

*Bank Street College of Education Commencement Address*

Parker J. Palmer

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It is a great honor to receive this honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from the Bank Street College of Education, with its long and distinguished history of serving the needs of children and public education in this city and in this country. You have my heartfelt thanks.

But the most important honors of this day go to the men and women who are graduating with hard-won degrees in hand. I can express my respect and admiration for you simply by stating what I believe to be true about public school educators: they—you—are the culture heroes of our time.

Every day, public school teachers and administrators must deal with the consequences, in the lives of our precious children, of such crushing wrongs as poverty and injustice—wronges that we as a society lack either the wit and the will to set right. Every day, public school educators are berated by politicians, the public, and the press for their alleged inadequacy in solving these problems. And every day these teachers and administrators go back to school to serve—with good minds and open hearts—the children we place in their care.

Here in New York City—where the horrific events of September 11, 2001, taught us to value and respect our society's "first responders"—I want to put it this way: public school educators are the first responders to the cultural, economic and political catastrophes that continue to afflict us. Our society must learn to value and respect our teachers as much as our police and fire fighters for

their courage when life is at risk. For the truth is that the lives of children in twenty-first century America are in great jeopardy.

I respect and admire you for being willing to stand in the tragic gap between what is and what could and should be in public education—to stand there courageously and help bring the possible into being. But, as you know, far too many people who enter public school teaching are gone within a few short years because the conditions in which they work are so discouraging. In the short run, those conditions are not going to change appreciably. So I want to urge you to do three things that can give you longevity in the vital work of educating our young, work that is both sacred and daunting.

The first is to attend to your own inner life. Good teaching comes not from technique but from the teacher's selfhood, from your own identity and integrity, from your soul. Caring for your soul is as important as caring for your body: let either one go to rack and ruin, and you will no longer be able to serve. Find some way—journaling, reading, meditating, walking in the park, or whatever works for you—to stay close to the passions that took you into education in the first place. Constantly rekindle your love for students, for a subject matter, for teaching and learning itself.

Just as the abrasions of everyday life can dull us to the precious love of another person, so the conditions in the workplace can dull us to the precious opportunities of teaching. In fact, I can guarantee that they will. I can also guarantee that, as can happen in any love affair, you will find your heart broken by teaching, by what happens in our schools or by the plight of some students. But by attending to your inner life, you can cultivate the gratitude that keeps love alive and learn to hold your heart in a way that allows it to be broken open,

not apart—broken open to greater capacity to hold the suffering and the joy of the young people entrusted to your care, and to their immense potentials.

There is a second thing that will help you stay in this work for the long haul. Join with others in a community of support, a community that knows how to “hear each other into speech,” to use a lovely phrase from Nelle Morton. And if a community is not there to join, create one.

I am not talking about a gripe-group, a pity-party, or a gaggle of amateur therapists who try to fix each other, doing more harm than good in the process. I am talking about a small cadre of soul-friends who can assist you in keeping your soul joined to your role by helping you to listen to the most important teacher of all—the inner teacher who wants you to be whole, stay whole, and pass that wholeness on to others. To do that, you need to spend time with people who can see beneath the brokenness of life in the moment and honor the wholeness that is deep within you, that is waiting to reweave your life.

With your heart in hand and a community to help you hold to it, there is one more thing I urge you to do. Join in the politics around public education, protesting injustice and proposing paths toward justice. Learn to speak truth to power inside and outside of schools. Become an agent of the nonviolent reformation that all our institutions need. Your soul wants you to do that. This society needs you to do that. Sometimes the best therapy is not personal and private but public and political. You need not, you must not, settle for institutional conditions that distort the educational mission or insult the soul—yours, your colleagues’, or your students’.

So, to keep the heart of a teacher alive in you, join a movement for integrity in public education. Tell the world at large that the mission of caring for

and educating the young is far too important to be left up to the people who know the least about it—the politicians. Be a teacher who speaks up not only in the classroom and in staff meetings but in the public square and you will do yourself, and all of us, a great service.

I thank you, I congratulate you, I offer you my respect and admiration, and I wish you Godspeed!