Reflections on a Program for “The Formation of Teachers”

An occasional paper of the Fetzer Institute

by Parker J. Palmer, Ph.D.

Teacher Formation and the Spirituality of Education

At the end of our conversation of November 19 (a fruitful day for me), you asked if I would take another day in December to write you a long memo on the spirituality of education. Specifically, you asked me to reflect on the conceptual foundations (rather than the programmatic details) of a long-term project Fetzer is designing to aid in “the formation of teachers.” You indicated that you are interested in all levels of education; that you hope to involve students and administrators as well as teachers; and that you would like to influence educational systems (including the public school system), as well as individual educators. Your vision also includes the development of your own retreat and conference center so that the work of “formation” could happen on-site, as well as around the country.

As we talked about this assignment, we agreed to focus on the formation of teachers—rather than on “teacher training”—for good reason. Formation is a concept from the spiritual traditions, and it involves a concern for personal wholeness. Where training asks if the person has the right knowledge and technique, formation asks after the state of the person’s soul. Where training offers the person new data and methods, formation offers the person help in discerning his or her identity and integrity.

This focus on teacher formation is important for at least three reasons:

• First, it is consistent with Fetzer’s larger goal in education: to develop capacities in students and teachers that will help them live healthy lives. This includes the capacity for wonder, for reverence, for life-giving attitudes toward themselves and other people.

• Second, the emphasis on the formation of teachers is consistent with my own deepest conviction about the nature of good teaching: good teaching cannot be reduced to technique. Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.

• Third, this is the kind of support teachers yearn for. Teachers often feel insulted, even abused, by “in-services” that stress gimmicks and by superiors who want only to know what the test scores look like. A program that focuses on the state of the teacher’s soul will be received with real gratitude.
Identity Is More Important than Technique

For the past 25 years, our national discourse about teaching has been obsessed with questions of techniques. But now, the limitations of that approach are becoming evident; witness a letter I received recently from a professor who has spent the past few years trying to help his colleagues grow as teachers: “My work in faculty development is fast becoming a mere puppeting of technique—a song-and-dance dummy for ‘student-centered, interactive learning.’ The workshops and projects we have developed over the past two to three years are quickly deteriorating into the shell of a new orthodoxy. We act as if real learning is simply a matter of adjusting the ways we teach instead of the ways we are.”

I do not mean that new techniques for teaching have no legitimate place in the work Fetzer will do with teachers. But I do mean that the question of methodology needs to take a distant second to helping teachers explore the primary question of who they are and how they are. No matter how plain or fancy our teaching methods may be, we tend to teach ourselves first, last, and always. We will find methods that work for us only as we become clearer and clearer about our own personal identities about what is within our integrity to do.

There is no need to adduce reams of research to prove this point. We only need to ask students, our colleagues, our friends, and ourselves to tell stories about the great and good teachers they and we have known. As one listens to these stories, it quickly becomes clear that there is no consistency of technique; some great teachers lecture a lot, some ask a lot of questions, and others play roles somewhere in-between. The consistencies have to do with qualities of being: great teachers have presence, passion, personal identification with their subjects, concern for students, a certain largeness of mind and heart. They are, in a word, “whole” people—though the very fact of their wholeness may make them appear eccentric in a society where wholeness is hardly the norm!

How can we move from this conviction about the soul-sources of good teaching into a program for the formation of teachers? The missing link is a perceptive diagnosis of how and why teachers lose their souls. What are the factors that obscure or distort the identity and integrity of the teacher so that he or she is not teaching from personal wholeness and, therefore, cannot possibly teach toward personal wholeness?

The Centrality of Fear

There are many specific answers to this question, and at least two generic questions: the obscuring/distorting forces lie outside the teacher (i.e., in the structures of schools and of professional life), or they lie inside the teacher (i.e., in certain features of the human condition). As the Fetzer program evolves, you will probably
want, and need, to deal with both inner and outer factors. But I strongly urge that the primary emphasis of the Fetzer program be on the internal factors that obscure or distort our identity. My rationale is simple: many, many programs are trying to effect educational reform from the outside in, but the greatest immediate power we have is to work for reform from the inside out. Ultimately, human wholeness does not come from changes in our institutions (as much as we need to work for such change); it comes from the re-formation of our hearts.

As I explore the inward factors that obscure or distort our identity and integrity as teachers, I keep returning to a single word: fear. The teaching-and-learning enterprise in our society is riddled with fear. Fear, not ignorance, is the enemy of learning, and it is fear that gives ignorance its power. Indeed, fear is the counterpoint of every great and good human virtue: fear, not doubt, is the counterpoint of faith; fear, not hate is the counterpoint of love; fear, not greed, is the counterpoint of generosity; fear, not betrayal, is the counterpoint of trust. It is fear that deforms our lives; it is fear that saps all the great virtues of their power to reform our lives.

If we are to deal with the formation of teachers from the standpoint of fear, it is important to understand that fear is not just a personal emotion (which is how we normally use the word), but a central feature of the culture that surrounds us as well. Fear is clearly at work in our civic culture, where the politicians too often try to win votes by playing on our fear of diversity, fear of material loss, fear of the future. Fear is clearly at work in our religious culture, where the churches too often try to recruit and retain members by playing on our fear of judgment and of death.

Fear is clearly at work in our educational culture as well. My own examination of fear in education suggests that it is rooted in at least three places—in our dominant way of knowing, in the lives of our students, and in our own hearts as adult professionals. To give you a sense of the kind of “teacher formation” that Fetzer might offer, I want to explore, briefly, the deformations created by fear in each of these three places.

**The Fear in Our Way of Knowing**

“Objectivism” is the name I give to our dominant way of knowing; it permeates education at every level—including the field of teacher training. Objectivism is the primary intellectual commitment of Western culture. It is a commitment to the notion that we cannot know anything truly and well unless we know it from such a distance that the “object” of knowledge remains uncontaminated by our own subjectivity (whether that “object” be a piece of literature, nature, history, or human nature).

This arm’s length approach to truth has been presented with such confidence, even arrogance, that it is hard to see the fear that drives it. But objectivism is full of fear—the
fear of subjectivity, the fear of relationship, the fear of being challenged and changed by that which we know.

Of course, there is good reason to fear unfettered subjectivity. I have no desire to return to an age when subjective whim reigned supreme, an age when (according to some historians) six million women were killed as witches because someone’s subjective hunch said “You’re evil.” But when the cultural pendulum swings to unfettered objectivism, the results are no less cruel: witness the Gulf War in which killing becomes acceptable because it is done at arm’s length (and this is only the most recent sign of the cruelty of an objectivist society). We need to be re-formed in a way of knowing that embraces the paradox of subjective and objective truth, a way of knowing that does not collapse into either inward or outward illusions, but one that brings us into a living dialogical relationship with the world that our knowledge gives us.

By holding us at arm’s length from the world, objectivism aims at giving us power over things—and our need for such power is directly related to our fear of living in the world. We need a way of knowing that makes us not masters but partners, cocreators. I am not a romantic: we need a way of knowing that gives us the power to survive in the world. But we also need a way of knowing that gives the world the power to survive us by transforming our lives. We need a way of knowing that brings us into a living relationship with all we know so that our knowledge itself will be a source of community rather than control. This way of knowing will emerge only as we address the fear that lies behind our commitment of objectivism.

This can be said more precisely: our need is not to “invent” a new way of knowing (an impossible task even if it were needed!). Our need is to develop concepts and images that more faithfully reflect the actual way we know. Objectivism, with its emphasis on cold facts and logic, gives a very unreal picture of how humans know their world (see the work of Michael Polanyi or Evelyn Fox Keller); and the objectivist conceit that human beings can own and operate the world by knowing it is nothing more than an egocentric, self-serving fantasy, one that is now dissolving around us.

The fear that is in our images of knowing is the first fear to be confronted and healed in a program of teacher formation; until these images change, our fearful ways of teaching will remain the same. Our one-dimensional, power-oriented pedagogy simply reflects an epistemology that has these same traits. To deal effectively with teacher formation, Fetzer must help teachers develop an epistemology that respects the complexity of human knowing, one that does not approach the world as a combat zone but as a viable place of grace.

The Fear in Our Students
The Fetzer program must also help teachers develop an alternative understanding of the condition of our students, in whose lives we find the second locus of the fear that deforms education.

Students have a bad reputation these days. Too many teachers, when asked to name the major obstacle to good teaching, will say, “My students.” They will describe their students as either passive and disengaged from the learning process (even brain-dead) or actively hostile to it. If you press these teachers to explain how students got this way, you often hear the same diagnoses that are popular in the mass media: public education fails to teach youngsters the basics; TV creates people with short attention spans who want to be entertained rather than taught; family breakdown leaves children without a readiness to learn and without basic values; etc. 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.”

Doubtless there is some truth to all of these explanations of why students act as if they would rather not be in class. But there are two reasons why these explanations are ultimately unacceptable. First, because they place the blame somewhere else, they give us little or no insight into what we might do to make the classroom a place where students can come more fully into their own. Second, none of these explanations gets inside the experience of young people in this society, so none of them touches the real reason why children develop a distaste for learning—which is, after all, an essential and enjoyable part of what it means to be human.

A deeper diagnosis of the student condition begins with the fact that students are marginal people in our society. Not only does our society fail to put positive value on the lives of the young; many young people feel that the society constantly puts them down: “You have no experience of any consequence, no knowledge of any value, no voice worth hearing.” How do people respond when they are marginalized by a society? We need only look at the history of other marginal groups (blacks and women, for example) for an answer. Marginal people withdraw. They become passive (and sometimes passive-aggressive), and they fall into silence—at least in the face of power.

In the presence of power, marginal people seek safety in silence. Our students are silent and even sullen, not because they are brain-dead but because they are filled with the same fear that has always haunted marginal people. It is the fear of having one’s voice denied once again, the fear of speaking one’s truth only to hear it called false, the deep-down fear that perhaps it is true that one has “nothing of value to say.”

It should not surprise us that fear plays such a central role in our students’ lives. After all, schools have always played on fear to enforce their educational norms—especially the fear of failure. If we are going to deal seriously with “the formation of teachers,” we must help teachers become people who have no need to control others
by playing on their fears. More than that, we must help them become people who have
the inner strength to help heal the fears of their students and (in the words of Nelle
Morton) help “hear them into speech.”

If we are to become teachers of this sort, our first need is not for new techniques,
although there are methods of active listening that are worth learning. But our first
need is for a more generous diagnosis of our students’ concerns, a diagnosis that will
help us understand why our pedagogy needs to be less judgmental and punitive, and
more compassionate and evocative.

The Fear in the Teacher’s Heart

If teachers are to become healers for their students, they must first work to heal
themselves. Our great need as adult professionals is to acknowledge and reveal the
fears that permeate our own lives so that we can stop feeding the fear in the world and
start relieving it.

Of course, one of the givens of professional life is that one never reveals one’s fears!
But everyone who teaches knows that fear abounds in the profession—from the fear of
not knowing the answer, to the fear of losing control, to the fear of never knowing
whether one’s work has made a difference. All these fears are worth exploring, and
some of them reach deeply into our souls. But there is one fear that most teachers feel,
though few ever name, a fear that reaches more deeply into our adult lives than any of
the others. It is our fear of the judgment of the young.

The daily experiences of many teachers is to stand before a sea of faces younger
than one’s own, faces that too often seem bored, sullen, even hostile. Even when one
knows that these visages merely mask the fear in many students’ hearts, it is still
discharging to stare into so much apparent disconfirmation day after day after day.
The message from the younger generation that many teachers take home each night
runs something like this: “We do not care about you and your values...You have been
left in the dust by a culture whose words and music you don’t even understand...You
and your generation are on the way out, so why n
ot just step aside and give us room to
grow?” It is a difficult message to bear—especially in a profession where one grows old
at a geometric rate, while one’s charges remain young, year in and year out!

The psychiatrist Erik Erickson has postulated that in middle age (and all teachers
are middle-aged), one faces a critical choice between “generativity” and “stagnation.”
Generativity is a more precise term than creativity. It is the capacity to turn to the new
life that is emerging in the wake of one’s own aging, as it were, and to help that new
life come into its own—thus renewing one’s self as well. (This “new life” could be one’s
children, one’s students, new ideas, a new culture.) Stagnation sets in when those who
are aging perceive the new life as holding more threat than promise, and react to the
threat by building barriers of self-protection—thereby protecting themselves against the threat but cutting themselves off from the chance for self-renewal as well.

Stagnation is the major occupational hazard of teaching. For evidence, look at the number of teachers who seek refuge in the cynicism against the perceived onslaughts of the younger generation. Cynicism is a way of saying to young people, “Who needs you? I am an adult with a degree, a job, an income, and power over your lives: your opinions make no difference to me at all. I will suffer your presence because my job requires it, but I will not enter into any sort of relationship with you that requires me to take you seriously.”

Cynicism may offer protection against minor cuts and abrasions, but only at the price of a mortal, self-inflicted wound to one’s heart: cynicism cuts one off from the great cycle of renewal that goes on between the generations. A program of “teacher formation” will take this issue very seriously. It will help teachers see that our vocation offers extraordinary opportunities for entering daily into this cycle of renewal. It will help us understand that “generativity” has even more benefits for the teacher than it does for the young who we teach.

A Reflective Postscript

What I have tried to do in these notes is to illustrate a conceptual approach to a program on the spiritual formation of teachers. There are other concepts one might work with, but I have found the concept of “fear” to be a major doorway into the subject. That is, I believe that the problem of fear is a (perhaps “the”) fundamental spiritual problem, and that a deep-reaching exploration of fear will take us into the ultimate spiritual questions: “Do I have ground on which to stand?”

Throughout this memo, My hidden agenda was to explore the “spirituality of education” with minimal use of traditional spiritual images, and of the word “spiritual”: I am convinced that in many of the settings where Fetzer would like to work with teachers, that word and those images will close more doors than they will open. They will close doors not only because of church-state issues, not only because some people are either embarrassed or dogmatic about religion, but also because “New Age” rhetoric has alienated many people from spiritual discourse with its false optimism about how everything from cancer to war will disappear once we get our attitudes straight.

Instead of focusing on spiritual concepts like faith and trust and grace, my focus has been on the human problem of fear. My educational strategy is (1) to deal with a problem that nearly everyone knows is real, and (2) to deal with it so deeply that people are forced to start thinking about fear’s antidotes. The antidotes, of course, are things like faith and trust and grace! But by compelling people to come up with their
own language for such things, and their own experiences of them, we create a far deeper-reaching program of teacher formation than we get when we write the spiritual prescription.

I was not asked to detail the pedagogy for such a program; that might be the focus of our next consultation. But here are some pedagogical keys to a course on the spiritual formation of teachers, as I see them:

• Insist on taking enough time for people to build trust and learn to speak from their hearts rather than accepting conventional images of “how busy we all are” (e.g., make Friday evening through Sunday noon the minimum length of a formation program).

• Provide constant opportunities for teachers to articulate and explore their own experience as teachers (rather than telling them what it is or should be).

• Offer insightful ways of “reframing” their experience so they can understand and respond to it more deeply (e.g., not as problems of technique but as questions of identity and integrity).

• Allow any discussion of methods to arise from their collective experience and from brainstorming (rather than deducing methods from someone’s theory of spiritual development).

• Make sure that the program’s design and leadership model the thing being talked about, rather than just talking about it (e.g., the facilitator needs to be able to expose his or her fears).

• Let the program’s “spirituality” be more evident in the ethos and process of the program itself (i.e., in the way it builds trust and draws upon the wisdom of participants) than in its rhetoric.

Ultimately, it is important that you be able to take teacher formation “on the road” where the maximum number of teachers can have access to it. But the program should begin onsite at the Fetzer Institute, where you can invite selected teachers, under controlled conditions, into a critical experiment with program design. Then it can be taken into the field, where you can deal with variations in context and teacher readiness once you have a design that is tried and true.

I hope these notes will help things along; if I can help with the next steps in this important experiment, I will be glad to.

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**About the Author:** Parker J. Palmer, founder and Senior Partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a world-renowned writer, speaker and activist. He has reached
millions worldwide through his nine books, including the bestselling *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Courage to Teach*, *A Hidden Wholeness*, and *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Parker holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, along with eleven honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press. In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. In 2011, he was named an Utne Reader Visionary, one of “25 people who are changing your world.”)