

Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach. Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, San Francisco 1998 (first edition)

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Translation in Dutch: "Leraar met hart en ziel. Over persoonlijke en professionele groei" (Being a teacher by heart and soul. About personal and professional growth), Groningen 2005. With a foreword from the translator Sebo Ebbens, especially about the difficulties in translating the, in his opinion, sometimes specific jargon.

Review

A Meaningful Book

Palmer brings up an issue of education that is essential and difficult as well, namely the person of the teacher. This is his first and main concern. However, in narrow connection with this, his work raises a second question: what is the core business of education? The context of Palmer and the several examples in the book are mainly determined by his educational experience in universities and adult study programs. But he also worked a lot with teachers and groups in different kinds of educational programs (public schools, religious institutions, and businesses) and during the nineties in formation programs for public school teachers. His focus on 'teaching from within' makes this book meaningful for everyone who is interested in the issue of good education. Not only the content, but also the style of his book, what is systematically build and written in a narrative way, contributes to a reflective attention of the reader.

After a discussion of the main issues mentioned above, we will focus on the matter of spirituality.

The Core Business of Education

Palmer makes a valuable contribution to the discussion about education by drawing attention to the core business of education: "to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced". Three prominent models of community like the therapeutic, the civic (in Dutch "political") and marketing model contain important insights for education. However, respectively the exclusiveness of intimacy, the compromises of democratic citizenship, and the 'product and consumer' approach of these models are dangerous aspects for the claim that "reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it". This means that the traditional idea of truth – or should we say to Palmer, the by modernism deformed idea of truth – no longer is sufficient. Despite the myth of objectivity that truth is outside us and is to teach by academic experts only, Palmer pleas for truth as "an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline". When "great things" – universal themes and aspects like the biological ecosystems, philosophical and theological symbols, themes of humanity in literature, and so on – are at the centre of this community in education, virtues (in Dutch "qualities") are evoked from us. We become free of our arrogance and narcissism and open up to transcendence. In this communal, complex and eternal process of knowing and not-knowing, of speaking and listening, of intimacy and distance, both absolutism (with the myth of absolute knowledge) and relativism (the idea we are never certain of anything) loose their impact on our arrogant overestimation of ourselves on one hand and on our servile overestimation on the other. For Palmer, "knowing, teaching, and learning are grounded in sacred soil". This sacred points to "an ineffable immensity beyond concept and definition", the "mysterium tremendum", and also to that what is "worthy of respect". In a culture stripped of the sacred, disrespect leads to banality. Living in this flat landscape, our ability to know, to teach and to learn is injured.

I consider Palmers attention for the notions of the myth of objectivity, the sacredness of life and the communal quest for truth, as essential. By this, he highlights the fundamental task and importance of good education. By doing so, school boards, parents and the individual teachers get the opportunity to rethink their view on education and to restructure and recreate their organisation and practice, step by step. In this way they really honour the different participants. I think Palmer makes a very important statement when he says: "Many critics have noticed the growing disrespect inherent in our social relations and the sad implications of such incivility for the future of democracy. But fewer have noticed our growing disrespect for the "grace of great things" and its sad implications for the future of teaching

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and learning and the life of the mind.” I will add to that: “Many notice the importance of spirituality for the welfare of our world and the individual human being. But fewer are aware of the discomfiting appeal that comes with spirituality and is necessary to make the spiritual process fruitful to the individual and his environment.” About this I shall make some remarks at the end of this review.

The Teacher and his Vocation

Though the activity of teaching and learning is a dynamic process that involves the teacher, the student and the “great things”, it is clear that Palmer puts the teacher in the centre. “Bad teachers distance themselves from the subject they are teaching – and in the process, from their students. Good teachers join self and subject and students in the fabric of life”, they “possess a capacity for connectedness”. The technical side of the profession of education has a value of its own, but crucial is the ability of the teacher to make connections in his heart, “as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit will converge in the human self.” The courage to teach concerns this openness of the heart and the weaving of a complex web of connections between teacher, subject and student, in order to grow as a learning community. Good teaching comes from the identity of the teacher, the evolving nexus or the moving intersection where inner and outer forces converge in one’s mystery of being human. Identity is connected with integrity, what means that I “choose life-giving ways of relating to the forces that converge within me”, instead of fragmentation and death, in order to become more whole and real.

It is important to see how our capacity for connectedness is strongly threatened by “the perverse but powerful draw of the ‘disconnected’ life”. In fact we collaborate with structures of separation because one of our deepest fears is the encountering of the otherness in another human being, in situations, in subjects and in our self. We try to protect ourselves from it, but what we should do is to recognize that fear, in our own heart and in the heart of our students. In fact we are driven by a fear of separation and are yearning for connectedness. To overcome that destroying fear, we need to reclaim the connectedness. There is some circularity in this, but this is the crucial point. This is “precisely how the spiritual life moves”. It is also the core business of the spiritual traditions: “be not afraid”.

The process of teaching and learning is not only undermined by the fear driven culture of disconnection, but also by our Western way of thinking in polarities. With this analytical approach of reality “we think the world apart”. Often the empirical world needs us to choose between true and false, based on fact and reason (for example, to determine if a particular tree is an oak or a maple). But there is also the realm of profound truth, “where, if we want to know what is essential, we must stop thinking the world into pieces and start thinking it together again”. Important then is the concept of paradox, by which we learn to accept that in certain circumstances truth concerns the paradoxical joining of apparent positions. The world of education is filled with broken paradoxes and their lifeless results, by separating head from heart, facts from feelings, theory from practice, and teaching from learning. As a teacher we must learn to recognize and to handle the paradoxes in our inner life (for example, to find a balance between our interdependency and dependency toward our students). But a good teacher also handles the concept of paradox in the classroom, by inducing the creative tension that is necessary for the high degree of awareness in the process of teaching and learning. Designing a classroom session, Palmer works with six paradoxical tensions. He tries to create a space that is bounded and open, hospitable and “charged”, inviting the voice of the individual and the voice of the group, honours the ‘little’ stories of the students and the ‘big’ stories of the disciplines and tradition. This space should also “support solitude and support it with the resources of community” and “should welcome both silence and speech”.

When we succeed in holding the tension of the paradox, our students can learn at deeper levels. However, this is among the most difficult demands of good teaching. It is not only a matter of technique, above all it is a matter of the heart. A good teacher knows how to negotiate this daily paradox of freedom and discipline, “by allowing the tension itself to pull them open to a larger and larger love”, to “a higher level where opposites are transcended” (quoting E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*, New York 1973). This love has the power of reconciliation, but asks for the patience of suffering, of being instead of doing.

Spirituality

“The courage to teach” is a very valuable publication in the field of education, because it throws light on the central position of the teacher in the complex process of teaching and learning and on the importance of his identity and integrity. In our view, this has everything to do with spirituality. Palmer mentions this word, or the adjective, a few times. In general we can consider his book as an introduction in the spirituality of the teacher. But precisely because he does not deal with spirituality as

a topic on its own, we want to add some remarks, in order to deepen out some elements that nowadays become of increasing importance.¹

Let us start with some questions. How can the teacher develop his identity and integrity? Palmer stresses the importance of that continuously and he also shows some directions in order to make this happen. But does he come to the core of this matter? How can we really get in touch with our inner life? How can we become sensitive for the meaning of our own life and become aware of a kind of destiny? How do we learn to make choices in such a way, that we grow into people with identity and integrity, which are able to teach from out of their heart, connecting students, the subjects and their selves in a dynamic search of truth? How can we develop that kind of wisdom that is necessary to choose and handle the right subjects that concern the great things of knowledge and life?

The key, I think, is to be found in what Palmer says about the sacredness of life. Only when I develop my own sensitivity for the “mysterium tremendum” that is at the heart of reality and for the grace of life, I can become a person that inspires other people into this way of looking and living. Palmer surely shows how this sensitivity can get shape in the daily practice of school and classroom. But it should be stressed more that one of his central advices, to overcome one’s fear by insight, also asks for trust in life. Intellectual and psychological knowledge and reflection are not enough. It requires also that I fundamentally become aware of the fact that life is a precious gift and that I have my own vocation for the larger good of the community. In that way I can become free of my anxieties, this is, of their destructive impact. This is a process that appeals to our different intellectual capacities, to our spiritual affinities and to aspects of our humanity like emotion, the will, and character. In the effect, it has to do with the important spiritual notion of discernment. Fundamentally it has to do with our receptivity to the divine source of our life and with our answer to that. Spirituality has to do with the process that is initiated when we become aware of the divine-human relationship we live in. Palmer is right when he refers to the great spiritual traditions as traditions that propose their different ways to overcome our fear. But he is wrong when he states that “they originate in an effort to overcome its effects on our life”. Seen from out of spirituality, the origin of spiritual traditions is not fear, but formed by wonder, gratitude and hope. Spiritual traditions evolve out of the experience of the preciousness of life and its intangible source. It flows forth from the contact with the Presence that is transcendent and immanent to our lives and that is reaching out to our devotion and growth in love.

Spirituality is a process of transformation, realized in the substance of human existence, internalizing the call of the divine Presence to become who we really are. It is an adventure of love, but it is also a confrontation, because this love has a purifying effect. The last chapters in Palmers book, about the importance and possibilities of the meeting with colleagues and of the dynamics of the social movement, are a illustration of this point. But to bring teachers in this process of comfort and discomfort and to guide them therein is probably the hardest task for teacher trainers and counsellors. It asks for special courses and training, but above all for the development of one’s ability to become sensitive and to hear. “All real living is meeting”, states Palmer with Martin Buber. However, this meeting concerns ‘the eternal You’. In the reality of the daily life we can become aware of that ineffable Presence that comes to us in everything that happens and in every person we meet. We can close our eyes, but also we can yield to it and let evoke in us Its love for life. If we do, our spirituality will inspire the life of others and education will become what it is meant to be: a healthy environment of knowing, teaching, and learning that brings together the sacred and the secular “so that they can correct and enrich each other”. Then we will become a community in search of truth.

¹ See for spirituality as a topic: Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Leuven etc. 2002.