



The Work of Parker Palmer

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In this short article I would like to introduce you to the work of Parker Palmer, an American educator whose books have inspired me in my research on supporting teachers. He does not concentrate so much on external support, but focuses on the inner life of the teacher. I will, for the most part, be drawing on his most famous book *The Courage to Teach* and his latest one *A Hidden Wholeness*.

Mirror to the Soul

In the *Courage to Teach* Parker Palmer's opening sentence is

'I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy.'

In the next paragraph he writes

'...But at other moments, the classroom is so lifeless and or painful or confused - and I am so powerless to do anything about it - that my claim to be a teacher is 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.'

And then two paragraphs later

'When you love your work that much - and many teachers do - the only way to get out of trouble is to go deeper in.'

More than any writer on education that I know he brings together depth psychology and spirituality in order to see teaching as a mirror of the soul. This article could just be quotes from his book so I will allow myself a couple more before going on to look at how he uses his approach with teachers.

'The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self knowledge - and

knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.....In fact, 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. When I don't know myself, I cannot know my subject - not at the deepest level of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth.'

Some kind of reflective practice is not for him a luxury, but a necessity for this self knowledge to happen. And he argues persuasively that unless we are willing to be vulnerable and not defend ourselves, we will resort to empty technique. He asks us to do something he considers alien to the profession - to talk to one other about our inner lives

Inner and Outer, Love and Fear, Subjective and Objective and Beyond Polarities

He comments on some of the assumptions that lie behind the drive for educational change - namely that it needs to come from factors external to ourselves; from budgets, methodologies, curricula and institutional restructuring. Continuing with the theme of inner and outer, he comments on educational institutions. Blaming them for our troubles perpetuates the myth that the outer world is more powerful than the inner. And these external structures would not have the power to divide as deeply as they do if they were not rooted in one of the most compelling features of our inner landscape - fear. He has an excellent section on the fearful teacher, and takes this further to look at how fear is embedded in our dominant way

of knowing - objectivism, which portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally from the thing we want to know. I remember many, many years ago (too many) writing in my experimental psychology finals paper before I walked out 'I am not a rat', and 'Is it not possible to know a thing better by loving it than not loving it?' a quote from Cezanne.

The logic of objectivism is that if we distance ourselves from something, it becomes an object; when it becomes an object, it no longer has life; when it is lifeless, it cannot touch or transform us, so our knowledge of the thing remains pure. The intuitive is derided as irrational, true feeling is dismissed as sentimental, the imagination is seen as chaotic and unruly, and storytelling is labeled as personal and pointless. As people become convinced that objective answers to all questions are possible, and as specialists emerge who are glad to give the answers, people begin to distrust their own knowledge and turn to authorities for truth. Those that have seen the Dead Poet's Society will remember how Robin Williams scoffed at this approach to poetry. I watch my 15 year old son try and turn himself inside out to give what the teacher wants so that he can get good grades. My other son left school at 14, unable or unwilling to adapt.

Palmer quotes an interview with Barbara McClintock the biologist, who won the Nobel Prize for her work with ears of corn which changed the map of modern genetics. She did not objectify her subject and over and over again she stressed the importance of having time to look, the patience to 'hear what the material has to say to you,' the openness to 'let it come to you.' A far cry from the idea of learning, taking in more and more knowledge from the outside at ever increasing speeds. At one school where I was running an Appreciative Inquiry event

for staff, it was not easy for them to hear my stressing the need to slow down. It was as if one part of their brain saw the gains as people began to connect more deeply with each other, and another wanted instant solutions. I noticed I got faster the longer I worked with them.

He goes on to say

'The real agenda driving objectivism is not to tell the truth about knowing but to shore up our self-aggrandizing myth that knowledge is power and that with it we can run the world.... Objectivism, far from telling the truth about how we know, is a myth meant to feed our fading fantasies of science technology, power and control.' (page 56)

'If we dare to move through our fear, to practice knowing as a form of love, we might abandon our illusion of control and enter a partnership with the otherness of the world.' (page 56)

He does not advocate mindless subjectivity of the 'whatever I feel must be ok because I feel it' variety, and points out how we think in polarities. If not objective, it must be subjective. He constantly invites us to hold the tension of opposites rather than go for simplistic solutions.

Community and Change

The second half of the book is about learning in community where he emphasises the interdependence of students and teachers. He uses the expression community of congruence which is facilitated by a willingness to make mistakes and talk about them openly. And he ends with some wonderful insights about change, recognizing that when visionaries meet resistance, they can feel frustration, resentment and even betrayal. His emphasis on authenticity encourages the individual to not accept the status quo and to take responsibility.

Because we so quickly blame our problems on forces 'out there', we need to see how often we conspire in our own deformation: for every external power bent on twisting us out of shape, there is a potential collaborator within us. When our impulse to tell the truth is thwarted by threats of punishment, it is because we value security over being truthful (page 34 A Hidden Wholeness).

He defines four stages of development for change. The first is for individuals make an inward decision not to keep compromising themselves. They find others. They go public and then put pressure on the system. Emphasising the power of personal authenticity he writes

'When we know that such power is within our reach, we may be less tempted to succumb to organisational gridlock, less tempted to indulge ourselves in the sweetness of despair.....An organisation is, at bottom, a system of social sanctions: do this and you will be punished, do that and you will be rewarded. But as soon as people decide that the institution's punishments are irrelevant, the institution's power starts to decline.....No punishment anyone lays on you could possibly be worse than the punishment you lay on yourself by conspiring in your own diminishment.' (page 167-171)

A final quote from this book

'People who start movements do so not because they hate an institution but because they love it too much to let it descend to its lowest form.' (page 170)

Questions, stories and programmes inspired by his book

His work has inspired thousands in America. I do not think it is very well known here, which I obviously think is a shame. Two related publications, inspired by his work,

are *The Courage to Teach – A Guide for Reflection and Renewal* and *Stories of The Courage to Teach*. The former takes each chapter heading in *The Courage to Teach* and asks questions related to the chapters, sometimes with a quote from the chapter first. Such questions include

- * Why did I become a teacher?
- * What do I stand for as a teacher?
- * What are some of my fears in the classroom? ...in relation to colleagues? ...in relation to my professional career?
- * How have I dealt with them? What have I learnt about myself and fear as a result?
- * Describe, in writing, a moment when things went so well you knew you were 'born to teach.'

Mentioning McClintock, the biologist, whose knowing came from, 'the highest form of love, love that allows for intimacy without the annihilation of difference' the question is asked,

· Does this kind of love have a place in education? If not, why not? There are over a hundred questions related to his writing.

Stories of Courage to Teach has dozens of moving accounts of courage, compassion, risk taking. It ends with a brief description of the *Courage to Teach* programme. The programme involves seasonal retreats spread over one or two years and focuses on the personal and professional renewal of teachers and others in education. It is built on the simple premise of 'We teach who we are.'

I rang up to find out more about them and was sent a copy of his latest book *A Hidden Wholeness – the Journey Towards an Undivided Life*. Much of the book is taken up with describing *Circles of Trust*. He defines

the purpose as one of supporting the inner journey of each person in the group, to help each person listen to his or her inner teacher, to make each soul feel safe enough to show up and speak its truth.

Some of the guidelines would go well for any group. No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.

He quotes Robert Bly saying

'Our disasters come from letting nothing live for itself, from the longing we have to pull everything, even friends, into ourselves and let nothing alone.' (page 51)

And continues

'Convinced that people lack inner guidance and wishing to 'help' them, we feel obliged to tell others what we think they need to know and how we think they ought to live.... In the face of our deepest questions – the kind we are invited to explore in circles of trust – our habit of advising each other reveals its shadow side....If the shadow could speak its logic, I think it would say something like this. If you take my advice, you will surely solve your problem. If you take my advice and fail to solve your problem, you did not try hard enough. If you fail to take my advice, I did the best I could. So I am covered. No matter how things come out, I no longer need to worry about you and your vexing problem.....The shadow side behind the 'fixes' we offer for issues we cannot fix is, ironically, the desire to hold each other at bay. It is a strategy for abandoning each other, while appearing to be concerned.' (page 117)

I am reminded here of Ram Dass's classic *How Can I Help* where he compares pity, a defensive reaction to suffering with compassion, a language of the heart. When Parker Palmer tells people about not offering advice they blurt out, 'Then what in heavens name are we going to do with each other for

the next two years. You've just excluded the only things we know how to do.'

He gives examples of highly resistant people who are left alone to find their way so that ultimately the group is holding them in a space where they are compelled to listen to themselves because they are not judged, confronted, diagnosed, counselled. Each person's transformation was deep and abiding because it came from within, made possible by a community that trusted the inner teacher and allowed space to hear its voice.

He stresses that circles of trust are not to be formed to solve problems. 'In our utilitarian culture, it is hard to hold fast to the notion that a circle of trust is not about solving a visible problem'. For many teachers that would be switch off time. I have found something similar in introducing Appreciative Inquiry where people want to rush on to planning before taking the time to really appreciate the best of the current culture.

He talks about the Catch 22 of joining a group. The very people who need it most often lead the busiest and most fragmented lives. A group could be seen as one more thing to juggle. He says, 'We must become

conscientious objectors to the forces that put us at war with ourselves.' I have just finished a supervision course where two of the senior practitioners had to overcome a sense of guilt at taking time away from clients. It was only by the third day that they began to see that the benefits were such that they would be helping their clients even more by giving themselves a space for reflection.

For me Parker Palmer stands for this space for reflection from which we can allow ourselves to speak and be our truth. We teach who we are is so simple and yet profound.

He ends with a story which for me sums up the essence of his work. (page 181)

'A pupil comes to the rebbe and asks, "Why does the Torah tell us to 'place these holy words upon your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?" The rebbe answers, "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And they are there until, one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in."



Further Reading

Palmer, P.J.(1998) *The Courage to Teach. Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Livey, R.C. (1999) *The Courage to Teach. A Guide for Reflection and Renewal.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Intrator, S.M. (2002) *Stories of the Courage to Teach.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Palmer, P.J. (2004) *A Hidden Wholeness. The Journey Toward an Undivided Life.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco