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- 24 Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. Jossey-Bass, 1998. \$20.99.

More than any other book that I have read in recent years, Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* has influenced my self-understanding as a teacher, and my approach to teaching preaching. At the same time, Palmer's book could have been entitled *The Courage to Preach*, because nearly everything he writes in this book is equally applicable to the preaching situation.

The Courage to Teach begins with a serious investigation of the inner landscape of the teacher's "heart." Palmer's premise is that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." (p. 10) If teachers do not attend to their own pedagogical identity and selfhood it is likely that they will be unable to build connections between themselves, their subject, and their students. Because teaching takes place at a vulnerable place where the personal and the public meet, teachers tend to disconnect from themselves, their students, and from their subjects in order to deal with the exposure and fear that they feel. According to Palmer, however, this is a fatal mistake. If this becomes our habit, then our words become "the balloon speech in cartoons" and we discover that we are "caricatures of ourselves." (p. 17)

Palmer invites teachers to begin the move toward integrity in teaching by taking time to remember "the mentors who evoked us." (p. 21) Because teaching is a mutual process, he wants to know not only "What made your mentor great?" but also "What was it about you that allowed great mentoring to happen?" (p. 21) He then encourages reflection on "the subjects that chose us." In this way teachers can begin to re-connect not only with their attraction to the vocation of teaching, but also to the subjects that they teach. The process that he describes in this section strikes me as imminently applicable to both teachers of preaching and to preachers as well.

In Chapter II, "A Cure for Fear: Education and the Disconnected Life," Palmer takes the reader on a journey into the labyrinth of education in North America. He exposes that educational environment as a "culture of fear" that both creates and mirrors an "inner landscape" of fear within teachers and students. (pp. 35-36) Structures of separation and disconnection that currently exist within the educational system have grown up around this fearful house of mirrors. Borrowing a theme from his previous work, *The Company of Strangers*, Palmer identifies the fundamental fear that teachers and students are up against as "the fear of having a live encounter with alien 'otherness,' whether the other is a student, a colleague, a subject, or a self-dissenting voice within." (p. 38) Both students and teachers

go to great lengths to avoid this encounter. Students hide behind notebooks, computer screens, attitudes of distance, etc., and teachers hide behind podiums, lecture notes, credentials, and the constant noise of hearing themselves talk.

Within this overarching fear of encountering the "other," Palmer identifies a "sequence of fears." This sequence begins with the fear of diversity and pluralism. Deep down, teachers fear that they will be forced to admit that there are other standpoints from which to see the subjects that they teach. If they make it past this fear, teachers stumble into another fear: "fear of the conflict that will ensue when divergent truths meet." According to Palmer, teachers fear conflict because of the win-lose intellectual warfare that is predominant in the culture of education. He argues that teachers must learn consensus-building if they are to make it past the fear of conflict. Once they move past this fear, teachers are confronted with a third fear: "the fear of losing identity." Teachers develop a strong identification with the subjects that they teach. New perspectives on the subject threaten a teacher's hard-won perspective, and this, in turn, threatens the teacher's sense of identity. Teachers need to learn how to differentiate their perspectives on a subject from the subjects themselves. If they are able to do this, then they can make it past the fear of losing identity.

It is at this juncture that teachers are confronted with one final and most terrifying fear. This is "the fear that a live encounter with otherness will challenge or even compel us to change our lives." (p. 38) It is into this place that teachers seldom want to venture. And yet, according to Palmer, this is the place where teachers can and must go in order to renew their relationship with their students and the subjects that they teach.

In Chapter III, "The Hidden Wholeness: Paradox in Teaching and Learning," Palmer offers practical wisdom for developing an educational ecology that is not controlled by the culture and inner landscapes of fear. Much of the advice in this chapter should be framed and hung on the walls of every teacher's office. Among the strengths that teachers might cultivate are:

- A capacity to combine structure or intentionality with flexibility in both planning and leading a class; clarity about my objectives but openness to various ways of achieving them.
- A respect for my students' stories that is no more or less than my respect for the scholarly texts I assigned to them.
- An ability to see my students' lives more clearly than they themselves see them, a capacity to look beyond their initial self-presentation, and a desire to help them see themselves more deeply.
- A willingness to take risks, especially the risk of inviting open dialogue, though I can never know where it is going to take us.

Also available in this chapter are several absolutely indispensable "paradoxes" for setting up classroom space. These could easily be reshaped into guidelines for ordering liturgical space.

- The space should be bounded and open.
- The space should be hospitable and "charged."
- The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group.
- The space should honor the "little" stories of the individual and the "big" stories of the disciplines and tradition.
- The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of community.
- The space should welcome both silence and speech.

Chapter IV, "Knowing in Community: Joined by the Grace of Great Things," is an exposition of the nature of communal epistemology. Palmer begins by defining the "community of truth" over against therapeutic notions of community on one hand, and civic and marketing ideas of community on the other. The hallmark of the "community of the truth," according to Palmer, "is in its claim that *reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it.*" (p. 95)

At the heart of the "community of the truth," are what Palmer calls "great things." These great things are the subjects that we teach, by which Palmer does not mean our disciplines, texts, or theories, but the things themselves. For homileticians, for instance, "great things" might include proclamation and its content, language, speech, or "the Word." The community of truth gathers around these things and holds an "*eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.*" (p. 104) In Chapter V, "Teaching in Community: A Subject-Centered Education," Palmer further explains this model of education, calling "subject-centered" education a "third way" between "teacher-centered" and "student-centered" education.

All in all, Palmer has once again proved himself to be a capable contemporary interpreter of education, epistemology and community. *The Courage to Teach* is a welcome follow-up to *The Company of Strangers*. Unlike narrow catechetical or grammatical approaches to education, Palmer's approach welcomes diversity without forsaking the centrality of the subject and the pursuit of truth. His is a welcome vision of collaborative education that could do much to transform the teaching of preaching. It is also highly suggestive for those willing to pursue more collaborative forms of teaching and preaching in a parish setting.

□ John McClure