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Book Review: *The Courage To Teach* by Parker Palmer

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The Courage To Teach. Parker Palmer. Jossey-Bass Publishers: CA, 1998. ISBN 0-789-1058-9

Parker Palmer is a self-described writer, teacher, and activist “who works independently on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change.” The words “social change” are not likely to be heard reverberating in the halls of mathematics departments, much less, “spirituality,” and since nothing in this book pertains directly to the teaching of mathematics (insofar as it only appears in one brief paragraph in this book), it is likely that this book will never find its way into the hands of many individuals in mathematical circles who might benefit from it and enjoy it. In traveling the country giving workshops on teaching, Palmer, to be sure, is well acquainted with the particular problems posed by the teaching of mathematics and science. On the other hand, he is not about to discuss how to teach any specific topic; not only would this go contrary to his grain to tell us how things should run, but it would run counter to his premise that good education in all fields (or good learning) shares common attributes, and that learning occurs best when all are engaged in that process—faculty as well as students—within a learning “community” considerably broader than a mathematics department.

The effect of his engaging with teaching in broad terms is that I can interpret what he says in ways that apply meaningfully to myself as a teacher of my students in my classroom in my department, with my thoughts about mathematics as it is now perceived and used in the world. And frankly, so exhausted am I in this mathematician’s environment, in which the discussions over the internet and within departments range in emotion from mild to extreme forms of anger (over calculus reform, redesigning courses, discussing attrition with the engineers, and playing the “shell game” in Palmer’s words, of whether student evaluations will or will not count) that it’s doubtful I could have suffered through a book that found teachers deficient. This book has the opposite effect: it is affirming and understanding, and I say this as one whose cynic-button tends to light up when the word “heart” is used in conjunction with teaching. But be-

cause the language comes from an honest place, and because his insights, based on years of discussion with teachers across the country, are quite gentle and beautiful, this book has much to stimulate one’s thinking about teaching.

One might ask, and I did: am I succumbing to feel-good psychologizing or isn’t this spiritual thing a bit thick—is there too much of the “thee/thou” in this book? (Palmer is a sociologist with a year in a theological seminary who has taught at a Quaker school.) But turn the question around to another of equal validity: doesn’t this language make as much sense as any we have available to us to discuss an entire realm of sociological problems that occupy us as mathematics teachers: i.e., sociological issues regarding unprepared students, non-supportive administrations, and so forth? Educational philosophers such as Dewey, C.S. Peirce and other American pragmatists were willing to accept the sociological makeup of where-we-are-now as breeding grounds for generating philosophical ideas about learning; why should we not be prepared to listen for signals from that breeding ground? Annie Dillard wrote the book “Teaching a Stone to Talk,” which of course, Palmer says, is about learning how to listen to rocks. Why shouldn’t we be able, at least, to listen to how others are discussing education around us?

The chapters in this book build from the inner to the outer aspects of our jobs, from examining the “heart” of the teacher (identity and integrity) and the “culture of fear” which academia seems to foster, to examining the larger community in which we teach. We are led along in our thinking by questions and paradoxes, rather than prescriptions and answers. As the poet Rilke says, we must learn to “love the questions themselves;” holding the tension thus, “makes the heart larger.” The author’s style of making his points using dialectic, dichotomies, and paradox is really very captivating. For example, he writes that the teaching space should be bounded and open, hospitable and “charged,” able to hear from the individual and the group, allow “little” stories as well as the “big,” support solitude and surround it with the resources of the community, welcome both silence and speech.

We learn best when we “hold the tension of opposites.” (I am reminded of the cliché: “one idea speaks, second idea argues, third idea presents itself and is good.”) Eventually we evolve into thinking about larger issues, to consider not just the classroom in which we teach, but beyond that, to how education in general terms is at its best when it is a process.

As mathematicians, we might well stop right here: “What or who is our mathematics community?” Many in our discipline are, using Palmer’s word, “purists”—Platonists who now find ourselves being hammered into serving the “client disciplines” or functioning as watchdogs for remedial/developmental mathematics. The single reference to mathematicians in this book is in the form of a quote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* from an unnamed mathematician. He says:

Our preliminary responsibility as mathematicians is not to students but to mathematics: to preserve, create, and enhance good mathematics and to protect the subject for future generations. Good students [the ones destined to become mathematicians] will survive any educational system, and those are the ones with whom our future lies.

This is a terrible point of view for a teacher to hold: that the subject must be protected, presumably even from students. There are more warnings in this book to be wary of objectivist styles of teaching. Alfred North Whitehead declared that objective, “inert” ideas are the bane of higher education, deadening the process of teaching and learning for students and teacher alike. On the other hand, if this mathematician’s quote means what I think, this professor is expressing a disappointment and frustration that many of us would share—that centuries of collaborative human endeavor in building up a foundation of rigor that would move us as close as possible to workable truths, is currently slipping away into muddied technological approximations and being blurred by methods of teaching that shortchange the subject so as to pass students through. That the ways in which mathematics is taught are grinding down this field. Palmer uses the example of this quote from the *Chronicle* to illustrate abuse of teacher-centered models of teaching, and elsewhere hints at an academic pecking order in which science would be on top: “...every ‘soft’ discipline in the curriculum has

practitioners doing research that is more objectivist than thou: literary scholars who count adverbs rather than explore meanings, psychologists who analyze the data of human behavior as if people had no more inner life than Styrofoam.” Nevertheless I am confident that in a workshop setting, Palmer would probably enjoy the difficulties of trying to identify the paradoxes of this teacher’s experience, ultimately to lay that problem and others at our feet as responsibilities for our educational community to struggle with, the struggle being part of our learning experience.

If a community of learning is what Palmer requires, he identifies four ways in which the community can be constructed: (1) community as a business-oriented enterprise (as with Total Quality Management, in which students are the “customers”—although they’re not always right), (2) community as a therapeutic organization (which must address the wounds of the injured), (3) community as a civic structure (with governing, hierarchial roles and rules and conventions), and finally—the only role he endorses, (4) a community of learners and knowers in a subject-centered educational environment. Thus the mathematician whom he quotes above has his place, too, in this type of community.

Following the book backwards, what does the community have to say about the smaller world of the classroom? To create a functioning educational community, the top-down model of teacher imparting wisdom to students will not work well because there are “baffles” to the learning on the way down, and these baffles not only constrain what can trickle down, but can jam and cause the flow to back up. (“We don’t care if civilization goes down the drain as long as it doesn’t back up.”) Rather, we must have subject-centered classrooms; teachers and students share their views on the subject—and one should imagine here a diagram of a complete graph with “subject” in the center. In Robert Frost’s words, “We dance round in a ring and suppose, / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.”

Palmer does not advertise any methods for the classroom; he briefly mentions group work and expresses curiosity about interactive methods—he enjoys astronomy software that allows him to feel a part of the universe—but he resists giving answers and solutions. In fact, if he would promote any technique for teach-

ing at all it would be to ask questions and...wait, ask more questions and...wait. He adds many personal anecdotes that speak to his own frustrations in teaching; in this way, I am reminded of the words in Frost's epitaph, "He had a lover's quarrel with the world," although of Palmer, we might say, "He is looking to make up that quarrel." In his workshops, to get discussion going, he often asks teachers for a "critical moment" in their teaching. The responses range from positive to negative, but the shared discussions offer participants a sense of the mutuality of their experiences. (Another exercise is to fill in the blank in the sentence following, with the best possible metaphor: "When I am at my best teaching, I am like a ____". To my own shock, I might have answered nurse but Palmer himself was a sheepdog.) Other suggestions for a communal affirming of teachers are "clearness committees" for purposes of listening and sharing, and standards for the evaluation of teachers, linked to their ability to listen and change. Again and again in this book, one reads that dissension, disagreement, and frustration are the natural components of the learning experience, and not only should students know this, but we should be able to hear this from students with more composure and less fear. He says,

If a space is to support learning, it must invite students to find their authentic voices, whether or not they speak in ways approved by others. Learning does not happen when students are unable to express their ideas, emotions, confusions, ignorance, and prejudices. In fact, only when people can speak their minds does education have a chance to happen.

All of this leads us down to the level of the individual teacher. (I deliberately unwound the book back to the point where Palmer begins.) As long as we teach with a sense of our own identity (characteristics—of who we are and what we feel) and integrity (character enough to be true to that identity), then we are well-equipped with the "courage" to enter a world that often "equates work with suffering" as guides, or authorities (authors) in that world, rather than as powers.

The conclusion seems clear: we cannot know the great things of the universe until we know ourselves to be great things. Absolutism and

relativism have ravaged not only the things of the world, but our sense of the knowing self as well. We are whiplashed between an arrogant overestimation of ourselves and a servile underestimation of ourselves, but the outcome is always the same: a distortion of the humble yet exalted reality of the human self, a paradoxical pearl of great price.

So here is a book looking at education as a general process, without any particular nod (or bow) to those of us who in mathematics feel we are not understood for our need to operate with a separate set of rules. Do we now dismiss this book, or can we learn from it? Our mission in education is the same as that in other subjects. If the mathematics community is going to address the idea of being able to teach large numbers of students, is it going to be conceived of as being available to these people? This is not a direct challenge from the book, nor are there direct answers. But this book can provide some resources for ways of thinking about ourselves as others see us. I think this book would probably work very well as the basis for a mathematics teaching workshop. It could, at minimum, provoke us to reflect on ways in which we are part of the rest of the education community and ways in which we feel we are not. At base, the book would require us not to forget the subjective while we teach the objective; we have both an entitlement and responsibility as teachers to listen respectfully not only to the voices of our students but to the voice of our own "teacher within," a voice we would often prefer to muzzle. Palmer quotes Richard Gelwick, an interpreter of the chemist Michael Polanyi:

Several times in public lectures, I heard [Polanyi] correct people who stood up to support him, [people who said] that they agreed that all knowledge had a personal element in it [and] then went on to say that this personal element was the risky part and that we should try to minimize it. Polanyi would explain that the personal was not to be minimized but understood as the element that was essential, the one that led us to break out and make new discoveries, and not at all an unfortunate imperfection in human epistemology. On the contrary, it is the cornerstone upon which culture, civilization, and progress were developed."