

Evoking the Spirit in Public Education

by Parker J. Palmer, *Educational Leadership* Dec.1998/Jan. 1999.

When we bring forth the spirituality of teaching and learning, we help students honor life's most meaningful questions.

I am a Christian of the Quaker persuasion whose spiritual forebears were persecuted, imprisoned, and sometimes executed for their beliefs by officials of the established church in England. When Quakers fled to America in search of religious liberty, they met with similar treatment at the hands of the Puritans. On Boston Common stands a statue in memory of Mary Dyer, a middle-aged mother of six who was hanged in 1660 before a crowd of civic leaders and churchgoers bent on safeguarding “godly” ways against her seditious belief in “the inner light.”

So I am no great fan of state-sanctioned religion or of the religious arrogance that says “our truth is the only truth.” As I explore ways to evoke the spirit in public education, I want neither to violate the separation of church and state nor to encourage people who would impose their religious beliefs on others.

But I am equally passionate about not violating the deepest needs of the human soul, which education does with some regularity. As a teacher, I have seen the price we pay for a system of education so fearful of things spiritual that it fails to address the real issues of our lives—dispensing facts at the expense of meaning, information at the expense of wisdom. The price is a school system that alienates and dulls us, that graduates young people who have had no mentoring in the questions that both enliven and vex the human spirit.

I reject the imposition of any form of religion in public education, including so-called “school prayer.” But I advocate any way we can find to explore the spiritual dimension of teaching, learning, and living. By “spiritual” I do not mean the creedal formulations of any faith tradition, as much as I respect those traditions and as helpful as their insights can be. I mean the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos—with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive.

We need to shake off the narrow notion that “spiritual” questions are always about angels or ethers or must include the word God. Spiritual questions are the kind that we, and our students, ask every day of our lives as we yearn to connect with the largeness of life: “Does my life have meaning and purpose?” “Do I have gifts that the world wants and needs?” “Whom and what can I trust?” “How can I rise above my fears?” “How do I deal with suffering, my own and that of my family and friends?” “How does one maintain hope?” “What about death?”

Inwardly, we and our students ask such questions all the time. But you would not know it to hear us talk, for we usually talk in settings where the imperatives of the fearful ego, or of the task at hand, strand us on the surface of our lives, compelling us to ask questions that are not the deepest we have: “Will that be on the test?” or “How can I get a raise?” Our real questions are asked largely in our hearts because it is too risky to ask them in front of one another.

Part of that risk is the embarrassed silence that may greet us if we ask our real questions aloud. But the greater risk is that if we ask a real question, someone will try to give us The Answer! If we are to open up the spiritual dimension of education, we must understand that spiritual questions do not have answers in the way math problems do—and that giving one another The Answer is part of what shuts us down. When people ask these deep questions, they do not want to be saved but simply to be heard: they do not want fixes or formulas but compassion and companionship on the demanding journey called life.

Spiritual questions are the kind described by the poet Rilke in response to an earnest student who had pressed him with question after urgent question:

Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart...Try to love the questions themselves...Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them—and the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers.[1]

Spiritual mentoring is not about dictating answers to the deep questions of life. It is about helping young people find questions that are worth asking because they are worth living, questions worth wrapping one’s life around.

When we fail to honor the deepest questions of our lives, education remains mired in technical triviality, cultural banality, and worse: It continues to be dragged down by a great sadness. I mean the sadness one feels in too many schools where teachers and students alike spend their days on things unworthy of the human heart—a grief that may mask itself as boredom, sullenness, or anger, but that is, at bottom, a cry for meaning.

Spirituality and the Subjects We Teach

How might we evoke the spiritual dimension of public education? Behind the word evoke lies an important assumption: The spiritual is always present in public education whether we acknowledge it or not. Spiritual questions, rightly understood, are embedded in every discipline, from health to history, physics to psychology, entomology to English. Spirituality—the human quest for connectedness—is not

something that needs to be “brought into” or “added onto” the curriculum. It is at the heart of every subject we teach, where it waits to be brought forth.

Why does a good historian care about the “dead” past? To show us that it is not dead at all, that we are profoundly connected to the past in ways we may not even understand. Why does a good biologist care about “mute” nature? To show us that nature has a voice that calls us to honor our connection to the natural world. Why does a good literary scholar care about “fictional” worlds? To show us that our deepest connection with reality comes not merely by mastering the facts but by engaging them with the imagination.

We can evoke the spirituality of any discipline by teaching in ways that allow the “big story” told by the discipline to intersect with the “little story” of the student’s life. Doing so not only brings up personal possibilities for connectedness but also helps students learn the discipline more deeply. Learning does not happen when the subject is disconnected from the learner’s life.

I can illustrate this point with a story from my own education. I was taught the history of the Holocaust at some of the best public schools (and private colleges) in the country. But because I was taught the big story with no attention to the little story, I grew into adulthood feeling, on some level, that all of those horrors had happened on some other planet to some other species. My teachers—who taught only the objective facts without attention to the subjective self—distanced me from the murderous realities of the Third Reich, leaving me more ignorant, more ethically impaired, more spiritually disconnected than authentic education should.

Because my little story was not taken seriously, I failed to learn two important things. One was that the town I grew up in, on the North Shore of Chicago, practiced systematic discrimination against Jews. In those days, if you were a Jew, you did not live in Wilmette or Kenilworth or Winnetka, but in Glencoe. It was a gilded ghetto, but a ghetto nonetheless, created by the same anti-Semitism that gave rise to the larger evils of Hitler’s Germany—not on another planet but in my own place and time.

The second thing I failed to learn was more personal and more important: I have within myself a “little Hitler,” a force of darkness that will try to kill you off when the difference between you and me becomes so great that it challenges my conception of reality. I will not kill you with a gun or a gas chamber, but with a word, a category, a dismissal that renders you irrelevant to my life: “Oh, you’re just a (fill in the blank...)”

By failing to intersect the big story with the little story, my history teachers left me with facts about the Holocaust that never came to life—and with a life that went unchallenged by the reality of those horrors. Because my teachers remained objective at the expense of the spiritual, they failed to educate either my mind or my spirit. I

learned neither about the Holocaust as it really was, and is, nor about myself as I really am.

When I speak about these things with fellow teachers, I occasionally hear an objection: “So you want us to stop being teachers and become therapists or priests.” No, that is not what I want: I want us to become better teachers. And part of what good teaching requires is that we stop thinking about our work in terms of the great divides: either facts or feelings, “hard-nosed” or “touchy-feely,” intellectual or spiritual, professors or priests.

We must embrace the fact that teaching and learning—to say nothing of living—take the form of paradox: They require us to think “both-and” instead of “either-or.” Teaching and learning, done well, are done not by disembodied intellects but by whole persons whose minds cannot be disconnected from feeling and spirit, from heart and soul. To teach as a whole person to the whole person is not to lose one’s professionalism as a teacher but to take it to a deeper level.

These whole-person connections are crucial not only in the “soft” subjects, such as history, but also in the “hard” subjects. I know a geology teacher who asks students to keep a journal of their daily interaction with rocks, an assignment that initially strikes students as quite odd but that eventually helps them understand how intertwined their lives are with the life of the earth. I know a math teacher who helps girls succeed by dealing empathetically with the emotional paralysis induced by the false social message that “girls are no good at math.”

The ability to think both-and instead of either-or is a skill that comes as we live our spiritual questions more knowingly and openly. The surface questions of our lives may yield either-or answers: “Shall I teach 1 st grade or 3 rd grade next year?” But to live the deep questions we must develop a taste for paradox—not least the paradox that some questions have no conventional answers and yet are the only ones worth living: “How shall I live today knowing that someday I will die?”

The Spiritual Lives of Teachers

Spiritual questions are embedded not only in the disciplines we teach—they are embedded in our own lives. Whoever our students may be, whatever subject we teach, ultimately we teach who we are. When I hear teachers ask whether they can take their spirituality into the classroom with them, I wonder what the option is: As long as we take ourselves into the classroom, we take our spirituality with us!

Our only choice is whether we will reflect on the questions we are living—and how we are living them—in a way that might make our work more fruitful. “How can I get through day?” is not as promising a question as “What truth can I witness to today?” If we do not live good questions, and live them in a way that is life-giving, our own

deformations will permeate the work we do and contribute to the deformation of the students whose lives we touch.

Over the past five years, I have worked with others to create a program that offers public school teachers around the country a chance for such reflection. It is a program that is centered on a question worth living:

We become teachers for reasons of the heart.
But many of us lose heart as time goes by.
How can we take heart, alone and together,
So we can give heart to our students and our world,
Which is what good teachers do?

The Teacher Formation Program (also known as “the COURAGE TO TEACH®”), in partnership with the Fetzer Institute, is a two-year sequence of eight four-day retreats for groups of 25 K-12 teachers in locales as diverse as inner-city Baltimore, metropolitan Seattle, rural South Carolina, and central Michigan. Its purpose is simple: to give teachers an opportunity, in solitude and in community, to explore the spiritual dimension of a teacher’s life.

These retreat groups gather quarterly for two years, following the cycle of the seasons. The retreats are named after the seasons not simply to designate their timing: Each retreat, under skillful facilitation, draws on the metaphors of the season in which it occurs, inviting teachers to examine the spiritual questions that are at the heart of that season.

For example, in the fall—when nature plants seeds that may grow when spring arrives—we inquire into “the seed of true self” by asking the question, “Who am I?” Retreatants explore memories of who they were as children in order to reclaim those birthright gifts that are so often stolen from us on the perilous passage from childhood to adult life.

As they answer the “Who am I?” question, retreatants are better able to ask “Whose am I?” What is the social ecology of my life, the place where I am planted, where I am called to give and to receive? We pursue such questions not simply for our own sake but for the sake of our teaching and of the young people we serve: A teacher who works from a distorted sense of self and community is likely to be doing more harm than good.

Of course, the “seed of true self” that we find in the fall seems to wither and die in the winter. But it may only be doing what seeds in nature—wintering through until spring arrives. So in the winter season we explore questions of darkness and death, dormancy and renewal: What is it that seems to be dying or dead in us? Is it really dead, or is it simply lying dormant, waiting for its time to flower?

If we can understand what is dormant within ourselves, perhaps we can understand more deeply the dormancy within our students. Some students present themselves as dead—dead to thought, to feeling, to relationships. But a good teacher will see the true self behind that false self-presentation, see what is dormant in the lives of young people that can be brought to flower by good teaching.

Seasonal metaphors offer a way to raise deep questions about life without blinking, while honoring the sensibilities of everyone from Jews to Buddhists, from Muslims to secular humanists, from Christians to those whose spirituality has no name. When we raise such questions in the context of safe space and trustworthy relationships, the soul can speak its truth—and people can hear that truth in themselves and in one another with transforming effect.

To help that transformation along, the Teacher Formation Program practices an uncommon form of community, one in which people learn not to fix or save one another but to hold one another's questions in a respectful and noninvasive way.

Community emerges when we are willing to share the real concerns of our lives. But in our society, you are reluctant to bring your concerns to me because you fear I am going to try to “fix” you—and I am reluctant to receive your concerns because I fear I am going to have to “fix” you! We have no middle ground between invading one another and ignoring one another, and thus we have no community. But by practicing ground rules that release us from our mutual fears, by teaching us how to live our questions with one another rather than answer them, the gift of community emerges among us—a gift of transformation.

The teachers who have participated in this program report several important outcomes. First, they feel more grounded in their own selfhood, more at home in their own lives, less likely to burn out and more likely to flourish. Second, they feel that they are better teachers, able to see their students for who they are and to respond to them in life-giving ways. Third, they feel that they are better citizens of their own workplaces, able to deal with conflict from a place of peace, to advocate for change from a place of hope.

The most important step toward evoking the spirit in public education is to bring teachers together to talk not about curriculum, technique, budget, or politics, but about the deepest questions of our teaching lives. Only if we can do this with one another—in ways that honor both the importance of our questions and the diversity with which we hold them—will we be able to do it for our students, who need our companionship on their journeys.

The teachers with whom I work are grateful to private foundations for creating settings outside the workplace where K-12 teachers can do professionally relevant inner work, as am I. But someday soon we would like to be able to express the same gratitude to a growing number of public schools for doing something they are not

doing today: creating settings within the workplace where teachers may reflect on questions that are worth living.

Of course, such opportunities must be invitations, not demands. The soul cannot be coerced into inner work, and when an employer tries to do so, it is both ineffective and unethical. But freely chosen inner work, done in solitude and in community, can contribute powerfully to the well-being of teachers, of teaching, and of the students we are here to serve. By creating such settings, our schools would offer teachers, students, and the mission of education they so deeply deserve.

[1] Rilke, R.M. (1993). *Letters to a young poet*. (M.D. Herter Norton, Trans.) New York: W.W. Norton, p. 35 (emphasis added).

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Those interested in convening their own study group might also find my book *The COURAGE TO TEACH®: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Jossey-Bass, 1998) helpful. See also *The COURAGE TO TEACH®: A Guide for Reflection and Renewal* (Jossey-Bass, 1999) and the video *Teaching from the Heart: Seasons of Renewal in a Teacher's Life* (Jossey-Bass, 1998).

About the Author: Parker J. Palmer, founder and Senior Partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a world-renowned writer, speaker and activist. He has reached millions worldwide through his nine books, including the bestselling *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Courage to Teach*, *A Hidden Wholeness*, and *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Parker holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, along with eleven honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press. In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. In 2011, he was named an Utne Reader Visionary, one of “25 people who are changing your world.”)