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Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

The Courage to Teach. Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, by Parker J. Palmer (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998). xvii + 199 pages. \$22.00 paperback. ISBN 0-7879-1058-9. Reviewed by John Van Dyk, Professor of Philosophy of Education.

"This book," says Parker Palmer in the introduction, "is for teachers who have good days and bad, and whose bad days bring the suffering that comes only from something one loves"(1). So this is a book for me and all other teachers who love their craft. But what will *The Courage to Teach* teach us? More methods and techniques? A raft of practical tips for increasing the number of good days? "As important as methods may be," Palmer replies, "the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it"(5).

I am reminded of what Agnes Struik, an experienced Canadian educational consultant, once told me. "John," she said, "what we need in Christian education is not more philosophy, more learning theories, or distinctive approaches to teaching strategies. What we need to work on is helping our teachers get it all together." Agnes was referring to the teacher's inner self that so often seems threatened, disconnected, and fragmented. *The Courage to Teach* seeks to explore this teacher's inner self. "Knowing myself," says Palmer, "is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject"(2).

My review of this interesting and important book consists of three parts. First I will briefly survey the contents, which is no easy task. Palmer's writings are rich and multifaceted and force typical readers to enter an unfamiliar paradigm. To prevent misunderstanding I shall have to quote Palmer frequently. Secondly, I will try to identify some of the themes that appear to me to be particularly significant for us, Christian educators. And, finally, I shall raise a few critical questions and lingering concerns. It should be noted at the outset that *The Courage to Teach* generally assumes a college or university classroom. This is not to say that elementary and secondary school teachers cannot read the book with profit. These teachers, too, can benefit from Palmer's insights. But don't look for an abundance of examples from K through 12 classrooms.

A survey of the content

"Good teaching," Palmer begins, "cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher"(10). Good teachers, in other words, are good not because they use proven teaching methods, but because they possess strong personal

identity and integrity. Palmer defines these terms as follows:

By identity I mean an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self.... Identity is a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human. By integrity I mean whatever wholeness I am able to fit within that nexus as its vectors form and re-form the patterns of my life. Integrity requires that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not.... (13)

What might be the connection between identity and integrity? Palmer puts it this way: "Identity lies in the intersection of the diverse forces that make up my life, and integrity lies in relating to these forces in ways that bring me wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death"(13). Heavy, metaphorical language indeed! I do believe that Agnes Struik was talking about an integration of such wholeness, identity and integrity, when she said, "We need to help teachers get it all together."

The problem, according to Palmer, is that teachers quickly "lose heart," obstruct the integration of identity and integrity, and thus prevent a sense of wholeness. Teachers do so when they disconnect themselves from both their students and the subjects they teach. A main culprit here is an "objectivism" which claims that academic knowledge must be impersonal and external. Palmer tells the story of a student who reported that every time he used the personal pronoun "I" in a paper, the professor would knock off half a grade (18). How can there be connectedness between teacher, student, and subject matter when professors require such an objective, disconnected stance? To avoid "losing heart," Palmer recommends that we teachers resist the "objectivist" mentality through a number of means, including listening to the "teacher within," who speaks to us with a voice reminding us of what fits us and what does not, an inner guard that can be heard through "solitude and silence, meditative reading and walking in the woods, keeping a journal, finding a friend who will listen" (31, 32).

The second chapter, titled "Culture of Fear," is likely to be the most interesting and relevant to many teachers. "How and why," Palmer wants to know, "does academic culture [besides encouraging us 'to lose heart']

discourage us from living connected lives? How, and why, does it encourage us to distance ourselves from our students and our subjects, to teach and learn at some remove from our own hearts?"(35) Palmer suggests that the answer resides at two levels. First, "on the surface, the answer seems obvious: we are distanced by a grading system that separates teachers from students, by departments that fragment fields of knowledge, by competition that makes students and teachers alike wary of their peers, and by a bureaucracy that puts faculty and administration at odds"(36).

The second, more compelling reason, however, is fear. Palmer believes that "from grade school on, education is a fearful enterprise"(36). He perceptively describes the fear felt by both the teacher and the student. Of the teacher he says, "When a class that has gone badly comes to a merciful end, I am fearful long after it is over—fearful that I am not just a bad teacher but a bad person, so closely is my sense of self tied to the work I do"(36). What about the students? "I should have remembered from my own experience," Palmer shares with us, "that students, too, are afraid: afraid of failing, of not understanding, of being drawn into issues they would rather avoid, of having their ignorance exposed or their prejudices challenged, of looking foolish in front of their peers"(37).

In the remainder of this interesting and insightful chapter Palmer discusses three places where fear shuts down our capacity for integrity and connectedness (39). These places are found in the lives of our students, our self-protective hearts, and our dominant way of knowing. Regarding the lives of our students, Palmer is critical of our tendency to blame students for their lack of motivation or ability to succeed: "Our assumption that students are brain-dead leads to pedagogies that deaden their brains" (42). Actually, according to Palmer, students are marginalized people in our society, people who have reason to fear those in power and who have learned that there is safety in silence, a silence not born of stupidity or banality but of a desire to protect themselves (45).

Second, a fear that grips our self-protective hearts is our need to be popular with young people. "This fear is pathological" says Palmer. "It leads me to pander to students, to lose both my dignity and my way, so worried that the sloucher in the back row doesn't like me that I fail to teach him and everyone else in the room" (49). The third place where fear shuts down connectedness is in "our fearful way of knowing." Here the bugaboo of objectivism comes to the fore once again, the view that claims "that we can know the things of the world truly and well only from afar" (51). Objectivism fears the inroads of the subjective self. Palmer explains that "objective," detached knowledge is no knowledge at all.

Rather, knowing is always relational and always communal (54).

Palmer continues by shifting from the "landscape of the inner self" to the sort of community that good teaching and learning require, one that fosters connectedness. Palmer begins with his definition of teaching, already described in some detail in his earlier book *To Know As We Are Known*: "to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced" (90). To understand this definition we need to understand what Palmer means by "community" and by "truth." Palmer proposes a "community of truth," which he describes as follows: "This model of community reaches deeper [than existing models do] 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 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 community with it" (95).

But what is truth? It is not, as the objectivists would have it, a "set of propositions about objects" (101). Rather, truth is the "passionate and disciplined process of inquiry and dialogue itself, as the dynamic conversation of a community that keeps testing old conclusions and coming into new ones" (104). Education, consequently, cannot be a system of delivering propositions to students to be memorized and repeated; rather, education means the participation in a community of truth inquiring into the subjects that are available to us and to which we need to be connected.

If, according to Palmer, this community of truth can never offer us ultimate certainty—since certainty is beyond the grasp of finite hearts and minds (104)—have we not landed in a morass of relativism? Not so, claims Palmer. By rejecting the objectivist model, he insists, he has "not embraced a relativism that reduces truth to whatever the community decides, for the community of truth includes a transcendent dimension of truth-knowing and truth-telling that takes us beyond relativism and absolutism alike" (105). This "transcendent dimension" involves the role played by the "subject": "As we gather around the subject in the community of truth, it is not only we who correct each other's attempts at knowing, rejecting blurry observations and false interpretations. The subject itself corrects us, resisting our false framings with the strength of its own identity, refusing to be reduced to our self-certain ways of naming its otherness" (106).

This interaction with the subject shapes the character of the classroom community by means of what Palmer calls "the grace of great things," i.e., the significant subjects around which the teachers and students gather. As examples of such subjects he names "the genes and ecosystems of biology, the symbols and referents of

philosophy and theology, the archetypes of betrayal and forgiveness in loving and loss that are the stuff of literature...the artifacts and lineages of anthropology, the materials of engineering with their limits and potentials, the logic of systems in management, the shapes and colors of music and art, the novelties and patterns of history, the elusive idea of justice under the law”(107).

Building on his discussion of “subjects,” Palmer makes a case for “subject-centered education” in Chapter 5 (“Teaching in Community”). He rejects a “teacher-centered” model (with its concern about academic rigor) and a “student-centered” model (with its emphasis on active learning). Rather, the subject should be the center of our attention. The subject must have “a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and students alike accountable for what they say and do” (117). In such a classroom the teacher’s central task is to give the subject an independent voice (118), which is best done by way of “teaching from the microcosm.” Rather than “covering the whole field,” we need to select samples that represent the entire subject.

Chapter 6 (“Learning in Community”) focuses not on students but on colleagues. Palmer bewails the “privatization of teaching” (142) and recommends that teachers spend more time talking to each other, not only about methods and tips, but about “critical moments in teaching” and metaphors of teaching that can enrich our sense of self. There should be ground rules for dialogue among teachers. For one thing, we should not tell each other what to do, for “the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard” (151). Fostering faculty dialogue on a campus requires leadership, according to Palmer. Such leadership “offers permission and excuses for faculty who want to enrich their experience as teachers but do not know how to do so for themselves” (159). Palmer suggests annual workshops, establishing an on-campus “teaching consultant,” training students to be participants and observers in classes they are not taking for credit, and establishing a Quaker-like ‘clearness committee’ (153).

The final chapter of the book shifts from the practice of teaching to the question of educational reform. Understanding and implementing reform requires a distinction between organizations (representing order and conservation), and movements (reflecting flux and change) (164). Palmer encourages reform movements within organizational structures. He identifies four stages that effective and successful movements go through: (1) they begin with dissatisfied individuals; (2) these individuals find one another and form a community of congruence; (3) these communities go public; and (4) a system of alternative rewards emerges to sustain the movements’ vision (166).

What can Christian teachers learn from *The Courage to Teach*? The following themes seem particularly valuable, and could profitably serve as discussion points in staff development situations.

1. Good teaching cannot be merely a matter of technique. Palmer reminds us that teaching is more than a bag of tricks. Good teaching requires self-reflection and self-knowledge. Teaching effectiveness suffers when, as Agnes Struik put it, the teacher “doesn’t have it together.” We need to pay much attention to our inner selves. This is not to say that Palmer considers technique unimportant. To be used properly, technique must serve larger purposes. For Palmer this means that “as we learn who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes” 24).

2. Good teaching requires a sense of wholeness and connectedness. Palmer’s critique of turning subject matter into abstract irrelevance, disconnected from the students’ lives, is very much to the point, in my view. Similarly, we need to reflect on our own teaching practice, and on the extent to which we really engage our students in learning. And we must continually seek to counteract the fragmentation of curriculum.

3. Palmer’s view of knowledge should also positively resonate among us. Knowledge is not an accumulation of facts to be memorized and regurgitated. Knowledge involves a communal engagement with subjects.

4. Palmer stresses that education, both teaching and learning, must be a communal enterprise. I strongly endorse this perspective. *The Courage to Teach* represents a powerful antidote to the rampant individualism and unmatched competition so common in our educational institutions. Though we may differ on definitions, the idea of teaching and learning as a circle of participants in a “community of truth” is rich in potential, also for us working in Christian colleges and in Christian schools. This vision should encourage us to ask fundamental questions about the way we structure our classrooms, the assignments we give, the assessment procedures we practice, and the collegiality we foster.

5. Throughout the book we encounter numerous concrete recommendations worth noting. For example, how can we overcome the fear that often characterizes our classrooms? Palmer proposes that we consciously see our teaching as “an act of hospitality toward the young” (50). Or take his suggestion to explore the metaphors of our teaching. Palmer shares, by way of example, his personal teaching metaphor with us. When he is teaching at his best, he tells us, he is like a sheepdog: maintaining a space where the sheep can graze, holding the sheep together and bringing back strays, protecting the space from unwelcome intruders, and leading the sheep to new pastures when the grazing ground is depleted

(148). Examining and unfolding our own teaching metaphors will deepen our insight into "our inner landscape."

In spite of all these strong points, there remain concerns and worries. I single out the following as most significant. First, the book loses some credibility when we see Palmer repeatedly engage in a practice he himself roundly condemns: either-or thinking. He describes, for example, relativism vs. absolutism (109), teacher-centered vs. student-centered education (117), disciplined thinking vs. "lip-sync" conclusions (123) as mutually exclusive contrasts, even as contradictions, seemingly existing as polarizations with no gradations, variations, or interlinkages. At times Palmer appears to caricature these sharply contrasted poles—perhaps even transforming them into straw men. Similarly, Palmer's treatment of "paradox" is unconvincing. For example, he sees our need for both community and solitude as paradoxical (65). But could these needs not simply be construed as variations over time in different situations?

Second, while the descriptions of the fear students experience are surely on target, it seems to me that Palmer must address additional issues: Have students not become comfortable with this fear? Have they not come to expect it? I am thinking of the hidden curriculum: students experience fear, yes, but they also effectively learn to cope with it, by, for example, learning to con their teachers or to get away with the least amount of work for the highest grade, and so on. We must address not only the reality and causes of fear, but also the misguided ways in which both teachers and students seek to eliminate it.

Third, Palmer's analysis of the teacher's integrity and identity is insightful, yet more should be said. What roles, for example, do diverse learning styles and comfort zones play? What criteria do we use to determine "what fits or does not fit our inner selves"? Palmer makes no use of recent developments in personality and learning theory. Similarly, in his critique of objectivism and his proposals for "community of truth," Palmer does not refer at all to recent trends in constructivist thought and Postmodernism. In some ways, the objectivism he decries might well turn out to be largely a straw man.

Fourth, the answers Palmer proposes are incomplete. Consider, for example his suggestions about (a) the

"inner self," (b) knowledge, and (c) the "subject." (a) As Christian teachers we need to connect our self-knowledge with a keen sense of office consciousness, a sense that we are called to a task and are to exercise authority and responsibility in response to God's will. Self-knowledge requires a large measure of spiritual discernment. (b) The concept of knowledge espoused by Palmer, though surely wholistic, does not do full justice to a biblical view of knowledge which teaches us that true understanding begins with the fear of the Lord and comes to expression in active discipleship. And (c) his elevation of the subject as transcendent speech leaves unanswered the question of why the subject should have such a "voice of authority" in the first place. After all, subject matter is but a human normative or antinormative construction in response to creational parameters and designs, to what Stuart Fowler calls God's "structure-defining law." Apart from the Lord's upholding power and his will for the creation, subjects have no inner, independent source of authority.

And finally, *The Courage to Teach* leaves unanswered the largest question of all: Why should we engage in a community of truth? Why should we seek to interact with the subject and clarify our thinking? What's the purpose of it all? This question brings us to the heart of Christian education at all levels: Why teach? What for? You and I have been appointed as teachers, the Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 4, to "equip for works of service." This theme must be the controlling goal of all our teaching and learning efforts. Disconnected from the overarching goal of knowledgeable, competent, and responsible discipleship and servanthood, a community of truth has no point. Its activities might be interesting and personally satisfying, but ultimately remain at the level of mere busywork.

In spite of these critical remarks, *The Courage to Teach*—like all of Palmer's writing—is well worth reading. Though not always easy to understand, the book is fascinating and thought-provoking. It helps us to counteract the influence of the technicistic, behavioristic so-called "effective teaching movement." It helps us see our task as teachers in a new light. Reading this book will enrich the life of any teacher who loves teaching. I recommend it!