



Palmer, P. J. (2017). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

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As an educator with two decades of teaching experience, the last thing I need to be told is to re-examine my career as a teacher, reflect on my life and passion, and, if possible, return to my true self to be a good teacher. However, this is exactly what Parker Palmer advocates in his book. Palmer believes, "...good teaching cannot be reduced to technique..." (10), just as you don't expect using role-playing to teach organic chemistry, he adds.

Parker J. Palmer is a writer, speaker and activist who focuses on issues in education, spirituality, and social reform. He holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley.

According to Palmer, it is no secret that most teachers suffer from bureaucratic harassment, put up with unreasonable expectations from parents and institutions, are at the mercy of student ratings, are unappreciated by the public and are poorly compensated. It is little wonder some good educators have given up altogether even the pretence of teaching.

A teacher needs to reclaim the motivations and repossess the passions that gravitated him to his profession in the first place as well as finding "an approach to teaching that respects the diversity of teachers and subjects" (12).

Identity and Integrity in Teaching

Palmer argues rather than technique, "...good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher (10). According to a saying by Socrates, "An unexamined life is not worth living". Palmer in the same vein believes, "good teachers must live examined lives and try to understand what animates their actions for better or worse" (xvii).

By identity, Palmer refers to discovering who and what you really are rather than who and what you are trying to imitate. He writes about a Professor X who tried to imitate his favourite mentor's style of teaching. However, Professor X and his mentor could not have been more different in terms of personality and temperament. Ultimately, Professor X came across, to his students, as unnatural or worse, a cheap knockoff.

By integrity, he means the limits and demarcations in one's beliefs, principles and morals. Or, to put it succinctly with a quote from Margaret Thatcher: "If you set out to be liked, you would be prepared to compromise on anything at any time, and you would achieve nothing". A good teacher needs to know where he stands, with unwavering conviction, not compromising on his cherished principles.

The book's first chapter is indeed not for the fainthearted as he requires courage in self-discovery, stands up to possible ridicules and cynicisms, and not succumbs to pressure and mediocrity.

A Culture of Fear (Education and the Disconnected Life)

Palmer notes "the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be" (11). It is precisely this fear of being disappointed, embarrassed, and ridiculed from students, colleagues, subject matter, administration, and public, some teachers put up a façade and barricade themselves behind a wall of ambivalence, dispassionateness, and distancing. Only through the acceptance of himself will he "speak and act from a place of honesty about being fearful rather than from the fear itself (61).

The Hidden Wholeness (Paradox in Teaching and Learning)

In the third chapter, Palmer advocates paradoxical thinking which "requires that we embrace a view of the world in which opposites are joined, so that we can see the world clearly and see it whole" (69). Able to keep within the boundary of a subject matter, yet at the same time remains open to alternative perspectives and solutions is a mark of a good teacher.

The learning space fenced off by a good teacher should make students feel safe to roam and explore without inhibition; while not giving students a false sense of security that prevents them from climbing over the fence to make further discovery.

"The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group" (77). Every individual should be able to voice out his opinion without reservation from himself and without harassment from others. The collective voice is important in gauging the overall process and direction of the group, while not neglecting the individual voice which may be easily deafened by the rest.

While it is crucial to know the grand and lofty goals of certain subject matters, the personal motivations of individuals are equally important in the learning space. Palmer believes: "The space should honour the 'little' stories of the individual and the 'big' stories of the disciplines and tradition" (79).

Learning is never complete as a solitary process but as a dialectic one that demands community engagement to challenge your preconceived ideas, to compete for the best explanation, to expose your biases or as Issac Newton aptly put: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants." Yet, the personal learning space of individuals is still sacred as it allows for reflection and intuition, and should be not violated.

Palmer writes: "The space should both welcome silence and speech" (80). The learning environment should abhor neither silence nor speech, eliciting speech from students during discussion and clarification, but at the same time carefully balanced with momentarily silence for reflection and consolidation.

According to Palmer, it is no paradox that paradoxical ideas in learning and teaching, when in the right concoction, instead of confounding, uncover a plateau of previously hidden wholeness.

Knowing in Community (Joined by the Grace of Great Things)

Palmer proposes that "to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced" (92). The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. A good teacher should leverage on the synergistic prowess that comes within a community. Rather than a top-down approach from the subject matter to the teachers and finally disseminate to the students, this ecosystem places teachers, students and other participants to interact with one another, yet everyone is revolving the subject matter which is at its nucleus of this community. Students are not simply passive participants but part of the contributors as well; teachers other than to deliver and instruct also serves an irreplaceable role of a facilitator.

Teaching in Community (A Subject-Centred Education)

Instead of teacher-centric or student-centric, Palmer advocates a subject-centred approach, where teachers, students as well as the community resources, co-build and shape the subject matter together. This is analogous to sand-castle building. Rather than to have the teacher demonstrating the process of castle-building from beginning to end, or the students having to be guided in every step, both the teacher and students could have collaborated and

chipped in at the same time, with every participants claiming ownership to the final completed enterprise.

Learning in Community (The Conversation of Colleagues)

Palmer suggests that teachers "must observe each other teach... we must spend more time talking to each other about teaching" (148). However, this comes as an insurmountable challenge for most educators, including yours truly, whose egos are often bigger than our head. So often we have been confronted with the statement "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye" (Matthew 7:3)? Palmer contends it takes courage to share and before one embarks on starting this conversation of colleagues, one should candidly do some soul-searching. To best summarise Palmer's suggestion, I shall quote from Luke (14:11): "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Only when one is humbled, one is willing to share and, at the same time, be receptive to constructive criticisms. Palmer wants good teachers to lead and take charge and make examples of themselves. "If we who lead and we who teach would take that counsel to heart, everyone in education, administrators and teachers and students alike, would have a chance at healing and new life (167).

Divided No More (Teaching from a Heart of Hope)

Palmer examines: "Is it possible to embody our best insights about teaching and learning in a social movement that might revitalise education" (169)? Although most educators may concur with Palmer, most, if not all, lament the uphill struggle against the 'system'. Most educators regard the education reform battle as already lost before the first shot is even fired. Palmer hopes educators in gathering courage will "make one of the most basic decisions a human being can make, which I have come to call the decision to live 'divided no more,' the decision to no longer act differently on the outside than one knows one's truth to be on the inside" (173).

Conclusion

Palmer has shattered many of my preconceived notions on being a good educator. In his book, he weaves an unassailable case for reform both on a microcosmic (individual) and macrocosmic (community) level.

That does not mean, however, that this book is perfect. The philosophical, at times tautological, and at other times Zen-like, writing style makes it too easy to pass off the book as another New Age, Self-Help book with esoteric preaching. Take, for example: "When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are... When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject" (3). Or: "We did not merely find a subject to teach – the subject also found us (26); which bears an uncanny resemblance to a Zen master's "You do not need to go in search of the transcendent, but the transcendent will seek you out."

While Palmer's intentions are laudable, there is always a possibility that an educator delving into his inner world may discover not his identity and integrity but more pride, ego and corruption. Moreover, if you are looking for a ready-made recipe and a time-tested technique to make you a consummate educator, keeping your students in constant awe, this is not the book for you.

Despite the mentioned flaws and the writing style being too

esoteric for my liking, the insights offered by Palmer do turn my previous convictions about good teaching on its head. Before reading this book, I could not reconcile the fact why I need courage to teach. Only upon my completion, I could not agree more that, to be a good teacher, I need to face my own demons, conquer my fears, bring down my façade, unlearn and relearn, defend my cherished convictions, stand up to authority and institutions, share and take criticism. Now it makes sense. It takes *courage to teach*.

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