

We're living in times…I can feel fear right now. And the fear is not the same fear as I might have felt growing up in Brooklyn at a time of economic deprivation, growing up as a little boy watching MLK be killed, or RFK be killed, or as you pointed out. But the fear right now is that I fear retribution from an authoritarian government. I fear the consequences of speaking up and speaking out. And if I'm going to take this to its logical conclusion, if I want to alleviate my suffering, if I want to alleviate, say, the suffering of my granddaughter, whom you both know is just like an animating character in my life, then I have to turn towards that which terrifies me with curiosity, not fearlessness, because I think you're right, Parker, we are afraid, but that same kind of spirit of inquiry and curiosity that your father was inducing in you by taking you for a car ride.

Parker J. Palmer:
We can do these things.

Sharon Salzberg:
Well, we also don't do them alone, you know, which is a pretty great thing in itself. You know, if somebody said to me, well, you've got to, all alone, turn around and face that which you're most afraid of and go toward it, I would probably say I'm really tired. need a nap. You it's like, maybe later, you know, like another cup of coffee, something like that. But, I mean, listening to each of you, you know, I feel emboldened because I know I won't be alone in doing that.

Parker J. Palmer:
I think that's so important. I'm now realizing, Sharon, as you make that comment, how important it was that my dad was there when I learned that lesson, that he was with me as I learned, and that made it possible to absorb it. And thinking about grandchildren, Jerry, as you know, I have a couple of those of my own. I think so often about the fact that I want my grandkids to be able to give an answer, of which they will be proud, to the question of, what was your grandfather up to back in those dark days in the United States? You know, I want that to be part of their identity and that that emboldens me. I really like the way Sharon introduced the whole idea of how we get emboldened into this conversation.

Jerry Colonna:
You know, I really appreciate what you brought in there. Because, as you know, one of my big obsessions is becoming an ancestor that my descendants deserve, right?

Sharon Salzberg:
Legacy.

Jerry Colonna:
That's the legacy. That's this notion of what is it that will be left behind in this regard. And there's something about, you know, I said before, turning towards the fear, turning towards the thing that terrifies us. And seeing ourselves in community and doing this work in community is important. Sharon and I would use the word sangha. Parker, you might use the similar word or even a word of congregation or community. But we're speaking about the same thing, that community. But I think, too, we're also talking about on whose behalf?

On whose behalf do we turn towards the end of suffering? And it's powerful to make it personal, to visualize a descendant or someone we know and we love. And it's also powerful to visualize a scared kid in Iran right now, or a scared kid in Gaza, or a scared kid in Jerusalem, or a scared kid in Beirut, or just in Minnesota.

Parker J. Palmer:
Or just down the street. Yeah. And you know, and holding, I mean, for me, I'm not above shamelessly calling our attention to children because if the wish to end suffering for children doesn't move you, I don't know what will.

And unfortunately, that is a struggle to see those children, whether it's at the southern border of the United States or a teenager wondering about gender identity or suffering to feel a lack of belonging in the world. If that doesn't move you, I don't know. What will move you?

Yeah, I think some of this sort of cramped mind and heart condition that we're talking about comes with the human package and always has. It was there in the 11th and 12th century that I'm reading about. And it's here today. And it was there when Sharon and I were starting to learn about the big old world in the 1960s as well. But I do think that on the level of what can be done about this, again, we need to say that our educational, and I'm going to add our religious institutions and civic institutions as well, haven't been paying enough attention to the issues that we're talking about here.

I don't want to say they've been altogether wrong-headed, although some of them have been. But there's an educational agenda here that I guess, in a way, the story I told about my father and his fatherly teaching role sort of illustrates. I mean, let's use the mature experience of the world to help younger people understand, and let's listen to them so they help us understand how to negotiate these complexities and to kind of inoculate ourselves against the suffering that

will always catch up with us if it hasn't yet, you know. That's so predictable in life.

And I like always to turn to the question of how do you put wheels on ideas? And I think revamping educational curricula, revamping the life of some of our spiritual communities, revamping what it is we pay attention to when we engage in the right of free assembly on any level, institutional or otherwise, is very important in this mix.

Jerry Colonna:
Sharon, anything to build upon that? What kind of wheels would you put on these ideas?

Sharon Salzberg:
Well, I really love this emphasis on institutions because in some way, they're also very personal and local. You know, rather than thinking of it as an abstract, there is a community around different faith traditions or humanism, or I think of each of you, both of you as educators. And so, I was going to ask something about that. I think also Parker is known, I think probably most prominently in many circles as an educator. But when I met him for the first time, I said, "My favorite of your books was about democracy," which I think was maybe an unusual comment. So does that remembrance of civic institutions, know, join something. Pay attention to your school board or your local… You know, I live in Massachusetts in a very small town, which has meetings about all kinds of things. And, you know, does anybody show up and both to listen and to talk? I think otherwise, we really descend into a kind of hopelessness, which is not going to serve anybody.

Parker J. Palmer:
Amen to that.

Jerry Colonna:
I think what I'm taking away from this conversation is I'm really struck by Parker, your point about responsibility and the ability to respond. I think part of the path, if we can tie it back into the theme, part of the path to the end of suffering is the ability, or the willingness to deploy the ability to respond. That there's a kind of moral and ethical responsibility to lean into that which is so frightening.

Parker J. Palmer:
Yeah, yeah, it's the old song comes to mind, "Ain't no hiding place down here," you know, and I think somehow that that sort of basic realization of the nature of reality that there isn't any place to hide from reality. You know, you know, it when you're living in illusions, to go back to one of Sharon's original themes. When you're living in illusions, it feels like you're hiding from reality, but you ain't. There is no hiding place down here. The more real we can get about who we are and how we are with each other, and the more responsible in that sense that we can become, the better off we're going to be with the end of suffering.

And of course, that's such an interesting phrase to me, because I think you have to hold it as

you hold poetry. And you have to keep turning it in your mind and heart. It reveals different things as you turn it. It's an impractical question, and yet it's a question that very much impacts how we live our individual lives and our lives together? So I love the question and I love the conversation.

Jerry Colonna:
Yeah, I love the phrase because for me it implies hope, it implies a wish, it implies a possibility, and you know, just the possibility of conceiving the end of suffering energizes me.

Parker J. Palmer:
Yeah, for me that was helpful, Jerry. It implies a trajectory that may never land on its destination, but the trajectory itself is worthy of pursuit.

Jerry Colonna:
It's like Martin Luther King's promised land, you know. It's the place that's there.

Sharon Salzberg:
Well, that goes back, Jerry, to your thinking about legacy, right? We may not see the fruit of our action, or not completely, but it's so deeply the right thing to do, whatever it is.

Jerry Colonna:
Right? Every single day, in every single way. A movement toward. So, well, I want to thank you both. You know, Sharon, you made me laugh when you considered me a teacher because I think of the two of you as my teachers and my friends and my, just my long-term buddies in dealing with the suffering of the world.

I can't thank you enough for this conversation, but for what feels like a lifetime of friendship. So thank you.

Parker J. Palmer:
Thank you, Jerry.

Sharon:
Thank you.