

The Courage to Teach

EXPLORING THE INNER LANDSCAPE OF
A TEACHER'S LIFE

Parker J. Palmer



Jossey-Bass Publishers
SAN FRANCISCO

Chapter I

The Heart of a Teacher

Identity and Integrity in Teaching



Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces . . .

—MAY SARTON, "NOW I BECOME MYSELF"

TEACHING BEYOND TECHNIQUE

Not long before I started this book, as summer took a slow turn toward fall, I walked into a college classroom and into my third decade of teaching.

I went to class that day grateful for another chance to teach; teaching engages my soul as much as any work I know. But I came home that evening convinced once again that I will never master this baffling vocation. Annoyed with some of my students and embarrassed by my own blunders, I pondered a recurring question: Might it be possible, at my age, to find a new line of work, maybe even something I know how to do?

The students in my first section were silent as monks. Despite my shameless pleading, I could not buy a response from them, and I soon found myself sinking into one of my oldest phobias: I must be very boring to anesthetize, so quickly, these young people who only moments earlier had been alive with hallway chatter.

In the second section they talked, but the talk flared into conflict as one student insisted that the concerns of another student were "petty" and did not deserve attention. I masked my irritation and

urged open listening to diverse views, but the air was already polluted, and the dialogue died. That, of course, sank me into another ancient angst: how awkward I am at dealing with conflict when my students decide to start talking!

I have taught thousands of students, attended many seminars on teaching, watched others teach, read about teaching, and reflected on my own experience. My stockpile of methods is substantial. But when I walk into a new class, it is as if I am starting over. My problems are perennial, familiar to all teachers. Still, they take me by surprise, and my responses to them—though outwardly smoother with each year—feel almost as fumbling as they did when I was a novice.

After three decades of trying to learn my craft, every class comes down to this: my students and I, face to face, engaged in an ancient and exacting exchange called education. The techniques I have mastered do not disappear, but neither do they suffice. Face to face with my students, only one resource is at my immediate command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this “I” who teaches—without which I have no sense of the “Thou” who learns.

This book builds on a simple premise: *good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.*

The premise is simple, but its implications are not. It will take time to unfold what I do and do not mean by those words. But here is one way to put it: in every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood—and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning.

My evidence for this claim comes, in part, from years of asking students to tell me about their good teachers. Listening to those stories, it becomes impossible to claim that all good teachers use similar techniques: some lecture nonstop and others speak very little; some stay close to their material and others loose the imagination; some teach with the carrot and others with the stick.

But in every story I have heard, good teachers share one trait: a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work. “Dr. A is really *there* when she teaches,” a student tells me, or “Mr. B has such enthusiasm for his subject,” or “You can tell that this is really Prof. C’s life.”

One student I heard about said she could not describe her good teachers because they differed so greatly, one from another. But she could describe her bad teachers because they were all the same: “Their words float somewhere in front of their faces, like the balloon speech in cartoons.”

With one remarkable image she said it all. Bad teachers distance themselves from the subject they are teaching—and in the process, from their students. Good teachers join self and subject and students in the fabric of life.

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The methods used by these weavers vary widely: lectures, Socratic dialogues, laboratory experiments, collaborative problem solving, creative chaos. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—meaning *heart* in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.

As good teachers weave the fabric that joins them with students and subjects, the heart is the loom on which the threads are tied, the tension is held, the shuttle flies, and the fabric is stretched tight. Small wonder, then, that teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart—and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require.

If teaching cannot be reduced to technique, it is both good news and bad. The good news is that we no longer need suffer the boredom many of us feel when teaching is approached as a question of “how to do it.” We rarely talk with each other about teaching at any depth—and why should we when we have nothing more than “tips, tricks, and techniques” to discuss? That kind of talk fails to touch the heart of a teacher’s experience.

The good news gets even better. If teaching cannot be reduced to technique, I no longer need suffer the pain of having my peculiar gift as a teacher crammed into the Procrustean bed of someone else’s

method and the standards prescribed by it. That pain is felt throughout education today as we glorify the method *du jour*, leaving people who teach differently feeling devalued, forcing them to measure up to norms not their own.

I will never forget one professor who, moments before I was to start a workshop on teaching, unloaded years of pent-up workshop animus on me: "I am an organic chemist. Are you going to spend the next two days telling me that I am supposed to teach organic chemistry through role playing?" We must find an approach to teaching that respects the diversity of teachers and subjects, which methodological reductionism fails to do.

The good news is very good, but the bad news is daunting. If identity and integrity are more fundamental to good teaching than technique—and if we want to grow as teachers—we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract.

I was reminded of that fear recently as I listened to a group of faculty argue about what to do when students share personal experiences in class—experiences that are related to the themes of the course but that some professors regard as "more suited to a therapy session than to a college classroom."

The house soon divided along predictable lines. On one side were the scholars, insisting that the subject is primary and must never be compromised for the sake of the students' lives. On the other side were the student-centered folks, insisting that the lives of students must always come first even if it means that the subject gets short-changed. The more vigorously these camps promoted their polarized ideas, the more antagonistic they became—and the less they learned about pedagogy or about themselves.

The gap between these views seems unbridgeable—until we understand what creates it. At bottom, these professors were not debating teaching techniques. They were revealing the diversity of identity and integrity among themselves, saying, in various ways, "Here are my own limits and potentials when it comes to dealing with the relation between the subject and my students' lives."

If we stopped lobbing pedagogical points at each other and spoke about *who we are* as teachers, a remarkable thing might hap-

pen: identity and integrity might grow within us and among us, instead of hardening as they do when we defend our fixed positions from the foxholes of the pedagogy wars.

TEACHING AND TRUE SELF

The claim that good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher might sound like a truism, and a pious one at that: good teaching comes from good people.

But by identity and integrity I do not mean only our noble features, or the good deeds we do, or the brave faces we wear to conceal our confusions and complexities. Identity and integrity have as much to do with our shadows and limits, our wounds and fears, as with our strengths and potentials.

By *identity* I mean an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self: my genetic makeup, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others and to myself, the experience of love and suffering—and much, much more. In the midst of that complex field, identity is a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human.

By *integrity* I mean whatever wholeness I am able to find within that nexus as its vectors form and re-form the pattern of my life. Integrity requires that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not—and that I choose life-giving ways of relating to the forces that converge within me: Do I welcome them or fear them, embrace them or reject them, move with them or against them? By choosing integrity, I become more whole, but wholeness does not mean perfection. It means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am.

Identity and integrity are not the granite from which fictional heroes are hewn. They are subtle dimensions of the complex, demanding, and lifelong process of self-discovery. *Identity* lies in the intersection of the diverse forces that make up my life, and *integrity* lies in relating to those forces in ways that bring me wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death.

Those are my definitions—but try as I might to refine them, they always come out too pat. Identity and integrity can never be fully named or known by anyone, including the person who bears them. They constitute that familiar strangeness we take with us to the grave, elusive realities that can be caught only occasionally out of the corner of the eye.

Stories are the best way to portray realities of this sort, so here is a tale of two teachers, a tale based on people I have known, whose lives tell me more about the subtleties of identity and integrity than any theory could.

Alan and Eric were born into two different families of skilled craftspeople, rural folk with little formal schooling but gifted in the manual arts. Both boys evinced this gift from childhood onward, and as each grew in the skill of working with his hands, each developed a sense of self in which the pride of craft was key.

The two shared another gift as well: both excelled in school and became the first in their working-class families to go to college. Both did well as undergraduates, both were admitted to graduate school, both earned doctorates, and both chose academic careers.

But here their paths diverged. Though the gift of craft was central in both men's sense of self, Alan was able to weave that gift into his academic vocation, whereas the fabric of Eric's life unraveled early on.

Catapulted from his rural community into an elite private college at age eighteen, Eric suffered culture shock and never overcame it. He was insecure with fellow students and, later, with academic colleagues who came from backgrounds he saw as more "cultured" than his own. He learned to speak and act like an intellectual, but he always felt fraudulent among people who were, in his eyes, to the manor born.

But insecurity neither altered Eric's course nor drew him into self-reflection. Instead, he bullied his way into professional life on the theory that the best defense is a good offense. He made pronouncements rather than probes. He listened for weaknesses rather than strengths in what other people said. He argued with anyone about anything—and responded with veiled contempt to whatever was said in return.

In the classroom, Eric was critical and judgmental, quick to put down the "stupid question," adept at trapping students with trick

questions of his own, then merciless in mocking wrong answers. He seemed driven by a need to inflict on his students the same wound that academic life had inflicted on him—the wound of being embarrassed by some essential part of one's self.

But when Eric went home to his workbench and lost himself in craft, he found himself as well. He became warm and welcoming, at home in the world and glad to extend hospitality to others. Reconnected with his roots, centered in his true self, he was able to reclaim a quiet and confident core—which he quickly lost as soon as he returned to campus.

Alan's is a different story. His leap from countryside to campus did not induce culture shock, in part because he attended a land-grant university where many students had backgrounds much like his own. He was not driven to hide his gift but was able to honor and transform it by turning it toward things academic: he brought to his study, and later to his teaching and research, the same sense of craft that his ancestors brought to their work with metal and wood.

Watching Alan teach, you felt that you were watching a craftsman at work—and if you knew his history, you understood that this feeling was more than metaphor. In his lectures, every move Alan made was informed by attention to detail and respect for the materials at hand; he connected ideas with the precision of dovetail joinery and finished the job with a polished summary.

But the power of Alan's teaching went well beyond crafted performance. His students knew that Alan would extend himself with great generosity to any of them who wanted to become an apprentice in his field, just as the elders in his own family had extended themselves to help young Alan grow in his original craft.

Alan taught from an undivided self—an integral state of being central to good teaching and a concept central to this book. In the undivided self, every major thread of one's life experience is honored, creating a weave of such coherence and strength that it can hold students and subject as well as self. Such a self, inwardly integrated, is able to make the outward connections on which good teaching depends.

But Eric failed to weave the central strand of his identity into his academic vocation. His was a self divided, engaged in a civil war. He projected that inner warfare onto the outer world, and his teaching devolved into combat instead of craft. The divided self will always

distance itself from others, and may even try to destroy them, to defend its fragile identity.

If Eric had not been alienated as an undergraduate—or if his alienation had led to self-reflection instead of self-defense—it is possible that he, like Alan, could have found integrity in his academic vocation, could have woven the major strands of his identity into his work. But part of the mystery of selfhood is the fact that one size does not fit all: what is integral to one person lacks integrity for another. Throughout his life there were persistent clues that academia was not a life-giving choice for Eric, not a context in which his true self could emerge healthy and whole, not a vocation integral to his unique nature.

The self is not infinitely elastic—it has potentials and it has limits. If the work we do lacks integrity for us, then we, the work, and the people we do it with will suffer. Alan's self was enlarged by his academic vocation, and the work he did was a joy to behold. Eric's self was diminished by his encounter with academia, and choosing a different vocation might have been his only way to recover integrity lost.

Gandhi called his life “experiments with truth,” and experimenting in the complex field of forces that bear on our lives is how we learn more about our integrity.² We learn experimentally that we thrive on some connections and wither with others, that we enhance our integrity by choosing relationships that give us life and violate it by assenting to those that do not.

Experimentation is risky. We rarely know in advance what will give us life and what will sap life away. But if we want to deepen our understanding of our own integrity, experiment we must—and then be willing to make choices as we view the experimental results.

“All real living is meeting,” said Martin Buber, and teaching is endless meeting.³ Staying open to new meetings, trying to distinguish those that have integrity from those that do not, is a tiring and sometimes frightening task. I am often tempted to protect my sense of self behind barricades of status or role, to withhold myself from colleagues or students or ideas and from the collisions we will surely have.

When I succumb to that temptation, my identity and integrity are diminished—and I lose the heart to teach.

WHEN TEACHERS LOSE HEART

Many of us became teachers for reasons of the heart, animated by a passion for some subject and for helping people learn. But many of us lose heart as the years of teaching go by. How can we take heart in teaching once more so that we can, as good teachers always do, give heart to our students?

We lose heart, in part, because teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability. I need not reveal personal secrets to feel naked in front of a class. I need only parse a sentence or work a proof on the board while my students doze off or pass notes. No matter how technical my subject may be, the things I teach are things I care about—and what I care about helps define my selfhood.

Unlike many professions, teaching is always done at the dangerous intersection of personal and public life. A good therapist must work in a personal way, but never publicly: the therapist who reveals as much as a client's name is derelict. A good trial lawyer must work in a public forum but remain unswayed by personal opinion: the lawyer who allows private feelings about a client's guilt to weaken the client's defense is guilty of malpractice.

But a good teacher must stand where personal and public meet, dealing with the thundering flow of traffic at an intersection where "weaving a web of connectedness" feels more like crossing a freeway on foot. As we try to connect ourselves and our subjects with our students, we make ourselves, as well as our subjects, vulnerable to indifference, judgment, ridicule.

To reduce our vulnerability, we disconnect from students, from subjects, and even from ourselves. We build a wall between inner truth and outer performance, and we play-act the teacher's part. Our words, spoken at remove from our hearts, become "the balloon speech in cartoons," and we become caricatures of ourselves. We distance ourselves from students and subject to minimize the danger—forgetting that distance makes life more dangerous still by isolating the self.

This "self-protective" split of personhood from practice is encouraged by an academic culture that distrusts personal truth. Though the academy claims to value multiple modes of knowing, it

honors only one—an “objective” way of knowing that takes us into the “real” world by taking us “out of ourselves.”

In this culture, objective facts are regarded as pure, while subjective feelings are suspect and sullied. In this culture, the self is not a source to be tapped but a danger to be suppressed, not a potential to be fulfilled but an obstacle to be overcome. In this culture, the pathology of speech disconnected from self is regarded, and rewarded, as a virtue.

If my sketch of the academic bias against selfhood seems overdone, here is a story from a class that I taught at a large university some years ago.

I assigned my students a series of brief analytical essays involving themes in the texts we were going to be reading. Then I assigned a parallel series of autobiographical sketches, related to those themes, so that my students could see connections between the textbook concepts and their own lives.

After the first class, a student came up to me and inquired, “In those autobiographical essays you asked us to write, is it OK to use the word ‘I’?”

I did not know whether to laugh or cry—but I knew that my response would have considerable impact on a young man who had just opened himself to ridicule. I told him that not only could he use the word “I,” but I hoped he would use it freely and often. Then I asked what had led to his question.

“I’m a history major,” he said, “and each time I use ‘I’ in a paper, they knock off half a grade.”

The academic bias against subjectivity not only forces our students to write poorly (“It is believed . . .,” instead of “I believe . . .”) but also deforms their thinking about themselves and their world. In a single stroke, we delude our students into thinking that bad prose can turn opinions into facts, and we alienate them from their own inner lives.

Faculty often complain that students have no regard for the gifts of insight and understanding that are the true payoff of education—they care only about short-term outcomes in the “real” world: “Will this major get me a job?” “How will this assignment be useful in ‘real’ life?”

But those are not the questions deep in our students' hearts. They are merely the questions they have been taught to ask, not only by tuition-paying parents who want their children to be employable but also by an academic culture that distrusts and devalues inner reality. Of course our students are cynical about the inner outcomes of education: we teach them that the subjective self is unvalued and even unreal. Their cynicism simply proves that when academic culture dismisses inner truth and honors only the external world, students as well as teachers lose heart.

How can we who teach reclaim our hearts, for the sake of our students, ourselves, and educational reform? That simple question challenges the assumption that drives most reform—that meaningful change comes not from the human heart but from factors external to ourselves, from budgets, methodologies, curricula, and institutional restructuring. Deeper still, it challenges the assumptions about reality and power that drive Western culture.

The foundation of any culture lies in the way it answers the question "Where do reality and power reside?" For some cultures the answer is the gods; for some it is nature; for some it is tradition. In our culture, the answer is clear: reality and power reside in the external world of objects and events and in the sciences that study that world, while the inner realm of the heart is a romantic fantasy, an escape from harsh realities, perhaps, but surely not a source of leverage over the "real" world.

We are obsessed with manipulating externals because we believe that they will give us some power over reality and win us some freedom from its constraints. Mesmerized by a technology that seems to have done just that, we dismiss the inward world. We turn every question we face into an objective problem to be solved—and we believe that for every objective problem there is some sort of technical fix. That is why we train doctors to repair the body but not to honor the spirit; clergy to be CEOs but not spiritual guides; teachers to master techniques but not to engage their students' souls.

Yet at this point in history it should be clear that external "fixes" will not come soon enough to sustain the deepest passions of people who care about teaching. Institutions reform slowly, and as long as we wait, depending on "them" to do the job for us—forgetting that

institutions are also “us”—we merely postpone reform and continue the slow slide into cynicism that characterizes too many teaching careers.

There is an alternative to waiting: we can reclaim our belief in the power of inwardness to transform our work and our lives. We became teachers because we once believed that ideas and insight are at least as real and powerful as the world that surrounds us. Now we must remind ourselves that inner reality can give us leverage in the realm of objects and events.

We will find such a reminder in the testimony of Václav Havel, poet and man of practical affairs, a leader in the Velvet Revolution that liberated Czechoslovakia from Soviet rule. It was a revolution that succeeded in the face of obstacles considerably more daunting than those stacked against educational reform.

Havel, now president of the Czech Republic, writes about spending years “under a rock” of institutional oppression that was dropped on the Czech people in the Communist coup of 1968. Then he speaks of the inward seed of human consciousness and how it grew into a flower of reform that cracked and crumbled the granite of totalitarianism a mere twenty years later: “The . . . experience I’m talking about has given me one certainty: . . . the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in . . . human consciousness, nothing will change for the better, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed . . . will be unavoidable.”

Havel helped the Czech people reclaim their hearts by reminding them who they, and all of us, are: not victims of external forces but persons possessed of an inner power that cannot be taken from us, though we can and do give it away.

Remembering ourselves and our power can lead to revolution, but it requires more than recalling a few facts. *Re-membering* involves putting ourselves back together, recovering identity and integrity, reclaiming the wholeness of our lives. When we forget who we are we do not merely drop some data. We *dis-member* ourselves, with unhappy consequences for our politics, our work, our hearts.

Academics often suffer the pain of dismemberment. On the surface, this is the pain of people who thought they were joining a community of scholars but find themselves in distant, competitive,

and uncaring relationships with colleagues and students. Deeper down, this pain is more spiritual than sociological: it comes from being disconnected from our own truth, from the passions that took us into teaching, from the heart that is the source of all good work.

If we have lost the heart to teach, how can we take heart again? How can we re-member who we are, for our own sake and the sake of those we serve?

MENTORS WHO EVOKED US

If identity and integrity are found at the intersection of the forces that converge in our lives, revisiting some of the convergences that called us toward teaching may allow us to reclaim the selfhood from which good teaching comes. In this section and the next, I want to reflect on two such encounters—with the mentors who evoked us and with the subjects of study that chose us.

The power of our mentors is not necessarily in the models of good teaching they gave us, models that may turn out to have little to do with who we are as teachers. Their power is in their capacity to awaken a truth within us, a truth we can reclaim years later by recalling their impact on our lives. If we discovered a teacher's heart in ourselves by meeting a great teacher, recalling that meeting may help us take heart in teaching once more.

In faculty workshops, I often ask people to introduce themselves by talking about a teacher who made a difference in their lives. As these stories are told, we are reminded of many facts about good teaching: that it comes in many forms, that the imprint of good teachers remains long after the facts they gave us have faded, and that it is important to thank our mentors, no matter how belatedly—partly because we owe them gratitude and partly as a cosmic counterpoint to the apparent ingratitude of our own students!

Then I ask the question that opens to the deeper purpose of this exercise: not “What made your mentor great?” but “What was it about *you* that allowed great mentoring to happen?” Mentoring is a mutuality that requires more than meeting the right teacher: the teacher must meet the right student. In this encounter, not only are the qualities of the mentor revealed, but the qualities of the student are drawn out in a way that is equally revealing.

One of my most memorable mentors was a man who seemed to break every “rule” of good teaching. He lectured at such length, and with such enthusiasm, that he left little room for questions and comments. Preoccupied with the world of thought, he listened poorly to students, not because he disdained them but because he was so eager to teach them by the only way he knew—sharing his knowledge and passions. His classes were mostly monologues, and his students rarely played any role other than audience.

He may sound like a pedagogical nightmare, but for reasons I could not articulate at the time, I was powerfully drawn to his teaching—indeed, he changed my life. Only years later did I understand my attraction and in that understanding are some clues to my identity.

I was the first in my family to attend college. My family valued education, but it offered no exemplars of the intellectual life that has turned out to be my birthright gift. I kept that gift sealed in the box it came in all the way through high school, graduating somewhere below the median of my class, with a major in extracurricular activities. Not until the second semester of college did I open the box, get excited about what was in it, and start doing well at schoolwork, going on to graduate school and into an academic career.

My loquacious professor in college gave me a first glimpse into this part of myself. My excitement in listening to him lay less in what he said—though his ideas were exhilarating—than in discovering a dormant dimension of my identity. It did not matter to me that he violated most rules of good group process and even some rules of considerate personal relations. What mattered was that he generously opened the life of his mind to me, giving full voice to the gift of thought. Something in me knew that this gift was mine as well, though it was years before I could fully trust that knowledge.

Long into my career I harbored a secret sense that thinking and reading and writing, as much as I loved them, did not qualify as “real work.” I taught and wrote, but I “justified” myself by working as an administrator for various institutions and projects—work that was practical and thus worthy, like that done by honored members of my family. Only in my mid-forties was I finally able to claim the life of the mind as the mainstay of my vocation, to trust the calling of my

soul, a trust that deepened when I was able to decode this early experience of being mentored.

As we recall our mentors, not all of our self-insights are as happy as the one I have just drawn. We sometimes take the wrong lessons from the mentors who draw us when we are young and impressionable.

I witnessed such a case at a faculty workshop I led a few years ago. My on-campus host had taken pains to warn me about Professor X, a curmudgeonly and unpopular teacher, though brilliant in his scholarly field. Of the forty people in the workshop, my host said, Professor X had probably signed up not to learn about teaching but to debunk what we were doing.

In trepidation, I began the workshop with something “soft,” inviting people to introduce themselves by talking about their mentors. By the time we got to Professor X, six or eight people had spoken, many with insight and feeling, and a spirit of openness filled the room. I tensed as he began to speak, fearing that this spirit was about to be killed. But it soon became clear that he, too, had been touched by the quality of the exchange.

He told the story of his mentor with the hesitancy that comes from speaking of sacred things and—as he talked about how hard he had tried to model his own career after his mentor’s—he surprised us, and surely himself, by choking up.

Later, in private conversation with him, I learned the reason for his emotions. For twenty years, Professor X had tried to imitate his mentor’s way of teaching and being, and it had been a disaster. He and his mentor were very different people, and X’s attempt to clone his mentor’s style had distorted his own identity and integrity. He had lost himself in an identity not his own—a painful insight that took courage to embrace, but one with the promise of growth.

Professor X’s story gave me some insight into myself, an example of the mutual illumination that often occurs when we are willing to explore our inner dynamics with each other. Early in my career, I, too, had tried to emulate my mentor with nonstop lecturing, until I realized that my students were even less enthralled by my cheap imitation than some of my classmates had been by the genuine original.

I began to look for a way to teach that was more integral to my own nature, a way that would have as much integrity for me as

my mentor's had for him—for the key to my mentor's power was the coherence between his method and himself. I began the long process of trying to understand my own nature as a teacher and to learn the techniques that might help it along.

Though I need sometimes to lecture and may even enjoy doing it, lecturing all the time simply bores me: I usually know what I am going to say, and I have heard it all before. But dialogical methods of teaching help keep me alive. Forced to listen, respond, and improvise, I am more likely to hear something unexpected and insightful from myself as well as others.

That does not mean that lecturing is the wrong way to teach. It simply means that my identity, unlike my mentor's, is more fulfilled in dialogue. When I was young and did not know who I was, I needed someone to model the intellectual gift that might be mine. But now, in midlife, knowing myself better, my identity demands that I use my gift in interaction and interdependence with others.

Here, I believe, is the proper and powerful role of technique: *as we learn more about who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes.* We no longer need to use technique to mask the subjective self, as the culture of professionalism encourages us to do. Now we can use technique to manifest more fully the gift of self from which our best teaching comes.

The self-knowledge that comes from these reflections is crucial to my teaching, for it reveals a complexity within me that is within my students as well. In my case, the "I" who teaches is both intimidated by and attracted to the life of the mind; for a long time it was bedeviled by a sense that the intellectual work it felt called to do was nonetheless a fraud. This "I," despite its intrigue with ideas, was once so unsure of itself that it welcomed a mentor whose performance barred participation. But today, this same "I" finds its own performance boring and needs to be nurtured in dialogue.

When I forget my own inner multiplicity and my own long and continuing journey toward selfhood, my expectations of students become excessive and unreal. If I can remember the inner pluralism of my own soul and the slow pace of my own self-emergence, I will be better able to serve the pluralism among my students at the pace of their young lives. By remembering our mentors, we remember ourselves—and by remembering ourselves, we remember our students.

Looking back, I realize that I was blessed with mentors at every crucial stage of my young life, at every point where my identity needed to grow: in adolescence, in college, in graduate school, and early in my professional career. But a funny thing happened on the way to full adulthood: the mentors stopped coming. For several years I waited for the next one in vain, and for several years my own growth was on hold.

Then I realized what was happening. I was no longer an apprentice, so I no longer needed mentors. It was my turn to become a mentor to someone else. I needed to turn around and look for the new life emerging behind me, to offer to younger people the gift that had been given to me when I was young. As I did, my identity and integrity had new chances to evolve in each new encounter with my students' lives.

Mentors and apprentices are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of teaching's great rewards is the daily chance it gives us to get back on the dance floor. It is the dance of the spiraling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn.

SUBJECTS THAT CHOSE US

Many of us were called to teach by encountering not only a mentor but also a particular field of study. We were drawn to a body of knowledge because it shed light on our identity as well as on the world. We did not merely find a subject to teach—the subject also found us. We may recover the heart to teach by remembering how that subject evoked a sense of self that was only dormant in us before we encountered the subject's way of naming and framing life.

Alice Kaplan is a teacher of French language and literature, and she has done this kind of remembering in a book called *French Lessons*. "Why do people want to adopt another culture?" she asks as she summarizes her journey into teaching and into life. "Because there's something in their own they don't like, that doesn't *name* them." French culture gave Kaplan a way of claiming an identity and integrity she could not find in the culture to which she was born.

Recalling a course she taught in which a bigoted young man learned to appreciate the stranger through encountering another people in another language, Kaplan reflects: "Moments like this make me think that speaking a foreign language is . . . a chance for growth, for freedom, for liberation from the ugliness of our received ideas and mentalities."⁶

But Kaplan also understands the shadow side of a borrowed identity: "Learning French did me some harm by giving me a place to hide. If life got too messy, I could take off into my second world." But, she says, "writing about it has made me air my suspicions, my anger, my longings, to people for whom it's come as a total surprise."⁷ The self-knowledge she gained by asking why she was attracted to her field helped her reconnect, wrestle with, and even redeem troubling events and relationships in her life, renewing her teacher's heart.

Reading Kaplan's reflections (richer by far in shadow and light than my brief review suggests), I was encouraged to make my own. My undergraduate majors were philosophy and sociology, and many of the details I once knew about those fields have long since leached away. But I still recall, thirty-five years later, the moment I discovered C. Wright Mills's idea of the "sociological imagination."⁸ I was not merely taken with it—I was possessed by it.

The essence of his idea is simple, but it was radical to me: we cannot see what is "out there" merely by looking around. Everything depends on the lenses through which we view the world. By putting on new lenses, we can see things that would otherwise remain invisible.

Mills taught me how to view the world through the lenses of social theory, and when I took my first look, the world jumped out at me as if I had donned the 3-D movie glasses that Hollywood was hawking at the time. I saw the invisible structures and secret signals that shape our social lives, that have a power over us that I thought resided only in face-to-face relationships. I was astonished at this new vision of life in which people walked about, not freely, as I had imagined, but controlled by strings attached to their minds and hearts by invisible puppeteers.

Why was I so deeply drawn to the idea of the sociological imagination? Why did it become such a defining feature of my worldview? By reflecting on those questions, I have re-membered some key features of who I am.

Intellectually, the idea of the sociological imagination spoke to me because at age eighteen I had begun to understand that what you see is not necessarily what you get. I was a child of the 1950s, with its many social fictions, so it took time for me to see that the visible performance of individuals and groups was only the “on-stage” aspect of things, that reality has “backstage” dynamics far more influential than the performance we see up front.

But my attraction to Mills’s concept was more than intellectual—it helped me come to terms with some of my deepest personal fears. As a young person, I found the on-stage world both seductive and intimidating. It was an arena of visibility where I wanted to perform and become known, but also an arena where my competence would be tested and surely found wanting. As I came to understand the backstage realities revealed by the sociological imagination, I was able to shake off some of my performance fears.

By looking backstage and seeing how human, how klutzy, how ordinary the mechanics of performance really are—how unlike the glitz and glamour of on-stage performance itself—I could ask myself, “If they can do it, why not me?” This backstage knowledge gave me the comfort of knowing that all heroes have feet of clay; it had the calming effect of the counsel given to nervous public speakers, “Imagine your audience naked.”

But my attraction to the sociological imagination went deeper still—beyond intellectual interest, beyond performance fears, to a gap within my own soul. Mills’s distinction between the on-stage show and backstage reality mirrored a great divide in my inner life. Outwardly, I had learned how to make my performance seem relatively smooth and accomplished, but inwardly, I felt anxious and fumbling and inept.

The constant contradiction between how I experienced myself and how other people viewed me created a painful, sometimes crippling sense of fraudulence. But the sociological imagination and its view of societal duplicity helped me understand how common that contradiction is, how basic to the human condition, and my sense of fraudulence became less onerous.

It has taken me a long time to turn Mills’s insight from an analysis of our society toward an understanding of myself. The sociological imagination is easily used as one of those “debunking” tools,

beloved of social science, that allows us to stand detached by the side of the road as the parade passes by, sniping at its silliness and pretending to be above it all.

For a long time, I stood off to the side as critic and judge, and now I understand why: I was projecting onto society all the fraudulence I felt but could not face in myself, and I was using that projection as a way of evading my own dividedness. I no longer want to live that way—which is why I take pains in my writing to counterbalance the truth of the sociological imagination.

Earlier in this chapter, I insisted that our inner world has a reality and a power that can keep us from being victims of circumstance and compel us to take responsibility for our own lives. In effect, I argued that the world of social structures and signals need not dictate our lives, that the sociological imagination that so entranced me as a young man (and has its grip on me yet) does not hold all the answers. In the very act of writing this chapter, I have been encountering my subject—and myself—afresh, still respectful of the power of social facts but unwilling to use that knowledge as an escape from personal responsibility.

What I have learned about my identity as a teacher from this remembering is, to some extent, encouraging: I would not be an advocate of the power of inner reality if I had not reached some degree of congruence between my on-stage and backstage lives.

But I have also learned that my conflict between on-stage and backstage reality is far from being resolved—it continues to come up in my teaching. That conflict was the theme of the teaching stories I told at the start of this chapter, stories whose drama, such as it is, lies in the tension between my external response to classroom events and my internal sense of incompetence.

One of my favorite essays on teaching is Jane Tompkins's "Pedagogy of the Distressed." It seems to have been written directly to my divided condition. With wonderful candor, Tompkins says that her obsession as a teacher had not been with helping students learn what they wanted and needed to know but rather with "(a) showing the students how smart I was; (b) showing them how knowledgeable I was; and (c) showing them how well prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the

students learn but to act in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me.”

Then she asks, “How did it come to be that our main goal as academicians turned out to be performance?” Her answer rings true to me—fear: “Fear of being shown up for what you are: a fraud, stupid, ignorant, a clod, a dolt, a sap, a weakling, someone who can't cut the mustard.”

That is how it sometimes is for me. Driven by fear that my backstage ineptitude will be exposed, I strive to make my on-stage performance slicker and smoother—and in the process, make it less and less likely that my students will learn anything other than how to cover up and show off. I conceal my own heart and am unable to weave the fabric of connectedness that teaching and learning require.

Once again: when I seek my identity and integrity, what I find is not always a proud and shining thing. The discoveries I make about myself when I remember the encounters that have shaped and revealed my selfhood are sometimes embarrassing—but they are also real. Whatever the cost in embarrassment, I will know myself better, and thus be a better teacher, when I acknowledge the forces at play within me instead of allowing them to wreak witless havoc on my work.

Florida Scott-Maxwell, writing in her mid-eighties, made the point powerfully: “You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done . . . you are fierce with reality.”¹⁰

THE TEACHER WITHIN

Encounters with mentors and subjects can awaken a sense of self and yield clues to who we are. But the call to teach does not come from external encounters alone—no outward teacher or teaching will have much effect until my soul assents. Any authentic call ultimately comes from the voice of the *teacher within*, the voice that invites me to honor the nature of my true self.

By the voice of the inward teacher, I do not mean *conscience* or *superego*, moral arbiter or internalized judge. In fact, conscience, as it is commonly understood, can get us into deep vocational trouble.

When we listen primarily for what we “ought” to be doing with our lives, we may find ourselves hounded by external expectations that can distort our identity and integrity. There is much that I ought to be doing by some abstract moral calculus. But is it my vocation? Am I gifted and called to do it? Is this particular ought a place of intersection between my inner self and the outer world, or is it someone else's image of how my life should look?

When I follow only the oughts, I may find myself doing work that is ethically laudable but not mine to do. A vocation that is not mine, no matter how externally valued, does violence to the self—in the precise sense that it *violates* my identity and integrity on behalf of some abstract norm. When I violate myself, I invariably end up violating the people I work with. How many teachers inflict their own pain on their students, the pain that comes from doing what never was, or no longer is, their true work?

In contrast to the strained and even violent concept of vocation as an ought, Frederick Buechner offers a more generous and humane image of vocation as “the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”¹¹

In a culture that sometimes equates work with suffering, it is revolutionary to suggest that the best inward sign of vocation is deep gladness—revolutionary but true. If a work is mine to do, it will make me glad over the long haul, despite the difficult days. Even the difficult days will ultimately gladden me, because they pose the kinds of problems that can help me grow in a work if it is truly mine.

If a work does not gladden me in these ways, I need to consider laying it down. When I devote myself to something that does not flow from my identity, that is not integral to my nature, I am most likely deepening the world's hunger rather than helping to alleviate it.

There are times when we must work for money rather than meaning, and we may never have the luxury of quitting a job because it does not make us glad. But that does not release us from continually checking the violence we do to others and ourselves by working in ways that violate our souls. Nor does it relieve us from wondering whether preserving integrity is a luxury. What brings more security in the long run: holding this job or honoring my soul?

The teacher within is not the voice of conscience but of identity and integrity. It speaks not of what ought to be but of what is real for

us, of what is true. It says things like, “This is what fits you and this is what doesn’t”; “This is who you are and this is who you are not”; “This is what gives you life and this is what kills your spirit—or makes you wish you were dead.” The teacher within stands guard at the gate of selfhood, warding off whatever insults our integrity and welcoming whatever affirms it. The voice of the inward teacher reminds me of my truth as I negotiate the force field of my life.

I realize that the idea of a teacher within strikes some academics as a romantic fantasy, but I cannot fathom why. If there is no such reality in our lives, centuries of Western discourse about the aims of education become so much lip-flapping. In classical understanding, education is the attempt to “lead out” from within the self a core of wisdom that has the power to resist falsehood and live in the light of truth, not by external norms but by reasoned and reflective self-determination. The inward teacher is the living core of our lives that is addressed and evoked by any education worthy of the name.

Perhaps the idea is unpopular because it compels us to look at two of the most difficult truths about teaching. The first is that what we teach will never “take” unless it connects with the inward, living core of our students’ lives, with our students’ inward teachers.

We can, and do, make education an exclusively outward enterprise, forcing students to memorize and repeat facts without ever appealing to their inner truth—and we get predictable results: many students never want to read a challenging book or think a creative thought once they get out of school. The kind of teaching that transforms people does not happen if the student’s inward teacher is ignored.

The second truth is even more daunting: we can speak to the teacher within our students only when we are on speaking terms with the teacher within ourselves.

The student who said that her bad teachers spoke like cartoon characters was describing teachers who have grown deaf to their inner guide, who have so thoroughly separated inner truth from outer actions that they have lost touch with a sense of self. Deep speaks to deep, and when we have not sounded our own depths, we cannot sound the depths of our students’ lives.

How does one attend to the voice of the teacher within? I have no particular methods to suggest, other than the familiar ones: solitude and silence, meditative reading and walking in the woods, keeping a

journal, finding a friend who will listen. I simply propose that we need to learn as many ways as we can of “talking to ourselves.”

That phrase, of course, is one we normally use to name a symptom of mental imbalance—a clear sign of how our culture regards the idea of an inner voice! But people who learn to talk to themselves may soon delight in the discovery that the teacher within is the sanest conversation partner they have ever had.

We need to find every possible way to listen to that voice and take its counsel seriously, not only for the sake of our work but for the sake of our own health as well. If someone in the outer world is trying to tell us something important and we ignore his or her presence, the person either gives up and stops speaking or becomes more and more violent in attempting to get our attention.

Similarly, if we do not respond to the voice of the inward teacher, it will either stop speaking or become violent: I am convinced that some forms of depression, of which I have personal experience, are induced by a long-ignored inner teacher trying desperately to get us to listen by threatening to destroy us. When we honor that voice with simple attention, it responds by speaking more gently and engaging us in a life-giving conversation of the soul.

That conversation does not have to reach conclusions to be of value: we do not need to emerge from talking to ourselves with clear goals, objectives, and plans. Measuring the value of inner dialogue by its practical outcomes is like measuring the value of a friendship by the number of problems that are solved when friends get together.

Conversation among friends has its own rewards: in the presence of our friends, we have the simple joy of feeling at ease, at home, trusted and able to trust. We attend to the inner teacher not to get fixed but to befriend the deeper self, to cultivate a sense of identity and integrity that allows us to feel at home wherever we are.

Listening to the inner teacher also offers an answer to one of the most basic questions teachers face: How can I develop the *authority* to teach, the capacity to stand my ground in the midst of the complex forces of both the classroom and my own life?

In a culture of technique, we often confuse authority with power, but the two are not the same. Power works from the outside in, but authority works from the inside out. We are mistaken when we seek authority outside ourselves, in sources ranging from the sub-

tle skills of group process to that less than subtle method of social control called grading. This view of teaching turns the teacher into the cop on the corner, trying to keep things moving amicably and by consent but always having recourse to the coercive power of the law.

External tools of power have occasional utility in teaching, but they are no substitute for authority, the authority that comes from the teacher's inner life. The clue is in the word itself, which has *author* at its core. Authority is granted to people who are perceived as *authoring* their own words, their own actions, their own lives, rather than playing a scripted role at great remove from their own hearts. When teachers depend on the coercive powers of law or technique, they have no authority at all.

I am painfully aware of the times in my own teaching when I lose touch with my inner teacher and therefore with my own authority. In those times I try to gain power by barricading myself behind the podium and my status while wielding the threat of grades. But when my teaching is authorized by the teacher within me, I need neither weapons nor armor to teach.

Authority comes as I reclaim my identity and integrity, remembering my selfhood and my sense of vocation. Then teaching can come from the depths of my own truth—and the truth that is within my students has a chance to respond in kind.