

Considering the Spirituality of Learning

I wonder if Keeling (2004) and the authors of *Learning Reconsidered* (LR) realized they were writing a secular explication of the educational philosophy practiced and promoted by Dr. Parker J. Palmer for more than 30 years? LR “define[s] learning as a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity” (Keeling, 2004, p. 22). The word “holistic” appears thirteen times in LR in conjunction with education, so its authors are clearly serious about educating the whole person – not just modifying learners’ knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

Long before I read LR and other documents in the growing body of published works promoting a “holistic” approach, I described myself as a holistic educator who views every moment in life as a potential learning opportunity and teaching and learning as spiritual activities. I thought I was alone in the world, because no one else in my immediate environment had any interest in the whole persons embodied in our individual students or in their collective welfare as learners. When I found the writings of Parker J. Palmer, however, I discovered a professional soul-mate – an avatar – who became, through his writings, a mentor. Consider the power of this message from the introduction to Palmer’s seminal work, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*:

“Authentic spirituality wants to open us to truth - whatever truth may be, wherever truth may take us. Such a spirituality does not dictate where we must go, but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge. Such a spirituality encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox. By this understanding, the spirituality of education is not about dictating ends. It is about examining and clarifying the inner sources of teaching and learning ...” (Palmer, 1993, p. xi).

In LR, Keeling (2004) describes the “social context” (p. 15) of learning. Palmer (1977) describes the community of learning, reminding readers, “Historically, education and community were inseparable” (p. 9). The “Integrated Outcomes” at the pinnacle of LR’s model comprises three interwoven constructs: “knowledge,” “meaning,” and “self in society” (Keeling, 2004, p. 14). Palmer (1977) admonishes “We

have lost a true sense of self in our time because we have lost community” (p. 12) and describes *LR*’s “self in society” quite poetically:

“We have forgotten that the self is a moving intersection of many other selves. We are formed by the lives which intersect with ours. The larger and richer our community, the larger and richer is the content of the self. There is no individuality without community ... So the way to self ... is the way of community. ... [L]ost things can be found. Community can be rebuilt...” (p. 12).

For me, reading the foregoing is a transformative activity that manifests *LR*’s definition of learning. How, then, can it be made clear to my peers who are less interested in educating the whole person? *LR* contains the answer: Student affairs personnel must take the lead in promoting awareness of learning as comprehensive, holistic, and transformative. Further, *LR* places the burden on student affairs personnel to provide educators with guidance for developing integrated learning that combines opportunities for spiritual and academic growth. In order to be effective, student services personnel will require proper training, which requires an institutional commitment to staff professional development that often does not exist on campuses.

Working together, faculty, administrators, and student services can implement *LR*’s precepts and exponentially enhance college students’ learning. Happy students make a happy campus. A happy campus is transformative in and of itself!

Resources

Keeling, R. P., ed. (2004). *Learning reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience*.

Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and American College Personnel Association.

Palmer, P. J. (1977). *A place called community. Pendle Hill Pamphlet 212*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications.

Palmer, P. J. (1993). *To know as we are known: Education as a spiritual journey*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco.