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# Pursuing the Best

*On missionary stages, retirement stages, and the folding table where I found what I was looking for*

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Before becoming a missionary, I spent my career as a consultant. In that world, the phone never rings for the second best. Only the best gets called back.

During missionary training, I was introduced to a framework for the stages of missionary life.

**Stage 1 — The Tourist Stage.** Everything is fresh and confirming. The strangeness of the place reassures you that you made the right choice.

**Stage 2 — Homesickness and Doubt.** The novelty fades. Longing for familiar comforts returns. The mounting frustrations make normal relationships hard to sustain.

**Stage 3 — Taking Root.** Real relationships with new neighbors form. A different kind of joy becomes possible — not the excitement of arrival, but the warmth of belonging.

This cycle repeated each time we moved to a new field. Knowing the stages didn't spare us the difficulty. But it let us move through it more quickly.

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Years later, I came across a similar framework for the stages of retirement.

**Stage 1 — Vacation.** Travel, hobbies, the things deferred for decades. Usually less than a year before the shine begins to wear.

**Stage 2 — Loss.** The job is gone — and with it, the status, the structure, the goals that gave shape to each day. Emptiness follows.

**Stage 3 — Trial and Error.** Attempts to find meaningful work. Repeated disappointment when the results fall short of what you used to be capable of.

**Stage 4 — New Roots.** A reassessment of what matters. Relationships with neighbors. Finding life's value not in achievement but in the ordinary work of being present to others.

I recognized the territory.

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After retiring and moving to New York State, I found my way to TaxAide — a program run by AARP and the IRS that provides free tax preparation assistance to low-income and elderly residents.

I sat across a table from people navigating a system that confused or frightened them. I rejoiced with people celebrating their refund checks the way others celebrate a lottery win — even knowing it was just their own money coming back to them without interest. I carried the worry of people who couldn't sleep because of a tax bill, alongside all the other things that kept them up at night.

For a while I served in management, overseeing the operation. Then I stepped down from those responsibilities. Sitting with neighbors through their returns — being present to their specific confusion, their specific life — turned out to be something I needed to do myself, not supervise.

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I came looking for the best.

I found it here — at a folding table in the Hudson Valley, with a neighbor's tax form between us.

The greater the difficulty, the greater the joy.

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## Small Group Discussion Guide — Church Community

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The story's arc is quiet but complete: a man who spent his life pursuing the best descends from Korea University professor to Congo and Nepal missionary to TaxAide volunteer in upstate New York — and calls the last stage the best. The two stage-frameworks are maps he used to navigate that descent without losing himself. The discussion task is to take seriously both the descent and the claim at the end: the greater the difficulty, the greater the joy.

### Young Adults (20s–35)

#### Opening (5 min)

Is there a framework or a map — a set of stages, a pattern someone described to you — that helped you navigate a transition or a difficult period? What made it useful? What did it miss?

#### Discussion (20 min)

1. Dr. Park says that knowing the stages of missionary life didn't spare him the difficulty of Stage 2 — the homesickness, the doubt, the feeling of being used — but it let him move through it more quickly. What is the difference between being spared difficulty and being equipped to move through it? Which do you tend to seek?
2. The retirement framework's Stage 3 is 'trial and error' — attempts to do something meaningful that keep falling short of expectation. What makes expectations the obstacle in that stage? Where do those expectations come from? And what would it mean to reassess them rather than try harder to meet them?
3. Dr. Park stepped down from management in TaxAide. He didn't want to oversee the operation; he wanted to sit across the table. That is a specific choice to give up institutional standing for direct contact with neighbors. In your own life: is there a position, a role, or a form of responsibility you hold that keeps you at a distance from the work you actually want to do?
4. The story opens with 'my life was always about pursuing the best.' It closes with a folding table and a neighbor's tax form and the claim that this is where he found it. What does 'the best' mean at the beginning of the story, and what does it mean at the end? What changed?

#### Scripture (10 min)

##### Philippians 4:11–12

*"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances... I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."*

Paul describes contentment as something learned, not received — a practice developed through experience of both plenty and want. Dr. Park's story is the same: he learned what the best actually was by going through stages he could not skip. What is the thing you are currently learning that cannot be taught, only lived through? And what stage are you in?

#### Application (5 min)

Think about where you are right now — in work, in community, in faith. Which stage does it feel like? And what would it mean to know that the next stage will come — even if you cannot see it from here?

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## Adults (36–60)

### Opening (5 min)

In your professional life: when have you held a management or oversight role when what you actually needed was to do the work directly? What kept you in the management role? And what finally moved you?

### Discussion (20 min)

5. The missionary Stage 2 — homesickness, doubt, the frustration of feeling used — is described as the stage that makes maintaining normal relationships difficult. That last detail is specific: not just internal suffering, but relational damage. In your experience of major transitions, how has that period of doubt and frustration affected your closest relationships? And what, if anything, helped?
6. The retirement Stage 2 — loss of status, goals, and self-esteem — is described plainly, without embarrassment. Loss of status is usually not named directly; people say they miss the work, the colleagues, the purpose. Dr. Park names the status. What does it mean to be honest about mourning status? And what is required of a community to hold space for that grief without shaming it?
7. Dr. Park recognized the retirement stages because they resembled the missionary stages. He had navigated those before. In your own life: what transition from an earlier period has equipped you to navigate a current or coming transition more quickly? What did you carry forward?
8. He stepped down from management to sit at the table. He is now in his seventies, a former Korea University professor and missionary to Congo and Nepal, sitting across from an elderly neighbor with a W-2. What does that image say about the direction of a life well-lived? Is descent the right word for what he has done?

### Scripture (10 min)

#### Ecclesiastes 9:10

*“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.”*

Qoheleth is not calling for heroic labor. He is calling for full presence to the work that is actually in front of you — not the work you wish were in front of you. Dr. Park found that the tax return in front of him, with all its difficulty, produced more joy than the management role above it. What does ‘whatever your hand finds to do’ mean in your current stage? And are you doing it with all your might, or are you waiting for something more worthy of your effort?

### Application (5 min)

Name one task or role in your current life that you have been treating as beneath you or as a temporary placeholder. What would it look like to do it with all your might instead?

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## Seniors (60+)

### Opening (5 min)

Where are you in the retirement stages — honestly? And looking back, where are you in the missionary stages, if you have experienced any of those transitions?

#### Discussion (20 min)

9. The retirement Stage 2 is described without softening: loss of status, goals, and self-esteem; emptiness and depression. Dr. Park does not skip over it or reframe it as an opportunity. He names it. At this stage of your life: have you been through this? Are you in it? And what has been or would be most helpful — not to escape it, but to move through it?
10. Stage 4 of retirement involves reassessing personal expectations and relationships with neighbors. It's a stage where individuals find new life values in helping others. But Dr. Park doesn't describe this as a stage he reached and finished. He describes it as something he is in, still deepening. What does it mean to be in Stage 4 and still finding your way forward, rather than having arrived?
11. Dr. Park stepped down from management so he could sit at the table. In your own community: what is the table equivalent — the direct, humble, sometimes difficult work of presence with a specific neighbor — that you have been managing rather than doing? Is it time to step down?
12. 'The greater the difficulty, the greater the joy.' That is an unusual claim. Most people expect difficulty and joy to trade off. Dr. Park says they increase together. Does that match your experience? And if so, what kind of difficulty is he describing — not all difficulty produces joy?

#### Scripture (10 min)

##### Matthew 25:40

*"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."*

The elderly neighbor with the confusing tax form is Christ in this story. Dr. Park does not say this explicitly. But the structure is there: the person most easily overlooked, most easily dismissed as a manageable administrative task, is the one in whose face Christ is present. How does that reframe the work of helping someone with their taxes? And how does it reframe the work you are doing, or not doing, with the specific neighbors in front of you?

#### Application (5 min)

Name the specific neighbor, the specific task, the specific difficulty in your life right now. Is this the place where the joy is? And if not — why not?

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## Small Group Discussion Guide — Community Groups

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No faith background needed. This story is about two things: stage frameworks as navigational tools for major life transitions, and the specific choice to descend from institutional standing to direct, unglamorous work with neighbors. Both are worth examining. The discussion task is to take the stage frameworks seriously as maps while also asking what they miss, and to take the TaxAide conclusion seriously as a claim about where joy is actually found.

#### Young Adults (20s–35)

##### Getting In (5 min)

Has someone given you a framework for a transition you were going through — stages of grief, stages of culture shock, stages of anything — and did it help? What did it do, and what couldn't it do?

#### **Discussion (20 min)**

13. Dr. Park says the stage framework didn't spare him Stage 2 — the doubt, the homesickness, the sense of being used — but it let him move through it more quickly. What is the value of knowing you're in a stage rather than just suffering? And what can't a framework give you that you still have to find yourself?
14. The retirement frameworks's Stage 3 — trial and error, repeated disappointment when results fall short of expectations — sounds like a lot of people's professional lives in their thirties. When does the problem become the expectations rather than the results? And how do you reassess expectations you didn't choose, that came with the role or the community?
15. Dr. Park stepped down from TaxAide management to sit at the table. He gave up the oversight role to do the direct work. In your field or context: what is the cost of doing the direct work rather than managing it? What does institutional standing protect you from? And what does it keep you from?
16. 'The greater the difficulty, the greater the joy.' Is this true? Under what conditions? What kind of difficulty produces joy, and what kind just produces suffering?

#### **Going Further (10 min)**

Many immigrant and diaspora communities include people at various stages of the retirement transition — some who were professionals in their country of origin and now work in lower-status roles, some who are navigating the Stage 2 loss in a context where that grief is particularly complicated. What does the TaxAide story say to someone who has already descended involuntarily — not by choice, but by migration or circumstance?

#### **One Step (5 min)**

Name the stage you are in — in any major transition you are currently navigating. And name one thing you know about the next stage that might help you move through this one.

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### **Adults (36–60)**

#### **Getting In (5 min)**

In the middle of your career: is there a role, a responsibility, or a form of institutional standing that is keeping you at a distance from the work you actually want to do? What would it cost to step down?

#### **Discussion (20 min)**

17. Dr. Park's story has a quiet structure: a man who pursued the best his entire career descends, step by step, to a folding table in upstate New York — and names that as where the best is. What does that arc say about the relationship between status and meaning? Is it always a descent toward meaning, or is that a particular story with particular conditions?
18. The missionary Stage 2 — the frustration of feeling used — is named without apology. That phrase is unusual: most descriptions of mission work or nonprofit work or caregiving work don't name the feeling of being used. What produces that feeling? And what, if anything, resolves it — not by making the feeling go away, but by changing its meaning?
19. Dr. Park recognized the retirement stages because they resembled what he'd already navigated. That is a specific form of wisdom: not immunity from difficulty, but orientation within it. What transitions in your life have given you this kind of orientation for current or coming transitions? What do you know now that you didn't know then?

20. He is now in his seventies, doing tax preparation for low-income elderly neighbors. He describes it as his channel of joy. What made it possible for him to find joy in work that most people would find beneath them or at least unsexy? What formation, what experience, what practice produced that capacity in him?

#### **Going Further (10 min)**

In communities shaped by migration: the descent from one career to another — the doctor who drives a taxi, the engineer who manages a convenience store, the professor who works in a factory — is often experienced as loss and shame rather than as a path to Stage 4. What would it take for communities to hold the lower-status work not as a failure of the transition but as a possible path to the deeper joy Dr. Park describes?

#### **One Step (5 min)**

What is one thing from today's discussion you will carry?

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### **Seniors (60+)**

#### **Getting In (5 min)**

Honestly: which retirement stage are you in? And which stage of the missionary framework, if any of those transitions have been part of your life?

#### **Discussion (20 min)**

21. Dr. Park names the retirement Stage 2 plainly: loss of status, goals, self-esteem; emptiness and depression. Most communities around seniors don't name it this directly. What happens when it is named? What becomes possible that couldn't happen when it was unspoken?
22. Stage 4 is described as a phase where individuals find new life values in helping others. But for Dr. Park, it's not a phase he finished — it's a daily practice he is still deepening. What is the difference between arriving at Stage 4 and living in Stage 4? And what does it mean that the work of Stage 4 apparently produces more joy the harder it gets?
23. He stepped down from management so he could sit at the table. That is a specific choice available to people in Stage 4: to give up oversight for presence. What is the management role you have been holding onto — the position that keeps you above the work — that might be time to release so you can sit at the table?
24. Looking back: what was the best thing you pursued, and where did you find it? Does Dr. Park's answer — a folding table and a neighbor's tax form — resonate with what you have found, or does it challenge it?

#### **One Step (5 min)**

Share one thing from this story you will carry.

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## **Small Group Discussion Guide — Immigrant and Multicultural Communities**

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Both stage frameworks Dr. Park describes apply with particular force in immigrant and diaspora communities: the tourist-to-roots arc of arriving somewhere new, and the career-to-meaning arc of major professional transition. Many people in these communities have navigated both, often involuntarily and without the stage

framework as a map. This discussion asks what it means to find the best in the work that is actually available — not the work you planned for.

## All Ages

### Getting In (5 min)

When you came to this country or moved to a new city: which of Dr. Park’s missionary stages did you go through? Are you still in one of them? And did anyone give you a map?

### Discussion (20 min)

25. Dr. Park’s Stage 2 in missionary life includes ‘the frustration of feeling used.’ In many immigrant contexts, that frustration is structural rather than incidental — people are brought in for their labor, not welcomed for their whole selves. How does that frustration change when it is named, framed as a stage, rather than taken as a permanent condition or a personal failure?
26. Many people in immigrant and diaspora communities have already experienced a version of the retirement Stage 2 — the loss of status, goals, and professional identity — not at retirement but at immigration. The doctor who becomes a hospital orderly. The engineer who works in maintenance. What does Dr. Park’s framework offer to someone who descended involuntarily, decades before retirement?
27. Dr. Park’s Stage 4 is reached through trial and error and reassessment. For people who descended involuntarily, is Stage 4 still possible? What does it look like when it is? And what communities or conditions make it possible rather than foreclosed?
28. He sits at the table in TaxAide and says it is his channel of joy. What makes work a channel of joy rather than just work? Is it the difficulty? The relationship? The fact that he chose it freely? And what does ‘the greater the difficulty, the greater the joy’ mean for people who did not choose the difficulty they are in?

### Going Further (10 min)

**Facilitator note:** *This section can open some of the most painful conversations in any immigrant or diaspora group: the loss of a profession, an identity, a form of standing that was left behind and never fully recovered. The facilitator’s task is to hold that grief with full weight while also making space for the possibility that Stage 4 — new roots, new values, joy in direct service — is genuinely available, even to people who descended involuntarily.*

For those who have experienced involuntary descent — loss of professional standing through migration, circumstance, or structural exclusion: where are you in the process of making meaning from that descent? Not reconciling yourself to it, but finding the table that is actually in front of you — and whether it might be a channel of joy.

For those who are helping others navigate this transition: what does Dr. Park’s story offer as a model? What does he do that you could do for someone else in Stage 2 or Stage 3?

### One Step (5 min)

Finish this sentence: “The table that is actually in front of me — the work that is genuinely available to me, with a specific neighbor — is \_\_\_\_\_. What I want to do with it is \_\_\_\_\_.”

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## Leader’s Guide

*For Church Groups and Community Groups*

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## In Dr. Park's Own Words

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*"I have spent my life moving through stages.  
Each time I arrived somewhere new, I thought I was finally at the best.  
And each time, the stage that looked like an ending  
turned out to be an opening.  
The folding table is not where I expected to find the best.  
But the greater the difficulty, the greater the joy.  
I have learned this slowly.  
I am still learning it."*

### Reflection questions from Dr. Park:

29. Which stage am I in right now — in any major transition I am navigating?
30. What role or position am I holding onto that keeps me above the table rather than at it?
31. What is the most difficult work in my life right now, and is that where the joy is?
32. Who in my community is in Stage 2 of either framework, and what does that person need from me?

## What This Story Is Really About

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The story has one arc and one claim, and both need to be held:

- The arc: Dr. Park spent his life pursuing the best — Korea University, Congo, Nepal, New York. Each move was a step down in conventional prestige. The arc ends at a folding table in upstate New York with a neighbor's tax form. And the story names that as where the best was found.
- The claim: 'The greater the difficulty, the greater the joy.' This is not a consolation. It is a specific theological and experiential claim about the relationship between difficulty and joy. It needs to be examined, not just admired.

The two stage frameworks are maps, not the territory. Their function in the story is to show how Dr. Park navigated the descent without losing himself: by knowing the pattern, he could move through the difficult stages more quickly. The facilitation task is to use the frameworks as entry points into the personal question: what stage are you in, and what do you know about what comes next?

## A Note on the Stage Frameworks

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The missionary stage framework is widely taught in mission preparation contexts. The retirement stage framework Dr. Park heard in a TED Talk has parallels with documented research on retirement transitions. Neither framework is presented as scripture or absolute truth — they are pattern-maps that proved useful.

The most important single insight from the missionary framework is the one Dr. Park names: knowing the stages doesn't spare you Stage 2, but it lets you move through it more quickly. That is the transferable wisdom. In any

major transition, the person who knows ‘this is a stage, not a destination’ navigates it differently than the person who thinks they have arrived at a permanent state.

For the retirement framework, the most important moment is Stage 3 — trial and error — because it is the stage where expectations become the obstacle. People keep trying to find work that matches their former standing or their former capacity. The reassessment that opens Stage 4 is not giving up: it is discovering that the best is available in a different form than expected.

## How to Open the Session

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For all groups:

“Before we read the story, I want to ask where you are. Think of any major transition you have navigated or are currently in — moving to a new country, changing careers, retiring, starting over. Pick one. And ask yourself: which stage am I in? You may not have a name for it yet. We’ll read a story that might give you one.”

Read the story. Read the two frameworks slowly, pausing between stages. After the TaxAide paragraph, pause before the final quote block. Let the image sit: the folding table, the neighbor’s tax form.

**Facilitator note:** *The opening question works because it puts people inside their own transition before they encounter the frameworks. When the stages are named, people often recognize where they are with immediate relief — ‘I’m in Stage 2 and I thought it was permanent.’ That recognition is itself the story’s first gift.*

## Watch for These Three Risks

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### Risk 1: The stage frameworks become the whole discussion

What it looks like: The group spends the session analyzing the frameworks, comparing them to other stage theories, discussing whether they are accurate — and never arrives at the personal question or the TaxAide conclusion.

Why it matters: The frameworks are scaffolding, not the story. The story is the arc: from pursuing the best to a folding table, and the claim that this is where the best was found. If the discussion never leaves the frameworks, the story has not been received.

Redirect: “Let’s use the frameworks as a way in. Where are you in them? And then: Dr. Park ends at a folding table doing tax preparation. He says the greater the difficulty, the greater the joy. What do you make of that claim? Is it true? Under what conditions?”

### Risk 2: The descent is romanticized or treated as a universal prescription

What it looks like: The group concludes that real meaning is always found in lower-status work, that ambition is suspect, and that everyone should step down from management to do direct service. This turns a personal story into a universal prescription and ignores the specific conditions that made Dr. Park’s descent meaningful.

Why it matters: Dr. Park’s descent was chosen, informed by decades of formation, and arrived at through specific transitions. Involuntary descent — migration, job loss, illness — does not automatically produce the same joy. The claim is not that lower-status work is inherently better. It is that this particular work, at this particular table, with these particular neighbors, is where he found the best. The discussion needs to hold the specificity.

Redirect: “Dr. Park chose to step down. Many people in immigrant and diaspora communities descended involuntarily. Does his story apply to them? What is the same? What is different? And what conditions make it possible to find Stage 4 after an involuntary descent?”

### Risk 3: ‘The greater the difficulty, the greater the joy’ is left unexamined

What it looks like: The final line is received as a nice thought, a closing benediction, something to feel good about. No one sits with the claim itself: is it true? What kind of difficulty? And what is the mechanism — why would difficulty increase joy rather than decrease it?

Why it matters: This is the story’s theological claim and it is not self-evident. It contradicts a great deal of how most people think about difficulty and joy. Dr. Park has earned it through decades of formation, but he is offering it to readers who may not have the same foundation. The discussion needs to examine it, not just receive it.

Redirect: “Is it true that the greater the difficulty, the greater the joy? Under what conditions? What kind of difficulty is Dr. Park describing — not all difficulty produces joy? And what does it take to reach the point where that equation holds for you?”

## Notes for Specific Groups

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### People approaching or navigating retirement:

This story offers the retirement frameworks as a gift rather than a diagnosis. For people in Stage 2 — the loss and emptiness — the most important thing the facilitation can do is name it without shame and hold Stage 4 as genuinely available. For people in Stage 3 — repeated disappointment when results fall short of expectation — the question worth sitting with is where the expectation came from and whether it can be reassessed without being experienced as surrender.

### Immigrant and diaspora communities:

Many people in these communities have experienced involuntary descent — the doctor who became an orderly, the lawyer who became a bookkeeper, the professor who worked in a factory. Dr. Park’s chosen descent and their involuntary descent are not the same. The discussion should hold both: what is shared (the possibility of Stage 4, the discovery that direct service can be a channel of joy) and what is different (the conditions of choice, the grief of involuntary loss that may not yet be resolved).

### Church and mission-engaged groups:

The missionary stage framework will be immediately recognizable to anyone who has done cross-cultural service. The key question for these groups is the transfer: does knowing the stages actually help you navigate them, as Dr. Park says? And have you used your experience of navigating them to help others in Stage 2 move through more quickly? That is the specific form of neighboring this story asks of people with mission experience.

### Intergenerational groups:

The two frameworks operate at very different life stages. Younger people in the room may be in the missionary stages of a new place or new community. Older people may be in the retirement stages. The conversation worth having across the generations: what does the person who has navigated these stages owe to the person who is currently in Stage 2? What is the specific gift of knowing what comes next — and how do you offer it without dismissing the difficulty of where someone is right now?

## Closing the Session

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For all groups, close with the arc:

“Dr. Park spent his life pursuing the best. He ended up at a folding table in upstate New York with a neighbor’s tax form. And he says: this is where I found it. The greater the difficulty, the greater the joy.”

“What is the table that is actually in front of you? Not the table you planned for. The one that is there. And is it possible that the best is available there — at this stage, in this difficulty, with this specific neighbor?”

Church groups: close with Philippians 4:11–12. Ask: “Paul says contentment is learned, not received. It comes through the experience of plenty and want, not despite it. What are you currently learning that cannot be taught, only lived through? And what stage are you in?”

Community groups: close with: “Dr. Park’s map showed him the stages before he entered them. What map do you have for the transition you are in? And if you don’t have one — is there someone in this room who has already navigated it and could give you one?”

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*I came looking for the best.*

*I found it here, at a folding table in upstate New York,  
with a neighbor’s tax form between us.*

*The greater the difficulty, the greater the joy.*

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