Feature Book Review

Bring Your Self to Work Day—Every Day

Review of: *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, 10th anniv. ed., by Parker J. Palmer; 2007; 248 pp.; John Wiley & Sons (San Francisco); ISBN-13: 978-0-7879-9686-4; and *The Courage to Teach Guide for Reflection and Renewal*, 10th anniv. ed., by Parker J. Palmer with Megan Schribner; 2007; 178 pp.; John Wiley & Sons (San Francisco); ISBN-13: 978-0-7879-9687-1

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VIVID IMAGES FROM THE COURAGE TO TEACH

I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illumined by the lightning-life of the mind—then teaching is the finest work I know.

But at other moments, the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused—and I am so powerless to do anything about it—that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent sham. Then the enemy is everywhere: in those students from some alien planet, in that subject I thought I knew, and in the personal pathology that keeps me earning my living this way. What a fool I was to imagine that I had mastered this occult art—harder to divine than tea leaves and impossible for mortals to do even passably well! (p. 1).

FINDING OURSELVES: FINDING COURAGE

It was the power of the passage above that initially drew me to Parker Palmer's book. His exquisite description of teaching highs and lows resonated with my own teaching experiences, first as a middle school science teacher and now as a professor of science methods for preservice and in-service teachers. When I shared this passage with colleagues, it seemed to describe an experience that is common to many of us.

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Palmer describes for whom this book will be of value: those of us who have both good days and bad days in teaching, and who care deeply enough about the bad days that we want to have fewer of them. He argues that we bring *ourselves* and all that we are to the art of teaching. Thus, increasing the

frequency of the days of joy and decreasing the frequency of the days of darkness require that we explore on a daily basis who we are and what we bring to teaching. It is this self-examination that requires the *Courage to Teach*.

Traditionally, it has been more common to focus on *what* is taught or *whom* we teach. Palmer asks us, instead, to reflect on the “who” question. Who is the self that teaches? To answer this question, Palmer suggests that we must examine our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual selves. Before we all leap into the fray over that last one, Palmer’s definition of the spiritual aspect of self will be reassuring: “the diverse ways we answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates the love and work, especially the work called teaching” (p. 5). For me, this definition resonates with the initial quotation and with images of colleagues and students with whom I have shared the excitement of that learning.

While the later chapters focus on community, the early chapters focus on the individual teacher. Chapter 1 considers how to reconnect with the self who is doing that teaching, exploring what originally drew you into teaching, how you connect with students, and how you connect with the subject. What Palmer asks of us is not easy. Teaching creates vulnerability, and thus requires courage. However, if we disconnect to protect our vulnerable selves, then we are working at a distance from both our students and our content, risking loss of the passion that initially brought us to our work. Unfortunately, this disconnect is often reinforced by the traditional culture of academia, which is examined in Chapter 2.

Palmer explores traditional academic culture, referencing Jane Tompkins’ “pedagogy of the distressed” and the distinction between the effort to effect the highest degree of student learning and the desire to perform our best in class, i.e., to appear well prepared and knowledgeable. This tension, of course, is exacerbated by the overreliance on student course evaluations found in most universities today. Examining these motivational factors in ourselves is another area that requires considerable insight and courage. When Palmer described the fears that he and others often experience in the classroom, I had to laugh; I experience those fears, but I thought it was only my own failings and insecurities. He focuses on how teaching from this often-unacknowledged fearful place in ourselves can blind us to the fears of our students and cause us to misread those fears as sullenness, defensiveness, withdrawal, and so on, or to fail to understand the source of these characteristics when we do interpret them correctly. Palmer points out that, before we can help our students recognize and move beyond their fears to become the best learners they can be, we must recognize and come out from behind our own fears to become the best teachers we can be. Palmer goes on to say that the real fear is that of having genuine encounters with ourselves and with others; instead we hide behind abstract discussions of teaching techniques. He suggests that we have more discussions with colleagues about these fears, rather than about teaching techniques. But, some would say, our own emotions should be dealt with privately, and the fears of our students are neither our problem nor our responsibility! Again, much research has dispelled this Cartesian falsehood. If our students’ fears impact the learning that goes on in our classroom, then it behooves us to attend to them. Intellect and emotion work hand-in-hand to create optimal learning and teaching.

The point of Chapter 3 is that the terrible days of teaching come from not embracing, or not being willing to accept, the tensions created by the paradoxes of teaching. We often rush into the silences in our classes, providing answers prematurely or, worse yet, refusing to ask our students any thought-provoking questions. Of course, such behavior makes our classes run more smoothly, but often at the expense of shallow teaching and shallow connections with our students.

After exploring the individual aspects of teaching, Palmer explores the ideal teaching and learning community. This examination includes analysis of both the concepts of *community* and *truth*. After discussing aspects of therapeutic, civic, and marketing models of community that both support and conflict with authentic education, Palmer rejects them, concluding that they do not lead to adequate examination of ideas and knowledge. His model of the community of education is one of a “community of truth,” in which the focus is on communication about the subject of study. He defines this community’s work as “sharing observations and interpretations [that are] far from . . . linear and static and hierarchical, [and are instead] circular, interactive, and dynamic” (p. 106). His ideal is a community of truth in which knowers are focused on a subject rather than specific objects and facts. A basic premise is that “*we know reality only by being in community with it ourselves*” (p. 106), rather than viewing the subject of our study as distant and separate from ourselves. In rejecting what he refers to as the “objectivist myth,” Palmer is clear that the community of truth remains a rigorous endeavor, with a dynamic “governed by rules of observation and interpretation that help define us as a community by bringing focus and discipline to our discourse” (p. 10). He is equally quick to reject relativism and absolutism as characteristic of the community of truth. Palmer’s community of truth is an image of ourselves, enmeshed in a reality much larger than we are, containing aspects of our study that have called to each of us. He refers to the work of Barbara McClintock through much of the book, and the degree to which her relationship to her work was scorned at the time, because she spoke of “having a feeling for the organism.” He rejects the imposed distance and boundaries between object and observers, while retaining the standards and rigor required of good science.

Having spent 30 yr of my educational life watching current teaching practices move from “teacher-centered” to “student-centered,” I appreciated Palmer’s discussion of “subject-centered” teaching in Chapter 4 as a moving away from *covering the field* to conveying the beauty and integrity of a subject to students. His discussion of the “subjects that evoked the teacher in us” (p. 149) was a point with which many will identify. For me, it is the order of science, the beauty of the relationships, that call me to teach. It is knowing that science always makes sense, that it always works. It is my knowledge that, when it does not appear to make sense or work, I just have to dig a bit deeper, learn a bit more. Whether you can spend a semester, a week, or a day taking the microcosm approach he suggests for conveying the essence of a field, it is rewarding for both faculty and students. I have seen explorations of the subject bring together groups of faculty in my own institution, both within and across departments.

The book ends with a detailed approach to learning in community, a way to develop a community of truth in your institution. The support of colleagues would, of course, go a

long way to sustain us during the hard days, and the wisdom available from the kind of learning community he describes would certainly increase the number of the positive days in an institution with the faculty learning community he describes.

THE NEW EDITION

The first edition of this book was written in 1997; Palmer has since established the Center for Courage & Renewal and has provided training to many professionals. In the Afterword to the 10th anniversary edition, he proposes what he calls “five immodest proposals regarding the education of a new professional” (p. 205). These proposals are oriented to developing teachers, professors, and others who will enter their

professional lives with a head start toward the community of truth that Parker Palmer’s book is advocating. As Palmer indicates, it takes courage to step out of old, comfortable ways, to come out from behind our walls, to leave behind our fears, and to acknowledge our students’ fears. He challenges us to find our authentic selves and to develop a reflective relationship with our subjects, our students, and our colleagues, thus discovering the courage to teach.

A teaching/discussion guide with a CD, *The Courage to Teach Guide for Reflection & Renewal*, is available. For individuals reading the book, I think the questions are fairly obvious and would not add a great deal to your personal reading of the book. If you were using the book in a graduate education course or a faculty reading group, the extended discussion probes and activities would be useful.