

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Professional and Organizational Development
Network in Higher Education: Archives

Professional and Organizational Development
Network in Higher Education

1992

Good Teaching: A Matter of Living the Mystery

Parker J. Palmer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podarchives>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Palmer, Parker J., "Good Teaching: A Matter of Living the Mystery" (1992). *Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education: Archives*. 197.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podarchives/197>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education: Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 3, Number 3, 1991-92

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org).

Good Teaching: A Matter of Living the Mystery*

Parker J. Palmer

*Excerpted with permission from *Change*. Jan/Feb, 1990. An expanded version of this article appeared in *Change*, the award-winning bi-monthly magazine focusing on higher education topics ranging from teaching and learning to policy, finance and technology to minority issues. Published by Heldref Publications, *Change* is under the editorial direction of the American Association for Higher Education.

Good teaching is an act of generosity, a whim of the wanton muse, a craft that *may* grow with practice, and always risky business. It is, to speak plainly, a maddening mystery. How can I explain the wild variety of teachers who have incited me to learn -from one whose lectures were tropical downpours that drowned out most other comments, to one who created an arid silence by walking into class and asking, "Any questions?"

Faculty and administrators who encourage talk about teaching despite its vagaries are treasures among us. Too many educators respond to the mystery either by privatizing teaching or promoting a technical "fix." The first group uses the variability of good teaching as an excuse to avoid discussing it in public - thus evading criticism or challenge. The second group tries to flatten the variations by insisting on the superiority of this or that method - thus evading the demands of subtlety. In both quarters, the far-ranging conversation that could illumine the mystery of good teaching has all but disappeared.

I want to share a few reflections on the mystery of good classroom teaching, whether in large lecture halls or small seminars. I want to name some of its challenges, and suggest some responses, without treating it as a "problem to be solved." Only by doing so, it seems to me, can we enlarge the community of discourse that might encourage more and more of us to teach well.

The Autobiographical Connection If it is important to get students inside a subject, it is equally important to get the subject inside the students. Objectivism, with its commitment to holding subjectivity at bay, employs a pedagogy that purposely bypasses the learner's life-story. Objectivism regards autobiography as biased and parochial and hopes to replace it with "universal truth" as told through a particular discipline.

Of course, everyone's story is, in part, parochial and biased. But when we deal with that fact by ignoring autobiography, we create educated monsters who know much about the world's external workings but little about their inner selves. The authentically educated person is one who can both embrace and transcend the particularity of his or her story because it has been triangulated many times from the standpoints of other stories, other disciplines - a process that enriches the disciplines as well. When autobiography and an academic discipline are brought into "mutual irradiation" the result is a self illumined in the shadows where ignorance hides and a discipline warmed and made fit for human habitation.

By intersecting knowledge and autobiography we not only encourage intellectual humility and offer students self-understanding, we also make it more likely that the subject will be learned. When students do not see the connection between subject and self, the inducement to learn is very low. I know a geology professor whose students keep journals on the personal implications of each session to help them remember that the rocks they study are the rocks on which they live. I know a college where students are asked to explore the childhood roots of their vocational decisions (or confusions). In these ways, curiosity about the self can empower curiosity about the world.

When class size prohibits methods such as these, a teacher can help

connect self and subject by giving away one of the academy's best-kept secrets: the major ideas at the heart of every discipline arose from the real life of a real person—not from the mind alone, but from the thinker's psyche, body, relationships, passions, political and social context. Objectivism tries to protect its fantasy of detached truth by presenting ideas as cut flowers, uprooted from their earthy origins. But good teachers help students see the persons behind the ideas, persons whose ideas often arose in response to some great suffering or hope that is with us still today.

We teachers can also show students how the ideas we care about are related to our own life stories. Many students will be surprised to learn that their teachers - separated from them by gaps of age and authority and vocation - even *have* lives. They will be even more surprised to learn that our intellectual interest arise from the larger lives we lead, that the two enrich each other. That, after all, is why many of us became scholars and teachers - and our teaching will become more vivid as we let the secret out.

Hearing Students into Speech If good teaching depends on drawing students and their stories into the conversation called truth, then good teachers must deal with the fact that many students prefer to sit silently on the sidelines. Students have blocked interactive teaching at least as often as have faculty. Many of them do not want to suffer the conflict and ambiguity of external conversation, and some try to avoid inward debate for the same reason.

If we are to treat their condition, we need an accurate diagnosis. It is inaccurate, though common, to attribute most student speechlessness to laziness or stupidity - and that diagnosis usually leads to teaching that is more punitive than provocative. Instead, I suggest, the silence of many students is the result of disempowerment that leads to privatization. Students are often marginal to the society by virtue of their youth, their lack of a productive role, their dependency on the academy for legitimation. Deprived of any sense of public place or power, they withdraw into the private realm where they keep their thoughts to themselves and, sometimes, from themselves.

The remedy is clear: establish a setting where silenced voices can be heard into speech by people committed to serious listening. The

classroom can be such a setting-if the teacher will work hard to gain credibility with the students who have learned that silence is the safer way. Credibility comes as the teacher empathizes with the voiceless and with their struggle to speak and be heard.

There are many practical ways of "hearing people into speech." Teachers who must lecture much of the time can honor minority viewpoints on their subjects, giving minority students a sense that alternative voices can be spoken and heard. Even in the largest classes, it is not necessary to lecture all the time; materials can be presented by questioning (as in the "microcosm" approach), and, if the questions are neither rhetorical nor catechetical, students will want to respond. When those responses come, teachers can hear people into speech by respecting their responses - which does not require assenting to false claims. The familiar problem of a few students speaking a lot while the majority remain mute can be controlled in many ways; I sometimes allow each student only three chances to speak, thus allowing the quieter ones to find an opening.

With smaller classes, when a divisive issue is up for debate and my students retreat into privatism, I sometimes give each of them a 3x 5 card and ask that he or she write a few lines expressing a personal opinion on the issues. I collect the cards and redistribute them so that no one knows whose card he or she is holding. Then I ask each student to read that card aloud and take sixty seconds to agree or disagree with what it says. By the time we have gone around the group, the issue has been aired, diversity has been exposed, the unspeakable may have been spoken, and a foundation for real conversation has been laid.

The Courage to Teach The word "courage" comes from a root that means "head," and I like to transpose the words. How can we develop and sustain, in ourselves and each other, the heart for good teaching (assuming that the mind is already available)? Good teaching requires courage - the courage to expose one's ignorance as well as insight, to invite contradiction as well as consent, to yield some control in order to empower the group, to evoke other people's lives as well as reveal one's own. Furthermore, good teaching sometimes goes unvalued by academic institutions, by the students for whom it is done, and even by those teachers who do it. Many of

us "lose heart" in teaching. How shall we recover the courage that good teaching requires?

In its original meaning, a "professor" was not someone with esoteric knowledge and technique. Instead, the word referred to a person able to make a profession of faith in the midst of a dangerous world. All good teachers, I believe, have access to this confidence. It comes not from the ego but from a soul-deep sense of being at home in the world despite its dangers. This is the authority by which good teachers teach. This is the gift they pass on to their students. Only when we take heart as professors can we "give heart" to our students - and that, finally, is what good teaching is all about.