

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

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Reviewed by Jill Singleton-Jackson

In *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 experience, 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 stagnation 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 behind pedagogy: podiums, research, credentials, and authority. This stagnation manifests itself as cynicism about students, the educational system, and ultimately about the ability to be an effective instructor.

Conversely, when there is creativity and hospitality in the classroom, 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, anthropology, chemistry, math, or history, 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, according to Palmer, neither of these approaches will satisfy the mission of education. He promotes a sub-

ject-centered classroom, "a classroom in which the teacher and students alike are focused on a great thing, a classroom in which the best features of teacher- and student-education are merged and transcended by putting not teacher, not student, but subject at the center of our attention."

Palmer also makes a good argument 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 integrity of the subject can be maintained, 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 medicine 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 malpractice. 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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