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# The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life

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Christian sources as well as the social sciences and "special interest" disciplines. Gerkin does not invalidate interpretations from other professions. Instead, he interprets them from the hermeneutical framework of "Christian fact". Interpretation and the critical thinking of theology reveal the "theory" present in practice or "praxis". This initial praxis is the working relationship between the supervisee and client. It is also the relationship between supervisee and supervisor. Gerkin adopts from the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer a concept known as the "fusion of horizons". The idea focuses on a meeting of the "horizon of meanings" and narratives that both supervisor and supervisee bring to the supervisory relationship and case studies. O'Connor embraces Gerkin's suggestion of five areas of interpretation of praxis: interpretations from "Christian fact", the social sciences, concrete experience, the narrative hermeneutical quality of supervision, and the "fusion of horizons". Interpretation and the "fusion of horizons" transforms practice or praxis. Therefore, practice moves *to* theory, and then *away* from theory *back* to practice transformed.

O'Connor's book is not a light read. Yet the case studies which O'Connor uses to open and close each chapter do illumine his point. Most interesting is O'Connor's analysis of Gerkin's *own* application of the "fusion of horizons". O'Connor rightly points out that Gerkin fails to employ the method fully. Gerkin's own case studies, O'Connor's research demonstrates, omit the important "fusion of horizons". O'Connor, on the other hand, makes sure to include this important aspect of Gerkin's method in O'Connor's case material. Indeed, in a sense O'Connor "fuses" Gerkin's horizons.

For those who have admired the work of Charles Gerkin, O'Connor's book is a treat. You do have to take the time to peel open the wrapper to get at the treat. Yet, in the end, it is well worth the effort.

Cindy Jacobsen  
Waterloo, Ontario

### **The Courage To Teach**

Parker J. Palmer

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998

199 pages, \$30.95

In *To Know As We Are Known/A Spirituality of Education* (1983), Parker J. Palmer presented a spirituality of education in which mind and heart work together in the quest for knowledge. "The search for 'wholesight',

for rounder ways of knowing reality is on in earnest today" (xii). "In Christian tradition, truth is not a concept that 'works' but an incarnation that lives" (14).

In *The Courage To Teach*, which is subtitled "Exploring The Inner Landscape of A Teacher's Life", Palmer takes this incarnational spirituality of education to its pedagogical heart in his bold claim: "We teach who we are" (1). "This book builds on a simple premise: good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (10).

Parker Palmer is highly respected as a gifted writer, a creative educator and a travelling teacher. He is a senior associate of the American Association for Higher Education and senior advisor to the Fetzer Institute, for whom he designed the Teacher Formation Program for K-12 teachers.

Some of Palmer's central convictions are expressed in the following sampling of quotations: "This book is for teachers who have good days and bad, and whose bad days bring the suffering that comes only from something one loves. It is for teachers who refuse to harden their hearts because they love learners, learning, and the teaching life" (1). "I have worked with countless teachers, and many of them have confirmed my own experience: as important as methods may be, the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching—and living—becomes" (5). "Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves" (11). "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" (11).

Palmer's central image for teaching is this: "to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced" (90). Teaching is primarily identified as rooted in the identity and integrity of the teacher and processed as mutual inquiry. Creating space has to do with the physical space, conceptual frameworks used to explore a topic or issue, the emotional ethos that is facilitated, and the ground rules that guide the mutual inquiry. Truth is not seen as constituting one viewpoint but students are invited into "the community of truth"—"truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline" (104) — by participating in a community of learning. "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). "Community, or connectedness,

is the principle behind good teaching, but different teachers with different gifts create community in surprisingly diverse ways, using widely divergent methods" (115).

Palmer ponders and wonders: "Could teachers gather around the great thing called 'teaching and learning' and explore its mysteries with the same respect we accord any subject worth knowing" (141)? His response is that "If we want 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" (141).

Palmer observes that in academia there is far too much emphasis on privatization—each teacher doing their thing within an enclosed space called the classroom. In order to grow in my capacity to be an effective teacher, Palmer suggests that teachers need to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced. He turns to his own religious tradition for guidance: Quaker beliefs and practices — "each of us has an inner teacher that is an arbiter of truth, and each of us needs the give-and-take of community in order to hear that inner teacher speak. So Quaker social structures offer community to help a person discover the guidance that comes from within and ground rules to prevent that community from invading the individual's inwardness with external agendas and advice" (152). In extrapolating from this Quaker tradition, Palmer notes: "We need ground rules for dialogue that allow us to be present to another person's problems in a quiet, receptive way that encourages the soul to come forth, a way that does not presume to know what is right for the other but allows the other's soul to find its own answers at its own level and pace" (151). "This capacity to 'hear each other to speech' is the key to creating communities of discourse that can help us deepen the identity and integrity from which good teaching comes" (155).

I have been energized, enthused and equipped in unique and particular ways simply by reading and reflecting on this book; it has strengthened my courage to teach. I anticipate incorporating many insights from *The Courage To Teach* into my own teaching; in fact, I will probably use this book as a required text in my course on Adult Education. Furthermore, I'm excited in exploring with my colleagues in teaching how *The Courage To Teach* is itself an invitation into a community of discourse. Palmer identifies what he calls the "clearness committee" (152) as a way of accomplishing the emergence of this "community of discourse".

*The Courage To Teach* is an excellent resource for those who teach, including professors, teachers, pastors, leaders within a variety of organizations. Palmer compassionately and encouragingly asks us to

recognize that our capacity to be effective teachers springs from our recognition of who we are and not simply on what we do.

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### **Understanding Catholic Morality**

Elizabeth Willems

New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997

189 pages, \$19.95 US Softcover

With the recent agreed statement between Roman Catholics and Lutherans on justification by faith, Elizabeth Willems' book on Catholic morality is timely. She roots Catholic ethics in faith in Jesus Christ and argues that putting on the "mind and heart of Christ" is the cornerstone of Catholic morality. Willems provides an introduction and overview to Catholic moral theology. Her view of Catholic morality emphasizes four themes: person-centredness, discipleship, conversion, and the development of Christian character. This character is rooted in the Jesus of the biblical texts as well as the relevant statements by the councils of the Church and papal documents. In putting on the mind and heart of Christ, she stresses the value of compassion. In dealing with the reality of sin, Willems utilizes an ethic based on just principles. These principles guide the Christian in dealing with the reality of sin which is in the world, in human structures and within the Christian person. In the development of an ethic based on character, Willems stresses the primacy of conscience. Conscience is God's voice and the Catholic Christian has a duty to follow that voice even when it leads the person against papal teaching. A brief history of moral theology is given beginning with the New Testament through the patristics, middle ages, reformation to the modern and post-modern world. Martin Luther is described as a reformer whose emphasis on grace, faith and mercy offered positive changes in moral theology.

Elizabeth Willems belongs to the School Sisters of Notre Dame and is director of field education and professor of moral theology at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans. Her book is informed by her practice of ministry as well as her teaching of ethics. It is easy to read, provides ethical vignettes, and presents many of the ideas and principles crucial to Catholic moral theology. The book is in the spirit of Vatican II and not condemning of other ways of doing ethics. The emphasis on faith in Jesus and putting on the mind and heart of Christ is a welcome focus on grace and compassion.