

## Introduction: Teaching from Within

Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

Ah, not to be cut off,  
not through the slightest partition  
shut out from the law of the stars.  
The inner—what is it?  
if not intensified sky,  
hurled through with birds and deep  
with the winds of homecoming.

Rainer Maria Rilke, "Ah, Not to be Cut Off"

### WE TEACH WHO WE ARE

I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illuminated by the lightning-life of the mind—then teaching is the finest work I know.

But at other moments, the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused—and I am so powerless to do anything about it—that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent sham. Then the enemy is everywhere: in those students from some alien planet, in that subject I thought I knew, and in the personal pathology that keeps me earning my living this way. What a fool I was to imagine that I had mastered this occult art—harder to divine than tea leaves and impossible for mortals to do even passably well!

If you are a teacher who never has bad days, or who has them but does not care, this book is not for you. This book is for teachers who have good days and bad, and whose bad days bring the suffering that comes only from something one loves. It is for teachers who refuse to harden their hearts because they love learners, learning, and the teaching life.

When you love your work that much—and many teachers do—the only way to get out of trouble is to go deeper in. We must enter, not evade, the tangles of teaching so we can understand them better and negotiate them with more grace, not only to guard our own spirits but also to serve our students well.

Those tangles have three important sources. The first two are commonplace, but the third, and most fundamental, is rarely given its due. First, the subjects we teach are as large and complex as life, so our knowledge of them is always flawed and partial. No matter how we devote ourselves to reading and research, teaching requires a command of content that always eludes our grasp. Second, the students we teach are larger than life and even more complex. To see them clearly and see them whole, and respond to them wisely in the moment, requires a fusion of Freud and Solomon that few of us achieve.

If students and subjects accounted for all the complexities of teaching, our standard ways of coping would do—keep up with our fields as best we can and learn enough techniques to stay ahead of the student psyche. But there is another reason for these complexities: we teach who we are.

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.

In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well.

When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject—not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth. The work required to "know thyself" is neither selfish nor narcissistic. Whatever self-

knowledge we attain as teachers will serve our students and our scholarship well. Good teaching requires self-knowledge: it is a secret hidden in plain sight.

### LANDSCAPES INNER AND OUTER



This work explores the teacher's inner life, but it also raises a question that goes beyond the solitude of the teacher's soul. That question about teaching often goes unasked. But it should be asked wherever good teaching is at stake, for it honors and challenges the teacher's heart, and it invites a deeper inquiry than our traditional questions do:

- The question we most commonly ask is the "what" question—what subjects shall we teach?
- When the conversation goes a bit deeper, we ask the "how" question—what methods and techniques are required to teach well?
- Occasionally, when it goes deeper still, we ask the "why" question—for what purpose and to what ends do we teach?
- But seldom, if ever, do we ask the "who" question—who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can educational institutions sustain and

deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes?

I have no quarrel with the what or how or why questions—except when they are posed as the only questions worth asking. All of them can yield important insights into teaching and learning. But none of them opens up the inner landscape of the teaching self.

To chart that landscape fully, three important paths must be taken - intellectual, emotional, and spiritual - and none can be ignored. Reduce teaching to intellect, and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual, and it loses its anchor to the world. Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on one another for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best.

By *intellectual* I mean the way we think about teaching and learning—the form and content of our concepts of how people know and learn, of the nature of our students and our subjects.

By *emotional* I mean the way we and our students feel as we teach and learn—feelings that can either enlarge or diminish the exchange between us.

By *spiritual* I mean the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching.

Rainer Maria Rilke gives voice to that longing in the poem at the head of this introduction: "Ah, not to be cut off. . ." He suggests that the spiritual quest for connectedness, rightly understood, will lead us out from the hidden heart into the vast and visible world: "The inner—what is it? if not intensified sky, hurled through with birds and deep with the winds of homecoming."

With striking imagery, Rilke offers us a mystic's map of wholeness, where inner and outer reality flow seamlessly into each other, like the ever-merging surfaces of a Möbius strip, endlessly co-creating us and the world we inhabit. The inward quest for communion becomes a quest for outward relationship: at home in our own souls, we become more at home with each other.

My concern for the inner landscape of teaching may seem indulgent, even irrelevant. As important as methods may be, the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching—and living—becomes.

#### A SELDOM-TAKEN TRAIL



My focus on the teacher may seem passé to people who believe that education will never be reformed until we stop worrying about teaching and focus on learning instead. I have no question that students who learn, not professors who perform, is what teaching is all about: students who learn are the finest fruit of teachers who teach. Nor do I doubt that students learn in diverse and wondrous ways, including ways that bypass the teacher in the classroom and ways that require neither a classroom nor a teacher!

But I am also clear that in lecture halls, seminar rooms, field settings, labs, and even electronic classrooms—the places where most people receive most of their formal education—teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal— or keep them from learning much at all. Teaching is the intentional act of creating those conditions, and good teaching requires that we understand the inner sources of both the

intent and the act.

“Who is the self that teaches?” is the question at the heart of this issue —though answering that question in print has been more challenging than I imagined. I have learned how tempting it is to stay with the “whats” and “hows” and “whys”: those questions are more easily answered.

But I have persisted with the “who” question because it marks a seldom-taken trail in the quest for educational reform, a trail toward the recovery of the inner resources that good teaching always requires. I have persisted for another reason closer to the bone: “Who is the self that teaches?” is the question at the heart of my own vocation. I believe it is the most fundamental question we can ask about teaching and those who teach - for the sake of learning and those who learn. By addressing it openly and honestly, alone and together, we can serve our students more faithfully, enhance our own wellbeing, make common cause with colleagues, and help education bring more light and life to the world.

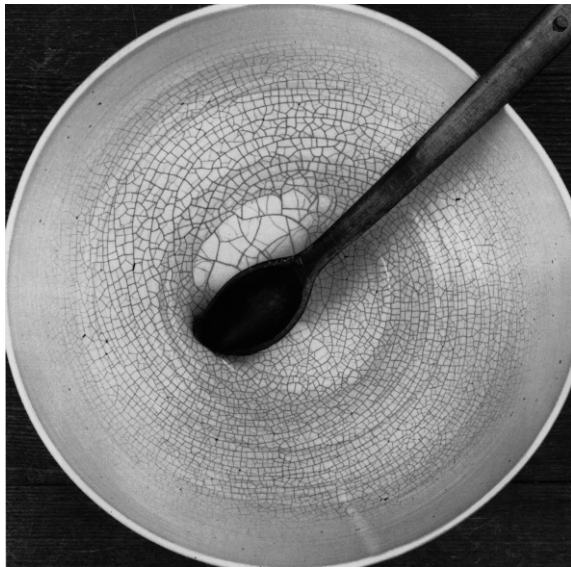
Excerpted from the Introduction to *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer, 1998; pp 1-7.

#### Karen Armstrong, *To Turn Again*

##### Learning:

Most of my days were spent in a silence that also had a transforming effect. I found that would sometimes go for two or three days without speaking to anybody. I was alone with my books. At first this silence had seemed a deprivation, a symbol of an unwanted isolation. But gradually the enveloping quiet became a positive element, almost a presence, which settled comfortably and caressingly around me like a soft shawl. It seemed to hum, gently but melodiously, and to orchestrate the ideas that I was contending with, until they started to sing too, to vibrate and to reveal an unexpected resonance. After a time I found that I could almost listen to the silence, which had a dimension all of its own. I started to attend to its strange and beautiful texture which, of course, it was

impossible to express in words. I discovered that I felt at home and alive in the silence, which compelled me to enter my interior world and walk around there. The words on the page began to speak directly to my inner self. They were no longer expressing ideas but talking directly to my own yearning and perplexity. I was no longer just grabbing concepts and facts from my books, but learning to listen to the deeper meaning that lay quietly and ineffably beyond them. Silence itself had become my teacher. I could immerse myself in the silence, allow it to open up wide spaces in my head, and listen to the undercurrents of these new ideas.



### **The Subject:**

If you bring your own personal agenda to bear upon it, a subject will close up on itself like a clam, because you have denied its unique and separate identity, its own inviolable holiness. You have to open yourself to a subject with a quiet, receptive mind, in the same way you might approach a difficult piece of music or poetry. You have to give it your full attention, wait patiently upon it, and make a space for it in your mind. And then the subject declares itself to you, steals deeply into the interstices of your being, line by line, note by note, phrase by phrase, until it becomes a part of

you forever.

I am entirely self taught in this subject, and if this makes me an amateur, that need not necessarily be all bad. After all an amateur is, literally, "one who loves," and I was day by solitary day, hour by silent hour, falling in love with my subject. I discovered I could scarcely wait to get to my desk each morning, open my books, and pick up my pen. I anticipated this moment as eagerly as a tryst with a lover. I would lie in bed at night waiting for sleep, delightedly reviewing what I had learned that day. Occasionally, while sitting at my desk, I would experience mini-seconds of transcendence, awe and wonder that gave me a sense of what had been going on in the particular nuance of the subject I was studying. At such a time I would feel stirred deeply within, and taken beyond myself. I was finding in study the ecstasy I had hoped to find in those long hours of prayer as a young nun.



Excerpted from *To Turn Again in The Spiral Staircase*, Karen Armstrong, 2004; pp 283-287.