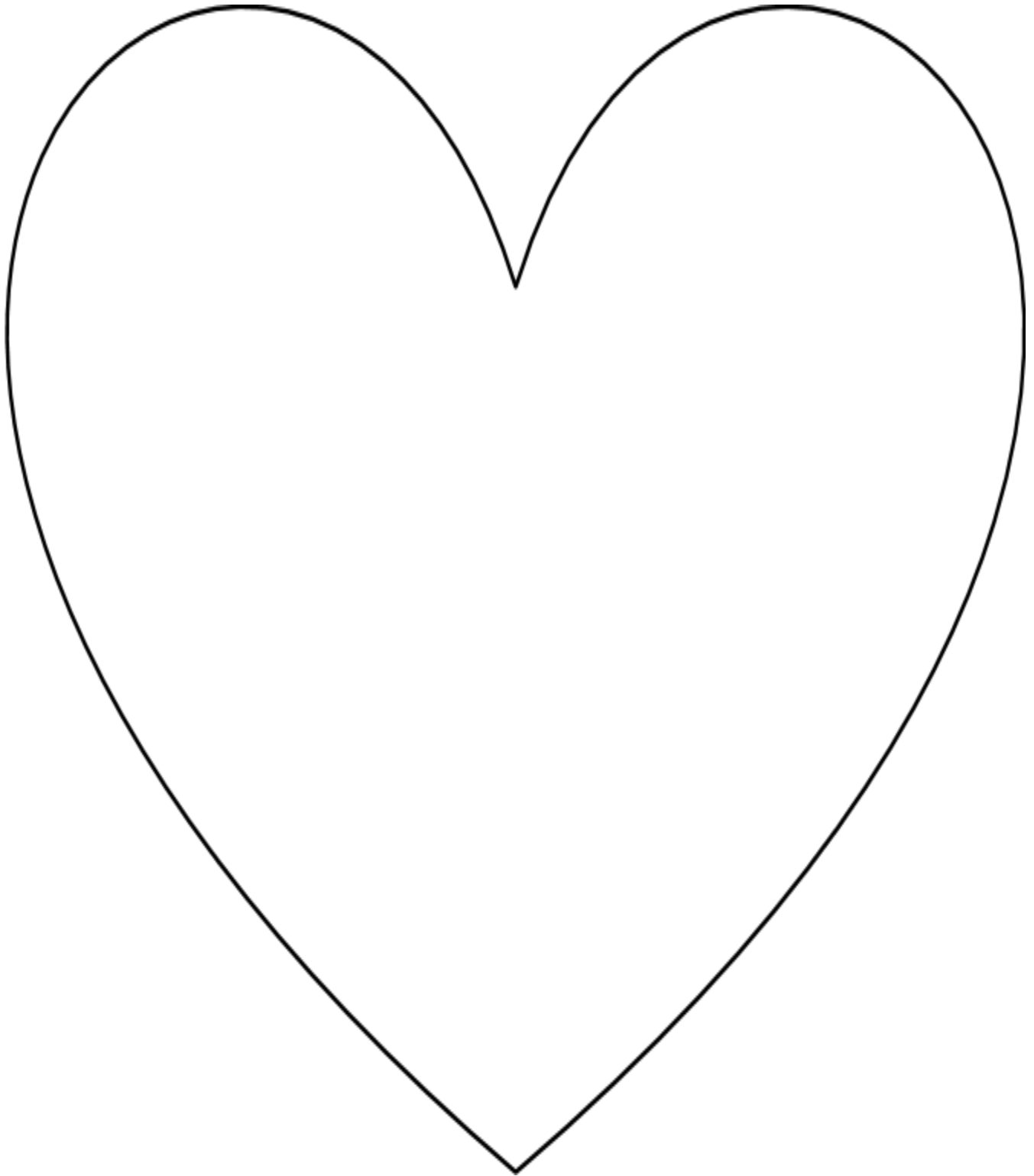


Key Learnings



FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

True self is true friend

It is odd that some of my most vivid memories of depression involve the people who came to look in on me, since in the middle of the experience I was barely able to notice who was, or was not, there. Depression is the ultimate state of disconnection — it deprives one of the relatedness that is the lifeline of every living being.

I do not like to speak ungratefully of my visitors. They all meant well, and they were among the few who did not avoid me altogether. But, despite their good intentions, most of them acted like Job's comforters — the friends who came to Job in his misery and offered "sympathy" that led him deeper into despair.

Some visitors, in an effort to cheer me up, would say, "It's a beautiful day. Why don't you go out and soak up sunshine and look at the flowers? Surely that'll make you feel better."

But such advice only made me more depressed. Intellectually, I knew that the day was beautiful, but I was unable to experience that beauty through my senses, to feel it in my body. Depression is the ultimate state of disconnection, not only between one's mind and one's feelings. To be reminded of that disconnection only deepened my despair.

Other people came to me and said, "But you're such a good person, Parker. You teach and write so well, and you've helped so many people. Try to remember all the good you've done and you'll surely feel better."

This advice, too, left me more depressed, for it plunged me into the immense gap between my "good" persona and the "bad" person that I then believed myself to be. When I heard these words, I thought another person has been defrauded, has seen my image rather than my reality — and if they ever saw the real me, they would reject me in a flash. Depression is the ultimate state of disconnection, not only between people, and between mind and heart, but between one's self-image and public mask.

Then there were visitors who began by saying, "I know exactly how you feel ..." Whatever comfort or counsel these people may have been headed toward, I heard nothing beyond their opening words, because I knew those words were untrue: no one can fully experience another person's mystery. Paradoxically, it was my friends' empathetic attempt to identify with me that made me feel even more isolated, because it was over-identification. Disconnection may be hell, but it is better than false connections.

Having not only been "comforted" by friends, but having tried to comfort others that way myself, I think I understand what the syndrome is about: avoidance and denial. One of the hardest things we must sometimes do is to be present to another person's pain without trying to fix it, to simply stand respectfully at the edge of his or her mystery — and misery. Standing there, we feel useless and powerless, which is exactly how a depressed person feels, and our unconscious need as Job's comforters is to reassure ourselves that we are not like the sad soul before us.

In an effort to avoid those feelings, I give advice, which sets me — not you — free. If you take my advice, you may get well, and if you don't get well, I did the best I could. If you fail to take my advice, there is nothing I can do about it. Either way, I get relief by distancing myself from you, guilt free.

— Parker Palmer