

2013

The Courage to Teach: From the Inside Out

Laura Foote
Malone University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/sotl_ched



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Foote, L. (2013). The courage to teach: From the inside out. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education*, 6(1), 11-17. <https://doi.org/10.31380/sotlched.6.1.11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Showcase. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education by an authorized editor of Digital Showcase. For more information, please contact thorner@oru.edu.

The Courage to Teach: From the Inside Out

by
Laura S. Foote, Ed.D.

Abstract

In contrast to God's wisdom, earthly wisdom is rooted in earthly systems and the epistemologies that undergird those systems. A primary and powerful epistemic system is the educational system (Goldman, 2011) and particularly higher education, upon which much of man's wisdom is built. Parker Palmer's (2007) book, *The Courage to Teach*, challenges the commonly accepted wisdom of higher education's focus on outcomes and "the impact of our society's growing obsession with educational externals—including relentless and mindless standardized testing" (p. ix). Palmer offers a roadmap for reform that begins with a call for self-reflection and ends with a call for resistance. Palmer's writing rests upon the premise that there is an alternative to the dispassionate, detached, and disconnected stance of the academy. Consequently, he offered not only directions, but also hope for the journey inward that leads to an undivided heart.

Introduction

The Kingdom of God has been referred to as an "upside down kingdom" (Robertson, 1982) because the values and practices of the Kingdom reflect God's wisdom, which is "foolishness" to earthly minded people (I Corinthians 2:14-15, NASB). The earthly minded have difficulty understanding the "mystery" of the wisdom revealed by the Spirit of God to "spiritual" men and women (I Corinthians 2:7-16). In contrast to God's wisdom, earthly wisdom is rooted in earthly systems and the epistemologies that undergird those systems. A primary and powerful epistemic system is the educational system (Goldman, 2011) and particularly higher education, upon which much of man's wisdom is built.

Parker Palmer's (2007) book, *The Courage to Teach*, challenges the commonly accepted wisdom of higher education's focus on outcomes and "the impact of our society's growing obsession with educational externals—including relentless and mindless standardized testing" (p. ix). Palmer challenges the wisdom of educational praxis that values objective knowledge as the preeminent way of learning and knowing. Instead, he reveals the upside down notion that good andragogy takes the courage to teach from the inside out. He proposes educational praxis that nourishes not only the mind, but also spirit and soul. Accordingly, he explicates an epistemology of the heart—one that requires the courage to journey inward toward living and learning from a place of self-knowledge and authenticity. This essay highlights some of the mysteries Palmer examined and supports the wisdom of teaching from the inside out by discussing how Palmer (and others) have challenged the accepted wisdom of an academic worldview and offer an alternative epistemology.

Challenging the Accepted Wisdom of the Academic Worldview

Palmer (2007) proposes that "we teach who we are" (p. 1) and that the mystery of good teaching is to "know thyself" (p. 3). Palmer explains, "teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-

knowledge” (p. 3). For that reason, Palmer calls us to an inward journey that allows us to know ourselves first and others second.

Palmer’s idea of teaching as a journey of the heart challenges one of the cherished tenets of academia: the necessity of becoming an objective, detached observer. Academia is deeply rooted in the modern ideas of scientific proofs, reductionism, objectivity, detached observation, separation of the secular and the sacred, and separation of the public and the private (Hoffecker, 2007; Holmes, 2001; Smith, 2007; Smith, 1990; Sire, 2009). Students must learn to think and reason through scientific, systematic, rational structures. Possessing these intellectual qualities and skills is fostered by the ideology that higher education promises the hope of achievement, hope of progress, and hope of future success because these are the skills employers are looking for. These characteristics form the foundation of an academic worldview (Bizzell, 2001).

The academic worldview dismisses the role of emotions and subjectivity in knowledge construction. This idea harkens back to the Greek philosopher Plato, who originally described emotions as “irrational urges that need to be controlled” via reason and as “impediments to rationality and the pursuit of truth” (Dirkx, p. 67). This view still dominates the academy in many ways. Higher education is biased against subjectivity, which then distorts the way students think about themselves and others because “the subjective self is unvalued and even unreal...[so] when academic culture dismisses inner truth and honors only the external world, students as well as teachers lose heart”(Palmer, 2007, p. 19). This cerebral practice may feed the intellect, but it starves the spirit and soul.

Academic success requires allegiance to an academic worldview (Bizzell, 2001), which is indicative of the “religious nature of cultural institutions that we all tend to inhabit as if they were neutral sites” (Smith, 1990, p. 23). Smith calls this *academic fundamentalism*, which he describes as...

the stubborn refusal of the academy to acknowledge any truth that does not conform to professorial dogmas. In the famous “market place of ideas,” where all ideas are equal and where there must be no “value judgments” and therefore no values, certain ideas are simply excluded, and woe to those who espouse them. (p. 25)

Palmer (2007) echoes Smith’s (1990) sentiment by explaining that academic culture perpetuates “distrust in personal truth...[and] though the academy claims to value multiple modes of knowing, it honors only one—an ‘objective’ way of knowing that takes us into the ‘real’ world by ‘taking us out of ourselves’” (p. 18).

This dualistic thinking reflects Enlightenment ideas about the separation of the public from the private and the separation of the intellectual from the spiritual. That is, the public world is for intellectual concerns and discussions; the private world is for the spiritual life (Hoffecker, 2007). Smith (1990) proposes that this duality is reflected in the Christian academy as well:

Christian education has absorbed a philosophical anthropology that sees human persons as primarily thinking things...an understanding of education largely in terms of information; more specifically, the end of Christian education has been seen to be the dissemination and communication of Christian ideas rather than the formation of a peculiar people. (p. 31)

Consequently, teachers and students alike are afflicted with the requirement to differentiate and separate their inner and outer epistemologies, which results in living a “disconnected life” (Palmer, 2007, pp. 20-21). There is, however, a means of reform.

Offering an Alternative Epistemology

Palmer offers a roadmap for reform that begins with a call for self-reflection and ends with a call for resistance. Palmer's (2007) writing rests upon the premise that there is an alternative to the dispassionate, detached, and disconnected stance of the academy. Consequently, he offers not only directions, but also hope for the journey inward that leads to an undivided heart. Overcoming a divided heart requires the courage to resist the spiritual subjugation required by an objective scientific system that dismisses a subjective epistemology of the heart. Palmer's call reflects King David's cry: "Teach me Your way, O Lord, and I will walk in Your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear Your name" (Psalm 86:11). As a result, Palmer calls us to reform our own praxis by living an examined life that nourishes the heart (teacher's and student's) and enables us (and our students) to overcome fear. He explains that the value and true meaning of a learning community should be in its promotion of authenticity through relationships that allow us to know others and be known by them—uniting intellect and spirit, mind and soul. His is a philosophy of wholeness representative of an undivided heart.

Much of Palmer's philosophy reflects the Biblical values of relationship, community, integrity, self-examination, and courageous love. This indicates a perspective that affirms not only the intellectual, but also the emotional, volitional, spiritual, and physical make-up of humans, and acknowledges the multi-dimensional characteristics of humans created in the image of God. In other words, we are called to honor the holistic human experience in learning, which is also reflected in embodied learning rooted in spirituality and spiritual ways of knowing (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgarner, 2007).

Similarly, James Smith (2009) called for epistemology and praxis that nourishes the heart of the learner:

What if education, including higher education, is not primarily about the absorption of ideas and information, but about the *formation* of hearts and desires...concerned with shaping our hopes and passion...transforming of our imaginations...[and] not first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love? (pp. 17-18)

If, as Christian educators, we are called to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength (Mark 12:30), then a praxis rooted in love rather than fear aligns us with the purposes of God's Kingdom and His call to make disciples: "Being a disciple of Jesus is not primarily a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs into your head in order to guarantee proper behavior; rather, it is a matter of being the kind of person who loves rightly" (Smith, 2009, p. 33).

However, living and loving rightly happens only when the teacher has taken the time to discover his or her true self and allows the inner world of heart and spirit to shape the outer world of intellectual pursuit. As Christians, we are called to be disciples of Jesus who live passionately from the inside out.

Palmer (2007) asserts that identity and integrity are essential to good teaching (p. 13). According to Palmer, identity is rooted in genetic, cultural, experiential, familial, and spiritual experiences (p. 13). Integrity is the ability to walk in wholeness while honoring selfhood and making life-giving choices to relate to the forces that shape our lives (p. 14). In other words, identity and integrity come from knowing one's self. This requires the inward journey that Palmer discusses.

However, “knowing” one’s self and understanding the forces that shape our lives takes more than a simple determination to do so. To discover our true identities, we must discover the God who created us, for He alone can reveal who He has formed and fashioned us to be: “You formed my inward parts; you wove me in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13). Additionally, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit “searches the hearts [and] knows what the mind of the Spirit is” (Romans 8:26). That is, God alone knows the depths of our hearts, the plans He has devised, the gifts He has given, the graces He has bestowed, and the call He has issued upon our lives. It is only within the context of a living and dynamic relationship that we discover our true identities as He reveals them to us. Only then can we live in the reality thereof. When we do this, however, we will “know” and “be known.”

Psychologist and brain researcher, Curt Thompson (2010), affirmed the importance of knowing and being known: “We have failed to see that this need to be right, to be rationally orderly and correct, subtly but effectively prevents us from the experience of being known, of loving and being loved, which is the highest call of humanity” (p. 17).

Allowing one’s self to be known and to know in return can be risky as it requires change when we live this way, especially when in relationship with God since He is ever changing us into the likeness of His Son. However, the human heart will never be satisfied without this experience. This is why we were created—to know Him as He knows us: “This is eternal life, that they may know You... I have made your name known to them, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:3, 26). Thompson (2010) explains, “To be known is to be pursued, examined, and shaken...to be loved and to have hopes and even demands placed on you...to allow your shame and guilt to be exposed—in order for them to be healed” (p. 23). This is the essence of what living a life of true identity and integrity looks like.

Once a teacher discovers (and keeps on discovering) his or her true identity and practices an integrity that nourishes the heart, that experience can translate into an ability to know our students and help them take similar inward journeys toward true selfhood and integrity. This process creates an open and hospitable environment for memorable and transformative learning, which occurs when there is a “strong, positive, emotional, or affective dimension, such as a supportive climate, a caring teacher who listens to us as individuals, a teacher who respects us as persons, or a teacher who involves the whole person in the learning experience” (Dirkx, 2001, p. 67). An open learning environment, which is based on relational authenticity, enables teachers and students to overcome fear (Palmer, 2007).

Palmer (2007) examines fears of teachers and students. He reminds us that teachers are often so fearful of losing control, appearing ignorant, or not measuring up to the demands of academic culture that we neither notice nor realize the fear in our students. Palmer reminds us that students are actually marginalized members of our culture. Hence, they tend towards silence as “silence has always been adopted by people on the margin” (p. 45). Significantly, the marginalized are often those who feel disconnected from—and disenchanting with—the dominant system that forces them to conform to a worldview that isolates them from their heartfelt desires and devalues subjective and/or alternative ways of knowing and making meaning. Palmer’s example of Rosa Parks is an ideal example of a woman worn out and worn down because she was not living authentically from the inside out. Her life, heart, and voice had been marginalized, and she decided that resistance was the means of returning to center, finding identity, and living in the integrity of wholeness. When we find our way out of fear and back to our hearts, we find our true voices, and we can lead the way for our students to discover their voices through resistance as well. They can live from the inside out and unite mind and soul, spirit and intellect.

These ideas not only reflect Christian teaching ideals, but they also echo the most recent literature about learning trends and methods in adult learning. For example, Kassworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon (2010), discuss a variety of current scholarship and learning perspectives that challenge the objective, modern teaching perspectives that have dominated academia since the Enlightenment. Holistic learning involves the whole person: body, heart, spirit, and mind (reflective of the First Commandment) and encompasses “cognitive, somatic, affective, and spiritual domains along with artistic and transpersonal domains” (Kassworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010, p. 36). Somatic or embodied learning is accessing knowledge through bodily senses. Affective learning occurs when we attend to and evaluate the emotional aspect of knowledge acquisition (p. 36). Kassworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon propose: “for lasting change to occur, the learning needs to take place at a deeper level, an emotional level” (p. 37). Spiritual knowing occurs when we pay attention to unconscious symbols, rituals, and experiences that transcend simple cognition and spring from the deepest parts of our beings: “Spiritual knowing incorporates all other ways of knowing” (p. 38). As Christians who acknowledge the importance of living by the spirit and paying attention to the many and various ways God communicates with us, we are wise to attend to the multiple learning modes God has given us and incorporate them into our classroom practices. We must encourage comprehensive learning that stimulates the whole person and meets the multi-dimensional learning needs of our students. That is, as Christian educators we must call our students to love the Lord with all their minds, bodies, souls, spirits. That is we call them to honor the First Commandment as they learn.

Likewise, Palmer’s ideas speak to the importance of teachers developing emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence includes skills such as “self-awareness, managing destructive emotions, and empathy” (Goleman, 2006, p. xvii) that enable “families, schools, jobs, and communities [to be] more humane” (p. xviii). Understanding the role that emotions play in learning is essential for any teacher since the “emotional and rational minds are semi-independent faculties...reflecting the operation of distinct, but interconnected, circuitry in the brain” (p. 9). Goleman proposes that emotionally intelligent people have an advantage in “any domain in life” (p. 36) and most likely to be “content and effective” (p. 36). Consequently, modeling and teaching emotional intelligence in the classroom can be a powerful means of integrating faith and learning.

Conclusion

The proposals and perspectives presented are really a call to the integration of faith and learning. Integrating faith and learning is more than implementing Christian ideas and practices. It requires us to know God and be known by Him. It requires us to turn inward for the source of life: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). It requires that we acquire the wisdom of God instead of accommodating the wisdom of man. When we do this, then we will participate in resistance that leads to reform—from the inside out. We will honor and demonstrate an epistemology of wholeness and remain open to spiritual ways of knowing rooted in Biblical orthodoxy. We will recognize that spiritual and embodied learning can be equally yoked to intellectual and scientific learning. We will overcome fear with love and live in authentic community in and out of the classroom. Instead of being foolish, we will become wise as we allow the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and demonstrate an upside down epistemology that reflects the Kingdom of God working in and through our hearts to touch the lives of our students.

References

- Bizzell, P. (2001). What happens when basic writers come to college? In K. Halasek & N. P. Highberg (Eds.), *Landmark essays: On basic writing* (pp. 15-22). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Dirkx, J. M. (2001). The power of feelings: Emotion, imagination, and the construction of meaning in adult learning. *New directions for adult and continuing education*, 89, 63-72.
- Goldman, A. I. (2011). A guide to social epistemology. In A. I. Goldman & D. Whitcomb (Eds.), *Social epistemology: Essential readings*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goleman, D. (2006). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ* (10th anniversary edition). New York: Bantam Dell.
- Hoffecker, A. W. (2007). *Revolutions in worldview: Understanding the flow of Western thought*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing.
- Holmes, A. F. (2001). *Building the Christian academy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmann Publishing.
- Kassworm, C. E., Rose, A. D., Ross-Gordon, J. M. (2010). *Handbook of adult and continuing education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- Palmer, P. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner land-scape of a teacher's life* (10th ed.). San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- Robertson, P. (1982). *The secret kingdom*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Sire, J. W. (2009). *The universe next door: A basic worldview catalog* (5th ed.). Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.
- Smith, J. K. (2009). *Desiring the kingdom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Smith, P. (1990). *Killing the spirit: Higher education in America*. New York: Viking.
- Thompson, C. (2010). *Anatomy of the soul*. Carrollton, TX: Tyndale.

Laura S. Foote teaches at Malone University in Canton, Ohio. She teaches in the School of Business and Leadership in both the Malone Management Program and in the Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership program. She can be reached at lfoote@malone.edu.
