

THE INNER LIFE OF A TEACHER (Speech at the Celebrating Pedagogy Conversation-IX)

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If I had been invited to give this presentation last semester, it would have been an entirely different talk.

The reason is that I'm going through a great change right now...a change that has been brought about by my experience as Division Chair over the past two years during which time I've conducted 20 classroom observations, some of them more than once (I counted them up last night), ... and my reading of Parker Palmer's 1998 book *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of A Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), a book that I am reading for the first-time...again.

In that book he speaks about something that I found quite evocative. He observes that the first two questions we teachers typically ask are, "What am I going to teach?" and "How shall I do it?" Then we may ask ourselves the "Why" questions: "What are my purposes for this course or seminar?" "What are the desired outcomes or competencies I want my students to achieve?" "What impact do I want to have in their lives?" But we almost never ask the "Who" questions: "Who am I that is doing the teaching?" "How does the person I am, with my special circumstances and background, my particular values, my prides and prejudices, influence my teaching?" "How do those personal qualities influence my relationship toward the discipline that I profess, the students who I teach, and faculty colleagues and administrators with whom I interact?" Parker Palmer then goes on to say something that *stopped my world*:

*"Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique:
good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 149).*

A Soldier in the Pedagogical Wars

Now, I've been a loyal soldier in the pedagogical wars for many years...ever since graduating from Purdue University in 1976 with a master of science degree in educational psychology and again in 1986 with a doctorate in general/experimental psychology from the University of Tennessee...where I learned from revered mentors that there was a right way to teach and a wrong way to teach... that if teaching is both an art and a science, the rational approach dictates it be more science than art and be based on what the science of teaching and learning has taught us about what students know, why people learn, and how the brain works... as spelled out in such authoritative books as Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956) with its structured learning outcomes of Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation... in books published by the prestigious National Research Council such as *What Students Know: The Science and Design of Educational Assessment* (2001) and *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* (2000)... in classroom textbooks like Anita Woolfolk's (2007) *Educational Psychology*... in evidence-based handbooks like Donald Bligh's (2000) *What's the Use of Lecture?* that tell us what lectures are good for (transmitting information) and what they're not good for (teaching values, inspiring interest in the subject, personal and social adjustment,

teaching behavioral skills)... in booklets like the “Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” developed by Arthur Chickering and others as part of an AAHE project summarizing what we know to be “best practice” in higher education (student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, respect for diverse ways of learning) ... and in disciplined-based journals such as *Teaching of Psychology* that presents research-based articles on what works and what doesn’t in the psychology classroom.

From my “fixed position in the foxholes of the pedagogical wars” (Parker Palmer’s phrase) and framed in terms of a theology of opposites,... trying to fix what was “wrong” in my colleagues, I would hurl my pedagogical points... that *Discipline-based pedagogies* are bad because they are narrow and dogmatic and promote a silo-type mentality that prevents faculty from trying alternatives to traditional forms of teaching and assessing, whereas *Generic teaching methods* are good because research demonstrates that all teaching methods are eminently transferable across all disciplinary fields and that people have different, preferred ways of processing information (called learning styles) that demand a variety of teaching methods be used.... *Essays* are bad because they are unreliable means of assessment due to the “halo” effect, extraneous factors,” padding” of answers, and an indefinite scoring key and have limited content validity when many objectives need to be assessed, whereas *Multiple-choice, true-false, and matching* are good because they possess a high degree of reliability in scoring and highly representative samples of objectives and content can be assessed.... *Lecture* is bad because it makes students passive, while *Group discussion* is good because it makes students active... that we teach *Students*, not our Discipline... that it is better to be the *Guide on the side*, than *the Sage on the stage*... and that people who believe otherwise are not bad or evil persons, but simply uninformed or misled by fixed ideas which program their interpretation of events and which emphasize only those perceptions that serve to give those mistaken ideas validity, teaching as they have been taught with the best of intentions by revered mentors of the past. You know the story....

Casualties of the Pedagogical Wars

That kind of talk...I have now come to believe...fails to touch the heart of a teacher’s experience, and can create a kind of pain of having one’s particular gift as a teacher forced into the mold of someone else’s method and the standards prescribed by it, and leave faculty who teach differently feeling devalued and forced to measure up to norms not their own. Our capacity as teachers for renewal and authentic expression and connectedness to ourselves, our subject matter, and our students becomes even more difficult, the more vigorously these polarizing ideas are promoted. It is not possible to say in words what one teacher (or student, for that matter) *looks for* in life, or what unique features best promote his or her growth and development. Even two plants of the same kind sometimes require completely different treatment.

The strong sense of personal identity we each have as teachers, the passion we bring to our teaching, and the enthusiasm that infuses our “Great Work” is what creates our capacity for connectedness... with ourselves and the subject matter we convey, and with the students we teach... a connectedness that joins it all together with the very fabric of life... *that* is at the heart of authentic education. That connectedness, however, becomes broken in the pedagogical wars...where our focus becomes more on technique and method than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood as a teacher and my willingness to make my “inner teacher” available and vulnerable in the service of my students. Instead of growing in identity and integrity as teachers, we harden defending, “our fixed positions from the foxholes of the pedagogy wars.”

After us, the next casualties of the pedagogical wars are our students. We lose touch with them because we've lost touch with ourselves. We distance ourselves from them in order to reduce our vulnerability when they are "behaving badly" or not behaving the way we expect them to. We no longer identify with our students, and may even project our own deadened emotional state upon them, making it easier to inflict unreasonable demands upon them in pursuit of our ideals. We can get so jaded that I've even heard a faculty member say, "This would be a good course, if it weren't for the students!" "Students *should* do this, and students *should* do that"... "Students *should* be this way, and students *should* be that way." Our students upset us because they don't live up to our expectations, or because in our mind and feelings, a present situation, or a proposed one, falls far short of some ideal, and the higher our expectations the greater any divergence from them seems.

The Living Picture of the World Grows Within the Mind

For my part, I can no longer negate the present reality of my faculty colleagues because I compare it to some idealized perfection. We must not expect our students or ourselves to be "perfect" either. Our ideas of perfection often presuppose something completed and done beyond change, and so beyond motion, further development or creativity, or a state of fulfillment beyond which there is no future growth, and no such state exists. Perfection is not being, for all being is in a state of becoming...not a state of becoming more *perfect*, but a state of becoming more perfectly *itself*, for the spirit is always in a state of becoming.... It has been my practice not to "should" on my students. I have found that that if I teach the students *that* I have, not the students I *wish* I had, I get a more harmonious outcome. If I treat each student as if he or she were my own son or daughter, I am able to tap into those loving emotions that I might have toward the development of my own children, and in my intent to have them develop their fullest capabilities. The thing is to find out where *they* are and what *they* know, and then build a bridge that *connects* them from *that* place to where I want them to be. Love is that bridge. I don't look for what's wrong, but for reasons behind the behavior. Avoiding absolutes and black-and-white thinking is also good because it is all too easy to become fanatical in the pursuit of our ideals from "our fixed positions in the pedagogical wars."

So what if a student does not know who wrote *The Jungle Book* when they first come into my course.... It does little good to ridicule or disparage or mock the student for his or her lack of knowledge...or call the student "lazy" or "unprepared," "culturally deprived" or "culturally privileged," as the case may be...or engage in the "blame game" and fault our culture or the high school teacher or parents, or whomever for the student's perceived behavioral excesses or behavioral deficits. If the student knew the answer, she wouldn't need a teacher, would she? Teaching is our job, our vocation, our passion, and if we remember why we got into this "Great Work" in the first place, and can achieve insight into what is happening inside us as we encounter that student in front of us who needs now to learn about Rudyard Kipling, we will do so without cynicism, sarcasm, or impatience. In this great work we need only adopt the pace of nature...her secret is patience.

In higher education, it is easy to become conditioned to believe that each teacher is interchangeable with every other student, like a replaceable cog in some impersonal machine, and that one teacher or student will do just as well as another. But for me, teaching is a *relationship*... a conversation... a dance...that sometimes works and sometimes does not. There are rhythms and cycles to good teaching, too, just as there are rhythms and cycles in nature. Some days are better than others, and timing is an ingredient in all things. We have all had the experience of preparing a great class that "flops." No fault. No blame. It is simply the nature of the dance. Each of us creates our own reality, and are therefore

participators in whatever events we may find ourselves enmeshed in - even those we dislike. We cannot expect to be in a state of bliss all the time; that is simply not the nature of existence. At such times, I look for what is right in my life, rather than becoming overly concerned about what is wrong. Otherwise, the intense desire for a solution can lead me to concentrate upon what is wrong, so that it becomes the entire issue. Concentration upon a problem magnifies it. The thing to do is to concentrate upon those improvements and positive events you sense daily, either in performance or in feelings of ease, release, or relief...for no day passes without some of these.

Frameworks 1 and 2

This in-between place that I am now at...this place of transition between belief systems in the pedagogical wars...is filled with the tension of two opposing impulses – a *conserving* impulse, on the one hand, that wants to hold onto my past belief in the privileged position of certain pedagogies and, on the other hand, an *originating* impulse that encourages my curiosity and creativity, and wants to throw aside accepted frameworks and answers to open up new avenues of perception, understanding, and expression not available to me before. ...These impulses are not new to me...I recognize them...I have sensed their presence before just before my decision to leave the seminary...and know that they have the potential to change my life and to reform and transform, magnify and yet refine, my knowledge frameworks ... as is usually the case whenever a new insight strongly clashes with previously held ideas and beliefs that I had so willingly accepted before.

Some of you may not know this, but in my past life (some 35 or so years ago), I spent 8 years studying to be a diocesan priest...fours years in high school and four years in college.... It was a liberal arts education in the finest Catholic tradition and my undergraduate major was Philosophy (with a capital P)... This was where I first encountered Carl R. Roger's (1969) *Freedom To Learn* which offered me my first alternative view of what higher education might become... and Viktor Frankl's (1959) book, *Man's Search for Meaning*...which taught me that the purpose of my life, and each life, is in its being...that being may include certain actions, but the acts themselves are only important in that they spring out of the essence of one's life, which simply by being is bound to fulfill its purposes.

Ever since my seminary experience, I've straddled two realities or "spheres of action"...a natural one that I call *Framework 1* which is the everyday world of my work-a-day life, and a spiritual one I call *Framework 2* which is the source of that world and from which the energy and vitality of my daily life constantly springs and is forever couched and supported. My life flows through me automatically and spontaneously from that unknown source which shows itself through the events of the physical world.... The natural world cannot be its own source. The power that moves the world does not come *from* the world, but at each moment comes *into* the world, and I am a part of, not apart from, that world and its source... As the poet has said: "You are earth come alive to view itself through conscious eyes, alive with a light from which the very fires of life are lit." Each private reality has its existence in an eternal creativity from which you and I and the world itself springs.

This "religious" feeling, I believe, is a *natural* religious knowing with which we are all born, given one expression through our Catholic faith, and that, although it may be consciously forgotten, overlooked, ignored, or deliberately denied, is impossible to leave. This feeling ("Life is a gift, not a curse. I am a unique, worthy creature in the natural world which everywhere surrounds me, which gives me sustenance and reminds me of the greater source from which I myself and the world both emerge") is an ever present context that gives meaning to the events of my life....in and out of the classroom. That feeling encourages my curiosity and creativity, and places me in a spiritual world and a natural one at

once. My present pedagogical dilemma or paradox (or whatever you want to call it) thus has a meaning and purpose for me, even if that meaning and purpose is not intellectually understood. It is quite possible that the pendulum may swing back to the other side (when I am again back in the foxholes of the pedagogical wars, lobbing pedagogical points at my colleagues in order to “fix” them because of the pull of the conserving impulse)...but not here...not now... as long as the originating impulse holds sway.

If identity and integrity are indeed more fundamental to good teaching than technique, as Parker Palmer asks us to believe... and if we want to grow as teachers...then we must do something that may be very uncomfortable and embarrassing and anxious for us to do...*talk to one another about our inner lives as teachers* – our limitations and our potentials, our hopes and our fears when it comes to dealing with our subject matter and the lives of our students. Stories are the best way to portray realities of this sort...and so I’ll tell one.

A Teacher’s Story

As a cognitive psychologist, I realize that our ideas about our life, or life itself, will have much to do with our experience of it...and so I have placed a small 8” x 15” banner titled “A Precious Human Life” next to my bed with a script composed by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama (I bought it from those Tibetan monks who made that beautiful sand mandala in the Art and Music Department last year and subsequently destroyed it to dramatized the impermanence of life... remember?)... which I use to inspire in me a desired attitude and mind-set to frame my perceptions and my actions as I prepare to meet and greet the events of the day.... The following words are written on it:

“Every day, think as you wake up, ‘Today, I am fortunate to have woken up. I am alive. I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it. I am going to use all my energies to develop myself, to expand my heart out to others, to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. I am going to have kind thoughts towards others. I am not going to get angry, or think badly about others. I am going to benefit others as much as I can.’”

This is but one of the many prompts, or “suggestions,” that I have around my home, in my office, or carry with me to keep in mind the existence of Framework 2...and of the mysterious effortlessness behind my life, so that I do not try too hard (this trying-too-hard has caused me some distress), and so that the events of my life each have their meaning in that larger pattern of activity.

What does all this have to do about my *inner life* as a teacher? In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the day’s lesson, depends less on the methods I use to teach them than on the degree to which I know and trust my “precious human life” (and, in turn the precious lives of my students)...and the degree to which I am willing to make that life available and vulnerable in the service of “guiding students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world” (Parker Palmer’s phrase). My moving physically among my students, making eye contact with them...all contribute to my capacity for connectedness...a connectedness that joins them with me in the two-fold spheres of action of Framework 1 and Framework 2 that exist one within the other. The twice-weekly 75-minute periods in the classroom that I have with my students is a special, sacred time and space to me...where intellect and emotion and spirit converge in the inner self of the teacher. In my other role as chair, my own inner journey to explore “the teacher within” now requires of me that I discover how I can create conditions within the Division of Sciences that sustain, deepen, and nurture the selfhood of the faculty on whom good teaching depends.

The Heart of Authentic Education

Yes... I continue to believe that it is students who learn, not professors who perform, which is what teaching is all about. Students learn in many different ways, including ways that bypass the teacher in the classroom, and in ways that require neither teacher nor classroom! It is also clear that teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal... or keep them from learning much at all.... In all of this, no matter what discipline we are talking about – History, Psychology, Biology, English, Communications, Nursing, Education, Modern Language, Business, Mathematics, Computer Science, Chemistry, Art, Criminal Justice, Political Science, Philosophy, Religious Studies – the identity and integrity and selfhood of the teacher is key...and no matter how technical our subject matter may be, the things that we really teach are the things that we love and care about.... Those are the things that can help us renew and express the capacity for connectedness that, in my mind, is that the heart of authentic education.

* **Dr. PAUL F. CUNNINGHAM** received his B.A. degree in philosophy from our Lady of Providence Seminary (Warwick, RI) in 1971, M.S. degree in educational psychology from Purdue University in 1975, and Ph.D. in general/experimental psychology from the University of Tennessee in 1986. A full-time faculty member of Rivier College since 1986, he has delivered numerous presentations throughout the New England area on assessment of student outcomes in higher education. Serving as treasurer of Psychologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals from 1994-1996, and member of the American Psychological Association since 1986, Professor Cunningham was elected 44th President of the New England Psychological Association in 2003. Having published mainly on animal use in psychology experiments and on student choice policies in biology and psychology education, he is currently co-authoring with Harris Friedman, editor of the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, an introductory textbook in transpersonal psychology (TP). Paul currently serves as chair of the Division of Applied, Natural, and Technological Sciences at Rivier College in Nashua, NH.