

Palmer, Parker J. The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1998
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Parker Palmer invites you into his personal space as a friend through his writing style. His clarity and focus present ideas in a palatable manner that takes the edge off of uncomfortable and challenging issues. Dr. Palmer's academic background of philosophy, theology, and sociology provides him with keen insight into human nature and enables him to journey into a teacher's heart. This journey might also be appropriate for persons engaged in other occupations. Palmer's experience as a traveling teacher, lecturer, and writer has provided him with illustrations that bring to life the concepts he communicates. Palmer's writing has been described as "profoundly moving", "utterly passionate", "a mix of elegance, rigor, passion and precision." However, above all the writing is intensely personal and he joins with the reader to explore this community of truth.

Early in the book Palmer provides a map of the message he will convey in exploration of the question "who is the self that teaches?" He suggests that:

To chart a landscape fully, three important paths must be taken – intellectual, emotional, and spiritual – and none can be ignored. Reduce teaching to intellect, and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual, and it loses its anchor to the world. Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on one another for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best, and I have tried to interweave them in this book as well. (Palmer, 1998, 4)

Palmer does an excellent job of weaving an intricate tapestry of these elements in the text. To simply recite a list of the powerful concepts elucidated by this book would do violence to the warp and weave of this tapestry.

Parker's writing motivates us to engage instructor and learner in the kneading of great ideas and inquiry into the "mysterium tremendum"(Palmer, 1998, 111). We advance

purposefully into involvement, teacher and student joined in examination and inquiry into the mysteries, the vastness, and the nature of “great things”. With this intentional advance we become searchers that surround the subject and share the grace and power of “great things”. We carefully guard against absolutism and relativism so that those “great things” may not disappear from our sight and hearing.

Palmer inspires us to seek truth and sets before us an image of truth as “an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline” (Palmer, 1998, 104). We no longer have to fear that truth will change when we are a part of the conversation, inquiry, and dialogue held in the community. We can relax, and share, adding our voices to those of others.

Parker teaches us about “soft eyes” (113). He tells us that when we reflect and meditate, then we experience the openness and receptivity that allows us to float freely on the currents of the mysteries of sacred reality. Our thoughts can take flight through the netherworld of ideas and words, our flight silent on the currents of past, present, and future streams of thought. We are lifted in flight by the power of those that precede, accompany, and follow us in the turbid flow of ideas. We are strengthened by the journey and by engagement with Palmer in an educational enterprise that seeks to co-create a place of learning within the hearts of those we teach.

Palmer’s proposition that one teaches out of the inner self is a reaffirmation of the personhood of the teacher, while it challenges the reader to look deeper, understand more thoroughly, and recognize more clearly all facets of our inner nature. He encourages us by pointing out that a difficult and sometimes uncomfortable journey to the center of the “teacher’s fearful heart” (Palmer, 1998, 47) will inevitably lead to an enhancement of our integrity as

teachers through reconciliation and the balancing of failings with capabilities.

The over-riding premise of the book is that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique, good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 1998, 10). Palmer does not attempt to force his thinking into a how-to book for the teacher. Rather the author takes great pains to exemplify through personal anecdote, powerful encouragement, and presentation of intricate ideas the skills necessary to enable a teacher to search inwardly for the connections that empower teaching. He encourages the teacher to not only find those strengths but to capitalize upon them.

Palmer’s journey does not have to be a solitary or lonely one. His writing sweeps us into the journey as a participant in a community of learners. Together we explore new meanings and relationships with the thoughts of others and in anticipation we work our way through the murky landscape of intellect, emotion, and spirit (Palmer, 1998, 4). Throughout the journey Palmer’s thoughts break the stillness and give voice to the idea that “as I teach I project my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together (Palmer, 1998, 2)”. The pitch and timber of that voice is changed by perspective and reflection yet somehow still engaged and united with our fellows who speak with their emotions and their intellect, as we inquire into the community of truth. Palmer’s words are no longer trapped by paper and ink, but have lifted from the page and joined the flow of thought coursing in silent flight through the universe and we discover “We are at home in a universe that embraces both the smallness of ‘I’ and the vastness of all that is ‘not I’. . . integral parts of the great web of life” (Palmer, 1998, 58).

Who you are as a person is who you are as a teacher. Your unique qualities bring your classroom to life reflecting the strength of your inner self. It will also reflect your weakness.

Both are necessary to create a cohesive wholeness that defines what it means to be human.

Regardless of vocation we live out of our inner self and bring both strengths and weakness to our daily lives. For all of us examining this inner self can be the beginning of “living divided no more” (Palmer, 1998, 167). This final chapter offers us hope as Palmer concludes “So we come full circle to the power within each of us that in communion with powers beyond ourselves, co-creates the world, for better or for worse (Palmer, 1998, 183).”