The Courage to Teach

by Parker Palmer
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reviewed by Rtie J. Pritchard, Nan Massengil, Sherri Merritt, & Andy Jackl

Parker J. Palmer's inspiring book, The Courage to Teach, (Jan. 1998) was the basic text of the 1999 Level II Institute of the Capital Area Writing Project at North Carolina State University. Although a reader can certainly benefit from a solitary study of this book, to focus on it in a learning community offers us the relational way of knowing that Palmer promotes: to "help us reclaim the capacity for connectedness on which good teaching depends" (p. 56). The integrity and identity of a good teacher, Palmer asserts, occur only when the person who teaches is truly present in the classroom and is deeply engaged in the lives of his or her students and the wonder and challenges of the common subject. In short, we teach who we are. In CAWP, each of us would develop this concept into a teaching credo.

In the pre-reading exercises we completed for Palmer's book, we explored who we are through personal lists and freewritings that were spirited by quotes such as these: "We do not merely find a subject to teach—the subject also found us" (p. 25). "Teaching is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives..." (p. 5). "Good teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young, and hospitality is always an act that benefits the host even more than the guest" (p. 50). "Every gift a person possesses goes hand in hand with a liability" (p. 71). "If we want to develop and deepen the capacity for connectedness at the heart of good teaching, we must understand—and resist—the perverse but powerful draw of the 'disconnected life'" (p. 35).

In Rosenblatt's terms, these quotes prompt an aesthetic reading (lived-through experience) of Palmer's book, rather than an efferent (fact-gathering) reading, which seems entirely in sync with Palmer's message of connectedness. We wrote about our "Aha!" experiences in our own education, what we know best about our students, good days of feeling connected, techniques we called up to get us through our bad days, the gifts our students give us, and the paradoxes and questions we face in teaching and learning. Embedded in our egocentric teaching stories are those spiritual questions we ask in our quest to connect with the largeness of life. Palmer calls these questions "spiritual" in the broad sense, even if they are not about God or angels:

- Does my life have meaning and purpose?
- Do I have gifts that the world wants and needs?
- Whom and what can I trust?
- How can I rise above my fears?
- How do I deal with suffering, my own and that of my family and friends?
- How does one maintain hope?

When such questions are evoked in public education, the deepest needs of the human soul to be connected are honored. Palmer points out that "evoked" is the proper verb, for the spiritual is always present in education whether we acknowledge it or not: "Spirituality—the quest for connectedness—is not something that needs to be 'brought into' or 'added onto' the curriculum. It is at the heart of every subject we teach, where it waits to be brought forth" (Palmer, Dec. 1998).

When Palmer tells a personal story, it always has a point larger than himself; as we teachers read his book, our own parallel stories were elicited and shared. Following are three accounts by high school English teachers of how Palmer's book spoke to the "inner landscapes" of their teaching lives. Nan Massengil writes about a personal and professional paradox that she faced in trying to demonstrate that she is a master teacher for National Board Certification; Sherri Merritt shares her courageous battle to be faithful in her own teaching to what she was professing in her doctoral dissertation; Andy Jackl describes how Palmer's concept of the "Community of Truth" found relevance in his teaching.

The Paradox of Teaching Who You Are
Nan Massengil
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I am a self-defined workaholic. Not only am I a workaholic, I am driven to be the best at whatever I attempt. It is for this reason that I recently found myself taking a Level II Writing Project while completing the National Board Certification process; both activities, I hoped, would augment and improve my teaching. Just as I was about to be overwhelmed by the surge of grading
and paperwork, the parent contacts and planning, we began to read *Courage to Teach* in the CAWP. As I struggled to complete everything I had begun, I found myself reassured by Palmer’s interpretation of teaching.

I particularly understood Palmer’s discussion defining the “paradoxes” of teaching. As I read, with stacks of ungraded essays at my side, I felt as if Palmer could see into my classroom, into my mind. Teaching for me had separated into the poles of success and failure. In addressing the National Board teaching standards, I felt as if I were failing my students so that I could be recognized as a “master” of teaching. Sounds like a paradox to me. If I were really the greatest master teacher, I would be reaching my students! I began the National Board Certification process because I felt confident that I am a good teacher. But as I worked through the process, I found myself doing some things in direct violation to my teaching credo. National Board Standards demand that I know my students personally; however, to demonstrate that knowledge, I had to write an extensive 15 page analysis which took my attention away from my classroom and students. To know my students personally, I needed to spend time with them, analyzing their responses to our activities and listening to their comments in class. Thus the paradox of proving myself a master teacher assailed me: should I spend more time on students or more time on the essays? In frustration, I found myself assigning things that would help me have time in the classroom to work on my essays. Busy work activities felt traitorous, as if I were cheating my students of “real” teaching. As I became more immersed in the requirements of the portfolio and the assessment test, my students became less important. I checked out movies from the library; I assigned in-class reading and long silent writing time; I sat at my desk and worked on National Board Standards. I was living a paradox: to prove I was a good teacher, I was violating everything I believed a good teacher to be.

Palmer asserts that as children we are trained to think in paradoxes: facts vs. feelings, community vs. solitude, and head vs. heart. Now at the completion of the process, I ask myself whether a test which tries to measure both the contraries of Palmer’s paradoxes, the facts and feelings of teaching, a test which endures to reach the heart of a teacher, can truly be valid. As I struggled to reach my students and my own goals, I found Palmer’s book a salve to my soul. He asked the very questions I was asking. The paradoxes he discussed fed directly into my classroom, condoning my right to ask questions, encouraging me to embrace the questions and showing me how to “think together” my idea of success and failure.

**Intellectual, Emotional, and Spiritual Paths to Good Teaching**

Sherri Phillips Merritt
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I began reading *The Courage to Teach* at a time when my courage was getting pretty low — while working on my dissertation. Because I did a qualitative action research study with four colleagues at my own school, I was particularly prone to reflecting on my own teaching, even while collecting and analyzing data. As a result, I felt the fear that comes with facing one’s teaching demons. With every teacher interview, with every student focus group, I realized everything I wasn’t doing right as a teacher. I could catch glimmers of who I ought to be as a teacher, but I felt that I was far from being there. I knew, however, that Parker J. Palmer had something to say to me when he wrote, “This book is for teachers who have good days and bad, and whose bad days bring the suffering that comes only from something one loves” (p. 1). I was indeed suffering through some of the bad days as I began a downward spiral of self-doubt about my own teaching.

The pain that I have felt the most often in my teaching the past few years stemmed primarily from the split I saw between myself as a teacher and myself as a graduate student. Reading Palmer’s book helped me see that the dichotomy I was creating (the theory-me versus the reality-me) was false and not even necessary. Gradually I began to see that I had been looking “out there” to improve myself as a teacher. I had been looking outside myself for educational theories and teaching techniques that I could blend together to make myself a better teacher. When the theory and the practice didn’t match, I became frustrated and felt like a hypocrite. What I was missing, though, should have been obvious: I had neglected to figure myself into the equation. My teaching needed to be bigger than just the theory behind it or the technique being used to deliver it: it needed to be a reflection of my own soul.

Palmer gives us permission to spend energy delving into ourselves when he writes, “...knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my
students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life — and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well” (p. 2). I needed to remember who I am — a decent person, a passionate person, someone who feels deeply about people and ideas. But I also needed to recognize that contradictions live inside us all. When I became willing to accept the paradoxes of my teaching self, and the messiness that comes with that, I found that my focus on theory-versus-practice was keeping my teaching on the intellectual level. I was avoiding going any deeper; as a result, I felt shallow as a teacher. Palmer argues that the inner landscape of the teaching life contains three important paths that must be taken — intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. For me, it was by recognizing both my intellectual attachment to the subject as well as acknowledging my emotional and spiritual self that I could come even closer to being a great teacher. These were insights I brought to our discussion of Palmer’s book at the CAWP Institute.

So much of the conversation teachers have with one another is of the “guess-what-happened-last-period” or “do-you-have-any-stuff-I-can-borrow-for-my-Odyssey-unit-next-week” variety. We already recognize in National Writing Project sites that we must dig deeper if we want to examine our teaching and our teaching selves. The Courage to Teach was an excellent tool for helping us do just that. We delved not only into our teaching but also our beliefs about teaching. We discussed how our philosophies differ from our practice at times and how problematic that can be. We attempted to give voice to some of our fears about teaching in an effort to better understand what we do and why we do it. We even tried to understand what it is that allows some of us to be assertive while others cringe in fear of confrontation. In short, we tried to find the courage to keep on teaching even when faced with problems in the classroom, self-doubts, and unanswerable questions.

By the time I had finished reading The Courage to Teach, I had also finally finished my dissertation. Amazingly, I had regained some of the courage I needed to face the task of being a teacher. Through my reading and the discussions we had in our workshop, I found the courage to embrace the contradictions in my teaching life, the courage to share my insights with my colleagues, and the courage to walk into my classroom and be myself.

A Different Type of Learning Environment
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In The Courage to Teach (Jan. 1998) Parker J. Palmer examines the concept of “community” in education, or, in other words, the environmental prerequisites necessary for successful teaching and learning. To this end, Palmer examines the three most common models of community with a critical and discerning eye, beginning with the therapeutic model, which underscores the need for intimacy in all meaningful human relationships. This model is of limited value for educators because we have too many students in our classes to establish deep rapport, and intimacy cannot be demanded or hurried. The civic model of community, on the other hand, calls for people to ignore their individual differences and unite for the common good. The model has roots thousands of years old, but Palmer notes that in a civic society controversial issues are settled by democratic politics, and the truth is often lost in negotiation, bargaining, and compromise. Lastly, Palmer discusses the relatively new marketing model, which perceives educational institutions as businesses that must satisfy their consumers — students and parents. But since education is more process than product, an outstanding teacher may often leave his or her students dissatisfied or angry as prejudices and misconceptions are challenged and overcome; feelings of discontent may in fact be the consequence of real learning and personal growth. Palmer then offers another model of community that he believes every educator should strive to create in his or her classroom: the Community of Truth.

The Community of Truth is a powerful concept with practical ramifications for classroom teachers. Once the concept is understood, it can change the way we teach in dynamic and exciting ways. To begin with, Palmer explains that most classroom environments are either teacher-centered or student-centered. In the teacher-centered classrooms the teacher is an “expert” in the content area and the students are expected to listen and learn. Unfortunately there are no ultimate authorities in our subject areas, and the most we can hope for is that our students will be able to memorize and recite our opinions, perceptions, and conclusions. The student-centered classrooms, by comparison, are powered by the “active learning” methodology, but any educator who has tried group work with students can tell you how easily the
learning process can degenerate or go astray.

To Palmer each of these environments in its pure form is a threat to learning: absolutism, which occurs when experts claim to precisely know all the answers, and relativism, which happens when we throw up our hands and announce that the answers depend solely on one’s own personal opinion. In teaching literature, the first threat is manifest when a teacher implies that there is only one preferred, correct reading of a text; the second threat surfaces when an impatient teacher gives up on students whose literary interpretations rest too heavily on their naive, esoteric responses.

Palmer’s compromise is ingenious in its simplicity. He proposes a “subject-centered” classroom in which there are no pure objects of knowledge, and no ultimate authorities. The very nature of truth, he submits, is “far from being linear and static and hierarchical... [it] is circular, interactive, and dynamic” (p. 103). In other words, the truth is always changing. Rosenblatt would say that it inheres in the negotiation between the subject/text and the reader. And since we can never reach any permanent conclusions about our subject matter, the truth is transformed from hard knowledge into an “eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline” (p. 104).

Palmer has revolutionized the way I perceive my own English classes and my role as a teacher. I was vaguely aware, as I strove to explicate the canon of literature, that I was only passing on my own “expert” conclusions about the works in question. Worst of all, I had so much confidence in my inability as a scholar that I had the audacity to claim that my interpretations represented the elusive truth. Now I know better. Real truth doesn’t flow from the mouths of experts; it originates from the object of study itself. My job is not to pass on the consensus of literary critics or summaries of my own research, for the value and meaning of a work of literature will vary greatly from student to student. My job is to use my energy, enthusiasm, and skill to propel the object itself into the center of our attention while creating a learning environment where we all “understand truth as the passionate and disciplined process of inquiry and dialogue itself, as the dynamic conversation of a community that keeps testing old conclusions and coming up with new ones” (p. 104). In a Community of Truth, then, knowledge grows from the interactive matrix created when teachers and students focus their attention on the object of study. Everyone involved becomes “knowers, teachers, and learners” (p. 107).

The concept of “community” in education represents a small portion of Palmer’s book, and many of his other ideas are equally brilliant and insightful. He challenges us, as educators, to reexamine the traditional approaches to education, to take a long and critical look at our own attitudes and perceptions, and openly admit to ourselves what is (and what is not) working in our classrooms. He also asks us to candidly evaluate the type of learning environment we are creating, either consciously or unconsciously, and what impact that model of community is having on the learning process. The need for self-evaluation and personal reflection is a powerful undercurrent in all the chapters, and is a prerequisite for the personal and professional growth the author is advocating. Read his book with an open mind and a willingness to learn. Parker J. Palmer can help you, as he has helped me, become a teacher in the Community of Truth.

References


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