A Reflection Upon
The Courage to Teach:
Exploring the Inner Landscapes of a Teachers Life

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Introduction

While reading this text I was taken through a range of emotions, from interested, intrigued, skeptical, and even upset. However, as I continued to read I began to not only appreciate the concepts Palmer was describing, but saw many applications and examples of his words within my own teaching career.

In the text Palmer describes the concept of teaching from within one's self and the importance of the educator being true to their own beliefs. In essence teaching is not so much about techniques, but rather an understanding of what is important to the individual instructor and the ability and willingness to allow that to show in the classroom. By delving into the book the reader is encouraged to reflect on why they became a teacher, what it is they are passionate about, and the importance of truly knowing themselves as individuals in order to teach as that person.

Several areas are identified where these principles can be utilized as well as easily lost. Each of these will be addressed in subsequent paragraphs.

Teaching from Within

The introduction to the text provided the groundwork for which Palmer bases many of ideas and arguments. I will admit that I often find introductions a necessary evil in books; however this was not the case in this situation. I often found myself relating to what was being discussed with specific experiences from my career. I especially appreciated the comment regarding “the only way to get out of trouble is to go deeper in”. (p. 2) I have found that what turned into some of my most gratifying days in the
classroom started out as some of the worst. In these situations the learners did not grasp the concepts I was introducing.

This may have been due to my explanations or their lack of preparation, but either way it soon became apparent that confusion was rampant and frustration was brewing on both sides of the coin. What I have found though is that delving deeper into the subject, despite the fact that I may have felt lost at that particular moment, often reveals a light at the end of the tunnel. This light is generally the point at which the confusion started, perhaps a missed foundational concept, or some other causative factor. Once that has been remedied we can then as a class move back out of the chasm with a better understanding of the material at hand, and in the end going deeper in indeed resulted in a richer learning experience for all, the learners in regards to the concept, and myself in regards to facilitating the session.

Knowing myself, as an individual and as an educator, was another topic I had not thought of in the manner Palmer presented it in. I would however say I have employed and experienced this phenomenon even though I may not have understood it. I have learned what subjects I do not have a passion for and am better off finding a guest instructor when possible. On the other hand I know what subjects excite me. This is often evidenced on evaluations for specific topics. Those I am passionate and excited about receive comments using that verbiage in regards to my presentation, while the others are limited to comments about the material and my knowledge of the subject.
The Heart of a Teacher

Shortly into this chapter I made the assumption that Palmer’s background must be one rooted in sociology and philosophy. I was not surprised when I later found this to be true. I found myself bristling at much of the chapter, yet in complete agreement with other parts. I was surprised though as I continued to read I saw not only the value in what he was saying regarding the need to connect with the subject and students, but upon reflection I realized I have likely been doing this in my own way. In re-reading those parts that caused initial distress I was able to grasp what he was saying in a new light, one that now made sense and did not cause an internal outcry.

Upon reflective thought I realize that I do connect with my learners through the subject at hand. It is one I have a passion for and one of my goals is to express, and perhaps pass on, that excitement and passion to the next generation of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) providers. In the classroom I put everything I believe and hold dear regarding EMS on display which does indeed create a bit of vulnerability. However I believe this is worth the risk. In my new position this has become particularly important as many of the participants in my classes are not there because they want to become EMS providers, but rather because they want to become fire fighters. It is my hope that by displaying that passion it will become infectious within the session, semester, and survive through the persons career as they take care of patients, regardless of what their uniform may say.

One other portion of this chapter struck me with a direct relationship to experiences in my past. Whenever I work with new instructors I always ask them to
remember a particular teacher from their past that they feel had a significant impact on them. When asked why the answers generally center around teaching style, classroom presence, interaction, and other such student interactions. Generally most admit they hope to be and teach like that individual. I use that as a warning to these individuals that they should not try to mimic that person as it often comes across cumbersome, or fake. Rather they should remember what they liked about their mentor and find their own style that incorporates those characteristics if possible.

However I had never thought of this from the angle Palmer presents it in, that of being true to yourself as an instructor. That in trying to mimic another you are not teaching from within yourself and what you believe in. I have seen many people struggle with this concept over the years. Hopefully I will now be able to share a deeper reason with them of the importance of developing their own style of teaching.

I was also struck by Palmer’s discussion of becoming a mentor rather than needing one. I have been fortunate to have become friends and colleagues with many of my mentors. While I still, and always will, consider them mentors, our relationships have changed dramatically over the years. Our conversations are now more of a personal nature rather than one of assistance to an educator who is breaking out of the confines of the classroom.

I do not think I fully realized this until two recent experiences during a trip to Salt Lake Utah last November, and on another one to Duluth Minnesota this January. In each location I was sought out by two [different] individuals who wanted advice in terms of how they could both begin speaking nationally and become published. As I shared my thoughts and ideas with them I began to realize that many of the questions they
were asking were the exact same questions I had asked my mentors when I was first breaking into those areas, and the advice I was giving was that which had been given to me. I suddenly found myself asking the question, who am I to be in the position of giving such advice? I am after all still learning myself and gaining a foothold in that world. It is my mentors that are well established and should be guiding these individuals, not me. The experience was a revelation as well as a humbling one.

A Culture of Fear

Of all the chapters this was the one that caused the most heartache as I read. Perhaps I have been fortunate, but I have not experienced many of the things described in this chapter in terms of being forced to be distanced from my subject and learners. I do not live in fear of administration, and have in fact found them to be very supportive. I believe objectivity rather than subjectivity is paramount in education. I kept wondering if there was some personal experience in Palmer’s past that led to these statements. It may be due to the thick skin I developed as a paramedic, but I found the descriptions of the fear of challenge, conflict, and differing opinions to be insulting. In general I am comfortable enough with my beliefs about my subject that I am willing to display them. I know for a fact that there are many in my profession that do not agree with me, while many others do. I do not fear losing my sense of myself if others do not agree as he indicates will happen and is a cause of distancing ourselves from others.

Despite my disagreement with several aspects of the chapter however, there was also a significant amount of valuable information. I do have fears as an instructor. One
of my biggest is that I may not do it well enough. As odd as it may sound I pose a much bigger risk if I teach poorly in the classroom that I would if I performed poorly in the back of an ambulance. In the latter situation I only affect one patient. In the former each of the individuals in the class will treat patients based on the information I provide, they will teach others based on that same information. The effect I can have as a provider is limited to the patients I see, the effect I have as an educator is exponential.

I once shared this fear with a mentor early in my teaching career. His response was that it meant one thing; I cared about my teaching, not for me and my reputation, but rather for the right reasons, its effect on the future generation of care givers and their patients. Palmer addresses this same concept on page 39 when describing what fear may actually indicate.

The chapter also provided explanation for other fears I did not necessarily know existed in the classroom. Over the years I have found one student that can intimidate me in the classroom, even though it may not be externally evident. That is the student who is older than I, which is becoming rarer, especially if they have more formal education than I do.

I am not sure why this occurs, perhaps it is due to the way I was raised in that respect and learning from your elders was paramount. After all, the learner is there to learn the material. Despite their age or prior education they do not possess knowledge of the topics I am discussing. I am in fact comfortable with my knowledge of the subject. I have several publications in my area, and frequently speak nationally to groups of hundreds and even thousands about EMS. So why then in the smaller setting of the classroom do I feel intimidated by those older than I? Is it the intimacy of the setting? In
large groups I rarely make the personal connection I make in the classroom. I had never considered fear as a causative factor prior to reading this chapter. This may provide new insight as I explore this further.

The final fear I am now aware of is that of the learner, even those who may unknowingly intimidate me. The description of the participant who remains silent, not out of stupidity, but rather out of fear jumped out at me. I had never considered that the learners themselves brought fears to the encounter. “Inwardly, these students relate to teachers as “elders”, even if the age difference is reversed, and they may easily be apprehensive about how we will respond to them as younger students tend to be”. (p. 46) I found this astonishing and humbling, especially in light of my views of elders as described above. It is my hope that with this new understanding of student fears, and the resulting silence it can cause, I can become a better facilitator within the classroom.

I in fact was able to employ this a few days ago when working with a group of experienced paramedics. We had just finished a very interactive two hour discussion of one topic when it was time to move to another. I asked them what they wanted to know about the new topic as opposed to me determining what we would discuss. Sure enough this group which had just been very interactive and talkative fell silent.

Having the knowledge of why they were now silent I decided to let it play out. As Palmer would likely have predicted after about fifteen seconds of silence one person broke the silence. This was followed by questions from others which ultimately led to a fruitful discussion of the topic. I will admit though I was more than a bit uncomfortable waiting for the silence to break. I suddenly became fearful that the ideas presented in this text may not work for me. Fortunately they did and I feel as though a new arsenal is
at my disposal. Although I discuss this in my review of fears in the classroom as it became a fear for me as it unfolded, the concept of silence and allowing participants to speak in an area of openness is discussed more fully in chapter three of the text.

Knowing and Teaching in Community

Although these chapters did not provide as many references to prior personal experiences, they did hold a wealth of knowledge upon which I feel I can expand my educational philosophies. In particular was the concept of the subject centered learning as opposed to teacher or student centered learning. In my classes thus far in this program the focus has been on the latter two models. There are times I have struggled with how to create a student centered model in the standardized world within which I live and teach. However, placing the subject at the center of the learning encounter allows for many methods of understanding, some may be teacher centered, others student centered, but regardless of approach it is the subject that becomes the focus.

I have long fallen victim to the notion that I must cover everything within my curriculum. I believe this to be two-fold. First a lack of knowledge of teaching philosophies on my part, and second the standardized national exam each of my learners must pass at the completion of their course work. This is addressed and debunked in the chapter. As the facilitator I do not need to fill the created space of the classroom with my entire knowledge of the subject. Rather providing insightful examples that stimulate learning may better serve the students. I feel compelled to explore this possibility further in the coming months and determine its applicability to my situation.
Learning in Community

Many realizations came to mind as I read this chapter. I am not sure that I have ever been observed in my classes other than the occasional obligatory observations early in my career. I had never thought of the fact that we essentially do teach in isolation with little input from our peers. This does in fact hinder professional development as we can each learn from others. As a case in point I am on a faculty advisory committee for technology and technological improvements at my college. We have a few rooms on campus with Smart Boards. We have discussed the issue of recommending the acquisition of more of these devices on campus; however we decided we should first see how they are currently being used. We contacted individual instructors who are using them and requested permission to observe their classes, and interestingly we were overwhelmingly denied. In short the instructors did not feel comfortable being observed by their peers, even though our intention was not to critique their teaching, but rather to determine how they were using the technology so we could in turn determine of more were needed.

The chapter also touched on something I have often wondered about, student evaluations of teaching. My college, as most, places a high value on these instruments. I have often wondered about their effectiveness. Do they truly evaluate teaching effectiveness, or simply the student’s perception of that effectiveness? While one instructor may be considered easy and likeable, receiving high scores, he may not be an effective educator. On the other hand someone may be very effective in the classroom, but viewed as demanding and tough. While student evaluations should be a
part of the overall evaluation, as the text states they should not be an inclusive mechanism. I found the discussion of how to talk with others about teaching, while avoiding the tricks and techniques trap interesting. It definitely provides fodder for future interactions with my colleagues which to this point has been limited to technique discussion.

Conclusion

I found The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscapes of a Teacher’s Life to be full of valuable insight and information. Admittedly my first reactions were not of this nature. I originally thought the book to be somewhat sanctimonious preaching what educators have to do and have not been doing. However as I continued to read I began to understand what the author was trying to impart. Granted as an objective and scientific person there were some areas that feel are a bit too philosophical for my use, but overall I feel it was worth the read. I found the afterword intriguing, although perhaps a bit self congratulatory, in terms of how the principles have been used over the last 10 years. I feel I am better prepared to conduct my learning sessions with the knowledge I gained from reading this book.

References