

Should It Matter Who the Teacher Is?
A Review of Parker Palmer's The Courage to Teach

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The curious belief that it makes a difference who the teacher is raises a troubling question: what about the teacher ought to affect educational outcomes? To what extent are we each effective or ineffective teachers as a function of our knowledge of the subject matter and thoughtfulness about it, our hairstyles and body shapes, discussion leadership skills, class preparation, social identities and personalities, uses of technological wizardry or apt cartoons, story-telling abilities, or participation in teaching conferences and conscientious readings of *Teaching Tips*? What we assume matters matters, does it not? For example, our beliefs may influence our self-esteem as teachers as we experience success and failure, how we evaluate aspiring and veteran colleagues, and how we strive to improve our teaching. (Should I get that haircut now, read *Teaching of Psychology*, spend the hour in therapy, or go to the lab?) More importantly, perhaps, our beliefs about what should matter may influence our goals as educators, that is, what we take for ourselves and communicate to students as worthy attitudes to bring to learning, what we strive to teach about what ought to matter in education.

Parker Palmer, a nationally-known education writer, teacher, and workshop leader (and graduate of an odd little liberal arts college in Northfield, Minnesota), stakes out a sharp and thoughtful claim about what matters in education in his 1998 book *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers). Palmer believes, first of all, that teachers matter and attempts to reset a balance that has, arguably, swung too strongly of late in the direction of "student learning." (Neither Palmer nor anyone else is opposed to students' learning, of course. The issue of balance concerns how significant teachers are thought to be in envisioning what ought to be achieved in education and in acting to bring about those ends.) What about teachers matters? At the heart of Palmer's view is his belief that the person who teaches matters, that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). What is Palmer arguing here? How also might his position stimulate our thinking about alternative conceptions of what matters?

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And what, ultimately, matters (in teaching, of course)? These are the questions that structure this review.

Palmer begins by suggesting it isn't how we teach (i.e., the methods we use in teaching) that most requires the attention of teachers (or educational reformers or organizations for teachers like the one that sponsors this discussion list). Thus, the expectation that education will be sustained or markedly improved by some new teaching method or approach (e.g., assessing outcomes, service learning, inquiry-based learning, or even lecturing as colorful electronic projections dance by overhead) is chimerical. Palmer isn't against innovative or traditional methods of teaching; rather, he believes that we pay far too much attention to and show far too much faith in methodological fixes for education.

It's unfortunate that here, as elsewhere throughout *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer provides little in the way of convincing evidence in support of his assertions. He pays scant attention to systematic research results and much prefers to cite his own experiences and reflections, as well as anecdotes and informal findings from his workshops and talks with students and teachers. Still, his ideas and observations are highly provocative. In the current instance, Palmer notes that when students talk about their best teachers, those teachers turn out to employ no substantially common teaching method. In his view (and mine, also), great teachers can be histrionic classroom performers or gentle discussion facilitators, highly sensitive supporters of students or their frightful critics, and focused research mentors or unfettered intellectual wildcatters. But if this is so, what then matters in teaching?

For Palmer, it's that the teacher's work as an educator and student of a discipline is strongly and obviously tied to that teacher's sense of self. It is our deeply wrought personal commitment to teaching, stemming from our curiosities, values, experiences, and emotions in life that may make education possible. It is that one person—a teacher—can be aware of the personal meaning and pleasure of his or her intellectual commitment and, especially, of the limitations and insecurities associated with that commitment. It is that such a person can appreciate the nascent struggles and aspirations of students and can help create conditions in a classroom or laboratory that may connect students and faculty to a field of knowledge and inquiry. It is study as an authentic expression of self.

Palmer's claim is that many teachers lose personal connectedness to their work as they defend against threats to the self of the teacher. We are subject, for example, to the seeming indifference or occasional hostility of students, colleagues, and administrators. We experience inevitable failure in teaching; as Palmer notes, "the same person who teaches brilliantly one day can be an utter flop the next" (p. 67). (My personal testimony is even sharper: the same person who teaches with success in one section of a course can experience abject failure in another section of the very same course on the very same day!) Most importantly, in Palmer's view, we have internalized an academic—in his terms, "objectivist"—bias against selfhood, and we don't want to behave unprofessionally by acknowledging our personal stake and vulnerabilities in studying and representing a subject matter. Finally, we fear the unmasking of illusions and the upheaval of habits that

may result from an open encounter with students' diverse realities. Of course, these are our students' fears as well, but do we allow ourselves to appreciate that? Palmer thinks not: "we cannot see the fear in our students until we see the fear in ourselves" (p. 47).

If all of this sounds vaguely familiar to psychologists, it may be because there's more than a faint echo of Carl Rogers in Parker Palmer (although Rogers is not mentioned in the book). What matters most in Palmer's scheme is the apparent authenticity of the teacher's commitment to his or her vocation and role. Inauthentic teaching reflects a turn from the deep personal valuing of the self toward, largely, the conditions of worth specified by the norms of contemporary "objectivist" culture. What results leads the teacher to distort his or her experience of self and others, and to shun true encounters with students and colleagues. Thankfully, Palmer doesn't recommend mass non-directive therapy for teachers, but he does encourage teachers to become more personally reflective about what initially drew them to the life of the mind and to teaching. For example, he suggests that we think about our mentors in academia and, more pointedly, (and I'm paraphrasing Palmer here) about what it was in us that allowed that mentoring to succeed. "By remembering our mentors, we remember ourselves—and by remembering ourselves, we remember our students" (p. 24). Similarly, Palmer would have us reconsider how our fields of study elicited and nurtured aspects of self we barely knew existed within us. What he hopes to rekindle is the teacher's "subjective engagement" with learning and personal commitment to teaching not as a scripted role but as a deeply human quest for understanding and meaning.

Effective teachers embrace what Palmer calls "the principle of paradox." If I understand his point, it is that teaching needs to be energized rather than intimidated by tensions inherent in apparent conflicts in education (e.g., self vs. technique, objective knowledge vs. subjective engagement, intellect vs. emotion). Doing so—and I am paraphrasing Palmer again (p. 74)—might allow teachers to design classes, for example, that are both bounded and open, welcome both silence and speech, and honor the "little" stories of the students and the "big" stories of the disciplines and tradition. Palmer continues: "the place where paradoxes are held together is in the teacher's heart, and our inability to hold them is less a failure of technique than a gap in our inner lives" (p. 83).

Given the principle of paradox, it isn't surprising that Palmer himself embraces the creative tension between the teacher's inner life and the role of community in knowing, teaching, learning, and stewardship of our educational institutions. In addition, under the rubric of "community," the latter half of *The Courage to Teach* manages to challenge—smartly, I might add—a number of the sacred cows of seemingly progressive innovation in American higher education, including the assessment movement (pp. 93-94) and the reorientation of teaching around student learning (p. 116, for example). Parker also manages to fit a wonderful discussion of what he calls "teaching from the microcosm" under the banner of community. What it's doing there isn't clear, but I hope to remember his call to teachers to forego covering the field and to replace that with an intensive focus on judiciously selected exemplars of a discipline when I fail once again to address the full body of material under a topic heading.

Should it matter to teaching if the teacher courageously confronts the kinds of personal-professional issues Palmer identifies? I believe there are reasons to question Palmer's view. First, let's give due respect to the null hypothesis, that, given some basic levels of disciplinary competence and communicative skill, teachers don't matter at all. I know the possibility is heretical, but don't we teach our students about the fundamental attribution error and other psychological tendencies that might inflate our sense of our own importance? The null is worth pondering here, for it directs our attention to external factors that may affect education more significantly than Palmer's teaching self. The null is also humbling. It reminds us of our doubtful significance, and, consequently, allows us to appreciate anew the courage it takes to stand against the current to generate ripples of thoughtful skepticism, knowledge, clarity, and discovery. I like a point made by James O'Donnell in *Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace* (1998, p. 123): "we teachers do not automatically deserve a future. We must earn it by the skill with which we disorient our students, energize them, and inculcate in them a taste for the hard disciplines of seeing and thinking."

Even if the apparent sincerity and passion of the teacher do affect educational outcomes, as both research on social influence and the history of demagoguery suggest they might, shouldn't we help students to approach messages so adorned quite cautiously? In other words, is it a good thing for students to be swayed by the teacher's self? There is an argument to be made for educational goals opposite those implicit in *The Courage to Teach*. In this alternative, heartless vision of education, students would learn to be more critical of what is seemingly authentic and more attentive to what is superficially tedious. (I am reminded in the latter regard of the routine manner in which Andrew Wiles supposedly presented and concluded his momentous talk solving Fermat's Last Theorem!) If we are successful as teachers, wouldn't our students learn how and why to seek meaning in dry communications, whether in the classroom or journal articles? If we are successful as teachers, wouldn't our students become more willing to employ the intellectual values of the discipline because of what those values yield in the world rather than what they mean to the person who teaches?

"Just tell me about the new continent. I don't give a damn what you've discovered about yourself." That's the caption of a wonderful cartoon in the October 18/25, 1999 issue of *The New Yorker* in which a king is shown speaking to his returned explorer. (That's a line I'd like to append to every paper assignment I give my students from now on!) Transposed to our current concerns, the cartoon reminds us to take our discipline seriously rather than ourselves (although, of course, the king isn't simply interested in the new world out of idle curiosity). Palmer comes to a similar conclusion about the importance of a field when he promotes a "subject-centered education" within "a community of truth," but for him the teacher's personal relationship with a field signals that potential value. In contrast, I am suggesting that a teacher ought to let the discipline speak for itself and to offer an informed, thoughtful, and open rendition of the character, accomplishments, and limitations of that discipline for students' potential appreciation.

In sum, the relationships between the personal self of the teacher, the professional self of the teacher, the selves of our students, and the meaning of a discipline in life may be far more variegated than those depicted in Palmer's portrait. Ultimately, arguably, what matters in teaching is that the teacher is able to craft a class experience that allows students to discover or identify ways in which a discipline—its epistemological values and claims to knowledge—may have meaning in life. Part of this may involve helping students to find personal meaning in the discipline, and part of that may be inspired by the teacher's complex example of same. However, helping students to see beyond themselves, to recognize and respect the possibilities of meaning in a discipline to others and even to times in history outside our own, remains one of the fundamental challenges of teaching. In that regard, it just might matter who the teacher is.