

The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life

Palmer, P. (2007). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. Wiley: San Francisco.

Summary: In a relatively non-threatening, yet convincing way, Parker Palmer does a masterful job of articulating and deconstructing many of the myths that surround the collegiate teaching enterprise. His honest characterizations provide an impetus (and maybe even permission) for faculty to explore their teaching, but more importantly, their inner lives as teachers. There are three primary take-aways from Palmer's treatise.

The first is that good teaching emanates from individuals who teach from *undivided selves*. Palmer defines this central concept as "an integral state of being" in which "every major thread of one's life experience is honored," which "[creates] a weave of such coherence and strength that it can hold students and subjects as well as self." Palmer posits "the divided self will always distance itself from others, and may even try to destroy them, to defend its fragile identity."

The second big idea presented in this book is that the subject, not the teacher nor the student, is the *great thing* that should exist at the center of our teaching. Palmer depicts this alternate way of knowing and telling in a model called the "Community of Truth." This model drastically differs from objectivist approaches that place experts (i.e., teachers) at the center of attention and objects of knowing so far out of reach, that students may feel they are not even really attainable. Palmer explains that "when we make the subject the center of our attention, we give it the respect and authority that we normally give only to human beings." This shift, he suggests, has tremendous power to influence the student-teacher-subject dynamic and in turn, invigorate the learning environment.

Finally, the third premise presented is that teaching is an enterprise that needs to be more publically practiced among colleagues. In a clever, yet relatable analogy, Palmer compares the professional practice engaged in by faculty, which is done in relative obscurity, with that of lawyers (who practice in courtrooms in front of other lawyers, judges, juries, and clients) and surgeons (who usually operate under the watchful eyes of other doctors and teams of medical personnel).

Each of these "lessons" is unpacked in chapters that offer anecdotal evidence, as well as poignant analogies that make comprehending Palmer's somewhat novel and dense premises easily comprehensible. Sprinkled throughout are practical activities that could be used to further and more deeply explore the topics introduced.

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Implications for Teaching:

1. Exploring (and exposing) your authentic self and teaching from that standpoint is not only entirely appropriate, but is a powerful strategy to facilitate authentic learning among your students.
2. In pursuit of better teaching (and learning), we must go beyond asking the “what,” “how,” and even the “why” questions, and be willing to explore the “who” questions.
3. Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness; intentionally look for ways to connect with your students, your subject, and your colleagues.
4. The paradoxes that exist in our disciplines, in our students, and in ourselves are to be celebrated, not ignored or explained away.
5. Clearness Committees* may be a structured way to engage departmental and/or program colleagues in the process of dialoging about good teaching.
6. Teaching from the Community of Truth model is a deliberate paradigm shift for most students and thus may need some introducing and contextualizing.
7. Look for teaching techniques “that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes.” In other words, chose techniques that are aligned with who you have discovered yourself (and your students) to be up to the present moment.
8. Start small. Think about how maybe a single concept could be taught with the subject as the *great thing* at the center of discussions, projects, etc.
9. Can you recall what evoked you about your discipline? When/how did you know you had been chosen by your subject?
10. Activity: In pairs, describe one of your greatest teaching moments and one of your worst. Have your partner identify your unique gifts in the positive case and your liabilities in the other case. Talk about the paradoxes you see with the larger group.

*“In a Clearness Committee a small group of five or six people gather together for the express purpose of asking illuminating questions to the person who is bringing forward an issue or dilemma for which they are seeking clarity” (<http://www.couragerenewal.org/resources/writings/117>).