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Considering the Courage and Practice of Teaching Workshop / Jan 31st 2013

This workshop was centered on a video of a discussion between two educators; Dr. Maryellen Weimer and Dr. Parker J. Palmer. During the video presentation, Weimer and Palmer discussed many ideas. I will reflect on just a few of them that struck a chord with me.

Why does effective teaching require courage? Palmer pointed out that, “There is such a thing as living behind barricades or barriers in every walk of life including teaching. And that’s not a courageous way to be present in the world. In the case of teaching, that translates into professors who distance themselves from students. They hold everything at what we call objective arm’s length. They stay behind the podium. They refuse to engage.” As I listened to their thoughts on the subject, I remembered back to professors of mine who definitely fit into this category. I realized that I, as a teacher, want to make a daily goal; to enter and prepare with the courage needed to effectively reach and connect with my students. I don’t want students to remember me as a professor who simply lectured and wrote problems up on the board. I want to share my love for math, while at the same time letting them know it is ok to make mistakes. I want to challenge their understanding on topics and get them to appreciate math, (or at least not hate it as much as they did when they entered my classroom). “Good teaching requires courage- the courage to expose one’s ignorances as well as insight, to invite contradiction as well as consent, to yield some control in order to empower the group, to evoke other people’s lives as well as reveal one’s own.”

How does knowing *why* you teach change the way you teach? I have always known that a passion for teaching is essential to becoming a great educator. Relying on technique and subject matter alone will not get me there. One thing I had not thought of before though is that I need to *constantly* examine myself and ask the question, “*why do I teach?*” It was said that, “Knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my subjects and my students.” I cannot expect to be great if I never evaluate (and reevaluate) myself and my methods of teaching. Palmer also expressed, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” In order to teach well, we need to be able to see inside our students, and you cannot see in another person what you cannot see in yourself. A great suggestion that was made while discussing this topic was to enroll myself in a “foreign” class that I don’t know anything about. Being a student again can help me remember and experience all over again the fears that come with being a learner in an alien subject. I have been a teacher for a few years now, and it would be very interesting to put myself back in my students’ “shoes.” I feel I would come out of the class with a better understanding of the frustrations and fears that live within my students. I would really like to do this soon.

Many teachers lose heart as the years go by. What is required for healing? I never want to be a teacher who has lost her heart. I am fairly early in my career as an educator, so don't feel like this has been an issue yet. If I want to continue with the same heart, I will need to continually evolve my teaching. This means I should always look to fine tune the techniques I have acquired over the years while at the same time, let my passion for teaching lead me in creative directions that may be outside my comfort zone. In 10 years I should not be the same teacher I am today. I want to always be improving. Palmer said that, "Truth, not technique is what heals and empowers the heart." To me, this meant that there is no "quick fix" to healing or reclaiming a heart. I must always be open to change, while knowing and accepting myself and my weaknesses. If I do this, I will be able to challenge myself in my classroom, which will ultimately turn my weaknesses into my strengths.