The Courage to Teach: Parker J Palmer

Parker J Palmer has been writing on the connections between learning, community, spirituality and teaching for many years. Born 1939 and raised in the States, he was initially set up for a career in academic life. However, he joined a theological seminary with a view to becoming an ordained minister. Despite his best intentions it became clear that he wasn't suited to the ministry and instead went back into academic life before then setting out, unexpectedly, into community activism.

Palmer's experience in Washington DC as a community organizer brought him into the role of teacher, working in community based education projects. After five years he was burnt out and left to take up study and reflection in Pendle Hill – a Quaker retreat centre. The year's sabbatical proved to be pivotal in shaping Palmer's direction and work. He began to be invited to talk about his ideas about teaching and its connection to soul and purpose.

As his work developed he became known for creating insight into the teacher's inner landscape and in doing so identified the importance of selfhood and significance of relationship in the role of teacher. His most influential development has been facilitating numerous teacher retreats in which mainstream school teachers engage in a personal development programme which explores and establishes the teachers' sense of self and purpose. Although clearly a man of faith – he became a Quaker – Palmer's work is not exclusively faith-based, and he incorporates the importance of integrity and identity within his concept of soul to account for professionals with and without a faith.

Central themes

Attending to the inner life of educators

In one of a number of memorable passages in *The Courage to Teach,* Parker Palmer dissects a fundamental problem with much of the discussion around educational reform:

> The question we most commonly ask is the "what" question – what subjects shall we teach?
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> When the conversation goes a bit deeper, we ask the "how" question – what methods and techniques are required to teach well?
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> Occasionally, when it goes deeper still, we ask the "why" question – for what purposes and to what ends do we teach?
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> But seldom, if ever, do we ask the "who" question – who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form – or deform – the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes? (Palmer 1998: 4)

We cannot hope to reform education, he argues, if we fail to cherish and challenge 'the human heart that is the source of good teaching' (Parker Palmer 1998: 3). For Palmer, good teaching is rather more than technique: 'good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher' (Palmer 2000: 11). This means that they both know themselves, and that they are seeking to live life as well as they can. Good teachers are, thus, connected, able to be in touch with themselves, with their students and their subjects - and act in ways that further flourishing and wholeness.

In a passage which provides one of the most succinct and direct rationales for a concern with attending to, and knowing, ourselves Palmer draws out the implications of his argument.

> Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together.... 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 do not know myself, I cannot know my subject – not at the deepest levels 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. (Palmer 1998: 2)

If we do not know who we are then we cannot know those we work with, nor the subjects we teach and explore. As educators we can work on this through things like keeping personal journals, exploring our feelings and experiences in supervision, talking with colleagues and friends, contemplation, mindfulness, prayer, and so on.

The Importance of Paradox

Palmer identifies six tensions within the learning environment, each of which is necessary for the educator to contain:

> **The space should be bounded and open.** Without limits it is difficult to see how learning can occur. Explorations need a focus. However, spaces need to be open as well – open to the many paths down which discovery may take us. 'If boundaries remind us that our journey has a destination, openness reminds us that there are many ways to reach that end'. More than that, openness allows us to find other destinations.
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> **The space should be hospitable and "charged".** We may find the experience of space strange and fear that we may get lost. Learning spaces need to be hospitable – 'inviting as well as open, safe and trustworthy as well as free'. When exploring we need places to rest and find nourishment. But if we feel too safe, then we may stay on the surface of things. Space needs to be charged so that we may know the risks involved in looking at the deeper things of life.
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> **The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group.** Learning spaces should invite people to speak truly and honestly. People need to be able to express their thoughts and feelings. This involves building environments both so that individuals can speak and where groups can gather and give voice to their concerns and passions.
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> **The space should honour the "little" stories of those involved and the "big" stories of the disciplines and tradition.** Learning spaces should honour people's experiences, give room to stories about everyday life. At the same time, we need to connect these stories with the larger picture. We need to be able to explore how our personal experiences fit in with those of others; and how they may relate to more general 'stories' and understandings about life.
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> **The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of community.** Learning demands both solitude and community. People need time

alone to reflect and absorb. Their experiences and struggles need to be respected. At the same time, they need to be able to call upon and be with others. We need conversations in which our ideas are tested and biases challenged.

The space should welcome both silence and speech. Silence gives us the chance to reflect on things. It can be a sort of speech 'emerging from the deepest part of ourselves, of others, of the world'. At the same time we need to be able to put things into words so that we gain a greater understanding and to make concrete what we may share in silence.

Taken from Palmer (1998) *The Courage to Teach*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 73 – 77.

The importance of community

Palmer reflects the commitment of other educators in emphasizing the importance of community for learning to take place. He extends his consideration by distinguishing three types of community. First, he recognizes the value of the therapeutic community with its emphasis on intimacy and self-exploration but notes a concern with how this might obstruct the connection between 'the stranger and strangeness'. Second he cites the value of civic community and its corrective to the therapeutic; the commitment to the public good and public mutuality. Finally, however, he maintains that the learning community is one that is based around the quest for truth;

> The hallmark of the community of truth is not psychological intimacy or political civility or pragmatic accountability, though it does not exclude these virtues. This model of community reaches deeper, into ontology and epistemology - into assumptions about the nature of reality and how we know it - on which all education is built. The hallmark of a community of truth is in its claim that *reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it*. (Parker Palmer 1998: 95)

Selected reading and references: Palmer, Parker J. (1983, 1993) *To Know as We are Known. Education as a spiritual journey*. A fascinating and influential exploration of education as spiritual formation. 'To teach', he argues, 'is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced'.

Palmer, Parker, J. (1990) *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring*, The early chapters explore the spirituality of work, creativity and caring in readiness for a series of six reflections on poems and stories that bring insights into 'the spirituality of active life'.

Palmer, Parker. J. (1998) *The Courage to Teach. Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*, Based on the premise that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique, but comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher, this book explores a number of themes central to informal education and to Christian teaching.

Palmer, Parker, J. (2000) *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, Fascinating series of essays exploring calling linked to the well-known Quaker admonition.

Palmer, Parker J. (2004) *A Hidden Wholeness; The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, This book 'brings together four themes ... the shape of an integral life, the meaning of community, teaching and learning for transformation, and non-violent social change.