

## **Palmer Personal Reflection**

Anne Teillet  
Colorado State University  
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Dr. Leann Kaiser

When I first picked up the book "The Courage To Teach" from Parker Palmer, I was intrigued by the title. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of courage is 'mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.' Courage is definitely not a word I had previously associated with teaching. In the first few pages of the book, Palmer states, "The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require" (Palmer, 2007, pp. 11-12). With these words, Palmer had caught my attention and I had to know more.

In "The Courage To Teach", Parker Palmer presents philosophical reflections on teaching. In the first chapter, he introduces the idea that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (Palmer, 2007, p. 10). Palmer expanded his statement by explaining that one of the key elements in being a good educator is to first 'know yourself.' As a teacher, I put myself forward to my students. The exposure is obvious. I agree that by engaging in personal reflection, I am better able to understand that personal frontier, to advance my values and to make myself more available to others around me. In previous courses during my Adult Education & Training (AET) journey, I was able to think about my ethics, background and to complete several tests that helped me understand who I was as an educator and how I got to where I am today. These evaluations included the Principles of Adult Learning Scale (PALS), the Philosophy of Adult Education Inventory (PAEI) which helped define what my learning and teaching style are. In addition, I developed an effective Adult Learning Facilitator (ALF) model that matches my teaching style

and values. I also started to develop my philosophy of teaching. I realize that these exercises are focused on a particular point in time and as I gain more experience teaching and gain confidence in my field, factors will change and my teaching style will change as well. However taking to heart the advice to 'know myself', I see that awareness is the first step to accepting others and to accommodating others' points of view. There are teachers who scold and preach, and there are teachers who invite an on-going conversation as a body of knowledge is explored and expanded upon. John Dewey, an American philosopher and educational reformer stated that, "The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action". I intend to continue reflecting on my teaching experience and on my own sense of self, as I learn from my peers and immerse myself in the pedagogic environment. I will learn from other teachers and from the lessons that I try to deliver and that my students attempt to take in. I strive to be a good educator, by which I mean, someone who is fully present to the class setting, aware of the needs of my students while being fully in command of the material being presented. This humble and deeply involved teaching formula leads teacher and student to jointly explore the content and the understanding of a body of knowledge. Unfortunately, too many teachers believe that the moment they've gained the methods and tools necessary to teach, they do not need to think further. I believe this misconception appears in job settings far beyond teaching. Some of the steps to staying current in a field of expertise are to: research, re-think, realign.

Capable teachers work to establish a learning environment that promotes a great give and take with students exploring new material. Palmer offers six principles that would help in creating an open and trusting learning space. I recall a middle school teacher who took the

exact opposite approach. Every class, she would target one student who would have to endure an hour of harassment. If a student would ask a question about the lecture or an assignment, she would scold the student for being ignorant. I think this was the longest school year for me. This woman was clearly an expert in her material and had incredible knowledge of the topic. She could be interesting and engaging, but I think that years of teaching middle school students had worn her down until she simply hated interacting with them and grew to reject the subject material. Palmer talks about a wide range of fears in his book. He includes a teacher's fear of engagement and a longing to distance him/herself from the learner in order to avoid being vulnerable to the wide array of vulnerabilities associated with teaching including student failure and judgment by peers. During my undergraduate program, my sociology teacher really welcomed the concept of sharing ideas and engaging in a full conversation about the material shared and the questions engendered by the feedback of the whole class. Our assignments were fascinating and I still vividly remember the topics we studied. This teacher reflected Palmer's thinking when he talked about teaching 'with the heart.' This facilitator maintained that by opening oneself to one's students and by guiding them to use critical thinking as they examined academic content, class conversations, and past experiences, they would be able to incorporate scholarly material into their lives and put it into action. In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the author, Mitch Albom talks about the impact his professor, Morrie Schwartz, had on him. Schwartz stated that "... no matter where you live, the biggest defect we human beings have is our shortsightedness. We don't see what we could be. We should be looking at our potential, stretching ourselves into everything we can become". By following

Palmer's philosophy, teachers can definitely reach out to students, stretch them and bring the best out of them.

As I continued reading "The Courage to Teach", I found myself lost in the chapter "Knowing in Community". The previous materials resonated with me but in this new section, I felt disconnected with the book. The author was switching between the inner, mental landscape, to the outside community. Palmer claimed that "to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced" (Palmer, 2007, p.92). He continued by explaining that the subject has to be at the center of the community. This allows the learners and teachers to interact on the same level of authority. The teachers are no longer considered hierarchically superior. Teachers and students offer their insights and understandings, and exchange ideas. No one is passive. The subject unites teacher and student in a shared quest. This model allows for a genuine learning community. This method reflects John Dewey's thought "We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience." I became familiar with this type of environment during my AET journey. Despite following a formal curriculum, I have experienced effective and excellent professors who have inspired and enabled me and my peers to engage and to learn educational concepts in-depth. The subject-centered learning relies on an interdependence between the students and teachers--each group fortifying this community of learning. I would suggest that online learning has somehow facilitated this type of model. I was unfamiliar with this subject-centered learning and at first, I was intimidated by posting not only my thoughts and questions about reading assignments but also by posting papers which sometimes can be personal. However, I've received only positive and enriching feedback from other students and teachers. This very supportive environment has helped me

gain confidence in the subject. This model makes me think about a video I saw on a Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" flashmob in the Placa de Sant Roc in Sabadell, Spain. The music starts with a single cellist. As he continues to play, one by one, more musicians, the conductor, and singers, join him to form a fully orchestrated rendition combined with a choral singing "Ode to Joy", all under the direction of a single conductor. Each group of musicians brings its experience, its gift, its knowledge of the musical subject. Each follows the conductor's baton to keep them in sync and to help them stay on track. By learning and receiving feedback, by listening to others, by sharing experience, the ensemble creates a beautiful and enriching experience.

I believe Palmer encourages teachers to teach with emotional intelligence. He believes that by both recognizing and responding to the feelings of the students and the facilitator, the lesson can be fully realized. Promoting an emotionally enriched state in the classroom allows learners to engage with the material and to learn from one another and from the teacher. To achieve such a setting (promoting emotional intelligence), a teacher has to do a great deal of preparation. He/She needs to plan for this environment and needs to be attentive to learners, deal with their expectations and recognize their feelings and individual inputs.

Unfortunately, I do not have extensive experience as a teacher. I teach only a few times a year and my work tends to focus on the format of a technical topic, specifically what steps a student should follow while using a software. My method follows a learner-centric approach. However, as I continue on my educational path, I may have opportunities to utilize and enjoy the subject-centered learning environment.

As I develop my skills as an educator and as I attempt to be generous with whatever personal offerings I might be able to contribute to the learning environment, I feel it is important that I reach out to the community of teachers and to an authentic community of seekers and learners. Palmer said that "to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft" (Palmer, 2007, p. 146). Sharing is part of teaching and we must encourage conversations so we can hear each others' stories, observe and listen. We have to be able to, open the dialogue and possibly even rally to solve problems or bring new ideas to the field of Adult Education. This constant quest of truth allows teachers to maintain their dual role as instructors and as learners.

In conclusion, I understand now that it takes courage to be a teacher. One must reflect on one's own inner landscape of experience and expertise. One must then be open to the full breadth of conversation that comes with being open to students and the learning environment. This book gives me another opportunity to become a more well-rounded person and I suspect that I'll read the book again during my career. Palmer's statement, "We teach who we are" (Palmer, 2007, p. 1) now makes sense to me. Educational methods and tools are important to master but what is crucial is the personal element in teaching, the connection to students, and the learning space. Albert Einstein said that "It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge". It is up to me to strive to do exactly that.

### References

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