The Courage to Teach Reflection Paper

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Parker Palmer is a writer, activist, teacher, and speaker well known for publishing many books on teaching, education, and spirituality. One of his most noted books is titled, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*, a book for educators looking to renew their connection and passion for teaching. The central theme of the book is that good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of a teacher and not just from his or her technique. In this reflection paper I will discuss some key elements in the book about the heart of a teacher, fear, and learning in a community. In addition, I will include my thoughts and reactions to Parker’s ideas about teaching and how it relates to my own teaching and learning experiences. Furthermore, I will discuss how the information in the book relates to what I have learned so far in my studies in adult education and the teaching and learning course.

In the introduction of *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer emphasizes the central theme of the book, “we teach who we are” and a teacher has to know who they are before they can expect to know who their students are. Palmer points out that in order to know your subject you have to know yourself first and, “good teaching requires self-knowledge: it is a secret hidden in plain sight “(Palmer, 1998, p. 3). There is an inner landscape that teachers should explore with three important paths that must be taken from intellectual to emotional and spiritual. The more comfortable teachers are with themselves and inner terrain the more grounded and confident they are regardless of technique and method. The question at the heart of this book and for every educator is, “Who is the self that teaches?” and by addressing that question it will have a great impact on the teacher and their students.

In the first chapter one of the key concepts is the heart of a teacher is through identity and integrity; teaching techniques will only get an educator so far. Educators do a lot to master their
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craft by going to conferences and trying out different methods of instruction, however when faced with a group of students all you have is your identity. Palmer’s definition of identity is a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make someone who they are (Palmer, 1998, p. 13). There are many factors in a person’s life that affects the structure of their identity like their culture, parents, and genetic makeup. One simple trait that Palmer recognizes as running through a majority of “good” teachers is the ability to have a strong sense of personal identity that infuses their work. Along with an educator’s identity good teaching also comes from integrity. Palmer clarifies what he means by the word integrity saying that it lies in diverse forces that bring wholeness and life rather than fragmentation (Palmer, 1998, p. 13). Palmer stresses that it is important for educators to realize that teaching is more than just technique it is about identity, integrity, and heart. Teaching can be great but also heart breaking at the same time and it is our job to push through in the toughest of times to connect the students, subject, and ourselves all together.

Entering into the profession of teaching normally comes from passion for a particular subject and the enjoyment of helping people learn. However, when educators lose their passion for teaching they lose heart, explains Palmer (Palmer, 1998, p.19). Over the course of a teacher’s career they can lose heart for teaching from a multitude of things that end up disconnecting them from their students, the subject they teach, and their self. Some teachers might look to reclaim their passion for teaching by waiting for things outside of their control to change like budgets, restructuring, and methodologies. Instead of waiting for external factors to change Palmer encourages teachers to reclaim their belief in education and their lives. If educators look within and remember why they became teachers in the beginning and put themselves back together with
identity, integrity, and self-knowledge they will re-discover their love of teaching. A teacher can find the heart to teach again by recalling the inspiration a mentor evoked years earlier and remember what was great about that mentor. Most teachers have someone in their life that made a difference to them and showed the great possibilities teaching cold bring that left an imprint for life.

Fear is a concept that Palmer touches on in the book because he says it distances teachers from their colleagues, students, and the subjects they teach (Palmer, 1998, p. 36). It is crucial for educators to understand and resist disconnecting from life and the profession they love. Fear can result from many factors like bureaucracy in departments and teacher’s competing with each other but when we really dig deep the underlying factors that cause teachers to disconnect is fear. Teachers have a fear of administration, conflict, being vulnerable in the classroom, and the fear of losing their job if they go against the grain. When fear occurs it causes one of the worst things for an educator to happen and that is to shut down the capacity to teach well. Palmer also acknowledges that students have fears and are afraid of not understanding a concept, getting a bad grade, and looking silly in front of the other students. The main point he is trying to make about fear is that we should not blame being disconnected from teaching on external factors that happen at academic institutions and look inward. According to Palmer (1998), “We no longer need to put our lives on hold while waiting for structural change…by understanding fear we could overcome the structures of disconnection with the power of self-knowledge” (p. 37). Overall fear is not always negative and can lead to learning about yourself and personal growth.

In order for teachers to be better at their craft Palmer points to learning in a community where teachers gather with fellow educators to learn more about themselves and their profession.
For teachers to have a circle of colleagues around them to help each other become better through resources within the group and collective wisdom could greatly benefit the profession. However, as Palmer (1998) notes, “Academic culture builds barriers between colleagues even higher and wider than those between us and students” (p. 142). The barriers that academic cultures build come from many sources like fear and a profession that is for the most part very privatized. While educators are accustomed to standing in front of students to teach they rarely consult their colleagues or share experiences on what happens in the classroom. The concept of “closing the door on our work” as Palmer notes is rooted in the broad evaluation process that educators go through and the lack of direct knowledge of our colleagues work (Palmer, 1998, p. 142). The only real way for educators to be evaluated is by observing each other teach in the classroom and take more time to talk to colleagues about teaching. In order for teachers to improve their craft they need to work together as a community of colleagues.

There are three elements that will assist teachers in dismissing the privatized aspect of the field and encourage good conversations about teaching. Palmer explores the elements of topics that teachers can talk about, ground rules, and leadership. Encouraging teachers to talk to each other may sound novel but can be a new experience for many educators. Some of these conversations can include topics about critical moments in teaching and learning, classroom experiences, and metaphors about ourselves and who we are when we are teaching our best (Palmer, 1998, p. 145). In order to have meaningful and productive conversations about topics in teaching there needs to be ground rules to avoid negative conversations. Palmer has adopted a way to set ground rules by the Quaker community structure called the “clearness committee.” The committee is made up of a few colleagues and is there to help the teacher solve an
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educational problem. The process is done by addressing the issue on paper, giving each other undivided attention, asking questions, and over all creating a community where there are discussions. The last element to dismissing the privatized aspect of teaching is leadership. The importance of leaders is to point educators toward a vision and invite conversations about good teaching. In order for leaders to do this they have to break through some self-imposed barriers that faculty put up to mask their true feelings about education. As leaders connect with themselves and teachers it opens up a new chance for learning together.

In reading Parker Palmer’s book it made me reflect on my past years as a student in education and my future as an educator. This booked really opened my eyes to some of the pitfalls that happen to teachers and why they can lose heart for the profession. As a student in an adult education program I struggle with some of the notions that Palmer makes about not relying on technique and methods. One of my first reactions was confusion to a statement he makes in the first chapter regarding technique where he says, “technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives” (Palmer, 1998, p. 5). Currently a lot of what we are learning now is about techniques, theories, and methods in education and it will take balancing all of what I have learned to classify myself as a good teacher. I was comforted by Palmers honesty about his blunders and frustration from time to time in teaching even after 30 years in the profession.

I selected this book at first strictly because of the title before reading it because I felt that as someone new to teaching in order to find courage you have to confront your fears. I learned a lot from the chapter on fear and not to let it disconnect me from my colleagues, students, and adult education. This book is perfect for all educators because if you are new to teaching it helps you become aware of some of the things that causes teachers to lose their heart for teaching. In
addition, it also helps educators who have been in the profession for a long time reconnect to why they wanted to become a teacher and how to form new bonds with their students and colleagues.

This reflection paper was focused on one of Palmer’s most noted books about teachers finding the courage to reconnect to the profession of teaching. I discussed key elements that were in the book on identity, integrity, the heart of a teacher, fear, and learning in a community. I reflected on what this book means to me as a new educator and how to balance Palmer’s advice on good teaching with the methods and techniques we have learned so far in the adult education program. I think all educators no matter how long they have been in the profession should read this book because it will benefit them by exploring ways to create communities of learning.
References