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The Courage to Learn: Explorations of an Adult Educator

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EXPLORATIONS OF AN ADULT EDUCATOR

The idea of embarking on a journey to explore and revise my personal identity and define integrity as a facilitator was not a journey I expected. I've read the works of Donald Kirkpatrick, Ken Blanchard, John C. Maxwell, Daniel Goleman, all related to leadership development and business practices, yet when I began to read *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* by Parker Palmer, I did not know the value that I would obtain from reading this book. Working in the field of training and development, I must candidly admit that I was apprehensive about this book and thought that I wouldn't relate to the writings of an academic teacher. I do recognize and respect the roots the field of adult education has in the field of pedagogy. Yet, I did not realize the close connection I would encounter with Palmer in his writing. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* served as an opportunity for me to reflect upon past experiences of fear in order to formulate new learning, and to explore my inner landscape as a facilitator. This reflection of past experiences, and specifically reliving moments I had feared in the past enabled me to clarify my personal identity, and outline characteristics of integrity that I wish to practice as an adult educator.

When preparing to read a new book, I did what most people would do when encountering a new book. Get a feel for the concepts and themes within the text by skimming through; reviewing the chapter titles, reading the summary in the back of the book, and even reviewing online reviews of the book. These may be my tendencies, but I'm sure these habits are shared by other curious readers. While doing this research, the terms of identity, integrity, and fear constantly resurfaced, yet I was unclear as to how this would unfold and apply to me. It wasn't until I took an evening, alone and uninterrupted that I embarked on this reading and journey of self reflection and exploration of my inner landscape.

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I immediately was drawn to the rawness of the Palmer's writing, past experiences, and the themes and metaphors expressed early on in the reading; he didn't hold back. Palmer revealed experiences and sentiments I had felt as a learner, adult educator in the past and some feelings I still encounter today. These are feelings of inadequacy, fear, struggle with self-identify, and the quest for personal discovery as an adult educator. In the early on chapters of this book, I found myself redlining the book, highlighting whole paragraphs and making notes in the margins. This is because Palmer immediately began to identify the issues within academia and the disconnection teachers have with students. Palmer explains that this is a disconnection built on the foundation of fear; fear from both the teacher and student. The disconnection is also attributed to the missing sense of self identity that teachers have not established in their practice, and the lack of integrity reflected in their work. These profound statements were supported by stories Palmer shared of the mistakes committed by himself as well as his observation of others. Needless to say, this book was a sincere moment for me to reflect back on my experiences as an adult educator and in the field of corporate training, and to ask myself critical questions; some I had ignored and hadn't wanted to revisit. Palmer forced me to recall the good, bad, and even ugly moments I had buried in my mind, but there I was finding myself in a space ready to relieve, reflect, and gain clarity from.

One of the most profound statements shared by Palmer (2010) is "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of a teacher" (p.10). This opening statement spoke volumes to me, although I had not yet been introduced to Palmer's notion to identify and integrity; I was intrigued by the words. Till this moment, I worked under the pretense that good teaching *mostly* involves applying various strategies to learning, adapting to various learning styles, and being learner-centered in delivery. Note that my

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interpretation and idea of good teaching didn't include elements of self; my individual self identity. So this concept of identity and integrity echoed through me, and I wanted to learn more about it. I soon learned that the lack of connectedness I've experienced in the past when training a curriculum that I was not invested in, nor personally related to distanced me from the learners, and self-inflicted fear in my teaching. I shared the same experience Palmer referenced to when highlighting the lack of connectedness teachers have with students.

In a previous role, I facilitated a week long workshop for new employees on the topic of crisis intervention. This curriculum was called Therapeutic Crisis Intervention and developed by Cornell University's Residential Child Care Project. This workshop focused on verbal de-escalation strategies and techniques for new employees that would work with adolescents in a residential home facility. Being sincere, this was not an element of my job that I was passionate about, as I felt inadequate to train employees on a topic that I truthfully hadn't obtained true experience in. The nature of the business required that I attend a train-the-trainer workshop to become certified to teach this curriculum to these employees, but I didn't possess the experience that many of them had in working with the population. Therefore, much of my knowledge came from a theoretical perspective; I lacked the real-life experience they had. This feeling of fear and inadequacy made me rigid in my teaching, and incorporated very little discussion and dialog among the learners. This was a time in my life when I hadn't begun the AET course work, and therefore knew very little of the extreme benefits of incorporating experiential learning into the classroom. Frankly, I just wanted to muddle through the curriculum, be asked minimal questions, and get the week. Not being invested in the material conveyed through my teaching; and therefore my participants suffered. This is a behavior I understood, but Palmer's personal shared experiences really shed a light on the detrimental impact learners endure when a teacher doesn't

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practice with integrity. Surely, by the end of the week long workshop, participants would be able to provide definitions for terminology, identify the best strategy to cope with crisis etc. However, I had to ask myself if I had mentally prepared for their role. Had I shared with them my fears of inadequacy, and in turn, allowed them to share their fears of reliving past experiences that may have been traumatic for them. The response to this question is no. I applied the facilitation approach of lecturing my way through the content, and having the participants cram their brains with terminology, to pass a test to begin a job. I failed many of these participants during this time.

Palmer (2010) states that “if the work we do lacks integrity for us, then we, the work, and the people we do it with will suffer” (p.16). This is a moment in my teaching that I am not proud of. This is an experience that shed a light on a weakness of mine, and a behavior I am now cognizant of. Palmer also states, “Identity and integrity have as much to do with our shadows and limits, our wounds and our fears, as with our strengths and potentials” (p.13). When Palmer speaks of integrity and identity, he doesn’t mean the shallow and simplistic way in which we would begin to define ourselves, and the heroic idea of behaving with integrity. Rather, I find it interesting that he does not provide a black and white definition, or measure of each. Instead, he prescribes the elements of each, and how to explore it and make sense of it. With Identity, the multitude of elements that compose one’s identity, i.e., culture, genetics, guardians, experiences of good and bad received and bestowed upon others (Palmer, 2010, p.13).

From these words I deem that establishing identify of oneself is a beautiful and painful reality. It means being true to everything about myself, accepting it (flaws and all), and building knowledge from it. As it relates to integrity Palmer (2010) asks that we as educators create clear distinctions between those concerns of that are truly fundamental to the scope of my identity. His

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explanation in analyze those matters that are fundamental to my true identity by determining what “fits” into my life and what does not, and whether or not I choose to welcome, embrace, fear, and/or reject experiences that contribute to the growth of my own identity. This notion of fear in learning struck me deeply as I was finding myself in a place accepting of my fears and willing to meet them as challenges for opportunities, rather than hindering elements of myself.

According to Palmer (2010), “the personal fears that students and teachers bring to the classroom are fed by the fact that the roots of education are sunk deep in fearful found” (p.51). These words are incredibly true, as I have memories as a young child in kindergarten of being extremely passionate about learning, having a teacher that I idolized, with an enthusiasm for learn. These passions faded as I entered middle school and encountered moments where learning was no longer as enjoyable as it used to be because it was no longer crafted from a place of creativity and curiosity. The classroom became fearful. The idea of sharing an incorrect answer to a question and being ridiculed by the class and teacher would cripple me with fear. This is the fear that educators bring to a classroom, that I believe is partly due to their own fears and insecurities; this is detrimental to the learning process. Thankfully, these experiences were balanced with passionate teachers that embraced fear and curiosity in the classroom. These memories of learning were exciting because these teachers ignited curiosity in my approach to problem solving, critical thinking, history, and in simply how I viewed the world. I have fond recollections of being wrong, and it being okay. Of witnessing my teachers apply an of the box approach to teaching science, and sometimes failing. Yet, it was still okay. This openness to learning fostered a connectedness between the teacher and I. Palmer (2010) shares his fears in explaining that he understands there will never be a day when he enters a classroom fearless because he’s perfected his craft. He states “I will always have fears, but I need not be my fears—

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for there are other places in my inner landscape from which I can speak and act” (p.58). This statement was striking to me, as I recall craving the moment when I’d know the content of a topic so well that a learner would not be able to stump me with a question. Yet, Palmer has helped me to realize that practicing teaching in this manner is simply not teaching with integrity. I cannot operate and teach under that premise of fear. I can only practice from my inner landscape of my true identity and integrity, and with transparency for my learners. It is from this place where I will face and conquer fears, while empowering the learner.

Synthesizing my adolescent experiences, my teaching experiences and Palmer’s enabled me to form new knowledge through critical reflection. If I hadn’t read *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*, and truly reflect back on my life experiences as a teacher and student, I wouldn’t have been empowered to explore my own inner landscape and reestablish the vision for how I will choose to teach moving forward. And that is to acknowledge my fears in the classroom, but not live in them. I will strive to be transparent in those fears and have the courage to work through them. Experience and learning are closely connected, as we learned from the works of Malcolm Knowles and others throughout the AET coursework. “Clearly, as we age, we have a variety of life experiences which can be drawn on in a learning situation, but which also stimulate the need for learning. Thus not only do we connect with our past experiences to foster new learning, our ongoing experiences often require new learning” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p.106). As we’ve learned in the works of Merriam and Bierema (2014), Transformative learning is the process for which new learning of our past experiences is formulated through critical reflection, thus enabling learners to have a new lens and perspective of life (p.107). This critical reflection has empowered me to view teaching

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through a clearer lens and to understand what good teaching really encompasses, and that is more than technique; it is to teach with self identity and integrity.

References

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