

Re-membering Ourselves as Teacher-Scholars on the way to Parnassus

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I am twenty years a college teacher now (at true mid-life in my career), and am mostly comfortable in my teaching skin. I have taught hundreds of Speech Communication courses to thousands of students at a variety of colleges and universities across the country. I have learned much about teaching and learning my discipline in that time, and on good days I feel that strong sense of personal identity and integrity that Parker Palmer identifies as the shared trait of all good teachers in his marvelous book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*.¹ I've also noticed some disturbing effects of reaching the mid-life of my teaching career, and those include a tendency toward frozen complacency, helpless cynicism and, most troubling of all, a growing sense of disconnection and distance between myself, my subject and my students. I catch myself teaching a course (particularly a fundamentals course) the same way year after year because I'm comfortable with it, even though in my heart I know there is room for improvement. I catch myself participating in too many "pity parties" with my colleagues, in which we wallow in our victimhood of lack of support from the heartless administration, lack of pay compared to our colleagues in the private sector, lack of appreciation from our students, and lack of good students in general. I catch myself experiencing a widening distance from my students with each passing year, making it easier to forget one of the most fundamental principles of good teaching I ever learned; the best teachers are those who remember what it's like to be a student, and craft their curricula accordingly.

I believe that confronting and combating frozen complacency, cynicism, and disconnection is some of the most important work we undertake in the dangerous middle age of our careers. Parker Palmer's wise counsel is a wonderful resource for undertaking that work. He reminds us to revisit the two convergences that called us toward teaching in the first place; the mentors who evoked us and the subject that chose us.

Like many teachers, over the years I have collected inspirational quotes and passages about teaching and learning. On any given day, as I sit in front of my computer screen, trying to generate lesson plans and activities that will spark both my students and myself with renewed or new found excitement and insights, I'll pick one out to read, and take a few minutes to reflect on the lesson it has to offer me, for this is a crucial time to re/member myself to my vocation.

One of the inspirational passages I turn to most often is attributed to John Steinbeck, purportedly from a journal he kept while he was writing *The Grapes of Wrath*. In it, he recalls the experience he had some twenty years earlier in Miss Hawkins' high school economics class in Salinas, California:

She aroused us to shouting, bookwaving discussions. . . . Our speculation ranged the world. She breathed curiosity into us so that we brought in facts or truths shielded in our hands like captured butterflies. . . . She left a passion in us for the pure knowable world and she inflamed me with a curiosity which has never left me. . . . She left her signature on us, the literature of the teacher who writes on minds. I have had many teachers who told me soon forgotten facts, but only three who created in me a new thing, a new attitude, and a new hunger. I suppose that to a large extent, I am the unsigned manuscript of that high school teacher. What deathless power lies in the hands of such a person.²

Indeed. That's the kind of teacher to dream of being someday, a kind of academic super-hero, and though I'm sure in reality Miss Hawkins had her share of "teaching days from Hell" and may not have had that profound an impact on all the students who passed through her economics class, Steinbeck's encomium to her stands as the quintessential evocation of the teacher I want to be. Twenty years ago, when I walked into the classroom for the first time as "Teacher," it was with more of a sense of impending death and powerlessness, than any sense of deathless power.

Another of my favorite passages comes from an essay Jay McInerney wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* on the passing of his mentor/teacher, noted author Raymond Carver:

Never insisting, rarely asserting, he was an unlikely teacher. . . . The recurring image I associate with Raymond Carver is one of people leaning toward him, working very hard at the act of listening. He mumbled, and if it once seemed

merely like a physical tick, I now think it was the function of a deep humility and a respect for the language bordering on awe, a reflection of his sense that words should be handled very, very gingerly. As if it might be almost impossible to say what you wanted to say. As is if it might be dangerous even the idea of facing a class made him nervous every time...He preferred listening to lecturing...He dealt in specifics, stayed close to the texts, and eventually there would come a moment when the nervousness would lift off of him as he spoke about writing that moved him...He did not consider it his job to discourage anyone. He said that there was enough discouragement out there for anyone trying against all odds to be writer...His harshest critical formula was: "I think it's good you got that story behind you." Meaning, I guess that one has to drive through some ugly country on the way to Parnassus.³

McInerney's loving recollection of Carver inspires me in part because I, too, feel that nervous agitation on class day. His deep love and respect for the power of language resonates with me as a rhetorician in whose insufficient hands is held the awesome task of passing on the legacy of the masters who handed down the language to me. Carver reminds me that humility and awe are the only appropriate attitudes to take toward my subject. The course I love to teach the most is

Introduction to Public Speaking, a requirement for all students at my university, and one which each and every student dreads, even more than the required math courses. Carver's philosophy of gentle critique of students' beginning creative writing efforts mirrors my approach to critiquing beginning student speakers. They need all the nurturing I can give in the face of the terror and vulnerability they experience each time they stand in front of the class to try to give articulate voice to their deepest convictions.

By periodically revisiting these, and other student tributes to great teachers, I experience a much needed renewal, a recommitment to my vocation, a reconnection to my love of subject and students which energizes my efforts to combat the dangers of mid-career malaise. There are of course, additional renewing activities crucial for me now, including initiating more dialogues with my colleagues at school about the substantive teaching/learning successes and failures we encounter separately and together. One of my fondest memories of being a graduate student teaching assistant is of the support and counsel we gave each other in passionate conversations about teaching, which I need now just as much or more as I needed it then. I also have to find ways to interact move with students outside the confines of the classroom, to better connect with them as whole persons, to lessen the intellectual and emotional distance between us.

I believe that all of these activities are crucial for those of us negotiating the tricky country of mid-career. As Palmer puts it, we need to reclaim our hearts by remembering ourselves and our power. *Re-membering* involves putting ourselves back together, recovering our identity and integrity as teacher-scholars, and reclaiming the wholeness of our lives.