

To Teach

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TO TEACH¹

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I have been seriously concerned about this talk, because my only role in previous years in this session has been a rather irreverent introduction of Bill Bondeson. I'm glad Joe Johnston was kinder in introducing me this morning than I ever was to Bill!

There are several threads that make up the fabric of my remarks today. The first thread came to me at a meeting in Philadelphia on higher education about two months ago. There was a vice president of the Knight Foundation there, a very thoughtful man named Rick Love who directs their education programs, and he was musing about the following fact: "You know we read and talk a lot about leadership," he said, "the quality of being a leader, the essence of being a leader, what it means to be a leader." He said isn't it funny that we have no word "teachership"? That was an interesting observation and I have been musing about this; if we had a word "teachership" what would it mean? What would it mean to describe the array of characteristics, qualities, attributes – whatever you want to call them – that make for a good teacher. Isn't it interesting that we don't have such a word? So, the first thread is to think together about what "teachership" would mean if it were in the dictionary.

Another thread in my musings about today came from a conference on science education in March in Washington, D.C. There was a lot of discussion about technology, and an officer from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education was reflecting about the great ambiguity that is about in the land today about what it means, "to be a teacher in a sea of

technology." What are the essential characteristics of teaching that can be served by technology but probably not replaced by technology? I've heard a lot of presentations about educational technology and I haven't always heard the teacher in those discussions. What does it mean to be a teacher today? Is it different from the way it was before? We have new tools. Which of those tools enhance teachership?

The third thread in the fabric of this morning's discussion was the reading of The Courage to Teach. I think this is the first time in my history with Wakonse that I have actually read in advance a book that was recommended, so a gold star on my door tonight would be appreciated! Since I know everyone else has read the book, you recognize that Parker Palmer's book focuses on exactly the same theme of what it means to be a teacher. And so those were the three threads of musing:

- One – If we had the word "teachership", what would it mean?
- Two – Particularly in this sea of technology, what does it mean to be a teacher?
- Three – What does Parker Palmer have to say about teaching?

And thus my remarks, entitled "To Teach."

Actually, I have to confess that there was a fourth thread in the fabric that contributed to these remarks, and that is the fact that in this past winter semester, I taught a formal course on my own for the first time in thirty years. The only other classroom experience I have had in the last thirty years was a very small role in a multi-disciplinary

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team-taught course in science three years ago. So, when Parker Palmer talks about fear, when he reflects on experiences with students, I have a new sense of identification with those issues, and a new appreciation for how difficult teaching really is. I thought a lot about this recent teaching experience in preparation for today.

Now I have three main points that I want to make, and then I have a conclusion. I had three threads plus a fourth and now I have three points plus a conclusion. I'm a symmetrical fellow!

Point One

My first point is Parker Palmer's observation that to teach is to make connections. It was in this room two years ago, this very room, that I was doing a presentation, back in the days when undergraduates were more at the heart of this conference. A faculty member asked me a question, and before I could give an answer, a wonderful young man named Mike from Texas A&M University, who was then finishing his freshman year, stood up and he responded with one of the most thoughtful things that I've ever heard anyone say. I got to know Mike, and I have learned a lot from him about how students think about teaching and teachers. After the first day of class

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*Parker Palmer,
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the next fall, Mike sent me an e-mail. Mike is about the most enthusiastic person I have ever met, and his e-mail message started with a capital "WOW! I just had my first day of class," he said, "and it's really interesting to me how quickly the class discovers which teachers connect with students and which teachers don't." He couldn't exactly explain to me what happened that made you know there is a connection versus what happened when there

isn't a connection, but the students all know, almost as soon as they walk into a class, whether the teacher connects. Connections. Parker Palmer says to teach is to make connections.

Palmer writes on page 11. "Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness." The connections made by the teachers originate not in their lessons, but in their hearts, meaning heart in an ancient sense as a place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the kindred soul. Connections. Pretty important, aren't they?

I was reminded in thinking about this of Howard's End, with E.M. Forster's epigraph. "Only connect."

Point Two

My second point is this: What gets connected? What gets connected in teachership? It's easy to say "connections," but what kinds of connections are made? Well, there are several connections. The first one is internal. When you're a good teacher, there are connections made inside of you, and that is the first kind of connection you need to be aware of. You can't connect anything else unless you're connected. Parker Palmer says this in a very moving way. "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique. Good teaching comes from the identity and the integrity of the teacher."

That is a pretty important subject: identity and integrity of the teacher. You have probably noticed that -- even though they may not say so very often, but deep down, in a way they can't even usually articulate and they would be embarrassed to do so if they could -- students in your class want to know who you are. They want to know you and if there's no "you" there, there's no one for them. So, it is very important for you to spend some time while at Miniwanca getting reconnected yourself, so that there is a "you" at the center of your teaching. Those internal connections take building, take time, and take nurturing; they take silence, pondering, and daydreaming.

Once you have this river of flowing wholeness that is in you, there are other connections. Palmer talks about connecting three things: the teacher, the student and the

subject. Teaching is like a three-legged stool of connections that are made: teacher to student, subject to student, subject to teacher, teacher to subject, student to teacher. Teacher, subject and student. It's interesting to analyze conversations about teaching from the point of view of are all three legs of that stool part of the conversation? Often they are not. We in this room, probably most of us, would quite often say that the thing left out in the usual conversation about teaching is the student. We have colleagues who can talk for a long time without ever mentioning a student, but some of those colleagues don't hear in some of our conversations about teaching enough mention of the subject. So some of them think that when we get excited about teaching, we're really getting excited about mushiness. Parker Palmer doesn't agree with that either.

In conversations about teaching, listen for the teacher, the subject and the student – all three.

In the novel Lucky Jim, a young history professor goes in to see his senior colleague, a very distinguished faculty member with a big corner office with a fireplace and an easy chair, like we used to see in the movies that encouraged me to be a teacher. While the young professor is there, the phone rings and his senior colleague picks up the telephone and says, "History speaking." I'm not sure Parker Palmer would like this, because there isn't any student in this story. There is only a subject and a teacher.

There's a third kind of connection that I think we make when we teach and that is that between and among students. You know it's very interesting to me, I think that learning, a little bit like faith, is not as much a private enterprise as we'd like to think – it's a community transaction. One of the things that we quite often don't think about enough is making connections in the group of students who are assembled in our classrooms around the subject.

So, there are lots of connections: internal connections, three-legged connections, connections among the group of students.

Point Three

Here is my third point: Palmer says if we are going to have these connections we have to create a space in which they can occur. I like very much the phrase he uses: "To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced." That's really a nice definition. Think about each work in this phrase, "create a space in which the community of truth is practiced." Very interesting words – there isn't a single mention of facts. "Create a space in which the community of truth is practiced."

Now, I think there are two senses in which we have to create the space. One of them is in our individual classrooms. Parker Palmer talks about putting this great thing in the middle of the classroom with the students and the teacher gathered about it, so that teaching is not teacher-centered or student-centered, but centered in the subject around which everybody gathers in this community of discussion and truth.

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Palmer writes, "Perhaps there are clues to a synthesis in the image of the community of truth, where the subject 'sits in the middle and knows.' Perhaps the classroom should be neither teacher-centered nor student-centered, but subject-centered. Modeled on the community of truth, this is a classroom in which teacher and student alike are focused on a great thing, a classroom in which the best features of the teacher- and student-centered education are merged and transcended by putting

not teacher, not student, but subject at the center of our attention.”

And in this image he points out that the subject is directly accessible to the student – it’s not necessarily coming to the students only filtered through the teacher, but the students themselves encounter and engage and discuss the subject, they think about the subject and even teach the teacher a thing or two about the subject. I learned some things from my students in teaching my course this spring. We talked about beauty and what beauty meant, both in music and mathematics. They had to write a paper on this topic and in those papers were some very thoughtful observations – things about beauty that I had not heard before, because the students directly encountered the subject, and processed it, and we were a community learning together.

But there’s another sense, other than in our own classroom, in which we have to create space. We have to create space on our campus. Now it’s true that you can be a superb teacher on an unfriendly campus. There are many in this room who are doing that – struggling by themselves, doing their thing because they don’t have a climate which nurtures and supports them in their teaching. But, I think Parker Palmer would say, and does so in his book, that you have an obligation to try to create on your campus a climate in which the kind of teaching that builds a community of truth can occur more easily than it does today. Parker talks in Chapter 6 of his book, a chapter entitled “Behind Closed Doors,” about the consequences of our viewing teaching as a private activity. We go into the classroom very proud of the fact that no one else can come in there, because we’re scared to death somebody actually might. It’s a very private activity – not something you talk about. You don’t find it easy to sit down and say, “I’ve got a problem with my teaching.” It’s not something we sit around a table and talk with our colleagues about, and that’s too bad. In Chapter 7, Palmer talks about the movement for reform and speaks about the need for an authentic movement to

be public. He writes that there are no authentic movements which don’t go public, and so one of the things we need to think about in creating a space is not only how we do that in our classroom, but how we do that on our campus. That will be different for each one of you and for each one of your institutions.

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I want to tell you one story that may inspire you. I work with a science education group called Project Kaleidoscope which has funding from a number of foundations and the NSF to construct something called Faculty 21. There may be a couple of Faculty 21 people in this room. The idea is to get young faculty in science and mathematics in about their third or fourth or fifty year as faculty, just as they are getting ready for a tenure decision, to start thinking about becoming leaders who will help make teaching more central in the future than it is today. It is a process of co-opting future department chairs and deans, if you like, trying to inoculate them so they don’t catch whatever disease it is that administrators catch when they become a “them” instead of an “us.” As part of Faculty 21, we have a leadership institute every year for some of these people in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in Colorado at a place called Baca, an area where flying saucers and Martians and all sorts of interesting things that you don’t want to inquire too much about are common.

One young man participant in such a leadership institute a few years ago is a community college instructor of chemistry in a suburb of Chicago. He was later chosen as a Carnegie Fellow, and he is a dedicated teacher. He’s tried all sorts of things in his classes. He turned his class completely from a lecture course into a hands-on

experiential class, he evaluates everything he tries, and he had had wonderful success with enrollments and outcomes. But he has had few interested administrators or colleagues and he is a guy who was determined to do something about that. Now it turns out that in the Carnegie program you have to have a project. Mark's project – this young man does not think small, he thinks big – has been to change his entire campus. He entitled

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his project "A Campus Reborn." He got this idea because his community college, as with most community colleges, is not very old, probably about 30 years. In reading about the history of this college, he discovered that in the early days there was a great curricular ferment and discussion about teaching habits and team teaching and there was a lot of collegial thinking about how to make courses better. As time went on people just sort of wound down. This is not a research institution, so the problem was not a focus on writing grants and doing research. There was a unionized faculty focusing on issues of pay and workload, and as the institution went on, the faculty slipped into an attitude of "If it requires more energy, let's don't do it because we will get paid the same anyway." And Mark didn't want to live any longer in that climate.

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So Mark set to work, and I began to get telephone calls from him. "Now I'm thinking about doing this. Is

that a good idea?" I knew nothing about the situation, but I handed out advice freely! Mark decided on a strategy to get the administrators and other faculty to catch some of his vision about what the college had been like. The institution was coming up to an anniversary and he told me, "You know, if I could get only get them to imagine the energy and excitement there was about students and learning in those days and to see that maybe we could rebuild that together. Maybe if they caught that vision, something would happen." He had a lot of discouragements along the way, but called me three weeks ago and said, "We had an awesome meeting about my idea because a major administrator has now adopted it as her idea, but I don't care." He said that three-fourths of the faculty at the meeting said they remembered what it was like and it was neat.

Now I tell you that story, not that this is what you should do or that your institution needs, but I wanted to stress that I think sometimes we think too small. Whatever your vision might be for your campus, your community, your department, your unit, whatever it is – go back home with a vision and a couple of ideas about how to make that vision more of a reality, and you, too, will have helped create more space in which a community of truth is practiced.

Now to conclude, what are the implications for you? First of all, while you're here, you will connect with lots of people, with lots of ideas, with lots of things, but connect with yourself first. Unless you go home clearer about your identity and integrity, you will never be a great teacher. Walk on the beach, read a book, do something outrageous at Chautauqua, but take time to remember who you are and restore any part of that that needs to be renewed.

Second, when you go back, go back with an agenda, but even more important, a vision. What would it look like if this vision came true? Remember that when I started, I told you about Rick Love, the man from the Knight Foundation. He told me that his view of what a

good teacher is was reflected in a wonderful book called Run with the Horsemen by Ferrol Sams. It's the story of Porter Osborne, Jr., growing up in the depression years as a boy in rural Georgia and the section that Rick Love liked so much is about Porter's encounter with a teacher. I invite you to think about the description I'm going to read, skipping around a bit, and what it tells us about teachership and about connecting with each other.

"Mr. Dorsey was the other teacher whose brilliance and ability had a lasting impact on the boy. He was all of 19 years old when he signed and mailed a contract to teach school in Brewtonton, but he had the self-confidence of a man twice that age. It was from him that the boy first began getting the idea that his hometown might be extra-special, and not just a duplicate of all the other towns in America. Mr. Dorsey recounted with merriment his arrival in town on the evening train for his very first job. He had assumed that the crowd of local citizens gathered along the tracks was a welcoming committee for the new teachers in town. Later, amused at himself, he learned that this daily trek to the depot was a community ritual second in social importance only to Sunday morning church attendance. From that day there was a mutual love affair between Mr. Dorsey and the community. Both delighted in discovering the character traits of the other, all while developing an unshakable loyalty and admiration that brooked no mean or petty assessment of either. The man could do anything. Everything about him was quick – his movements, his speech, his perception, and above all his intellect. He had an impudent irreverence about what people assumed to be their fate. His slanted green eyes would twinkle puckishly as he exclaimed in mock dismay, 'you really think you can't do that? Well, with that attitude, I dare say you won't. It's a pity, too – you'd have been good at it.' He inspired more farm boys to achievement than anyone before or since. He stimulated a pride in self that squared drooping shoulders and raised hanging heads. His boundless energy and enjoyment of everything he did

were as infectious as his quick laugh. His American History was the most popular class in school. He presented the Founding Fathers as personal acquaintances and the Constitution as a living document, the revered depository of everything fine and noble in Western civilization.

'What we need is a real class election.' Mr. Dorsey announced one day. 'You young people are treating these Whigs and Tories like something dead and dry. They weren't. They affected the lives of people who voted. You seniors need to form a couple of political parties and nominate candidates with real platforms to support. I'm going to see the principal and Miss Berry about it. Most class elections are nothing but a popularity contest, but they should be based on what a candidate can contribute rather than on how well you like him.'

Concealing his immediate excitement, the boy raised his hand. 'You mean we should have a political campaign?' 'Certainly I do.' Dorsey's ideas tumbled out." Well, it goes on and on and the boy gets enthused, tries one thing after another, and begins to accumulate extra curricular points. As the chapter ends we have this scene of him in the hall: the principal had just told the boy he was nominated to speak at the FFA district convention. "He assured the boy that he was proud of him and that he was sure that he would do a good job. The boy promised to try and vowed silently to deserve this man's admiration. That night in the barn, his head pressed into the flank of a cooperative cow as he milked by lantern light, he considered his lot. 'Well,' he said to the cow, 'I thought this senior year was sure to be a breeze and I'd just loaf my way through it, and I'm blessed if I'm not working harder than I ever have in my life. I sure do have three good teachers, though, and you can't let a good teacher down. They're too hard to find.' He moved on to the third cow and began washing her bag. 'You know,' he told her, 'I've gone all through high school and nobody has ever mentioned extra curricular points to me before, and now, all of a sudden, every time I turn around, some

teacher is telling me how many points you can get for this and how many points you can get for that. The way I figure it, I'm having my nose rubbed into forty-five extra points and it's not even Christmas yet. That's more than I have every heard of anybody winning in a year, and I'm sure to make the debating team again, too. Sah in there now, you're having your tits pulled by a sure-fire valedictorian. Back your leg.'" This is a wonderful image of teacher as inspirer and connector.

I want to close with two reminders of just how sacred what we're about is. Parker Palmer toward the end of his book talks about the sacred soil in which good teaching grows. On Palm Sunday in my church, as the time was drawing near for this talk, and I was thinking about it more and more, the Old Testament lesson was from Isaiah 50. "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher that I may know how to sustain the weary with the Word."

So go in peace and serve the Lord in your teaching.

"The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher that I may know how to sustain the weary with the Word."