

A calling to teach:  
Faith and the spiritual dimensions of teaching

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## A calling to teach: Faith and the spiritual dimensions of teaching

I am an educator. Teaching is my calling. I believe that teaching is inherently a spiritual endeavor characterized by the search for meaning. Given these assertions it is surprising to me that as a child I never assembled imaginary classrooms of stuffed animals, dolls or siblings. I have few memories of my schooling experience. I was a willing student and respected my teachers but I never aspired to be a professional educator. I do, however, have vivid memories of learning to teach. I remember the passionate discussions with fellow novice teachers about philosophy, pedagogy and curriculum. I remember with delight when my teaching kindled a bright gleam of understanding in the eye of a student. I remember with fright the perception of power I experienced when all eyes in the classroom turned to me for guidance. I remember with embarrassment the day I led my students into a thicket of conceptual confusion and emotional turmoil out of which no one escaped unscratched.

My teaching memories are so enduring, so revealing of my inner self and so personally transforming that I can argue with complete certainty that I am a teacher. Teaching is and always was at the core of my soul. It is a gift that in my youth I lacked sufficient experience and wisdom to see and cultivate. Only now, after understanding teaching as the spiritual process of uncovering truth, am I able to more fully enact my calling. Truth in a pedagogical sense is the core set of beliefs or understandings I hold about teaching revealed through thoughtful reflection, life experiences and the wisdom of academic texts.

After twenty years of teaching and reflecting on learning in colleges, public schools, nature centers, churches and wilderness settings it is clear to me that I am philosophically and pedagogically drawn to student-centered forms of teaching. I rely heavily on the power of faith to guide me in the task of knowing each student as a unique learner and as a collaborator in designing classroom experiences to benefit all students. The more attentive I am as a teacher to each student as a learner, and as a person, the more effective I am at providing educational experiences that lead each student to deeper understandings of subject matter, knowledge of self and development of self in relationship with others.

In the remainder of this essay I hope to bring additional insights to these claims about the linkage between spirituality, faith and teaching by first describing the role of spirituality in my classroom. Then I will describe the role of faith in my classroom by viewing my teaching as a series of paradoxes held in creative tension by faith. Throughout this description I will offer pedagogical vignettes into my teaching to illustrate the ways faith is evident in my classroom. The first paradox I will examine is the tension between individual and communal views of truth. The second is the struggle between humble and authoritative speech about the nature of truth embedded in educational texts. Finally I will examine the paradox of suffering and wonder in my teaching.

### **The role of spirituality in the classroom**

One characteristic of teaching is the need to make meaning out of the lived experience of the classroom by developing a set of beliefs or concepts that organize and

order the daily interactions with students. It is this system of meaning making and its corresponding set of pedagogical beliefs that allow educators to make judgments about which classroom actions are justifiable and which are arbitrary. When I ask myself why I hold the beliefs I do about teaching, why I order my classroom interactions the way I do, I often turn inward for answers. Do the pedagogical choices I'm making feel right for me? I also seek guidance from the more objective insights of students, colleagues and the texts of educational sages. But ultimately it is me, not these external voices, who is faced with the real task of resolving the uncertainties of the classroom. I can more easily live with the consequences of my pedagogical choices when I am sure my actions arise from the core of being instead of my ego.

I agree with scholars (e.g., Palmer 1998; Astin and Astin 1999; Laurence 1999) who argue that the journey inward toward our inner teacher, toward greater pedagogical certainty, is inherently spiritual. My efforts at ordering my classroom interactions with students in increasingly meaningful ways reveals much about my core being and my gifts as an educator. These are gifts to be uncovered and cherished, not techniques to be mastered and catalogued away for future reference. Teaching is the act of clarifying old, often unconscious frameworks of meaning and establishing new more-fully conscious patterns of meaning. In essence what I can claim as pedagogical certainty, the truths I hold most dearly about teaching, are anchored on the bedrock of my soul.

The metaphor of ground both enables and constrains my teaching. The "ground of our being" as described by Paul Tillich (1948) sets the parameters for our external self. For Tillich, one goal in life is to seek a better match between our internal calling and ordering of truth, and our external actions. Analogously, the ground of my internal

teacher sets the ideal parameters for my external pedagogy. My responsibility as an educator is to teach what I have learned to be true, which means identifying my inner gifts, clarifying my inner sense of meaning-making, professing my knowledge of subject matter and making what is internal external and open to investigation.

The ground of being for teachers can be lightly bonded and shifting or as tightly structured and certain as bedrock. The spiritual journey of the teacher is the peeling away of loose outer layers of teaching beliefs and diving deeper into the center of what calls us into the classroom. My personal journey from unconscious recognition of my calling to teach to conscious examination of my inner teacher has lead me to believe that the insights, gifts and grace of the spirit are essential tools in this transformation. I try to consciously respond to the “voice from the burning blackboard telling me to take off my shoes,” and treat the classroom and learning as sacred space (Carson 1996, 17).

Classrooms can also be spiritually rich for students. One characteristic of learning is the formation of new perceptions of self and systems of meaning following encounters with new forms of knowledge, new visions of the world, and differing perceptions of truth (Parks, 2000). Learning is in part the process of becoming increasingly grounded in the matrix of internal and external truth. As with teaching, ground is an important metaphor when describing learning in the classroom. In the natural world, ground has a strong influence of the physical shape of landscape, the presence or absence of plant species and human patterns of land use. As the quality of ground varies foot by foot across a landscape so too does the ground of meaning vary according to the learning trajectory of each student in my classroom. My classroom is a landscape of student identities waiting to be discovered rather than an ideological

monoculture to be harvested and processed en masse. My students and I share the common ground of learning as the process toward clearer visions of self, grounded in meaning making.

The spiritual journey in the college classroom is a personal and communal search for truth in the form of deeper and stronger layers upon which to justify our actions in the world. For teachers the task is identifying core values and beliefs that support pedagogical choices. For students the challenge is reorganizing lived experiences into coherent and cohesive patterns that act as guides for right and defensible action in the world. As a check against over self-justification, meaning making is also a communal endeavor. Viewed through the lens of spirituality, the classroom becomes a sacred space from which teacher and students make the pilgrim's journey toward greater understanding of subject matter, understanding of self and understanding of truth.

### **The role of faith in the classroom**

By faith I mean listening to and following my inner teacher, often over the external protests of my ego, my rational mind and the normative confines of academia (Miller 2000). The more I act from internal faith, rather than external ego, the more I am convinced that my teaching actions are likely to be meaningful to my students. My students see the real me rather than a shadow figure of who I think I am, who my students think I should be or whom my colleagues believe is an appropriate professional image. As Parker Palmer (1998) argues, I display a greater sense of "integrity" to my students. Faith provides the courage to be real and it is the solid ground upon which I can design experiences that reveal some notion of truth for my students. I never assume my students

will fully accept my vision of truth, but at least they will recognize it as an honest expression of who I am and what I know.

Faith is an essential component of my teaching because it encourages me to more fully express the truth within my soul, allows for the truth of texts to emerge and it calls forth the truth that my students bring into the classroom. Faith is also a source of the authority that compels me to voice my opinions in class and to act with purpose and meaning. Faith also generates moments of peace and solitude within which I can reflect on my teaching practices and measure their value in accordance with the degree to which my actions resonate with my inner sense of truth. Faith encourages me to take pedagogical risks that my ego and rational mind view with suspicion because of the unknowable quality of their outcome. Finally, faith facilitates the formation of community in the classroom.

To illustrate the role of faith in my teaching I offer the following vignette describing a pedagogical puzzle my students challenged me to solve:

Five minutes into the third class meeting of the semester it is painfully obvious to me that most of my students are unprepared for the day's class. I sense, judging by down cast eyes, withdrawn body language, and the shuffling of pages in response to my questions that no one did the assigned reading. I am surprised, angry and faced with a pedagogical conundrum. My core teaching values are being challenged. Do I allow my students the power to force me to abandon my student-centered principles and to treat them as objects to be filled solely with my interpretation of the author's words? Do I address this issue or cover for my students and go on as if being prepared is an optional activity?

To buy some time to process my response and to forestall my impending sense of doom I try a few techniques to stimulate conversation and interaction. During this pedagogical timeout I begin the process of looking inward for answers. My external self registers the persistent sense that my students are unprepared and faltering intellectually. My mind begins to reel and I feel my body sagging under the weight of uncertainty as to how to truthfully address the puzzle my students are offering me.

As a check against my ego and my rising sense of anger I give my students the benefit of the doubt. Maybe my perceptions are wrong and it only looks like no one did the readings. I ask for a show of hands indicating who did the day's reading. Even as I ask the question my external self dreads the answer and my internal self begins sorting through my repertoire of past experiences to plan my next pedagogical move. Only two hands rise into the air.

The cat is now out of the bag and everyone, including myself, waits for the next move. I calm myself and focus on the advice of my inner teacher, which in this moment of pedagogical doubt is the only solid piece of ground I can find. The response from deep inside is soft yet unmistakable; dismiss the class. My rational mind balks at the suggestion; you have never done this before and have no idea what the consequences will be. I find the possible scenarios terrifying. How will my students interpret this show of power? What effect will my actions have on our ability to intellectually and emotionally trust each other throughout the semester? What assurance do I have that my actions will lead to enhanced



learning? As fast as I process each question it is replaced by a new concern. There seems to be no end to the potential pitfalls.

Yet I have to act on the pedagogical conundrum dominating the classroom space and in order to be truthful to my principles of teaching I have to honor the wisdom of my inner teacher. The bridge to action is faith. I trust the still small voice of my soul urging me to respond to my students with a firm yet caring refusal to let them enter our classroom unprepared. I take hold of my fears and plunge into the unknown, down into the heart of teaching. I take a pedagogical risk and will my external self to close my book. With an angry tone of disappointment I tell my students that their choice to not do the reading is unacceptable, class is dismissed, and they should go home and do their readings. I invite the two students who did the readings to stay and join me in conversation.

The truthfulness of my actions are affirmed later in the semester by the ways my students engage the course material, the sense of trust and respect that develops between us, and the high marks students give the course for its rigor, its content, and its ability to facilitate learning. They learned about the power they have to structure and take ownership for their own learning. They learned to honor their responsibilities to themselves, to their classmates, the text, and to me as their professor. I learned experientially the importance of trusting my inner teacher and having faith in the pedagogical advice it offers. If faced again with this same story I am not all certain how I will act. My pedagogical response will depend on the circumstances surrounding the

conundrum and my ability to faithfully listen to and act on the advice of my inner teacher.

### **Paradoxes as a form of faithful teaching**

The vignette speaks to the role of faith in my teaching, but it also suggests the presence of several paradoxical elements of my teaching that on the surface appear contradictory. For instance, how do I weigh the needs of the individual against those of the community? How do I create a classroom space that encourages both vigorous expressions of truth and humble contemplation? How do I maintain a classroom space that welcomes suffering and wonder? Faith allows me to teach in a way that holds these paradoxes in tension without attempting to collapse either into the other. Faith provides the rationale for believing that the strength of paradoxes as a tool for enhancing teaching is centered on their unity not their disunity.

### **The paradox of individual and community**

Faith holds in dynamic tension the forces of individual and community interests in my teaching (For the purpose of this paper, by individual I mean my self-reflection on teaching and by community I mean the learning interest of students). Faith driven pedagogy is a journey of discovery into the soul of my teaching; it is often uncertain, problematic and highly dynamic. Despite hours of reading, planning and reflection I never fully know what will transpire between the text, the students and the professor. I crave this mysterious nature of teaching even though it sometimes stimulates my ego into action to hide the fear; if I look busy I can't really be afraid. I believe that effective

teaching is faith driven and never regularized, processed and prepackaged for easy digestion. It contains patterns, rhythms and principles but it should never be completely managed. A static pedagogy is a spiritually dead pedagogy.

In the vignette, the unexpected nature of the limited preparation of my students and my response taught me much about myself as a teacher. I learned that a teacher's soul is more like a wild animal than a domestic pet. It is elusive, insightful and easily scared into hiding by noise and confusion. It is more at home in the solitude of wilderness than the lights and clamor of civilization (Palmer 1998). My teaching soul is more likely to offer assistance in the form of pedagogical advice when I create a calm inner space than when I create a noisy environment full of the external chatter of a teacher trying to maintain the perception of control. Faith reassures me that if I listen to the small voice of my soul the answers to pedagogical questions will be forthcoming. In the vignette it was only after calming my external ego was I able to attentively listen to the call to action; to dismiss my students. I do need to structure learning in accordance with my professional and disciplinary responsibilities but never to the point where external structure impedes the ability of faith to assist in the formation of meaningful learning experiences for my students.

Frustration, disappointment and fear mark my journey into the soul of my teaching. I have learned to use the weight of my fears to plunge through the deep unknowable darkness of teaching. Faith transforms my fears and uncertainties from tormentors into advisors to facilitate spiritual growth and more effective teaching. When I go deep into my ground of being, I am more likely to catch a glimpse of my inner teacher peering out from behind a pedagogical boulder. Thomas Merton (1958) argues

that: “The solution of the problem of life is life itself. Life is not attained by reasoning and analysis, but first of all by living.” For Merton, one route to greater spirituality, or deeper levels of self-discovery is to live life. In the crucible of pain, joy and decision-making that constitute life, we begin to know our inner self and the spirit that makes us unique. Instead of running away from the uncertainties of life, Merton suggests plunging in and living soulfully.

The same advice can be applied to teaching. The solution to the problems of teaching is teaching itself. By plunging into the fears, uncertainties and joys of teaching, educators are more likely to uncover the soul of their teaching. By being mindful of those teaching actions that lift my spirit and those that darken it I gain insights into the character of my inner truth, my inner teacher. The closer I am to my ground of being as a teacher the more certain I am that my pedagogical choices will nourish my students emotionally, spiritually and intellectually. In the vignette, instead of walling off the pedagogical puzzle offered by my students I embraced it and moved as a teacher from surprise, to anger, to action that respected my students as learners and challenged them to be more fully present in our classroom space.

My process of knowing self as teacher begins in the quiet moments before class when my dragons of intellectual and personal inadequacy are most active. My body is keyed up and nervous. I pace around feeling unsure of myself. My mind is cluttered with pedagogical uncertainty. Do I have all the supplies I need? Will I remember to make the intellectual points I have so carefully planned for? Will my students follow my intellectual lead? This internal sense of chaos marks the transition from the life of my office to the life of my classroom. It is a preparatory phase before entering into

relationship with my students. A deep breath, a calming meditation and I walk to class with the flames of ego licking dangerously close behind. I try to enter the classroom with a sense of being fully present, a sense of being fully open to my students and the day's reading. I strive for a milieu within which there is little difference between the teacher my students see as I walk through the door and what I hold internally as truth.

Sometimes being fully present means revealing aspects of my pedagogical or intellectual uncertainty, unmasking the dragons I have invited into the sacred space of the classroom. My demonstration of inner rawness can leave me vulnerable. Elements of my core being are publicly exposed for students to accept or deny. This is risky business and my ego is straining to be released and to take control. Faith is a steadying hand when I make the trusting leap past my external sense of self as expert into my internal sense of self as questioner. What if my students reject the image of self I present to them? What if the activity I have planned for the class period flops? Or in the context of the vignette, what if an unintended consequence of dismissing my students is the perception that I am needlessly cruel and hateful? It is my faith that sustains me through these moments of interpersonal doubt and pedagogical uncertainty. Faith also assures me that the more I divulge my inner sense of truth the more my students see me as a genuine person. And the more they see the virtue of being true to self, the more willing my students are to divulge their view of truth.

While my faith journey into teaching is highly personal its paradoxical other is community. Belief untested by the experiences and wisdom of others is doomed, at best it stagnates and at worst it festers into blind dogmatism. Faith as a spiritual dimension of teaching fosters community in the classroom. In cooperation, each member calls forth

new and fuller meanings of self, others, world and community. By viewing my classroom as a community of faith, a sacred space where teacher and students are open to learning from each other and from the text, my teaching responsibilities become clearer.

If I truly value the sense of integrity and vision of truth held by each of my students then I must acknowledge that each student embodies a unique vision of truth. Just as our knowledge of a mountain is enhanced by the descriptions of multiple observers from differing locations so to is our personal sense of truth enhanced by listening clearly to the views of others reporting from unique vantage points. The making of meaning becomes communal rather than insular.

My challenge within the classroom community is to listen for and call out this inner understanding, to educate each of my students. And it is my charge to call out their sense of truth, which sometimes languishes behind an artificial wall of complacency. I have come to understand that the souls of my students are as timid and elusive as the soul of their teacher. Several class periods after dismissing my students in the vignette, they confided that no professor had ever publicly challenged them to take full responsibility for their learning, to honor their intellectual abilities.

My best teaching occurs in relationship with, not in isolation from, the real needs of the students in my class. When I am true to the spiritual dimensions of teaching I grow interpersonally by responding honestly, from my soul, to the ethical and pedagogical dilemmas my students present. For instance, how do I assess the learning of a student who has demonstrated exceptional ability and understanding but has missed numerous classes due to challenging life circumstances? How do I respond to a student who dominates the conversation and silences classmates? Or in the case of the vignette,

how do I remain true to my calling to teach when my students fail to read the assigned text?

I am pedagogically and spiritually challenged by the myriad ways students ask me to suspend my initial judgment of who they are. Their actions challenge me to grapple with the complexity of their lives, to look past their overly sincere expressions, the latest clothes fashion, dyed hair, sloppy thinking and the blind acceptance of authority. I struggle against the voice of culture and academic colleagues who stereotype students according to dress, social class, academic discipline and intellectual performance. My students encourage me to look past all this social and cultural flak to their ground of being, to join them in relationship.

### **The paradox of humility and authority**

Humility, the act of being silent, is a counter balance to the overzealous expression of truth, especially when the needlessly assertive point of view is mine. I have learned the dangers of exhibiting too much authority and committing the sin of pedagogical hubris. My ego replaces reserved wisdom and I cut students off, railroad my agenda or discount a student's intellectual contribution. Humility tempers the force of unrestricted individual-authority. When I remain humble in the face of the truths that my students and the text reveal, I remain open to change. My ability to listen more fully, my ability to see more clearly and my ability to communicate the fullness of truth are improved. Through an exercise of humility I sometimes find that the strained silence I encounter after asking a question arises from the need for my students to process the

question and generate an honest response instead of my assumption that they failed to do the readings for the day.

Through the power of pedagogical faith I am less concerned with overly filling the classroom space with the sound of my voice. Faith provides the courage to let go of the need to always speak authoritatively and it provides the patience to allow the shared spirit of inquiry to wind its way around the room, revealing truth on its own time. I know that when I have something worthwhile to say I will be compelled to speak my understanding of truth. I value silence in my teaching as much as dialogue.

Faith gives me the certainty to speak with authority from my heart and soul, to know that what I am about to convey to my students comes from a source beyond all of us. I speak not for myself but rather for the other: the text without a voice, the author who's disembodied words we are reading, and the universal truths of humanity and social justice. I take less of the center stage and truth moves to the forefront. The classroom dynamics become tripartite: students, teacher, and the text (Palmer 1998). Each has a distinct voice and authority to speak the truth. Through faith I know that the truth will be spoken, but not always by me.

Faith also compels me to speak the truths that my students sometimes would rather not hear. At times they need to know that their views of truth are not universally accepted. And sometimes, as in the vignette, they need to hear of my disappointment when their performance fails to match their potential. Humility also compels me to listen to those truths that I would rather not hear. For instance, sometimes my students call into question my rationale for a text we are studying. When their critique rings with authenticity, faith compels me to remain humble and to question whether or not we are



reading a piece for the right reasons. When I am true to the learning embedded in these encounters, humility encourages me to remake meaning about teaching and to find more inclusive centers of pedagogical authority. My teaching goals become clearer and more consistent with the learning needs of my students. But it is only by listening to the authoritative voice of my students that I can test and be tested by my perceptions of pedagogical reality.

A classroom infused with humility and authority is attentive to the dual demands of individual and community interests. It drives everyone in the learning process, teacher and students alike, toward clearer understandings of personal uniqueness and encourages us to be open and accepting of challenges to our beliefs. The learning environment is both more humane and more rigorous as teacher and student follow truth deeper and deeper into the bliss of understanding. Both teacher and students alike must know their subject matter, trust each other and have faith in the process of discovering personal truth, tempered by communal oversight. Faith allows teacher and students to humbly journey forward into the intellectual unknown, knowing that we will eventually arrive at a point of understanding, a place of personal authority and meaning-making where classmates, the text and emerging understandings of self are held together in relationship.

### **The paradox of suffering and wonder**

Faith binds together the paradox of suffering and wonder in the college classroom (Parks 2000). For students, suffering takes many forms: a significant personal relationship is ending, a midterm exam is failed, an academic text awakens a sense of guilt and privilege, or a teacher embarrasses a student in front of her peers. I can picture

in my pedagogical eye a number of students I have met over the years who walk into class physically, emotionally and intellectually weighed down by the demands of their life outside class. I cannot ignore the effect this suffering has on their ability to fully attend to learning. I sometimes approach these students during the quiet moments before class begins and give them permission to relax, to take the time to find their center before fully joining the class.

As the vignette of my teaching suggests, teachers suffer too when students fail to read an assigned text. Teachers also suffer when students spend more time passing notes than engaging in a class discussion, when a question is asked during a lecture and no one volunteers an answer, or when half the class fails the final. Yet classrooms are also full of wonder. Students embody wonder, when despite their personal suffering they rise above their wounds and are compassionate toward a fellow student in trouble, when they demonstrate wisdom by synthesizing stories of truth in profound ways, or when intellectual connections are made and a previously quiet student blazes with understanding for all the class to see. Teachers are swept up in wonder when they are awed by the nuances of understanding exhibited by a previously average student or when they offer a powerful image during a seminar that crystallizes student understanding of a pivotal concept.

I have learned during my faith journey of teaching that my pedagogical suffering and wonder, the lows and highs of my classroom are elements of a moving wave rather than static experiences. I am convinced that suffering, just as much as wonder, is a virtue and an integral part of the cycle and rhythm of teaching and learning. How can I know the wonder and joy of rescue if I never experience a pedagogical shipwreck? How can I

avoid self-complacency and gain distance from my entrenched pedagogical-self if I never experience complete isolation and separation from the well-established routines of my classroom? A good shipwrecking is never convenient but it can provide the time for pedagogical reflection, an opportunity to take stock of the core beliefs that survive the ordeal, and it offers the promise of returning to the wonder of teaching.

Pedagogical suffering challenges me to dive deeper into the ground of my being around which I organize meaning as a teacher. My teaching missteps constitute the “negative pedagogy” of my teaching and although unintentional, they can harm the emotional, spiritual, or intellectual well being of my students (Colucci 2000). These mistakes can be as minor as failing to fully listen to my inner teacher, my students or the text. I force an activity that doesn’t meet my students, as learners, at the point of their need. As a class we experience a tinge of suffering and we flounder through the activity emerging relatively intact. I remind myself to be more attentive and trusting of my inner teacher and as a class we regain our bearings and move on.

In contrast, violating the trust of a student and damaging our relationship is a major pedagogical misstep. The results are quite disastrous and the suffering can be intense. For example, at times a student will take an overly aggressive stance toward the class material and other students in the course. If unchecked, the student’s actions threaten to shut down the openness and community-based discourse of the classroom. As the professor I am institutionally and pedagogically compelled to talk with the student one-on-one. In an effort to evade conflict I tend to avoid these conversations hoping instead that the need for intervention will pass. But of course the issue rarely moderates.

I schedule a meeting and the opening moments of our conversation are often fraught with pedagogical uncertainty. What is the most effective approach for dealing with this issue while maintaining the student's sense of humanity? I barely know this person sitting in front of me. I often know only an incomplete image of self, projected within the normative confines of a college classroom. At best I see my students three days a week for fifty minutes each class period. If I am lucky a student will stop in during office hours, hang around after class or pull up a chair in the college cafeteria. Beyond what I am able to ascertain during the class period or after class while answering questions about assignments I hardly know the soul of my student. How do I know if what I am about to say will liberate or cast the student into an unnecessary period of suffering?

Pedagogical faith provides an answer by encouraging me to practice good listening skills. When I really listen for the inner voice of my student I gather valuable information about the student's ground of being, even though our interaction is limited. Yet listening, as the earlier vignette suggests, is not enough. Faith also entails acting to the best of my pedagogical ability. Still, sometimes I manage to completely misjudge the student. My ego overrides measured judgment because I am angry with my student for disturbing the sacred space of the classroom. I come off too heavy-handed; I make false claims, and I sail right into a reef of hidden rocks. I shut the student down, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. Water pours through the rents in our relationship. I bail madly and faith becomes a life ring. It assures me that through our suffering I will gain new insights into myself as teacher and into my student as a human being and learner. Faith also reassures me that with the right form of attention the pedagogical relationship

can be patched and a sense of wonder can be restored. But the shock and embarrassment of my misstep is a very painful reminder to be more attentive to each precious moment I spend with each student in and out of class.

Suffering can also shatter the complacency that sometimes follows my pedagogical successes in the classroom. Given the disparate teaching, professional and scholarly demands of higher education I find it difficult to resist the temptation to teach the same material or use the same activity from semester to semester, especially when my bag-of-tricks elicit moments of wonder. Yet I have learned that successful teaching strategies may work for a few semesters but sooner or later my students will change sufficiently to expose the inadequacy of my curriculum and pedagogy. Suffering is a wake up call. It challenges me to pay attention, to wonder again about the mystery of teaching.

For example, for the first time in my pedagogical career I find myself teaching a course that meets once a week for two and a half hours. I am suffering mightily these days. I love my students and look forward to engaging them in conversation, but I also feel out of synch with the texts, my students and myself. I often end the class feeling battered by the crashing waves of doubt and tossed on the beach of pedagogical uncertainty. Too much time passes between classes for me to feel grounded in my pedagogical objectives and fully in touch with the learning needs of my students. I am being forced to reassess my beliefs on teaching and question whether or not the texts I use and the activities I teach from are appropriate for a course that meets only once a week. Despite my pain, faith compels me to return weekly to the classroom knowing that at some point my suffering will turn to wonder.

## **Conclusion: teacher as learner**

During my early years as a teacher I viewed much of my teaching through the separate lenses of teacher and student. Now I see more clearly the similarities I share with my students, while acknowledging our different levels of academic preparation, of life experience and unique views of truth. The spiritual dimensions of teaching suggest that the more attentive I am to my inner calling to teach the more I will use my gifts to call out the inner learning spaces of my students. Viewing teaching as essentially a spiritual journey can shift the focus from teacher as the center of pedagogy to elements of learning shared by both the teacher and students. The primary teaching tasks of the classroom become learning opportunities rather than teaching techniques. The teacher and student no longer stand in opposition.

Bridging the student/teacher dichotomy is consistent with a student-centered pedagogy. To know a student as an individual is to understand the unique emotional, intellectual and spiritual qualities of the learner. A teacher equipped with this knowledge is afforded greater opportunities to guide students toward understanding of self, others, subject matter and truth. In the process of listening and calling forth the truer essence of a student, the teacher becomes increasingly aware of his/her inner teacher. For it is in companionship with the challenges, doubts and uncertainties of navigating interpersonal spaces that teachers can hear more clearly their inner voice of meaning-making; a beacon guiding their pedagogical choices.

I have learned to increasingly trust my inner teacher when encountering pedagogical uncertainties. Over and over I find that my teaching effectiveness is directly

tied to my ability to pay attention to the spiritual dimensions of teaching and learning. In particular I find that faith is a useful tool to continue my growth and to enhance the learning of my students. I believe this to be true because faith-filled teaching is inherently student-centered. Faith is grounded in the spiritual tasks of meaning making. It enhances our understanding of the ground of our being, for students and teachers. Faith sustains reflective encounters with subject matter and community. Faith ferrets out answers to the challenges of teaching by encouraging the teacher to plunge into the pedagogical uncertainties of the classroom, rather than pulling away. Faith is paradoxical glue. It binds together the interests of the individual and community, speech that is humble and authoritative and teaching that elicits suffering and wonder.

Faith journeys are certainly full of pitfalls and the thorns of disappointment. Faith is never an anecdote to personal or pedagogical struggle. For me, faith is simply a more truthful way of teaching and learning. It calls the teacher and students to a fuller accounting of their unique status as a person. It encourages all members of the classroom community to articulate and justify the ways they organize life experiences into coherent patterns of meaning. When old systems of meaning are threatened or swept away by classroom experiences, students must learn new ways of making sense of knowledge, life, self and truth.

College classrooms are rich sites for personal change and college professors are uniquely positioned to help young adults develop fuller understandings of self, world and community. For as Parks suggests, “Every institution of higher education serves in at least some measure as a community of imagination in which every professor is potentially a spiritual guide and every syllabus a confession of faith” (Parks 2000, 159). I

am an educator. Teaching is my calling and I increasingly listen attentively to the blackboard in my classroom for the whispered offerings of pedagogical wisdom.



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