Novel program helps educators rekindle their passion for their careers

by Scott Driscoll

Just four years into her new career as a teacher, Seattleite Dana Knox was feeling burned out and cynical. She’d switched from the field of advertising to the field of teaching because she wanted to connect with children—to reach them in ways that would benefit them the rest of their lives. Instead, she grew pessimistic about her students’ interest in learning and even about their ability to learn. She scaled back her expectations and quit giving homework to some classes. For all but upper-level courses, the only reading assignments were ones that could be finished in class. She was bitter. She was reaching hardly anyone. “I felt isolated, overrun and out of breath even though I was only 27,” she says. “The job’s never done. You’re under pressure to perform all the time, but you never get feedback. You have no way to measure whether you’re doing a good job, and there’s no time for supportive conversations with other teachers.”

When she discovered a new program called Courage to Teach, it sounded like something that might help her survive. She decided to give it a try, enrolling in CTT’s first Washington state retreat series in 1996.

Started in the early 1990s as a pilot program funded by the Michigan-based Fetzer Institute, a private foundation whose focus is addressing the roots of societal problems, Courage to Teach offers a series of weekend retreats designed to rekindle lost passion for teaching.

To help launch the program, the institute turned to nationally known educator, writer and activist Parker J. Palmer, who has a doctorate in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley and who has taught at prominent schools such as George Washington University. Palmer notes in a 1992 white paper that “the daily experience of many teachers is to stand before a sea of faces ... that too often seem bored, sullen, even hostile. ... It is disheartening to stare into so much apparent disconfirmation day after day.”

When student disinterest or animosity is combined with a heavy dose of pressure to improve student performance on standardized tests, you have a recipe for burnout, says Rick Jackson, co-director of the Center for Courage & Renewal, which is based on Bainbridge Island, west of Seattle. Founded in 1997 in collaboration with Palmer, the center trains facilitators to lead all of Courage to Teach’s retreats, which are now offered nationwide.

“Most educators who come to Courage to Teach programs are searching for ways to hang in there,” Jackson says. “They are usually mid-career teachers, with 15 to 20 years of experience, who want to sustain or rekindle their passion but who have key questions about how to be an excellent teacher and still lead a healthy, balanced life with integrity.”

Courage to Teach does not focus on the “how or what” of teaching, he says. Instead, it gives teachers a time and a place to look within, to be listened to and supported, to become clear about their values and purpose.

The program—which features a series of four to eight weekend retreats, spread over one to two years—helps teachers discover for themselves what they can do, and what they want to do, to enhance their professional lives.

It emphasizes “formation” versus “training”—concentrating on spirituality, which Palmer, a Quaker, defines in his paper as “personal wholeness within.”
Formation leads to reform from the inside out rather than pushing reform from the outside in, he states.

In practical terms, “formation” occurs at the retreats through surprisingly simple activities such as walking with another teacher through a peaceful forest to talk about “threads” that connect the teachers to their passion and about issues that threaten to break those threads. It occurs when people spend quiet moments by themselves, thinking about what they’d like to change, and writing in their journals. It occurs via sessions in which a teacher sits in a circle of peers who ask thought-provoking questions to help the teacher come to his/her own realizations about desires, needs and strengths.

“Courage to Teach helps teachers learn how to live in paradox—how to live between school-district standards and creativity,” notes Beth McGibbon, who spent 15 years teaching Japanese and social studies before becoming part of a team that’s in charge of teacher professional development at Spokane’s Shadle Park High School. She enrolled in a Courage to Teach retreat series in 2003.

“CTT helped me remember that it’s not an either-or proposition. We need both: standards and creativity,” she says. “We will always have resisters and supporters when it comes to implementing new ideas or standards for schools. I don’t fight it anymore. My job is to motivate people to be good teachers versus getting them to agree that the changes are good. This realization has been very helpful to me.”

But Courage to Teach’s most important contribution is, as its name implies, helping participants overcome their fears, Jackson says.

Fear is “a fundamental (perhaps ‘the’ fundamental) spiritual problem,” according to Palmer. Teachers fear a lot of things, he notes. “They fear losing control. ... They fear never knowing whether one’s work has made a difference. ...They fear the judgment of the young.”

They also fear stagnation: They worry that over time they’ll lose their passion, and experience stagnation that breeds cynicism regarding the possibility of useful change, Palmer writes. The net result of this cynicism is that “too many teachers view their charges with thinly veiled hostility—and too many of them want to blame their problems on factors that are external to education or are located somewhere ‘upstream.’”

Jackson says that he and his wife, Marcy, who is his co-director at the Center for Courage & Renewal, wrote an essay this past spring about the heartbreaking tales they hear from teachers around the country—tales that are all versions of the same story: “The love that brought them into this profession is being wrung out of them by forces that are largely beyond their control and by people who pay little attention to their ideas ... about how things could be done differently.”

Courage to Teach retreats help take the fear out of teaching and put the love back in, Jackson says.

Dana Knox, who is an English and senior seminar teacher at Shorewood High School in a Seattle suburb, says Courage to Teach helped her see what really mattered. “CTT taught me to shift my focus to the person. I started paying attention to the kids versus just the subject matter. I began my senior seminar class [which like other classes at the school runs for 100 minutes] by having the kids sit in an informal circle on the floor. I started the class by getting them away from their desks to see what was on their minds. I asked them to tell me about books they liked to read, or about their home lives.

“Once they sensed that I cared about them, their attitude did a complete turn-around. They started doing their homework. They started writing, and enjoying it. They wanted to participate in class, and they did the reading.”

That’s not to say the change came quickly or easily. One boy routinely came to senior seminar wearing a sweatshirt with the hood up, earphones on. He’d sit under the tables or easily. One boy routinely came to senior seminar class [which like other classes at the school runs for 100 minutes] by having the kids sit in an informal circle on the floor. I started the class by getting them away from their desks to see what was on their minds. I asked them to tell me about books they liked to read, or about their home lives.

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“He’d challenged me constantly in the past,” Knox says. “I’d brought in a [school guidance] counselor—she wanted him gone.”

Before Courage to Teach, Knox would have agreed with the counselor and written the student off as an intractable behavior problem. Post-CTT, she decided to keep him in the class and see if she could win his respect. When he interrupted the discussion with belligerent or seemingly irrelevant questions, she responded calmly, without anger.

“He announced one day to the circle, for example, that his goal in being ‘honest’ was to expose everyone in class as a ‘poser.’ When he said that, I maintained eye contact a moment longer, tried to keep a welcoming posture, then turned my focus to the next person,” Knox says.

At the close of the circle session, she acknowledged that everyone at times experiences others as being inauthentic, but at the same time, it is important for everyone to trust that they can say what they
need to without fear of insensitive remarks.

For the next two weeks she respectfully reproved comments that seemed designed only to sabotage group trust, but she also practiced forgiveness, a CTT principle, by continuing to invite his input.

Slowly, the student opened up. During the third week of Knox’s new approach, she asked, “What is it like to listen to other people talk about stress?” He volunteered a response, claiming he found it annoying to listen to everyone “moan and wallow in self-importance.”

Another student then spoke up: “I hear what you’re saying,” she mused. “But I can relate to what each person is saying. It makes me feel more normal to hear that I’m not the only one having those feelings.”

This exchange was eye-opening for Knox: “It was beautiful. They had accepted him for who he was, but they wouldn’t cut him any slack.”

By the end of the semester, the student was participating authentically. He volunteered his own insights. He became the kind of kid others listened to.

“At the end of senior year he gave me a big hug,” Knox says. “He still comes back to visit me. Two years out of high school, he’s in college, has a girlfriend, a job. Contrary to what I thought when I first met him, he will not become one of those kids who end up stuck in a dead-end life.”

To find out firsthand how Courage to Teach achieves these kinds of results from seemingly basic approaches, I joined a group of Seattle educators last spring for a weekend retreat at the Tierra Learning Center in Sunitsch Canyon, a few miles outside of Leavenworth, Washington. Aside from bird chatter and the soughing of the breeze through the tall surround of Douglas firs and ponderosa pines, the lodge was ensconced in silence—a perfect place for reflection.

On Friday night, 29 of us—two staff facilitators, numerous teachers and a few administrators—convened in the lodge’s A-frame meeting room for a get-acquainted dinner and session.

The group included Christina Mastin, who was in her third year as a teacher—all of that time spent teaching eighth-graders with learning disabilities at Seattle’s Denny Middle School—who said she came to the retreat wondering, “What am I doing, being a teacher?”

Mastin, an extroverted, emotive ex-actress with 22 years of experience on stage, most of it in Seattle, said that in her new profession she felt overwhelmed.

Jon Olver, who had 19 years of experience teaching middle

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Program History and Results

In the early 1990s, the Fetzer Institute, a Michigan-based private foundation, approached educator Parker J. Palmer and asked him to create a teacher-development program that would help teachers with personal and professional renewal.

Palmer—a national-award-winning educator who is a senior associate of the American Association of Higher Education—has written more than 100 essays and several books on education and social change. He created a Courage to Teach pilot program that operated from 1992 to 1996, and involved single-weekend retreats for teachers. The teachers’ feedback was positive, and the concept then evolved into a series of eight weekend retreats over two years.

In 1996 the Fetzer Institute started developing CTT programs in four states, including Washington. Since then, the retreat series have spread to 28 program sites nationwide, including sites in Oregon, Montana and California.

Costs vary by state. In Washington, teachers pay $695 to attend a four-weekend series of retreats. The $695 covers only about a fourth of the cost, and Washington State Courage to Teach, a nonprofit, is also supported by a variety of foundations, including the Fetzer Institute, Social Venture Partners, Washington Mutual, Nesholm Family Foundation, Seattle Foundation, Krillen Foundation, Charlotte Martin Foundation and Greater Tacoma Community Foundation. In addition, it receives funding from various educational associations and school districts, and from about 150 individual donors.

To funnel the most money directly to the program, the Washington state CTT maintains a basic paid staff: five facilitators, plus Yarrow Durbin as a director/facilitator, and an office administrative assistant.

Statistics compiled over the last three years show that 81 percent of participants in Washington have been teachers or teaching specialists, and 41 percent are from Seattle Public Schools, the most urban of the state’s districts.

Since the first Washington retreat series started in 1996, CTT has served 503 educators in a variety of retreat programs, and hundreds more educators in a program that sends facilitators to schools to do modified versions of CTT. How effective is CTT in accomplishing its mission of helping teachers retain or rekindle their passion for their careers?

Of the educators who completed a five- to eight-retreat series since the program’s launch in the state, 88.4 percent are still in education. Less than 2 percent left the profession for reasons other than pregnancy, retirement or death.

Each CTT program keeps its own statistics regarding participant satisfaction, and no national compilation is available, but in Washington state, 83 percent of respondents have said that CTT benefited their experience with students in the classroom, and 86 percent credited CTT with renewing their passion for teaching.

Eighty percent reported more effective professional performance; 85 percent reported greater personal and professional satisfaction; and 94 percent reported greater personal and professional confidence.

While school districts have no official policy toward teacher participation—which is strictly voluntary and may or may not be funded by a school or school district—it’s not uncommon for school principals, concerned about losing good teachers, to apathy if not attrition, to encourage participation.

Seattle Public Schools is a district that sees Courage to Teach as beneficial, says Melissa Schweitzer, instructional coach and professional-development representative for Seattle Public Schools.

“It is absolutely a good idea,” says Schweitzer, who went through a CTT series herself while still a special-education teacher. “By honoring the work teachers do, the program not only helps in the classroom, it also helps you achieve more balance in your daily life. By being better with yourself, you’re better able to be with kids.” —S.D.
and high schoolers at Summit K-12, a Seattle alternative school, said that at the end of the previous school year, he was ready to quit teaching.

“This job has become too hard—we spend too much time fixing stuff not related to the classroom,” said the home-styled musician, who values time in the outdoors spent hiking and camping with his wife and preteen daughter.

Partly he was displeased about being expected to change curriculum to prepare students for the Washington Assessment of Student Learning test, which in 2008 will help determine whether a student can graduate. But more than that, he’s endured three changes of principals in the last three years while watching a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation–supported school transformation—which would mean smaller class sizes and is designed to create more meaningful interactions with kids and other teachers—stall for what he sees as lack of administrative backing.

“I’d begun to doubt I was up to the heroic effort required to keep going after four years of trying to institute reforms with no success,” Olver said.

“Know what I really want to do this weekend?” he told me early Saturday morning as we hiked a 1.7-mile trail that coursed steeply—amid blue lupines and sage—up a ridge behind the learning center to a view of snowcapped Mount Stewart. “I want to play my guitar. I really need to do that.”

It turns out that this type of activity is also part of what the retreats are about: Giving permission and time—that too precious commodity—to frayed teachers to put aside the papers and tests, to not answer calls from enraged parents, to forget about the e-mails piling up and about the complainers at that last committee meeting, and to just be who they are. Or, more to the point, who they are when calm.

As part of the Saturday session, the group gathered in the meeting room to discuss vocational “threads.” Dressed in casual wear, the majority of us in our 40s and 50s, we sat around the perimeter of the room, some on chairs, some stretched on the floor and leaning on pillows.

Yarrow Durbin, a former math teacher who is now the Washington state director of CTT, read a poem, The Way It Is, by Oregon poet William Stafford (1914–1993). The poem opens with these lines:

“There’s a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn’t change.”

We were asked to consider questions aimed at guiding us along our inner threads back to what inspired us to follow our vocation. Many of us headed outdoors.

Lori Douglas, an English teacher at Seattle’s economically challenged Chief Sealth High School and a veteran teacher of 19 years, accompanied me on a walk past a barn belonging to a local farmer.

An athletic, tough-minded, early-40-something who moved to Seattle from Oregon and was the first in her family to go to college, Douglas admitted she was disillusioned.

“I thought being a decent teacher would be enough,” she said, as we passed into the shade of trees lining the road. “In the past two years at Chief Sealth, I’ve discovered it’s not.”

Her current kids are the most “at risk” of any student population she’s ever taught, she said. “Some have no parental support and come to school without being fed, without having slept the night before. I’m discovering that in my role as teacher, I can’t penetrate far enough into their lives to change what makes learning difficult for them.”

Douglas has come to a crossroads in her career: Should she take a promotion to a department chair position at a less challenging school, or stay at a school that’s threatening her sense of her identity as a teacher?

She came to the retreat to ponder this question: “Can I be an effective teacher if I’m worrying that I can’t make a difference in a system geared toward middle-class habits and values, with kids who have none of that privilege, none of that safety net, none of that parental support?”

She hoped to find the answer at the retreat’s spring-themed sessions, which focused on “renewal, re-emergence and paradox,” and through an activity most of us had never heard of before: a Quaker-style circle known as the “Clearness Committee.”

In the committee, the person seeking “discernment”—that is, guidance with a question or issue—sits in a circle with his or her peers, who attempt to ask helpful questions. The “focus person” doesn’t sit in the middle but, rather, is part of the ring of people.

“One clearness session lasts two hours,” explained Jackson, “and in that time, the peers are allowed only to ask open, honest questions to help the focus person give advice to themselves, or, put another way, to surface their own wisdom.”

If no one asks a question for a time, silence endures, he said. This is OK. Someone takes notes and gives them, at the end of the session, as a gift to the person seeking guidance.

The concept of open, honest questions is key to understanding “formation,” so Durbin and her co-facilitator, Terry Chadsey, both from Seattle, devoted almost half a day to instructing us on how to avoid “SAP” questions: questions asked to satisfy our own curiosity; questions cloaking advice; questions that merely disguise problem-solving.

The roomful of teachers looked perplexed. So what’s left?

Durbin explained that open, honest questions are the type that can be answered only by the focus person, that do not have yes or no answers, and that will help open doors into the person’s thinking without the questioner intending to fix anything.

We tried a practice session in which a participant posed her problem roughly thus: Should she finish out her teaching career in Seattle, or take early retirement and move to the East Coast to live near grandchildren, not knowing if she’d get back into teaching? Each of us wrote down what we hoped would be helpful questions.

Durbin directed the talk around the circle, asking each of us to present our questions for consideration. Every one of mine—I was not alone in this—turned out to be at best suggestive, and some openly pushed my own values. I wrote, for example, “Would you be willing to vacate your career altogether?” a not-so-subtle admonition. This, with group help, morphed into: “When faced with career changes in the past, what techniques worked for you?”

“Advice is experienced as criticism,” warned Durbin. We took a big gulp and started over.

“Teachers tell us,” said Jackson, “that the Clearness Committee is the most moving part of the retreats, the part that most facilitates change back in the classroom.”

Did it help the teachers in my group? Although they hadn’t had much time to let the experience marinate before I called a few weeks after the retreat to see how they were doing, some
reported that they saw immediate value even after just one weekend.

Christina Mastin, the former actress who felt like she was failing in her role as a teacher, changed her attitude toward her kids. “I opened up to what’s happening rather than sticking to the rules.”

She had a student who used to walk out of class most days, and when he left campus she was forced to call security, she said. He’d been suspended numerous times for various offenses. “He’d show up back in the classroom reading this novel called Gangsta,” she said. “He read it and read it.”

After going through CTT, Mastin understood that he was telling her something about himself. She took him out in the hall with his book and a clipboard. She sat down on the floor beside him and said, “OK, tell me the story.”

His vocabulary, she noted with surprise, was brilliant. “For a half hour he tells me the story. I take notes. Then I have him type them up.”

Courage to Teach reinforced her inclination to trust her instincts and not take the standard approach to this situation. “I said, ‘How can I benefit him instead of wanting him to adapt to me?’ Now I hear their voices.”

Lori Douglas, the veteran teacher at a challenging school, didn’t come to any one realization, she said, “but it did make me wonder what I’m hoping to get out of my work. If we can’t be proud of what we’re accomplishing at our school, what does that say about what we’re doing there?”

For now, she’s decided to let the opportunity for promotion go, believing there will be others, while she determines whether she can improve her experience at the more-difficult school. She’s giving it one more year. It helps to know that she’s not alone.

Jon Olver, who was frustrated by turnover of principals and the requirement to teach to the Washington Assessment of Student Learning exam, said he came out of the retreat feeling calmer.

“You go into the retreat thinking you want to fix problems. This helped me quiet my mind about that.”

Although his school is “in a great upheaval,” he said, “I’m able now to let go of my angst about the conflicts.”

He is no longer thinking about quitting. Instead, he signed up to take the National Board Certification, a credential offered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards that adds a notch to a teacher’s career status and tells others the teacher is serious about doing his job well.

The experience of these teachers suggests that Courage to Teach succeeds in promoting change from within and fostering teachers who are comfortable with who they are. The teachers are then more comfortable with who their students are.

I visited Dana Knox in her classroom about a month after I attended my CTT retreat, to ask her about life nearly seven years after she completed her two-year retreat series. She proudly showed me a mural drawn in black marker along the back wall, above a bookcase, that tells the story of creation as seen through the eyes of a former problem student.

The student, I’ll call him Sam, paid no attention to American literature. He was too busy sketching. At Knox’s suggestion, the wannabe Michelangelo lay on his back atop the classroom’s 8-foot-tall bookcase and told his own story, in pictures. Sam is now in art school, has his own Website, and is selling his paintings as a professional artist.

“You can attend any workshop and learn a new tool,” observed Knox, “but until you’ve come face to face with yourself and can open your heart and mind to the kids, it won’t make any difference in the classroom. Courage to Teach gives you the practice and space and time to face yourself.”

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For more information on Courage to Teach, visit www.teacherformation.org.

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