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Parker J. Palmer on Healing the Heart of Democracy

Abstract

This paper centers on the theories of Parker J. Palmer, who is a public intellectual, an independent contemporary writer, master teacher and activist. In 2010, the REA honored Palmer for his significant contributions to the field of Religious Education. His interests lie in issues concerning education, community, leadership, spirituality and non-violent social change.

His latest book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*, delves into the importance of living an integrated life as citizens and public leaders. He argues that effective citizens and leaders approach their work and world from a place of the heart. This concept is the focal point of the paper. Of significance is the fact that, true to his calling as an activist, Palmer moves beyond the theory stage and develops practical applications that can be applied in the context of a school classroom and houses of worship. The paper examines Palmer's theories of nonviolence and places them in the context of real life testimonies, both from history and from the outcomes of his theoretical applications.

This paper explores the theories of Parker J. Palmer as they relate to nonviolent social change. His theories address the dynamics of both the individual and of communities. Palmer is a leading contemporary public intellectual. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. He is a writer, teacher and activist who is nationally recognized as one of the ten key “most influential senior leaders” in higher education and one of ten key “agenda setters” of the decade. His interests lie in issues concerning education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change. His most widely read book is *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (Intrator 2005, 16). Palmer is also distinguished as the recipient of the William Rainey Harper Award, an honor bestowed by the Religious Education Association in 2010.

Early in his work, Palmer’s interest was on the individual and the dynamics of the self. He explored the human psyche and discovered the importance of living an authentic, integrated life. This concept and the phrase “to live divided no more,” became the hallmark of his career. His theories aim to unravel the complicated nature of human interaction in a world that all too often impedes the true self from emerging. He reasons that each of us brings something special to the world; a birthright gift that needs to be honored. However, he notes, many of us spend most of our lives squandering this gift of self (Palmer 2000, 12).

According to Palmer, we deny our truth out of fear. We are fearful of judgement, of rejection, and of being unloved. When actually confronted with these situations, rather than remaining true to ourselves, we tend to doubt ourselves, and our own self worth. We begin to favor adopting a different public persona, subconsciously suppressing our true nature. In recollecting his own personal journey, Palmer states: “it is indeed possible to live a life other than one’s own” (2000, 2). This, he asserts, is what it means to live a divided life.

Palmer shares a Hasidic tale that reveals this aspect of human nature - “the tendency to want to be someone else, and the ultimate importance of honoring one’s self.” He writes: “Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: “Why were you not Moses?” They will ask me: “Why were you not Zusya?””(11). As simplistic as this concept may seem, Palmer argues that it takes courage to follow our hearts, to live undividedly, and be who we are meant to be. Social dictates and peer pressure often get the better of us.

The concept of living undivided lives extends to Palmer’s theory of communal life. He affirms the innate human need for community and interconnectedness, and the human desire to live in harmony. We are innately interdependent but, he argues, it also takes courage to live in community. For instance, it takes courage to be the one to welcome the stranger or strange ideas in our midst, especially when others in the community are not willing to do so. It takes courage to stand firm in our convictions when others are ready to pass judgement against us, or worse yet, exclude us from the circle, lest we go along with the majority. According to Palmer and other social theorists, divided communities form the precursor to social violence. Given this, the question Palmer addresses is: How can we form communities of congruence? And, of greater urgency is the question: How can we keep democracy alive?

Amidst all of the social conflicts, Palmer sees possibilities for the future of this country and for an end to violence. He sees a beauty in human creation. Having a deep affinity with poetry, he draws from the metaphors of artistic imagery to tell his story. For example, he likens community to a richly woven tapestry, held together by the creative tension in each thread.

Creative tension and courage are the central themes in his discourse about nonviolent social change. He explores these concepts at length in his latest book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. Palmer writes, “Holding tension creatively does not mean indecision or inaction. At every level of human life - from living our own lives well to governing a nation justly - decisions must be made. But they must not be made in the haste that comes from being impatient with tension or in the ignorance that results from fearing the clash of diverse opinions” (2011, 22).

Palmer believes that as a nation, creative tension is formed by governing from the heart. Although the idea may seem far removed from the ways we witness government, the concept is not new. Alexis de Tocqueville who wrote the classic *Democracy in America* after a visit to the United States from 1831 to 1832, saw that American democracy could not survive across generations unless the government, and citizens alike, developed “habits of the heart.” Habits of the heart refers to “deeply ingrained patterns of receiving, interpreting, and responding to experiences that involve our intellects, emotions, self-images, and concepts of meaning and purpose - habits that form the inward and invisible infrastructure of democracy” (24). According to Tocqueville, “ideas are at least as important as feelings, for without [feelings] there is no action in common . . .” (41). There is clear evidence of how crucial a role the heart plays in politics. As Palmer notes, “The most casual student of electoral politics knows that the surest way to win votes is to divide and conquer the heart, pitting emotion against intellect” (51).

The story of Abraham Lincoln provides an example of a leader who governed from the heart. In the book *Lincoln’s Melancholy*, Joshua Shenk probes into our “sixteenth president’s journey with depression” while leading the nation (3). According to Palmer, who has suffered with this affliction at various points in his adult life, Lincoln’s ability to integrate his own shadow and light was what made him “uniquely qualified to help America preserve the Union. Because he knew dark and light intimately - knew them as inseparable elements of everything human - he refused to split North and South into “good guys” and “bad guys,” a split that might have taken us closer to the national version of suicide” (4). As Palmer notes, using carefully chosen words in his second inaugural address, Lincoln “appealed for “malice toward none” and charity for all,” animated by what one writer calls an “awe-inspiring sense of love for *all*” (4). The antithesis of this is the transformative power of the heart filled with hate, which can lead to destruction, as witnessed in the horror of the holocaust and ongoing genocides in underdeveloped countries.

Palmer asserts, the human heart is the core of the human self. Therefore, forming part of the infrastructure of democracy, is the invisible dynamic of a heart filled with goodness and love. However, he notes: as with any human activity, change has to begin with an individual before it can manifest into a communal effort. And, key to positive social transformation is a common conviction, and a community of individuals who are grounded in who they are. A prime example of this theory is the story of Rosa Parks who in 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to yield her seat to a white man on a bus. Her action sparked a national movement that would culminate in the Civil Rights Act. As Palmer writes, “Of course, she acted in the context of a community, of a shared social concern, and of a theory of nonviolent social change. Among other things, Parks served as secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) and had participated in sessions at the Highlander Folk School on the tactics and

strategies of nonviolence” (185).

Although the Rosa Parks historical event was of national proportions, nonviolent social change can also come about in more subtle ways. Palmer suggests practical ways to gather people to form communities of congruence. He asserts, “deep democracy” can be established in the classroom and in houses of worship, among other public venues. For example, in school settings, the classroom can provide the space for social transformation when students are allowed a hospitable space for the inner search for truth, and for their individual voices to be heard. He explains that the classroom environment can “help students find meaning and purpose by connecting with realities that bring life, not death” (125). According to Palmer, the inner search is embedded in all subjects. For example, history connects us with our past to teach us about ourselves in connection to the present time. Biology teaches that nature does in fact have a voice. Nature speaks to us by responding to the “impact of our actions.” Fictional literature shows us that reality is not only about facts, but about “engaging them with our imaginations” (125).

The justification for engaging in nonviolent social change in houses of worship can be summarized in a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr., who was noted for saying, “Eleven o’clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America, and Sunday school the most segregated school of the week” (138). As a public intellectual and community organizer, Palmer has been asked for his guidance in diversifying congregations. In his exploration of the dynamics amongst parishioners in the mainline Protestant tradition he grew up in, he found that many parishioners “regard personal relationships in their congregations as *unsafe* when it comes to exploring sensitive personal issues” (137). If they were to discuss sensitive issues, they fear rejection and damaging gossip. Responding to the *un-diversified* and divided nature of these houses of worship, Palmer asks: “Why would anyone with a *visible* difference want to join a group who look like each other but cannot embrace their own *invisible* differences?” (138). He notes, “Many religious communities have a long way to go when it comes to embodying their verbal commitment to compassion among their own members, let alone in the larger world” (138).

While being well aware of the obstacles and challenges that both the clergy and/or the congregation can present, Palmer offers several ways to bridge this divide within houses of worship. First, Palmer finds that in most worship settings, the congregation is a passive recipient during the service and homily. Palmer asserts, “The theological message may be one of community, but the lived experience is one of dependence on an authority. Under those conditions, not much can be done to build the communal trust that allows compassion to flower, no matter how benign the leader is” (139). He suggests participatory forms of congregational life as a form of building trust amongst parishioners. This can mean giving parishioners a voice by engaging them in theological reflection about their own lived experiences on matters of faith.

Palmer observes: shared authority also builds trust and confidence among parishioners and provides the seeds of community. Most congregations have to make decisions on a range of issues concerning the parish. He recommends decision making by consensus as a form of sharing authority. He explains, unlike decision making by a majority vote, where we create a win-lose contest, consensual decisions require open, honest dialogue. It invites the participants to listen deeply to one another, and to be open to “listen for where I might join with you and what I might learn from our differences, because I know we cannot move forward unless we move together” (144). This shared authority also deepens the sense of hospitality that parishioners can

carry into the public world.

Another thought which Palmer offers is for the clergy to host simple events. He has learned that potluck suppers work especially well because “breaking bread together is one of the best ways to create community, a celebrated sacrament in the Christian church” (142). This grassroots event provides the parishioners with the opportunity to tell personal and “public stories that range from painful to hopeful to joyful, stories that create solidarity and energize action, helping people reweave relationships within the church for the sake of their ministry in the world” (142). In conclusion, he writes, “The leader and teacher who wants to work this way needs at least two deep-rooted habits of the heart: patience and self-confidence” (140).

Bibliography

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