Summary of: The Courage to Teach

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Introduction

In the ten years that it took Parker Palmer to create The Courage to Teach, it is evident that he was diligently working and meditating on every aspect of teaching. The Courage to Teach is much more than a book on teaching, it is a lifestyle. It offers food for thought and viewpoints that are far from traditional education. After every few pages I had to sit back and ponder on all the life lessons that I was receiving. Palmers states, “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.” This illustrates and sums up Palmers untraditional viewpoints; and to me it offers hope and validation. Hope for untraditional educators like myself and validation that I have assembled a systematic style of teaching.

I am not a typical educator. I do not plan on being a teacher, coach, or a traditional educator in any capacity. However, I plan to be a leader and a role model. So it was refreshing to read so many points that I have thought of on my own, being validated in The Courage to Teach.

Chapter 1

The concept of identity and integrity was central throughout chapter 1. Identity can be summed up as simply who you are and integrity can be summed up as being true to yourself. This concept means so much to me. It makes me think of my high school English teacher, who had a very dry sense of humor (identity). He incorporated his dry sense of humor into his lesson
plans but he realized it could be taken the wrong way (integrity). To stay true to his identity and integrity, he continued to use his dry sense of humor, while being sensitive enough not to offend any students. This allowed for identity, integrity and connectedness to take place. He did not hide behind his teaching role, he was real and he was everyone’s favorite teacher because of that.

Palmer states that hiding behind roles can make educators lose the heart to teach. In turn, teachers lose a connection with their students. This disconnection can result into a role play where the students are distant learners and the facilitators are information zombies. A way to stay connected is by finding your inner teacher. Palmer suggests several ways to find your inner teacher. The one I relate to most is writing in journals. Journals help me to express what I cannot verbally express. I typically write in my journal and then I will analyze what I wrote. Writing helps me understand myself better.

Chapter 2

Fear is common in teaching. Palmer stated that after 30 years of teaching he still has fears in the classroom. Fear is what limits people from teaching with their hearts. We have to recognize the fear in our heart so that we can recognize fear in students. Palmer explained how “knowing” and “objectivity” can correlate to fear. Eliminating fear allows for people to see with an unbiased lens and allows for teaching to take place from a heart that is “life-giving.” As a leader, I have a fear of failing and stepping out of my comfort zone. However: understanding, acknowledging and working on my fears allows me to see fear in others; and help teach them in a loving way.
Chapter 3

This chapter focuses on the wholeness of learning. Palmer states that humans have been taught to polarize things. Psychological test is one of many things that are polarized. This was profound to me because I was recently trying to figure out what type of person I was. Was I an introvert or extravert? After reading both of the characteristics I realized that I was a little bit of both, but both were not an option. It is our challenge to resist these boxes and think holistically.

Paradoxes cannot only be acknowledged in our way of thinking but it must be reflected in the classrooms. Last semester in Karen Kaminski’s EDAE 620 course we had to write a paper that described our teaching style. My style was “Organized Chaos.” As illustrated in the title, this style of teaching used paradoxes to contribute to my teaching. My teaching style of organized chaos was very similar to Palmers 6 steps in pedagogical design. One of the many things we both mentioned were putting students in an open environment while still monitoring and having control of the class.

Chapter 4

The sentence that most appropriately outlines chapter 4 states, “To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.” Equating truth to teaching is amazing to me and it reminds me of my favorite college football coach. My coach had a very low tolerance for people who “avoided the truth.” I realized that all the people that he thought highly of were who he called, “truth seeker’s and truth givers.” Although many of my teammates did not understand exactly what he meant, it always stuck close my heart. Truth seeker’s and truth
“givers” allow for a clean flow of knowledge to take place without the blockage of ego’s, pride and many other personal idiosyncrasies. Creating a community of truth is vital in teaching and learning because it highlights a subject and not an expert. Palmer illustrated a model on the community of truth. It center was a subject, opposed to a teacher or an expert; and there was a constant connection between the subject and the “knower’s.” This model was illustrated in Professor Jeff Foley’s EDAE 520 course. This model was further explained in chapter 5.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 begins by explaining how teaching is privatized. Teachers are in charge of each of their classrooms and are separated from their colleagues; this creates a separated community and a challenge to teachers. I personally think the challenge is not to find ways to openly communicate with colleagues about classroom situations and other topics that comes with teaching; but it is finding the appropriate way to communicate these things. Palmers states that, “As we listen to each other’s stories, we are often reflecting silently on our own identity and integrity as teachers.” This is an example of how we should communicate to our colleagues. This reminds me of a time that I had to find a way to promote thought and communication to a colleague. My junior year of college I was one of the captains of the football team. While talking to a teammate (who I considered a leader on the team) about a story of when my coach allowed me to miss a meeting because of excellent communication between us both, he suddenly interrupted me. He depressingly said, “Coach would not ever let me do that.” I realized that every time I tried to tell a story in which something positive happened in my place of work (football) he always had a negative response. There was a
barrier stopping the flow of communication. I eventually found the right time and a clever way (a way that would probably only make sense in our relationship) to bring to his attention that he was not allowing me to communicate with him without strumming a sensitivity nerve. While in good spirits I tried to bring up another story and he depressingly said, “coach never does that for me.” I laughed and told him, this story is not about you. He also laughed and I could tell that he realized he was playing a victimized role and being a barricade for communication. For the first time I could finish a story without feeling guilty. I was able to tell him several stories throughout the year. When I was telling my stories I could tell that he was thinking of his own integrity and identity. He may have been thinking in his head, “coach does not do that for me” or “coach does not like me” but I could tell that he was thinking of how and why it would not work for him. The next year he was the leader that I knew he could be. A couple years later he realized that the positive stories that I was telling him was food for thought and also I was showing him how to create conversation amongst colleagues. We helped each other grow. This situation helped me grow because I had be a leader to a leader and find a way to promote conversation amongst a colleague.

Chapter 7

Changes within institutions are necessary but not an easy task. Palmer explains, institutions do not have a capacity for constant evolution therefore a social movement is required. He explains that social movements call for a toughness that not everyone possesses. The biggest movements in history had strong-willed people who did not disappear when organizations told them no. Palmer offers 4 logics to social movements.
Conclusion

In a broad world of education, Palmer somehow was able to capture the complete essence of teaching in one book. The Courage to Teach is an amazing book. It did exactly what it states in the title, it gave me the courage to teach. It gave me validation in my, once thought, unique and unsystematic teaching style- verifying that teaching indeed does come from within.
References