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"Heart to Heart: Teaching with Love"
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Teach 11

Heart to Heart

Teaching with Love

To speak of love in relation to teaching is already to engage a dialogue that is taboo. When we speak of love and teaching, the connections that matter most are the relationship between teacher and subject taught, and the teacher-student relationship. When as professors we care deeply about our subject matter, when we profess to love what we teach and the process of teaching, that declaration of emotional connection tends to be viewed favorably by administrators and colleagues. When we talk about loving our students, these same voices usually talk about exercising caution. They warn us about the dangers of getting "too" close. Emotional connections tend to be suspect in a world where the mind is valued above all else, where the idea that one should be and can be objective is paramount. Both during my student years and throughout my career as a teacher I have been criticized for having too much passion, for being "too" emotional.

I have been told again and again that emotional feelings impede one's capacity to be objective. Discussing objectivity in *To Know as We Are Known*, Parker Palmer states: "The root meaning of 'objective' is 'to put against, to oppose.' This is the danger of objectivism: it is a way of knowing that places us in an adversarial relation to the world . . . Indeed objectivism has put us in an adversarial relation to one another." Throughout my student years I noticed that the professors who valued objectivism highly were often individuals who lacked basic communication skills. Often pathologically narcissistic, they simply could not connect. At times they experienced as a threat any efforts students made to emotionally connect with them. It was their inability to connect that helped me interrogate their overevaluation of objectivity. They stood at a distance from us (students) and the world, and yet I could see no evidence that this distance made them see everything more clearly, or enabled them to be just or fair. Certainly, the argument in favor of objectivity was that it freed us from attachments to particular individuals or perspectives.

Objectivity was made synonymous with an "unbiased standpoint." The professors who prided themselves on their capacity to be objective were most often those who were directly affirmed in their caste, class, or status position. Parker contends: "The oppression of cultural minorities by a white, middle-class, male version of 'truth' comes in part from the domineering mentality of objectivism. Once the objectivist has 'the facts,' no listening is required, no other points of view are needed. The facts, after all, are the facts. All that remains is to bring others into conformity with objective 'truth.'" It is this will to bring others into conformity that merges with the will to dominate and control, what Parker calls 'the domineering mentality of objectivism.' Where there is domination there is no place for love.

Embedded in the notion of objectivity is the assumption that the more we stand at a distance from something the more

we look at it with a neutral view. This is not always the case. Still it is a way of thinking about knowledge that continues to hold sway over the minds of professors who fear getting too close to students and to one another. Explaining the dialectics of objectivism Parker Parker writes; "the ideal of objectivism is the knower as 'blank state,' receiving the unadulterated imprint of what facts are floating around. The aim of objectivism is to eliminate all elements of subjectivity, all biases and preconceptions, so that our knowledge can become purely empirical." While objectivism can work well in hard sciences and more fact-oriented subjects, it cannot serve as a useful basis for teaching and learning in humanities classrooms. In these classrooms much of what students seek to know requires engagement not just with the material but with the individual creators whose work we study.

At times objectivism in academic settings is a smokescreen, masking disassociation. In *Lost in the Mirror*, psychotherapist Richard Moskovitz describes dissociation as "a defense mechanism in which experiences are sorted into compartments that are disconnected from one another." Teachers who fear getting close to students may objectify them to maintain the valued objectivity. They may choose to think of students as empty vessels into which they are pouring knowledge, vessels without opinions, thoughts, personal problems, and so forth. Denying the emotional presence and wholeness of students may help professors who are unable to connect focus more on the task of sharing information, facts, data, their interpretations, with no regard for listening to and hearing from students. It makes the classroom a setting where optimal learning cannot and will not occur.

When teachers and students evaluate our learning experiences, identifying the classes that really matter to us, no one gives testimony about how much they learned from professors who were disassociated, unable to connect, and self-obsessed. Many charismatic professors are narcissistic yet they may pride

themselves on their ability to move through this narcissism to empathize and care about the fate of students both in the classroom and beyond. Like all caring teachers they see that to be successful in the classroom (success being judged as the degree to which we open the space for students to learn, getting at that root meaning of the word to educate: to draw out) they must nurture the emotional growth of students indirectly, if not directly. This nurturance, both emotional and academic, is the context where love flourishes.

In our nation most colleges and universities are organized around the principles of dominant culture. This organizational model reinforces hierarchies of power and control. It encourages students to be fear-based, that is to fear teachers and seek to please them. Concurrently, students are encouraged to doubt themselves, their capacity to know, to think, and to act. Learned helplessness is necessary for the maintenance of dominator culture. Progressive teachers see this helplessness in students who become upset when confronting alternative modes of teaching that require them to be active rather than passive. Student resistance to forms of learning that are not based on rote memory or predictable assignments has almost become a norm because of the fixation on degrees rather than education. These students want to know exactly what they must do to acquire the best grade. They are not interested in learning. But the student who longs to know, who has awakened a passion for knowledge is eager to experience the mutual communion with teacher and subject that makes for profound engagement.

Competition in the classroom disrupts connection, making closeness between teacher and students impossible. Just as the insistence on objectivism negates community, the emphasis on competition furthers the sense that students stand in an adversarial relationship to themselves and their teachers. The predation that is at the heart of dominator culture emerges when students feel they must symbolically destroy one another in

order to prove that they are the smartest. Even though students enter universities at similar levels of capability and skill, it is not assumed that the classroom will be a communal place where those skills will naturally lead to overall excellence on the part of all students. Competition rooted in dehumanizing practices of shaming, of sado-masochistic rituals of power, preclude communalism and stand in the way of community. If students enter a class all sharing similar skills and capabilities and thus common bonds, strategies of distancing and separation must be deployed to effectively disrupt these organic ties. Rather than regarding each other as comrades, students are taught to see each other as adversaries struggling to compete for the prize of being the one smart enough to dominate the others.

Dominator culture promotes a calculated objectivism that is dehumanizing. Alternatively, a mutual partnership model invites an engagement of the self that humanizes, that makes love possible. I began to think about the relationship between struggles to end domination and love in an effort to understand the elements that made for successful movements for social justice in our nation. Looking at anti-racist civil rights struggle, one of the most revolutionary movements for social justice in the world, it was clear that the focus on a love ethic was a central factor in the movement's success. In *All About Love: New Visions* I defined love as a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust. All these factors work interdependently. They are a core foundation of love irrespective of the relational context. Even though there is a difference between romantic love and the love between teacher and pupil, these core aspects must be present for love to be love.

When these basic principles of love form the basis of teacher-pupil interaction the mutual pursuit of knowledge creates the conditions for optimal learning. Teachers, then, are learning while teaching, and students are learning and sharing

knowledge. In *To Know as We Are Known* Parker Palmer contends that "the origin of knowledge is love," declaring: "The goal of a knowledge arising from life is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community . . ." This is the spirit of communalism competition works to disrupt and destroy.

The culture of fear that is rampant on most college campuses, present in and outside the classroom, undermines the capacity of students to learn. Fear-based students doubt that they can accomplish what they need to accomplish. More often than not they are overwhelmed by fear of failure. When students are encouraged to trust in their capacity to learn they can meet difficult challenges with a spirit of resilience and competence. Teaching at a Methodist liberal arts college where professors and administrators affirmed, to greater or lesser degrees, the need for diversity and appreciation for difference on campus, I was struck by the fact that no one wanted to deal with the reality that most students were coming from homes where religious teachings had encouraged them to fear difference, to exclude rather than include voices and perspectives different from their own, to shun diversity. Attending college and being suddenly presented with a different worldview placed them in an adversarial relationship with the family values and spiritual beliefs they had learned. When no recognition and care is given the inner conflicts they face, students in these circumstances may either ruthlessly uphold the status quo (that is, cling to the way things have always been—repudiating engagement with diversity) or fall into debilitating states

of apathy and depression. To avoid stress and conflict they simply shut down. Teachers who extend the care and respect that is a component of love make it possible for students to address their fears openly and to receive affirmation and support.

Contrary to the notion that love in the classroom makes teachers less objective, when we teach with love we are better able to respond to the unique concerns of individual students while simultaneously integrating those of the classroom community. When teachers work to affirm the emotional well-being of students we are doing the work of love. Colleagues have shared with me that they do not want to be placed in the role of "therapist"; they do not want to respond to emotional feeling in the classroom. Refusing to make a place for emotional feelings in the classroom does not change the reality that their presence overdetermines the conditions where learning can occur. Teachers are not therapists. However, there are times when conscious teaching—teaching with love—brings us the insight that we will not be able to have a meaningful experience in the classroom without reading the emotional climate of our students and attending to it. In some cases that may require becoming more emotionally aware of psychological conflicts within a student blocking the student's capacity to learn. It may then be appropriate to steer a student in the direction of therapeutic care.

Sometimes professors are fearful of engaging students with love because they worry about being engulfed. They worry they will become too enmeshed in a student's dilemmas. This fear is keenly felt by anyone who is unable to establish appropriate boundaries. Most of us have been raised with a misguided understanding of love. We have been taught that love makes us crazy, makes us blind and foolish, that it renders us unable to set healthy boundaries. Teaching with love, at the end of the semester I had students in my office complaining because they did not receive the grade that they thought they would have received. After all, I cared about them. Their sense of my

love/care was that it would lead me to give them higher grades than they deserved. I had this experience several times. Finally, I openly discussed at the start of each new class that there would be no correlation between my loving a student and the student's grade, that the grade would be solely determined by the quality of the work. I explained to the students that, rather than blinding me to the true nature of their abilities, love for them was far more likely to enhance my understanding of their capabilities as well as their limitations, helping them embrace a new understanding of the true meaning and value of love.

When as teachers we teach with love, combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, we are often able to enter the classroom and go straight to the heart of the matter. That means having the clarity to know what to do on any given day to create the best climate for learning. Teachers who are wedded to using the same teaching style every day, who fear any digression from the concrete lesson plan, miss the opportunity for full engagement in the learning process. They are far more likely to have an orderly classroom where students obey authority. They are far more likely to feel satisfied because they have presented all the information that they wanted to cover. And yet they are missing the most powerful experience we can offer students, which is the opportunity to be fully and compassionately engaged with learning.

Often teachers want to ignore emotional feeling in the classroom because they fear the conflict that may arise. Much as everyone likes to imagine that the college campus is a place without censorship, where free speech prevails and students are encouraged to engage in debate and dialectical exchange, the opposite reality is a more accurate portrait of what takes place in college classrooms. More often than not students are afraid to talk for fear they will alienate teachers and students. They are usually terrified of disagreeing if they think it will lead to conflict. Even though none of us would ever imagine that we could have a romantic relationship with someone

where there is never any conflict, students and sometimes teachers, especially in the diverse classroom, tend to see the presence of conflict as threatening to the continuance of critical exchange and as an indication that community is not possible when there is difference.

Many of us have not witnessed critical exchanges in our families of origin where different viewpoints are expressed and conflicts resolved constructively. Instead, we bring to classroom settings our unresolved fears and anxieties. The loving classroom is one in which students are taught, both by the presence and practice of the teacher, that critical exchange can take place without diminishing anyone's spirit, that conflict can be resolved constructively. This will not necessarily be a simple process.

When I taught a seminar on the work of African-American novelist and essayist James Baldwin I just assumed that students signing up for the class would be aware that he was homosexual and want to know more about the ways this experience informed his work. Teaching at a state school, in a classroom that was predominately non-white, initially I was not prepared to cope with a class where some students were shocked to learn that Baldwin was gay and expressed openly homophobic remarks. These students also assumed that they could say anything since gayness was "out there" and not "in here" with us. Their heterosexist thinking prevented them from even considering that gay students might be taking this class. From the moment class began I had to work with loving kindness at establishing a learning community, in a context where the expression of different viewpoints was potentially a threat to the well-being of gays and non-homophobic straight students. By openly talking about the context of love in community, we had to talk about the place of judiciously withholding a viewpoint if it was damaging to others in the community. We had to confront the difference between hate speech and simply stating an opinion. Students who were freaked out by learning

that Baldwin was gay also had to learn that we were not an audience for their freaked-out-ness.

Our group became a learning community because we privileged respect and responsibility as needed values in a context where one person's viewpoint could damage the self-esteem and well-being of someone else. Students had to learn the difference between "trashing" someone or a subject and offering careful critique. This classroom was charged with emotional feeling, with painful feelings. Had I ignored their presence and acted as though an objectivist standpoint would create order, the class would have been a deadening experience; students would have *read* Baldwin, but not understood the meaning and significance of his work. Through their work at making community, at creating love in the classroom they could hear more intimately Baldwin's declaration of love's power: "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth." I wish that I could testify that every homophobic individual who took this class underwent a conversion experience and let their hatred go. I cannot. But I can testify that they learned to think beyond the petty boundaries of that hatred. And therein lies the promise of change.

All meaningful love relations empower each person engaged in the mutual practice of partnership. Between teacher and student love makes recognition possible; it offers a place where the intersection of academic striving meets the overall striving to be psychologically whole. While I approach every teaching experience with a general spirit of love, a relationship of love often flourishes between a particular student and myself, and that abides through time. Students I love most intimately never seem to leave my life. As they grow and become teachers or enter professions, they still call on me to

teach, guide, and direct them. That our teaching relationship formed and shaped by love extends beyond our time in the classroom is an affirmation of love's power. When I asked one of my students, now a law professor, if my love of her created a climate of favoritism in the classroom, she laughed stating: "Are you kidding? The more you loved us, the harder we had to work." There can be no love without justice.

Love in the classroom prepares teachers and students to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created. Teachers need not fear that practicing love in the classroom will lead to favoritism. Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us. This is the heart of the matter.