

## **Learning Communities: Reweaving the Culture of Disconnection**

### **Excerpts from a keynote address by Parker J. Palmer**

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After reading the FIPSE report-and sensing the spirit of this conference-I can tell that there has been a big change in the question that the advocates of "learning communities" have been pressing upon the university.

A few years ago, you were asking the powers-that-be, "Would you mind if we created a few 'structures of connectedness' that would relate teachers and students and subjects in some new ways?" Today, you seem to be asking, "Would you mind if we fundamentally undermine academic culture and transform some of its most basic values-not just its structures but the habits of heart and mind that academics tend to bring to their work?" And for some strange reason, the response you are getting today is less benign and more resistant than the response you were getting several years ago!

The FIPSE report shows that you can't create structures of connectedness in the academy without challenging other dimensions of that culture. As soon as you start working toward more connectedness-between faculty, between faculty and students- my question is, "Why is connectedness so difficult to achieve in the university?" Lest that seem like a no-brainer, let me press it a little deeper. "Why is connectedness so difficult to achieve when we know -- with considerable certainty -- that it is connectedness that allows us best to pursue our mission, the mission of knowing, teaching, and learning?"

We know that knowing, teaching, and learning are communal acts. We also have several generations of solid research on the fact that pedagogies and curricula-of connectedness help people get smarter faster about complex fields of information than do competition and dumping data into people's heads. We know these things -- so is connectedness so difficult to achieve in higher education?

The basic answer I want to give is that the academy has cultivated a powerful culture in which disconnection is regarded as a virtue rather than the pathology that it is. If we don't face that fact -- and understand why it is so -- I don't think we are going to get very far with our agenda for institutional change.

Academic culture holds disconnection as a virtue on at least two levels: intellectual and sociological. Intellectually, the academy is committed to an epistemology, a way of knowing, which claims that if you don't disconnect yourself from the object of study -- whether it's an episode in history, or a body of literature, or a phenomenon of the natural world -- your knowledge of it will not be valid.

This "objectivism" claims that, if you don't create distance between yourself and that object of knowing, the worst possible thing will happen: your subjectivity will slop over onto it and your knowledge of it will be impure. The implicit concept of truth in academic culture is that it consists of objects of knowledge delivered to others, as it were, "untouched by human hands," antiseptic and uncontaminated. Objective truth has been construed-or misconstrued-as knowledge that lacks any connection to the inwardness of the human spirit, the human heart, the human soul.

For a century and more we have venerated "detached scholarship" (while disciplines that require close encounters between the knower and the known-art, music, dance, and the like-have been pushed to the bottom of the academic totem pole). When subjectivity is factored out of knowing, discredited by our epistemology, relationship disappears: there is no relationship without an investment of selfhood in "the other." Analytic rationality alone cannot connect me to thee.

I only have two problems with this objectivist epistemology. One is that it is morally deforming, and the other is that it's not true. Aside from that, I think it's a splendid way of doing business!

The claim that objectivism is untrue is grounded in my reading of the intellectual biographies of scholars from many fields: I have yet to find one whose knowledge did not emerge from a deep and often costly investment of selfhood in the world he or she was studying.

**"I believe-that we educators hold in our hands the power to form, or deform, students' souls, their sense of self and their relation to the world."**

Objectivism is morally deforming because it sets students at arm's length from the world they are studying: they end up with a head full of knowledge but without any sense of personal responsibility for what they know, no sense of connectedness to the world that their knowledge reveals to them.

My own story is typical, I think. I was educated in the history of the Holocaust by objectivist historians who, because of their distanced approach, left me feeling that all of those horrors had happened on another planet, to another species. I failed to learn that the very community in which I grew up, on the North Shore of Chicago, practiced its own form of systemic antisemitism. Lacking that knowledge was morally deficient.

Deeper still, my objectivist introduction to the Holocaust utterly failed to reveal that I had within myself a kind of fascism of the heart-I mean a shadow that rises up when the difference between you and me gets too great, when you threaten my conception of what's good or true or beautiful, and I need to find some way to kill you off. I will do it not with a gun or a gas chamber but with some sort of mental dismissal ("Oh, you're just a this or that...") that renders you lifeless, irrelevant to my world. Ignorant about the fascism in my own heart, I was not only morally deficient but morally dangerous.

It is not a real education when a student is given information about "the big story" at such dispassionate distance that it does not connect with "the little story" of his or her life. Indeed, that practice is the root of ethical deformation: we need to ask why the academy regards it as a virtue when it breeds the sort of cultured ignorance that makes so-called educated people deeply dangerous.

Why is the culture of disconnection so tenacious? Because it makes education-and lifeless messy and more manageable when we teach, learn, and live at arm's length from the world and from ourselves. What will it take for us to insist on making these connections despite their inherent messiness? We must overcome our rightful fear that the power of the institution will come down on us with punishment when we challenge its most deeply rooted commitments.

How do people overcome the fear of punishment-people like Rosa Parks, Vaclav Havel, Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela and all the unnamed thousands whose courage they represent? I believe that these people came to a moment of realization-a moment that we can experience as well-when they understood that no punishment anyone could lay on them could possibly be greater than the punishment they laid on themselves by conspiring in their own diminishment.

These exemplars of authentically high culture are people who finally decided to live "divided no more," to no longer act on the outside in a way that defied some truth they held deeply on the inside. Only so could Rosa Parks find the power to confront and help transform the system of racism with which she had collaborated by sitting at the back of the bus...

Are the moral stakes in our work as high as those in the great social struggles I have cited? I believe they are. I believe that we educators hold in our hands the power to form, or deform, students' souls, their sense of self and their relation to the world. The world is badly served by a system of education that disconnects people from each other, from their own hearts, and from their own knowledge, thus encouraging the divided life. The ethics of knowing, teaching, and learning are our responsibility-so I feel proud to be associated in any way with the work represented at this conference. I wish you power and hope as you carry it forward.

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Parker J. Palmer is a teacher, writer, and activist whose most recent books are *The Courage to Teach* and *Let Your Life Speak*. 1998, The Leadership Project, a national survey of 11,000 faculty and administrators, named Dr. Palmer as one of the thirty "most influential senior leaders" in higher education and one of the ten key "agenda-setters" of the past decade.