



The Courage to Teach

The Work of Parker Palmer

It is a Challenging Time to be in Higher Education

- In our busy, jam-packed lives we can sometimes lose touch with that which is most important to us.
- Questions preoccupy us, such as:
 - How can I possibly accomplish all of the tasks I am juggling?
 - Why, or for what purpose, am I engaged in this work, anyway? What's the point of all of this activity?
- Seldom, however, do we ask the questions:
 - How can I be renewed as I work with and relate to others?
 - With a renewed sense of vitality, how can I discover my strengths and work toward the common good at the university?

A Vision of an Integrative Practice

The institution of higher education is notoriously slow to change. But many individuals within the institution have kept the vision of an integrative practice alive in their hearts – using heart in its original sense, not just as the seat of the emotions but as that core (essential) place in the human self where all our capacities converge: intellect, senses, emotions, imagination, intuition, will, spirit and soul.

*Parker J. Palmer, from: *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal – Transforming the Academy through Collegial Conversations**

Another Motivation

- Most of my professional work has revolved around Lee Shulman's (1986) notion of *Pedagogical Content Knowledge* (PCK) – “What teachers need to know if they are to teach well.”
- Criticisms of PCK as placing an over-emphasis on the role of knowledge in teaching (Ball and Wilson, 1996):
 - Teaching as a fundamentally moral enterprise – focus on PCK unduly emphasizes the technical in teaching
 - The cost is high – draws attention away from the fundamentally moral and contextualized character of teaching practice

Why Courage to Teach?

When people connect who they are with what they do, the seeds of transformation are planted in their lives and the lives of those they touch (teach).

When those people join with each other, transformation becomes a possibility in the larger world.

Courage to Teach (Circles of Trust®) work supports such movements toward positive personal and social change in venues ranging from the family to the classroom to the workplace and to the larger community.

Background on Parker Palmer

- **Parker J. Palmer's** writing speaks deeply to people in many walks of life. Author of nine books – including the bestsellers *The Courage to Teach*, *Let Your Life Speak*, and *A Hidden Wholeness* – Palmer is the founder of the Center for Courage & Renewal.
- He earned a Ph.D. in Sociology from Berkeley, but has worked largely outside higher education as an author, speaker, and consultant. He is distrustful of organizations and their impact on the human spirit. He is a true public intellectual (a rare and dying breed).
- His work has been recognized with ten honorary doctorates and many national awards, including the 2010 William Rainey Harper Award, previously won by Margaret Mead, Paulo Freire, and Elie Wiesel.

Parker Palmer on Teaching

- *Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique. Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.*
- *To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced. Truth is defined as an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.*
- *We become teachers for reasons of the heart. But often, as time goes by, we lose heart. How can we take heart, alone and together, so we can give heart – which is what good teachers do.*

Parker Palmer on Leadership

- *Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, and what values you represent.*
- *A leader is someone with the power to project either shadow or light upon some part of the world, and upon the lives of the people who dwell there. A leader shapes the ethos in which others must live, an ethos as light-filled as heaven or as shadowy as hell. A good leader has awareness of the interplay of inner shadow and light, lest the act of leadership do more harm than good.*

Community of Being

We are participants in a vast community of being, and if we open ourselves to its guidance, we can learn anew how to live in this great and gracious community of truth.

- Parker Palmer, Let Your Life Speak

Living an Undivided Life

[Parker Palmer video clip on living an undivided life](#)

*“And it starts with a sentence that might last a lifetime
Or it all might just go down in flames
If I let you know me then why would you want me?
But each day I don't is a shame
And each day I don't is a great shame”*

- From *Strange Weirdos* by Loudon Wainwright III

Background on Courage to Teach

- A short history of the CTT program: Michigan, 1994 – Parker designed a workshop for teachers to create a safe space that they could reflect on their teaching and listen to their inner guidance. He had a desire to express gratitude, and create a trustworthy and safe space. Designed as a one-shot, but teachers needed more (“You can’t leave us here”). So he developed a 2-year seasonal retreat series that has been replicated in numerous forms.
- Now exists as cross-professional Circles of Trust®
- About 250 trained facilitators, 30K+ participants

Courage to Teach retreats

- Called CTT, but focus on teaching is a little indirect – it becomes a part of the conversation because of who we are, what we bring to the conversation
- Touchstones (boundary markers) create a safe space for true or authentic self to emerge
- Invitational - not “share or die”; you may opt-out at of any activity; you know what you need

Courage Retreats

- Seasonal-based themes (natural rhythms as metaphors for human experience)
- Tools we use: Poetry, Journaling, Silence in Solitude, Small Group, Large Group
 - Metaphors – “Tell the truth/ but tell it slant” (E. Dickinson)
- For many of us, working with poetry in this way can be new. It may help to remember that our reason for working with poetry is not to critique or analyze what the “correct” meaning of the poem is, but rather to notice how it speaks to us in relationship to our lives and our work, to let the words and feelings of the poem guide us towards thoughtful reflection about our own truths.

Sample Poem

Shoulders by Naomi Shihab Nye:

*We're not going to be able
to live in this world
if we're not willing to do what he's doing
with one another.*

*The road will only be wide.
The rain will never stop falling.*

Reflection Questions for *Nye's Shoulders*

- What are the challenges on the wide road you walk?
- Whom do you feel you have been carrying?
- How do you want the world to be different because you lived in it?

A Few Words on Being in Retreat

- Permit yourself the luxury of doing just one thing
- Leave those full agendas, to-do lists and worries outside the door (be fully present)
- A chance to slow down and allow the unexpected to bubble up
- Relax, refresh, replenish, reconnect with true self

Retreat

“Retreat” as we understand it, is not a withdrawal or an escape from a life we don’t want to live. Rather, it is an opportunity to engage at a deeper level with our own true self, and our unique calling. Our lives “back there” are not separate from what we do here, and likewise the benefits of what we do here will have a great impact on our ongoing family, community, and professional roles. What’s different about “here” is that the product is the process. This kind of retreat is not about arriving anywhere in particular. It’s not about producing something. It’s about paying attention to the unfolding of our identity and integrity (as educators), and how we might help each other to embrace courageously the various roles and responsibilities that fill our lives. It’s about how bring our full selves to our lives.

Circles of Trust

If we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole, we cannot embrace it alone – at least, not for long: we need trustworthy relationships to sustain us and tenacious communities of support to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. Taking an inner journey toward rejoining soul and role requires a rare but real form of community that I call a “circle of trust.”

– Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

C&R Principles and Practices

The Circle of Trust approach is distinguished by principles and practices intended to create a process of shared exploration – in retreats, programs and other settings – where people can find **safe space** to nurture personal and professional integrity and the courage to act on it.

These principles and practices are grounded in the Center for Courage and Renewal's core values which spell out the foundational beliefs and intended purposes for our work with individuals, groups and organizations.

Center for Courage and Renewal -- Core Values

- Integrity / Wholeness
- Authenticity
- Diversity
- Community
- Courage
- Love
- Hope
- Renewal

Center for Courage & Renewal Principles

- Everyone has an inner teacher
- Inner work requires both solitude and community
- Inner work must be invitational
- Our lives move in cycles like the seasons
- An appreciation of paradox enriches our lives and helps us hold greater complexity
- We live with greater integrity when we see ourselves as whole
- A "hidden wholeness" underlies our lives

Safe Spaces for the Soul

In this culture, we know how to create spaces that invite the intellect to show up, to argue its case, to make its point. We know how to create spaces that invite the emotions to show up, to express anger or joy. We know how to create spaces that invite the will to show up, to consolidate effort and energy around a common task. And we surely know how to create spaces that invite the ego to show up, preening itself and claiming its turf! But we seem to know very little about creating spaces that invite the soul to show up, this core of ourselves, our selfhood.

—Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

Center for Courage and Renewal Practices

- Creating spaces that are open and hospitable, but resource-rich and charged with expectancy
- Committing to no fixing, advising, “saving” or correcting one another
- Asking honest, open questions to “hear each other into speech”
- Exploring the intersection of the universal stories of human experience with the personal stories of our lives
- Using multiple modes of reflection so everyone can find his or her place and pace
- Honoring deep confidentiality

Six Paradoxes of Formation Space

Open ----- Bounded

Hospitable ----- Charged

Voice of the Individual ----- Voice of the Group

Personal Stories ----- Archetypal Stories

Solitude ----- Community

Speech ----- Silence

Clearness Committees

- Quaker tradition of discernment

Impact

Participants in a Circle of Trust return to their homes, workplaces and communities, taking two important resources with them:

- 1) Greater access to their inner teacher and a new depth of self-knowledge, often resulting in a clearer sense of guidance for their personal and professional lives and a resolve to live closer to their core commitments (i.e., live more authentically).
- 2) Principles and practices from the Circle of Trust approach that can be applied to their daily lives.

As a Result of Participating in Circles of Trust, People Report:

- a stronger sense of purpose and integrity
- expanded capacity to be fully present to others in ways that affirm and heal
- increased skill in asking the honest, open questions that help others uncover their own inner wisdom
- greater confidence to seek or create communities of support
- increased understanding, appreciation and respect for human differences, based in deeper awareness of the identity and integrity of ourselves and others

People report ...

- greater capacity to build the relational trust (Bryk and Schneider, 2002) that helps institutions pursue their missions
- more courage to live and lead authentically
- renewed passion for their work or vocation
- a deeper commitment to leadership and service to others

Movement Model of Social Change

The work of the Center for Courage & Renewal and the Circle of Trust approach is informed by a movement model of social change. Every social movement, small and large, that has made the world a more just and hospitable place has been animated by active respect for human identity and integrity. Typically, these movements have unfolded in four stages:

- (1) individuals reach a point where the gap between their inner and outer lives becomes so painful that they resolve to live “divided no more;”
- (2) people form communities of support that can help sustain that decision;
- (3) they go public with their values and visions in order to gather support;
- (4) together in community, they achieve the moral leverage necessary to help transform our common life.

Positive Social Change

What happens in a Circle of Trust – grounded in honoring the identity and integrity of each participant – flows out into the world as an authentic source of personal and societal healing and a power for positive social change.

- Parker Palmer

Conclusion

The issues facing the next generation globally demand that we educate our students worldwide to use all of their resources, not just their minds or their hearts. The hour is late, the work is hard, and the stakes are high, but few institutions are better positioned to take up this work than our nation's colleges and universities.

- Diana Chapman Walsh, President Emerita, Wellesley College

Center for Courage and Renewal

CCR Mission: The Center takes great care to prepare facilitators who have the knowledge and skill required to hold and guide Circles of Trust® using these principles and practices. These core elements, in the hands of a skilled facilitator, give this approach structure and intentionality and create its transformative power.

www.CourageRenewal.org

(National organization)

www.CourageandRenewalNY.com

(Courage and Renewal New York)

www.wholeheartinc.org/programs

(Courage Vermont - WholeHeart)

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