

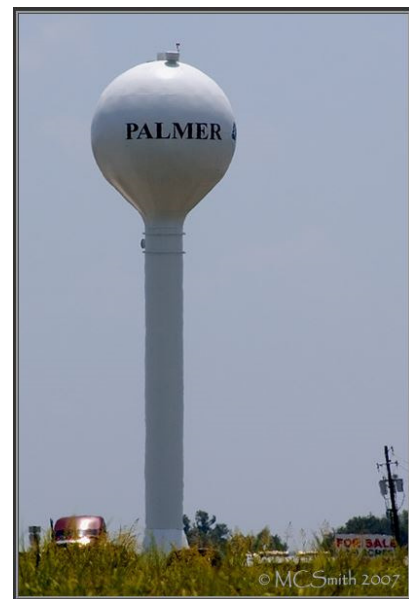
Courage to Teach

A Personal Reflection by David Simmons for EDAE 624 – Spring 2016 – Dr. Don Quick

1 A GREAT LUNCH....DURING A BUSINESS DAY

As I think of how best to describe the book, “*Courage to Teach*” by Parker J. Palmer, what comes to mind is having a GREAT lunch – but feeling constrained & pressured by the hurriedness of the ‘lunch hour’...but not wanting to miss one bite! You have heard of some of these flavors / spices, but have not necessarily tasted them together like this nor had the food presented in such a beautiful prose! Do I just ‘sample’ each part to say, “I had some”? Then the only ‘joke’ is on the patron whom has had the rare opportunity to partake from this full course meal but has cheated only themselves by not having more (alluding to just reading enough to submit a paper but not really drinking deep from the wisdom presented to incur life-change).

My original plan was to listen to the audio-book (which clocked in at around 8 hours) during the ‘wind-shield’ time of some business trips; boy did that backfire! After hearing just the Foreword and Introduction – there was no way I could continue just the audio learning. I needed to high-light, under-line, make-notes, etc. to really take in the true value and create notes for myself as a reference for later revisiting. While pondering the genius (or question of ‘has he crossed that fine line into lunacy’) of some of the thoughts discussed/presented and considering their implication; I was actually wondering the ‘true value’ of this book in my life. Upon doing so (and driving safely) I literally passed this water tower on the side of the road. Divine Intervention? That convinced me that there was ‘more than meets the eye’ (or ear, as in this case) and I needed to really put the time in to consume, bit-by-bit, what was presented before me. While I realized that it probably meant a diminished grade due to tardiness – there was no way I was going to miss the life/mind-change that I could feel was about to happen....then a peace came across me as I realized THIS is TRUE learning – no matter the consequences...it was mine.



2 THE INNER CONFLICT/DIALOGUE FOR/AGAINST HOME-SCHOOLING

It is said that to truly be skilled in the art of Debate is when you ‘win’ the debate but later state that personally you are totally against the issue you just rigorously defended! To make it even more personal is to envision the angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other – each playing their part within the mindful discussions surrounding life’s questions (and life’s answers that need to be questioned). One of these has been the topic of ‘Home Schooling’ for me. I’ve had the pleasure of knowing individuals and

hearing proponents of both sides telling their tales of the pros/cons of this topic. Having grown up in public schools (not having the opportunity of home-schooling), I've always favored the need for 'traditional schools' because I've continued to butt up against the notion that a student would only grow to the level of that one teacher/parent. As the saying goes, "No student is above the Master". When I hear about home-schooling due to behavioral issues of the student which would only marginalize them in a public school; I relent to see the value in home schooling. But it never 'sat easy' with me as a norm or valued approach. In the first few 'chewings' on the material presented in the Forward / Introduction; the answer became crystal clear in an epiphanic moment! Parker's positing that teaching is not just about knowledge transfer (which, of course, is a vital part) but more the '*capacity for connectedness*' in which '*relational trust*' between all the individuals involved – '*built on the movements of the human heart such as empathy, commitment, compassion, patience, and the capacity to forgive*' forms the secret to success. There it was! Finally, an answer/resolution! If personal connection was the answer – then it was right before me. **Nobody** will be willing to continue to give/share/put 100% of their heart into your education like a mom/parent would! From Bryk and Schneider's study, we learn that the answer is a '*secret in plain sight*' in that even '*(those) with less than adequate resources...can produce exceptional work*' overcoming the scholarly/material limitations due to the 'person/heart/willingness' to find a way. This fueled my interest into what other 'jewels' could be gleaned!

3 FINALLY, WORDS TO DESCRIBE....BUT REALIZING IT NEEDS TO BE REBUILT

Twenty years of being in the electrical manufacturing industry has provided the opportunity for many different learning environments, audiences, topics, and techniques. Within that time, I've had people ask me, "What makes your presentations so good"? To which I answer, "I'm not entirely sure – I present some really dry topics so I spruce them up to the level of what I, myself, would like to hear". But that always seemed like a coy response to deliver out like business cards after a meeting (which are predestined to be put into a draw somewhere and quickly forgotten). Palmer's statements that "*good teachers share one trait: a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work*" and "*connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts – meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self*" intrigued me. While initially they sound a bit 'hippy-ish', I really value how much I enjoy seeing 'the proverbial light bulbs' click on in people's heads with topics they may not have earlier understood and/or struggled to obtain some clarity in. This seemed to allow me some 'words to use' for what seemed like ethereal notions (which also highlights my ineptness to verbalize emotions – but that is another story). While I was feeling good about this new revelation about how better to answer people, it was quickly turned as I read more in the book and found him discussing the 'worst ways' of presenting which stunningly sounded exactly like my *modus operani*! I'd like to talk about the ideas presented in Chapter 5 that discuss the '*ways of presenting courses that deliver a great deal of information*' as this is right up the alley of my profession. I'm often called to do so within the constraints of a one-time visit in about an hour with other professionals in my industry (electrical). Palmer's posit that '*the worst way to do it is by non-stop lecturing*' in which we're pushing to '*cover the field*' **turns my world upside down!**

I've been searching for other ways to impact the adult learner and his discussion that '*the human brain is simply not good at retaining armies of facts as they march single-file through a lecture laden with information*' so much describes my peers and my approach. By trying to '*bring them into the circle of*

practice in the field, into its version of the community of truth' and that 'every discipline has a gestalt' - my eyes were bless to start to see a new light! The thought that I could take crusty electrical products and "present (the information) not in the form of isolated data bits but in patterns of meaningful connection, in a community of data, as it were" - was reminiscent of the 'Do you see the Light' scene in the Blues Brothers movie in which they find 'the inner logic so profound that every critical piece of it contains the information necessary to reconstruct the whole - if it is illuminated by a laser, a highly organized beam of light. That laser is the act of teaching.'

Yes, I see the light...but I need to find my specific path so that I can show the way to others.

4 NEXT STEPS

While Palmer ends his text with a 'mobilization of the army' to bring around educational revolt, I realize that, for me, I am a living example of the Pogo Principle: "We has met the enemy, and it is us."

I started this entire program (for good or bad) with the notion/searching that, "There has got to be a better, more-effective way to connect with adults through learning". Within my profession, I have peers that are managers with the skills of being great number-crunchers, understand the markets, and can budget/forecast within such a tight tolerance that you start to believe that they are the 'Amazing Kreskin' in disguise! But they are also required to talk about their individual products and when they finish their presentation – nobody is awake, nobody is excited, and nobody is going to purchase their products. So what is the 'value' of this education; in this case it takes on the sobering reality of the lost dollar & opportunity.

Toward the conclusion of this course (and your simple question of "what are the goals of AE?"), I've come to see/summarize that "**Education is Empowerment**". Empowerment that can come through social change, changed personal lives/actions, improved skillsets for employment/jobs, increased affluence & economic gain, and simply the increase of knowledge for knowledge's sake (presented as the 'ultimate cure' by Merlin in the quote used at the beginning of Chapter VI). While my initial wanting was for proven/tested techniques for interacting with the Adult Learner – the 'Courage to Teach' text has shown to me the futility of that thinking and that my wantings for 'refinement' have now turned to 'burn this mother down and start over'.

The vital steps in the 'reconstruction of the Rome of Me' will need to include:

- The preplanning of any time with students to include the convergence of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual in such a way that:
 - connections us
 - opens the space so that subject is at the center (creating the 'Community of Truth') in which we can all interact/grow/learn from it
 - creates the community necessary for optimal learning

- The killing of my loquacious nature and desire to 'fill the space' / 'cover the field' with continual lecture. To allow the students to 'find their way' and in doing so "learn to fish" rather than just being given a fish

- Reduce the 'either-or' thinking that has given us a fragmented sense of reality that destroys the wholeness and wonder of life by replacing it with the 'both-and' mindset
- Finding the gestalt of the topic such that I can be the laser that will illuminate the subject matter from all angles and allow the exploration of those angles by the students
- Reduce the debilitating nature of 'Fear' - both in myself and my students and find ways to 'put them behind the wheel' so that they can feel empowered and find their voices while at the same time look for ways to coax the '*wild animal of the human soul*' out of its tepid hiding place to experience the fullness of 'together'
- Find alternative ways to present facts/data (which currently '*engorges rather than engages*' students in my teaching opportunities) and learn to reframe/articulate what we (the student and I) have learned in a way that relates it to where we have been & where we are about to go – building a bridge to the next topic and fully employing the students to be full participants in this miniature version of the 'Community of Truth'
- Practice (with some close friends willing to experiment/grow with me) the mindset of a Quaker Clearness Committee

And in the end, have the '*ancient human dance, and one of teaching's great rewards (in that it) is the daily chance it gives us to get back on the dance floor. It is the dance of the spiraling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn.*'