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The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life.
By Parker J. Palmer. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

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With *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer inspires deep reflection and acti-
vates the imagination. The power to create enrichment is rare, yet Palmer
does this in every chapter. For this reason, the book is impossible to read
straight through or even very quickly. Veteran teachers will imagine actions for
improvement; new teachers will see a fresh spiritual foundation to consider.
Without doubt, readers will walk away from this book with new ideas and an
uplifted spirit. This is the means by which Palmer hopes to initiate educa-
tional reforms.

The first three chapters explore the inner domain of the teacher and of
learning. These early chapters attempt to bridge gaps that disconnect teachers
and students. Chapter 1 establishes the need for teaching from the heart and
for maintaining identity and integrity in our teaching. Chapter 2 describes and
analyzes fear common in academe albeit rarely spoken of candidly. Chapter 3
explores paradoxes in teaching and learning that are inherent and unavoid-
able yet that must be resolved for wholeness to occur. At the end of chapter 3,
readers are likely to accept the idea that conflict resolution can only occur
when we take "it into our hearts." Palmer says "this used to be called being in
the hands of God" (87).

Palmer also defines and uses *identity* and *integrity* as terms to support
the idea that teachers must become "more real by acknowledging the whole

of who [they] are" (13). He urges all teachers not to lose heart and to resist an "academic culture that distrusts personal truth" (17). Indeed, Palmer goes further by claiming that the academic preference for objectivity is the very force that causes students to write poorly. In his view, when students distance themselves from their ideas they "deform their thinking about themselves and their world" (18). To remedy this, he asks teachers to allow reality and power to reside in their inner world, in their heart, in their identity, in their integrity. These are brave words considering the distrust the academic culture has for any concept that seems based in emotion. Yet it seems imperative that if educational reform is to occur we must confront standard biases and procedures. We must enhance what we already trust by disrupting the existing dichotomies that disconnect us. Palmer wants teachers to "engage their students' souls." To do this we must first engage our own souls.

If we are to engage our own souls, we are required to resolve conflicts and face fears that fragment our own wholeness. Transcendence of fear is possible, but Palmer says the "only path [he] knows that might take us in that direction is one marked 'spiritual'" (57). Although the spiritual tone of the book is strong, Palmer takes an implicit approach to spirituality in pedagogy. Since my own research on spiritual practices in pedagogy has taught me how hard it is to present this topic to an academic audience, I was eager to see a direct and explicit discussion of this subject. Palmer only writes a few passages that use words like *God*, *spiritual*, or *sacred*, yet it is obvious that he is concerned with the academy's antipathy to anything "spiritual." Fortunately, he does not forsake the spiritual and does find a compelling way of presenting to this tough audience. He writes with a sense of discovery and excitement that flows from the spiritual, and he does so with a language that may be more acceptable to a doubting audience.

Palmer's ability to connect with his audience arises out of a long-standing relationship with academe, yet it also arises out of a strong knowledge of community-building. The second half of this book focuses on community—ways to grow an outer community from an inner life. He argues that the three current models of community we use—the therapeutic, civic, and marketing—fall short of our needs. The therapeutic model "exploits our fear of otherness by reducing community to whatever can take familial or friendly form" (91). The civic model embraces goals that promote the "common good" of community members and is governed by democratic means that call the majority to rule. Herein lies the threat to education's core mission, the quest for truth, for "truth is not determined by democratic means" (92). He says that the sun might still be circling the earth if we had counted the

votes on Copernicus and Galileo's ideas. The marketing model is also unsuitable to the quest for truth even as it "combines the personalism of the therapeutic with the pragmatism of the civic" (93). The main defect is the model's dependence on valuation systems that are questionable at best. Palmer aptly identifies that "good education is always more process that product, . . . [and students may go away] angry that their prejudices have been challenged and their sense of self shaken" (94).

For Palmer, "the hallmark of the community of truth is in its claim that *reality is a web of communal relationships and we can know reality only by being in a community with it*" (95). If we accept community as the matrix of reality, as Palmer suggests, then within education we should look closely at how the parts form the whole. As we do this, the subject matter of any class will take on a new position. Instead of flowing out of the teacher into the students, it should flow from all who bring inquiry to it. It is not objectified, but rather it is "available for relationship" (102). At the deepest level, students and teachers should be open to transcendence. We need to enter the subject's inner life and enter it with empathy (106). We cannot enter it with empathy if our hearts are closed and if we do not listen to one another.

The community of truth is also forwarded by "the grace of great things" (106). Palmer defines great things as "the subjects around which the circle of seekers has always gathered—not the disciplines that study these subjects, not the texts that talk about them, not the theories that explain them, but the things themselves" (107). Of course, there are threats to great things, namely, absolutism and relativism. To safeguard against these, Palmer suggests we "acknowledge the independent reality of great things and their power to work on our lives" (109). Again, readers will find Palmer bringing us back to our inner lives. If we are to see ourselves as great things, then we also need to seek the virtues available to the educational community: diversity, ambiguity, creative conflict, honesty, and humility (107). This is essentially a spiritual process.

Palmer further posits that "the health of education depends on our ability to hold sacred and secular together so that they can correct and enrich each other" (111). I completely agree, but others will need convincing. The word *sacred* is going to turn people away. In acknowledgment of this, Palmer addresses fears teachers have by defining *sacred* as "worthy of respect." Quite simply, Palmer wants us to "practice continuous respect for the great things of the world." This is a bold idea in today's academic culture of disrespect. In academia, we criticize rather than support or uplift one another; indeed, we train our students and prospective teachers to become ardent critical thinkers.

They soon learn that finding the weakness in a theory is a sign of intelligence while praise is received as a form of dull thinking. Palmer's community of truth would balance these tendencies and do it in the form of a celebration of great things. This is educational reform at its finest.

A skeptic might exclaim, Fine, but how do we meet these lofty goals? Expecting such a question, Palmer provides concrete, easy-to-follow instructions on various practices he says will facilitate a community of truth. Palmer wants us to evaluate teaching by being there and by spending more time talking to each other about our teaching. He claims that evaluation systems that do not seek to open the closed doors of our classrooms cannot be effective. Single-visit observations are insufficient since they do not provide the evaluator with enough context or information about the dynamics created by the students and teacher. He also wants students to participate more fully in the process of faculty evaluation than they currently do through an end-of-term course evaluation form. He suggests that we invite a colleague to sit in our class for several sessions and then to return to the class to discuss things with students. When he invites such evaluation, he leaves the class and lets the students talk freely with the observer. In other words, he opens his door to others and keeps it open. The observer can come in and out without prior invitation or notification. This process works for Palmer because he invites it, but I have doubts that it would be as successful for teachers who resisted it. Academics are too afraid to open their doors because it makes them vulnerable to the criticism the academy expects from evaluation. Palmer probably does not expect whole departments to embrace these practices without first testing them with a few brave individuals.

While the open-door policy may seem a little daunting to some, Palmer's small group workshops that facilitate "critical moments" will seem almost like fun. In this practice, teachers think about a critical moment they have experienced in the classroom and then place it in the context of a metaphor or image. This practice loosens inhibitions and creates distance between the teacher and the experience. It frees people to talk about their teaching in new terms. Palmer reports that people using this technique speak with candor and honesty. They are instructed not to counsel colleagues but only to speak about their own experience. He says that the "inquiry that goes on in these small groups takes us deeper than methodology, because as we listen to each other's stories, we are often reflecting silently on our own identity and integrity as teachers" (147). The emphasis here is on *listening* and *individual reflection* rather than on objective analysis or constructive criticism. It is an

inner, not an outer, process, and as such it has the potential to be a gentle form of educational reform.

Another practice that uses a gentle inner process dates to the 1660s and is borrowed from the Quakers. The "clearness committee" invites people to "help each other with personal problems while practicing a discipline that protects the sanctity of the soul" (152). A teacher selects committee members to sit and ask questions about his or her problem. Committee members do not criticize or offer advice. They ask open-ended questions that do not imply a correct or incorrect answer. Everything is kept confidential, and members may never approach the person with comments or suggestions outside of the meeting. My first response to this idea was to form my own clearness committee, so I asked several people in my department to participate. Several said they would, but no one ever followed up, not even I. Why not? Reluctance, fear, overwork? I know that I did not want to add to my colleagues' busy schedules. I also doubted whether my colleagues could refrain from their academic training of engaging in constructive criticism or analytic evaluation. I did not know if they actually could listen and ask the types of questions Palmer describes. I began to think that my clearness committee needed members who were friends not associated with the academy. I stopped then to reflect and recognized the fear and anxiety that Palmer says is pounded into academics. It is in me. I do not want it. I also know that I need courage to rid myself of it. I believe Palmer when he says that courage is in the heart if only I will let it guide my actions. This above all else is the message of Palmer's book.

The Courage to Teach is a successful book because it helps us confront fear. While I have been successful in confronting some of my fears, others are still elusive. When fear threatens to freeze my creativity, I let Palmer's vision whisper quietly to reawaken the courage in my heart. It was easy to integrate the concept of "great things" into my teaching. Likewise, assigning this book as required reading in a graduate-level teacher education seminar brought Palmer's ideas to others. But the hard work Palmer asks of readers is the inner work that we do for ourselves. It is this work that will deliver reform. I am ready now for Palmer's "open-door policy" for evaluation, and I am considering again inviting academic friends to serve on my clearness committee. Like Palmer, I believe that the inner world of teaching is a profound place to live. Its rich terrain holds great potential for educational reform and promises to promote and sustain our ability to grow. It takes courage in the heart to grow and reform education; *The Courage to Teach* has awakened that in mine.