

Transforming Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: An Interview with Parker J. Palmer

By Parker J. Palmer

As a respected educational writer, teacher and activist, Parker J. Palmer shares some powerful thoughts on the current landscape of higher education with regard to pedagogy and practice. Through his personal and professional experiences with teaching and learning, Palmer highlights the existing disconnect between objectivist thinking and subjective experience within our classrooms and campuses and how to address this in order to better navigate the connection between our external and internal worlds. Palmer argues that, at the present time, we no longer can ignore the “inner drivers” that connect to the very core of humanity and the central mission of higher education, and advocates for the intentional integration of meaning, purpose, and spirituality within our institutions.

Please share your background and experiences in education and the connection to issues of meaning, purpose, faith, and spirituality.

At age 70, having spent the past 40 years of my life intentionally and intensely devoted to this area, I am able to reflect back on my early experiences that shaped my life's work. I was raised in a very open and slightly left-of-center mainline Protestantism in the Chicago suburbs where faith and reason cohabited very nicely. Within this environment, I grew up feeling that there were different ways of looking at the world and that every way had some sort of enrichment or added dimension to it. For this reason, I have never engaged in the warfare of religion and science, and I have never quite understood it!

I had the good fortune of going to a very fine liberal arts institution – Carlton College – where I double-majored in Philosophy and Sociology. As an undergraduate student, I had many remarkable mentors who modeled the cohabitation of faith and reason in their own lives – not least in their intellectual lives. When I graduated from Carlton, I was selected as one of one hundred Danforth Graduate Fellows. This Fellowship program aimed at providing support to individuals who had made both intellectual and academic commitments along with faith and value commitments.

The Danforth Fellowship not only provided me with the funding to attend graduate school, but also gave me the much greater gift of an international community of young scholars and older mentors who met both regionally and nationally to deepen the dialogue about issues of value and faith within the scope of various fields. This opportunity exposed me to a lot of folks who were actively and seriously interested in religion – to those who saw the “shadow side” of religion as much as the side of illumination and possibility. While religion has had a very dark side historically in terms of suppressing free inquiry – as I like to say, “Remember Galileo! – I began to see how the tools of free inquiry should be turned upon religion to both illuminate the shadow as well as the positive contributions that it can make and has made to human history.

I spent a year at Union theological seminary in New York City between college and my doctoral program at UC Berkeley, where my view of religious phenomenon began to deepen even further. When I got to Berkeley, I had the good fortune of having Robert Bellah as my dissertation chair. My research in understanding the role of religious symbolism in political modernization helped me see how a scholarly lens can be thrown on religion and illuminate a lot of the rest of history and human dynamics in the process. Too often in higher education, scholars research religion as a “debunking exercise” instead of trying to understand it better; and when you begin your study with disrespect for the phenomenon itself, you are not going to come to a true understanding of it. That would be like a physicist studying subatomic particles in order to debunk them!

When I finished my doctorate, I moved back across the country and became a community organizer in the Tacoma Park/East Silver Spring area in Washington DC. This decision was largely influenced by feeling called to join the social change movement of the 1960's. A coalition of churches from many denominations helped to support making this community that was experiencing rapid demographic change a stable, integrated, diverse, and healthy place to live. During the five years I was engaged in this work, I learned more about the connection between religion, education, and society from working with people in their communities outside of the classroom.

I spent the next eleven years at Pendle Hill, a Quaker living-learning community near Philadelphia. I was drawn to Pendle Hill because the Quaker tradition has always embraced a form of religious understanding that is very respectful of the intellectual life, while, at the same time, bringing a contemplative dimension to their practice that deepens teaching and learning and intellectual inquiry itself, to say nothing of social action, in which the Quakers have majored historically. During my time at Pendle Hill, I had a chance to experiment with a completely different mode of teaching and learning than goes on in most colleges and universities, allowing me to weave together the threads of intellect, spirit, soul, heart, practical application in the world of social change. The Quaker form of worship is rooted in silence, which, rightly understood, is a mode of knowing. These eleven years really changed my life by immersing me in a comparatively radical form of communalism where I developed an alternative form of epistemological inquiry and pedagogy.

All of these experiences led me to start writing and then traveling, speaking, and doing workshops, which took me to a lot of college and university campuses – connecting my work back to higher education. Within colleges and universities, I focused my work on reclaiming a “depth-dimension” to higher education that, at the time, was disconnected from these deeper issues. Since this time, things have changed to some extent, as perhaps this factoid will indicate: When I started doing this work nearly forty years ago, my invitations came largely from campus ministers, and the audiences were small – my host, my host’s partner, a couple of faculty members who had been dragooned into coming, and a handful of people who came to hiss and boo! I exaggerate slightly, but you get the picture!

But as the years went by, the invitations started coming from department chairs, deans, and presidents, and the audiences grew sizeable, while the committed cultured skeptics were largely replaced by real seekers. When Wellesley College and a few other prestigious east coast institutions sponsored a conference on spirituality in higher education in 1998, and over 800 people came from institutions of every size and description, I knew we had achieved a breakthrough of some sort – not because any of us doing this work are so wise or powerful, but because the hunger and need was and is so deep. The hungers of modern life simply cannot be met by the thin soup of cognitive rationality in isolation – as if “isolated rationality” were even possible! What we need is to achieve a working partnership between the mind and all the other human faculties, between scientific objectivity and all the other ways of knowing, so we can pursue questions of meaning and purpose as well as questions of what the facts are and how they hang together.

I have been very lucky to find a way to integrate many of the experiences that shaped my thinking and my life’s work in an ongoing national project represented by the [Center for Courage & Renewal](#). This small non-profit organization has created a network of 180 well-prepared facilitators in 30 states and 50 cities who offer long-term retreat series to cohorts of people in the serving professions and other walks of life, helping them “rejoin soul and role.” It’s remarkable work – “legacy work” for me, really – that has served more than 25,000 people in the past decade, and continues to teach and train others interested in furthering this work.

Describe how spirituality is connected to undergraduate teaching and learning.

When people press me to define spirituality, the best operating definition I have ever been able to come up with is that “spirituality is the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos.” This definition carries experiential “water” because those of us who have tried to live only by our own egos realize that this is a very lonely and self-destructive kind of life. But the deeper reason I like this definition is because it is value-neutral as a good definition should be. So you can look through this lens and say that the great wisdom traditions are ways of responding to this yearning, and so are many forms of fanaticism and evil, such as the Nazi ideology and its contemporary clones, at home and abroad.

When I use the word “faith” or “religion” in a positive sense, there is always a risk of misunderstanding what I am talking about. I am not talking about a creedal commitment or fanatical devotion to irrational ideas. Instead, I am talking about a substrate of human life that has existed forever, where people are reaching for a deeper meaning, sense of purpose, and identity than can be found in the material, visible world. What troubles me about academic culture is that it has been so blind to the power and importance of religion and spirituality in human life on a descriptive level that has created a kind of cultivated ignorance or studied blindness. The fact that we had very few academics seriously studying how religion was at work in politics and economics prior to September 11, 2001 is rather appalling. It is kind of like tripping over Mt. Everest. It has been there all along, and if you did not see it, it is not the mountain’s fault!

A fundamental part of undergraduate education is to help create “free” people teaching critical thinking and explorative inquiry – that is what “liberal” means in this context. As Socrates said when he was on trial for heresy, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” In higher education, we are obligated to help students examine their “inner drivers,” commitments, and devotions, many of which are inherited, received, and unconscious. They receive messages their entire lives that say, “you were born into this family, this community, this religion,” and these messages shape their identity. Many students do not even know they have different philosophies and ideas from others because these ideas have always been part of the air they breathe and they have not been exposed to “the other” until entering college. Helping students become aware of these identities and appreciatively examine them with an unbiased commitment to trying to understand and make good choices about these received beliefs and values is a fundamental task of a liberal education.

Our colleges and universities help students examine many dimensions of the external world – history, politics, economics, physical reality; yet we rarely turn the lens inward to help students examine their own lives. This lack of critical inquiry into these personal dimensions of students’ lives reflects a multi-leveled fear on the part of academics – the fear of venturing into “subjective territory,” saying, “I don’t want to go there because I’m not a psychotherapist.” But faculty and staff need to find ways of inviting students to examine these inner drivers and dynamics within the classroom and co-curricular activities that lead to greater self-understanding, without which one cannot be said to be well-educated.

Research over the past 50 years has shown that the most effective forms of teaching and learning integrate the subjective and the objective. In my speaking and teaching, I like to say that a good teacher must learn how to connect the “big story” of the discipline being taught with the “little story” of students’ lives, because if you don’t make this personal connection, students’ learning will not go very deep or very far. Any educational experience that lacks an experiential component – simply presenting content or research – is far less effective in helping students learn the subject matter than those that provide opportunities for engagement. By adding the “juice” of an experiential component, students are actually able to grasp the cognitive factors better as well. Common sense, as well as science, tells us that this is the way people learn best.

Here's a personal example of this phenomenon. When I learned about the Holocaust at school, it was taught at such an arm's length and objective distance that I held that knowledge as if all of these horrific experiences had happened "on another planet, to a different species" – because I was not educated in a way that connected me with the inhumanity of it all. I should have been helped to see this connection in college by professors who were willing to go deeper into the subjective dimension. I should have had to wrestle with the fact that the community in which I grew up on Chicago's North Shore was driven by the same kind of anti-Semitism that in larger, amplified forms fueled the Holocaust. Had I understood that something similar had happened right in my own backyard would have made this knowledge more personal and more powerful.

Until I understood the "big story" of the holocaust as it connects to the "little story" of my life, I was not truly educated because arm's length knowledge does not reach deep enough or become true enough in any meaningful, operational way. I should also have learned that I contain within myself, as we all do, a kind of "fascism of the heart," meaning that when the difference between your beliefs and my own is so great that they become threatening to me, I will find a way to "kill you off" – not with weapons or physical force, but with labels and phrases of dismissal that render you irrelevant to my life.

We see this happening all the time in academic life when people justify their disengagement from or disdain for "the other" by saying, in effect, "I don't have to listen to you because you're just a young person, humanist, scientist, religious nut, administrator, or whatever." We have places within ourselves where fascism lives, as it did in the Third Reich, at it is critical that we be aware of that if we want to claim to be educated or civilized. Reflect for a moment on the fact that a very high percentage of the people who administered and guided the horrors of the Nazi death camps had Ph.D.s.

When I started speaking on college campuses 40 years ago, I realized that I could not use the word "spirituality" without getting ridden out of town on a rail, so I started to talk about epistemology and ways of knowing. The epistemological path to spirituality is to do a critique of disconnected objectivist knowing that sets the knower apart from the known, which then points you toward a more integrated view of what knowing itself is all about since it is really not possible to disconnect human experience and subjectivity from knowledge. And once you get to a more integrated mode of knowing, you also get to a more integrated mode of teaching and learning. So service learning, for example, turns out to be more acceptable in academe once we understand that real knowing does not happen at an arm's length, but results from a fully human engagement with the phenomena.

How can educators infuse elements of spirituality into their pedagogical practices to create transformative educational experiences for their students?

In our society, the “inner drivers” of our lives do not get taken seriously; they are marginalized and relegated to the private realm. From a very young age, young people hear the message “If you have a spiritual concern, a value concern, or a personal concern, take it somewhere else; we don’t want to hear about it at school. Take it to your priest, your rabbi, your pastor, your parents, your therapist, but don’t bring it to school.” One sad result that this message creates is the surface appearance that students are not interested in questions of meaning and purpose; yet this is merely because they have learned that these are dangerous subjects to raise in the educational arena, and have been given very little, if any, open and caring listening around these topics from their teachers and professors.

That is why we sometimes hear innovative teachers say, “I tried to get students to talk about these topics, but they wouldn’t open up.” Well, if you want to fold these inner life questions into your teaching, you have to do some hard work to get students to trust that this is not a trap because this is a contrary message to what they have heard their whole lives. You have to show them that you mean what you say, which means being patient and proving your good will. If students are asked to talk about their inner lives and then get put down in a class, they will never want to go there again.

There are all kinds of reasons why we need to be interweaving spiritual connections with academic learning, to reach to deeper dynamics of our lives and consider questions of meaning and purpose in connection with the subjects we teach and the work we are preparing students for upon graduation. I have no specific program or agenda to prescribe as a solution. Rather, the essence of this issue lies within the larger mission of the academy to foster free inquiry into anything and everything human, which goes beyond the objective world into the subjective heart.

It would help move us in this direction if we could find more ways to integrate the academic side of campus with the student life side of campus. The gulf that exists between academic faculty and student life staff represents a deeply flawed compartmentalized image of what human beings are. We treat students as if they have two lives – one as learners in a classroom and the other as denizens of a dormitory – and this leads to a weakness in both learning and living.

We need to create more traffic between the classroom and the dormitory, bringing faculty more deeply into students’ larger lives outside the classroom. Some universities have created living-learning communities to bring classroom space into residential setting to create more connective environments where students can do their learning. Some have simply created opportunities for faculty to have pizza with students and share their personal stories in the spirit of mentoring, which can greatly enrich student learning by helping them see the humanity of their teachers more clearly, creating a deeper, more personal connection between teachers and learners. My overall point is that we need to integrate Academic and Student Affairs because we all have a piece of the pedagogy that students need to become whole-self learners.

One of the innovations that has been emerging on some campuses to foster this cross-fertilization of student and academic affairs is the creation of “teaching and learning centers.” I have found that such centers offer some of the most promising opportunities for academic life because they have the potential to host rich conversations about pedagogy that bring many stakeholders in higher education together to explore common concerns and engage in mutual inventiveness.

Additionally, within the sciences and social sciences, we have the opportunity to connect the “big story” of the discipline with the “little story” of both scholars’ and students’ lives, including their inner lives, while examining these subjective dimensions. As you look at the biographies and autobiographies of great scientists, they talk about the role of intuition, instinct, dreams, and aesthetics in coming to the scientific insights that are then tested against data and reason. All of these components take us into a realm that is beyond what we conventionally think of as “fact” and “theory,” some of which can be called “spiritual.” Likewise, in the social sciences, many windows can be opened into the “inner drivers” of our lives. The very word psychology means “the science of spirit,” a meaning we have lost in positivist psychology.

Likewise, there are many entry points in the humanities to connect with these deeper questions of meaning, purpose, and faith. We need to reclaim the core teachings of philosophy, literature, even of the psychological and social sciences to reveal what they really are – inquiries into the human condition. When we fail to connect these great “inner life themes” to personal experiences, we are missing valuable opportunities for students to reflect on these deeper issues, some of which can be called spiritual.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of faculty in the humanities who are afraid of “going there” with students, for a variety of reasons, ranging from the fact that they’ve never gone there in their own lives to their fear that teaching this way will require that they become therapists. While all of this needs to be talked about and dealt with responsibly, I have often found these arguments to be elaborate rationalizations for not wanting to turn the lenses of the humanities on our own human condition. It takes a certain vulnerability to the messiness of your own condition to be willing to deal with the messiness of the student condition. But if faculty do not engage students at these deeper levels in our classrooms and wade into the messiness, we are failing to live up to the greater purpose of higher education, which is to throw the light of reason, data, and inquiry on messy, complex situations. A person who claims to understand the world but fails, or refuses, to try to understand the inner workings of the human spirit simply cannot claim to be fully educated.

What current opportunities and challenges exist within the landscape of higher education that impacts this work?

Let me begin by sharing my definition of truth: “Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter conducted with passion and discipline.” We need to be doing this sort of “truthing” (which is very different from Stephen Colbert’s “truthiness!”) around the relationship between the subjective and objective elements of life and thought. Based on this idea, a major challenge is to create the kind of conversation between the intellectual and spiritual that is respectful of both sides and, therefore, inviting of real dialogue.

The religious voices that want to join in this conversation must speak in a way that respects the legitimate concerns of academic and intellectuals when it comes to religion and spirituality. Too often, the public voices that represent religion in our society have been irresponsible. Religious voices that want to join in the academic conversation must not only renounce the fanatical views that distort every major faith perspective, but must also must find a way of speaking that builds bridges rather than walls without losing their integrity.

Creating this conversation is a very big job because both religion and the academy are wedded to non-negotiable orthodoxies. Higher education holds to a narrow objectivist model of knowing that has as much rigidity as most religious fundamentalisms. So on both sides of the fence, the challenge is to create a discourse that doesn’t turn people away from the conversation before it even has a chance to begin.

This means that we need people in places within academic life who can encourage and cultivate these conversations. All of the entry points I discussed lead to places where questions of meaning that require both faith and reason can be framed and pursued in a life-giving way to benefit students and make their lives, as well as the lives of faculty and staff, more dynamic and vibrant. In the classroom, faculty often get stuck in the rut of teaching the same material in a very structured manner instead of probing into deeper dimensions of life. Think of how refreshing it would be for teachers and well as students to open up issues of the heart that really matter and are significant for everyone’s development!

I think we are in a moment of huge historical opportunity, because I do not see how any reasonable person can continue to deny that spiritual and religious elements play a very powerful role in the human past as well as our present. For this reason, these issues can no longer be so easily dismissed by academics; we have a moral and educational obligation to explore them in our classrooms and elsewhere on campus. We are at a moment now where a lot of things we resisted in the past as “cultured despisers” or religion are now academic “no brainers” – they have to be addressed for the sake of the common good.

Our colleges and universities must develop a capacity for doing this kind of work with faculty and staff. We need to find people who are called to this kind of work. We need leadership that can foster this work within our institutions. We are in a time of a huge opportunity to reconfigure the way we understand teaching and learning and the way we bring together the skill and knowledge necessary to navigate both our external and internal worlds.

The time is now. We just have to claim it.

Parker J. Palmer is founder and senior partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal. A writer, speaker and activist, he serves as senior advisor to the Fetzer Institute and previously served as senior associate of the American Association of Higher Education. His seven books include *A Hidden Wholeness, Let Your Life Speak, The Courage to Teach, The Active Life, To Know as We Are Known, and The Company of Strangers and The Promise of Paradox.* He holds the Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, as well as ten honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press, and major grants from the Danforth, Lilly, and Fetzer foundations. In 1998, the Leadership Project, a national survey of 10,000 educators, named him one of the thirty “most influential senior leaders” in higher education and one of the ten key “agenda-setters” of the past decade. *Living the Questions: Essays Inspired by the Work and Life of Parker J. Palmer*, was published in 2005.