Not For Professors Who Never Have Bad Days

The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life
By Parker J. Palmer
Reviewed by Jill Singleton-Jackson

I n The Courage To Teach: Exploring The Inner Landscape Of A Teacher's Life, Parker Palmer warns his readers that this book is not for the “teacher who never has bad days, or who has them but does not care.”

Instead, he begins his excursion into the soul of teaching with the inscription: “This book is for teachers who have good days and bad, and whose bad days bring the suffering that comes only from something one loves. It is for teachers who refuse to harden their hearts because they love learners, learning, and the teaching life.”

Palmer argues that as teachers, if we are to teach from the true self, we must accept our shortcomings and shadows as well as our nobler characteristics. He shares stories of the mentors and inspirational educators who influenced his love of learning and education. But Palmer cautions that trying to emulate a favorite teacher may betray one’s true self, or inner teacher—the source of true teaching.

This inner teacher is what educators need to locate and embrace in order to find the integrity and identity that leads to great teaching. Throughout the book, Palmer strives to keep technique and good teaching separated as concepts. This is not a “how-to” manual for teachers. He declares convincingly that “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique: good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.”

The author provides exceptional insight into the culture of fear that permeates the educational experience, both for teachers and for their students.

“From grade school on,” he tells us, “education is a fearful enterprise.” Palmer candidly discusses his own fears. They are fears that all teachers who are willing to be honest with themselves can identify with on some level.

These include the fear of being pulled down into the negative undertow of a class, the fear that questions to students will never be answered, that any semblance of control over the class has been lost forever. He describes the fear of being not only a bad teacher but a bad person and—perhaps the greatest fear of all—the fear that if we encounter other people and other ideas, or if our identities and lives are challenged, we might actually have to change.

The author tells a story of his own encounter with a “student from hell” that will make readers both laugh and sigh, remembering their own students from hell.

Palmer has an impressive ability to openly share his painful and humiliating experience at the
hands of a hellish pupil. But he did
find the silver lining in this experi-
ence, discovering that even the
most diabolical of students is, most
likely, nothing more than someone
who is terribly afraid of the
teacher, of appearing stupid, of
himself.

Palmer draws on Erik Erikson's
psychosocial theory of development
to talk about the drive to teach.
Specifically, he applies the choice
that humans make between what
Erikson calls generativity and stag-
nation to the profession of teaching.

He proposes that teachers who
are unable to overcome fear of their
students, or unable to get past the
wounds inflicted upon them by
frightened pupils, will stagnate.

These professors will hide be-
hind pedagogy: podiums, research,
credentials, and authority. This
stagnation manifests itself as cyni-
cism about students, the education-
al system, and ultimately about the
ability to be an effective instructor.

Conversely, when there is cre-
ativity and hospitality in the class-
room, when teachers wish to give to
their apprentices information that
springs from the well of their true
selves, then generativity is
achieved.

Aside from the teacher and
learner, Palmer points out, there is
the subject itself to consider.
Whether we teach psychology, an-
thropology, chemistry, math, or his-
tory, in order to be effective seekers
of knowledge, Palmer notes, we
must put the subject at the center
of our efforts.

While the debate continues over
a teacher-centered or a student-
centered model of instruction, ac-
cording to Palmer, neither of these
approaches will satisfy the mission
of education. He promotes a sub-
ject-centered classroom, “a class-
room in which the teacher and stu-
dents alike are focused on a great
thing, a classroom in which the
best features of teacher- and stu-
dent-education are merged and
transcended by putting not teacher,
not student, but subject at the cen-
ter of our attention.”

Palmer also makes a good argu-
ment for applying the “less is more”
philosophy to education. Here he
explores the idea of teaching from
the microcosm. This is a technique
that reconciles the eternal battle
that plagues all teachers who are
trying to cover the field in limited
space and time.

For Palmer, the honor and in-
tegrity of the subject can be main-
tained, and more can be learned at
a deeper level, if we teach less
“stuff.” He proposes that we make
our courses “more engaging than
engorging.” Sound advice for any
instructor.

Palmer discusses what he calls
the privatization of teaching and
how this has isolated teachers from
the resources they most need in
order to grow and improve—each
other.

Unlike those who practice med-
icine or law, teachers go into their
classrooms and close the door.
What goes on behind that closed
door is only known by the teacher
and the students. If it is successful
it is limited in its potential to help
others; if it is lethal there are no
witnesses to bear testimony other
than the victims.

These victims are students
who, often times, have only poorly
designed teacher evaluation forms
to use to try to stop the malprac-
tice. The battle cry of academic
freedom has, at times, isolated and
stifled good teaching.
The Courage To Teach is a fascinating and thought-provoking work. It will awaken thoughts and ideas that for many teachers have been buried under piles of self-defeating cynicism and despair. Teachers who despair that they will never make a difference, that their students will never care about learning, that they cannot be as fabulous and inspiring as their favorite teacher was will find solace here.

Parker Palmer reminds us that good teaching comes in many forms, but that the key to the process is a sense of identity and integrity combined with a sincere and deep caring for students.

Palmer combines his background in philosophy and sociology to produce a creative and innovative look at the moral and community activity we call education.

His three-dimensional characters and experiences bring a realism to what could have easily turned into a “How I Determined The Best Way To Teach” manual. The author avoids preaching or advising and, instead, non-directively offers suggestions and examples, philosophies and logic to help readers come to their own conclusions about their needs and how to resolve problems in their classrooms.

This book may not appeal to the card-carrying pessimist—the cynic who has long given up on the idea of honesty in self when teaching, or who no longer believes that educational reformation is possible.

Closed minds and closed ears will probably not give this book a chance past the first few pages. They'll be put off by the philosophical and psychological nature of the writing and decide it is nothing but another evangelist on the mount spouting ideas of self-exploration and inspiration—psycho-babble and drivel.

But for others who teach or learn—those who are truly invested in education at any level—reading this book is a worthwhile investment of time. Even for those who have been jaded by years of frustration and feelings of falling just short of the mark, this book may revive and rejuvenate the spirit of teaching that first compelled them into the field. Parker Palmer reminds teachers about why they teach.

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