

The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal

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Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajonc. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. 2010. 237 pp.

Abstract

The Heart of Higher Education absorbs its readers into a series of conversations with two giants in the field of higher education, Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc. In the past decade both authors have become major voices in the growing movement to re-engage institutions in fulfilling higher education's original mission to educate the whole person by integrating cognitive, emotional and spiritual learning into the student experience. In this volume, Palmer and Zajonc explore the range of conceptual models and practices that have become associated with the integrative education movement, defined as a shift of educational focus from imparting information to cultivating the development of students' learning through personal insights.

The Heart of Higher Education provides its readers an encounter with a compilation of recent and reformulated ideas, and thinking of two giants in the field of higher education. In fact, this volume not only offers its readers a compendium of thoughtful, innovative approaches for redirecting their own educational orientation and practices but also absorbs its readers into a series of conversations with the authors, Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc. This feeling of a personal engagement with the authors results both from the style in which the volume is written, which emphasizes personal experiences over academic analysis, and most significantly from the fact that the book emerged out of a long series of actual conversations between the authors. As the authors state in the "Afterward" to the book, "What began as a conversation between the two of us has grown into a full book of questions and explorations, probes and proposals, visions and hopes" (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 151).

The underlying premise of each author's longtime work in and contributions to higher education is that "The education of the young is one of humanity's greatest communal undertakings. . . . Education is a vital, demanding and precious undertaking and much depends on how well it is done" (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, pp. 151–152). In their individual ways, for many years both authors have devoted themselves to and promoted approaches for transforming our systems of education and higher education to serve more fully the moral and spiritual side of human experience. And in the past decade both authors have become major voices in the growing movement to reengage institutions in fulfilling higher education's original mission to educate the whole person by integrating cognitive, emotional, and spiritual learning into the student experience.

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Palmer and Zajonc define transformational education as “educating the whole person by integrating the inner life and the outer life, by actualizing individual and global awakening, and by participating in compassionate communities” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. vii). They introduce their examination of transformative learning with a central question:

How can higher education become a more multidimensional enterprise, one that draws on the full range of human capacities for knowing, teaching, and learning; that bridges the gaps between the disciplines; that forges stronger links between knowing the world and living creatively in it, in solitude and community? (p. 2)

In answering this question, Palmer and Zajonc explore a broad set of philosophical frameworks and pedagogical approaches with the goal of bringing a more coherent and powerful conceptualization of integrative education to the forefront of higher education practice.

The Heart of Higher Education is in essence the unfolding of the authors’ separate and joint explorations of the range of conceptual models and practices that have become associated with the integrative education movement, which has emerged during the first decade of the 21st century. One of the basic principles of integrative education is that at its heart education is not a process for conveying information “but a leading of the inquiring minds of our students through the manifold layers of experience and reason . . . to the exalted experience of genuine insight” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 69). As Zajonc proposes, this shift of focus from imparting information to cultivating the development of students’ learning through personal insights results in bringing to the forefront of education

inner human experiences such as trust and jealousy, love and hate, aspiration and depression . . . [as] legitimate areas of inquiry. They no longer need to be explained solely in terms of neuroscience or biochemistry. . . . The mind is at the core of our human nature, our humanity. Yet its direct exploration by introspection has been off limits [in higher education] for a century. (p. 71)

Some of the major elements of the integrative learning approach are familiar. These include

- interdisciplinary teaching and learning that emphasizes “connecting skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences . . . [and] utilizing diverse and even contradictory points of view” (p. 8);
- a focus on applying theory to practice in such areas as service learning; and
- engaging students in systematically examining the relationships between their studies of specific disciplinary knowledge and “the purpose, meaning, limits, and aspirations of their lives” (p. 10).

The sense that the reader is engaging in conversation with Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc throughout this book reflects one of Palmer and Zajonc’s central premises about educational change: Collegial conversations represent the most effective process for transforming the academy. As Palmer suggests, the disciplinary silos around which the academy is structured result in isolating faculty and administrative staff from each other and largely from the students. There is significant evidence that the utopian concept of the university as a community of scholars is rarely, if ever, realized. Palmer proposes the conversation of colleagues as a critical element for breaking down the professional isolation typical of most campuses. He asserts that transformative conversations draw on the same skills as those used by scholars in their research:

The skills that are key to inquiry are also key to transformative conversations. . . . Good scholars keep asking honest, open questions of the phenomena they are studying, questions meant to deepen understanding of what that reality is all about. They reach conclusions and

think about the implications only when the inquiry feels complete, all the while expecting a next round of questions, conclusions and implications. (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 132)

Palmer further argues that the problem is not that we don't know how to conduct inquiries, but that these skills so familiar to scholars in their academic work are not used in interactions with each other. He suggests that coming together with a few colleagues to engage with them in the same types of inquiry we use toward the phenomena we study is the first step toward change:

Those of us who understand inquiry, for whom it is a way of being in the world, can use our understanding to reach across the gaps, ask each other questions that matter, listen with care, and find our way toward personal and communal action. (p. 133)

Through this process we can seek to learn about and understand our colleagues' experiences and visions as educators.

To assist readers seeking to initiate such collegial conversations, Palmer provides a set of guidelines that includes the following.

- In seeking those on campus who might be receptive to engaging in integrative education, “cast the net wide: consider faculty, administrators, students, staff, alumni and anyone else who is a stakeholder in the nature of education on your campus” (p. 137).
- To fully achieve the goals of initiating conversations that “take us to the deeper reaches of our lives—to tap into those values, visions, and energies that might lead us to become agents of change” (p. 137), it is critical to establish a safe space for taking such relational risks.
- Palmer proposes that starting collegial conversations by sharing personal experiences is the most effective pathway for creating a space where colleagues feel safe to be vulnerable. “Storytelling can create community at an even deeper level: the more one knows about another person's story, the less one is able to dislike or distrust, let alone despise, that person” (p. 139). And as even more encouragement for readers to engage in this process, Palmer provides a list of possible storytelling prompts intended to open the conversation to the larger issues involved with “uncovering the heart of higher education” (p. 140). He suggests that this approach leads to an exploration of the philosophy of integrative education because “when we start from our own experience, moving from the ‘heart of an educator’ to the ‘heart of higher education,’ the means are congruent with the end” (p. 141).
- As you move from personal stories to examination of ideas, Palmer recommends staying connected to the personal stories, “referring to them and weaving them in and out of your exploration of theory and practice” (p. 141).

Other higher education leaders also have advocated for the centrality of collegial conversations as a mechanism for producing significant change. Robert J. Nash, DeMethra LaSha Bradley, and Arthur W. Chickering (2008) in their book on *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus* (reviewed in the *Journal of College and Character* in 2008) propose the creation of a campus culture of moral conversation through which “genuinely pluralistic, cross-campus dialogues on highly volatile topics” (p.10) can occur. As the authors define it, *moral conversation* creates a milieu of good faith in which individuals exchange ideas, opinions, and personal truths, although they may contradict and disagree with each other. “Moral conversation obligates each of the participants to listen actively and respectfully to the stories of others, both to understand and affirm them as well as to discover whatever ‘narrative overlap’ might exist among them” (Nash et al., 2008, p. 8). Parallel to the transformative ideas of Palmer and Zajonc, the concept of moral conversation as a way to engage in discussions that encourage full and honest expression of many truths in one group was developed out of Nash's experiences in teaching at the University of Vermont. And Chickering's insights on the issues involved with and techniques for initiating moral conversations campus-wide

developed out his experiences as a faculty member, researcher, senior campus administrator, and national higher education leader.

Perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of Palmer and Zajonc's book for its readers is that both authors frame their insights into higher education and their proposals for change in terms of their personal experiences. This work thus exemplifies some of the primary approaches to transforming higher education espoused by my coauthors, Jon Dalton, and myself in our volume *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education* (2006):

[To strengthen higher education] we need to move from the inside to the outside, to work out from the core of our experiences. . . . The language of science is our most precise way of communicating meaningfully about facts. But because it is based on observing external facts, the language of science and logic does not cope well with our inner experience. It follows that the most central tenet of our orientation toward strengthening authenticity and spirituality in higher education is that each and every one of us must be as candid and open as we can about our own orientations, motives, prides and prejudices. . . . All the structural changes, all the creative, adventurous innovations, will only scratch the surface unless each of us professionals can be authentic ourselves. (pp. 10–11)

Palmer attributes the foundation of his ideas about the power of transformative conversations to the 5 years he spent as a community organizer in Washington, D.C., after completing his PhD in sociology. Rather than join the academy, he decided to apply his knowledge of sociology “in the streets.” As he recounts, “During that time, it became clear to me that conversations rightly held—the kinds of transformative conversations that are the meat and drink of every community organizer—can help create real change, sometimes massive change, in the real world” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 147). Subsequently, Palmer has pursued and promoted his devotion to education, particularly pedagogy, as a teacher and educational activist in a range of institutional and community contexts.

Zajonc relates the origins of his own calling to engage in and create an approach to higher learning that unites personal meaning, purposes, and values with the process of gaining and expanding knowledge. As an undergraduate he reached a point of despair at the lack of inner meaning he experienced through his studies. He was rescued by a concerned physics professor who engaged him in ongoing conversations about creating an undivided life that “embraced an experiential, contemplative spirituality” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 54) with a commitment to academics. Zajonc went on to develop and expound on the value of such an undivided life through his years of teaching physics at Amherst College. Of particular interest in Zajonc's personal history is the time he and five other scientists spent in Dharamsala, India, in a weeklong dialogue with the Dalai Lama and 20 Tibetan monk-scholars exploring the intersection of Buddhist philosophy with cosmology and physics. This connection with the Dalai Lama, which has continued since their original encounter, advanced Zajonc's own thinking about and advocacy for change in higher education.

As Parker Palmer has elaborated in other writings (e.g., Palmer, 1996), “The decision to lead an undivided life—made by people who know what they truly value—has always been a spring point of social change. Higher education can grow into its fullest potentials if more and more academics will make the ‘Rosa Parks decision’ ” (p. 136). Engaging in the type of radical change in the academy proposed by Palmer and Zajonc requires the courage to take personal risks such as that made by Rosa Parks in 1955, which as Palmer defines it is the decision to live “divided no more,” to no longer behave differently on the outside than the true self on the inside.

One of Palmer's primary premises is that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique. As elaborated more fully in other publications, most notably his groundbreaking work *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Palmer's goal is to construct a spirituality of good teaching. His proposals for

achieving this goal very much parallel the goals of integrative education for students. To prepare teachers who embrace teaching as a true vocation, he asserts that teachers must first explore who they are, or who is the self that teaches, and how they are, or what methods and techniques are required for good teaching. To create teachers who teach from the heart, educators must first seek a center for their lives that integrates their personal values and interests with their work.

As previously noted, the strength of *The Heart of Higher Education* is the experience it provides to its readers of participating in the exploration of ideas with these two eminent champions of transforming higher education. The book is less strong in the areas in which the authors feel that it is necessary to justify their cause. Acknowledging that the “straw man” approach is standard to academic discourse, it would seem that given the nature of the often radical changes that Palmer and Zajonc advocate, the recourse to customary academic approaches detracts from the power of their message. Palmer, for example, devotes the two opening chapters of the book to framing his concepts about the philosophical infrastructure of integrative education as a “dialogue with the critics” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 22). The defense of integrative education involves examining and countering what he defines as the “five archetypal criticisms of integrative education” (p. 22). Although the reader certainly can learn some of Palmer’s major ideas about effective educational approaches incorporated into integrative education, defining and advocating for such a potentially powerful educational transformation through the standard academic form of dueling with the opponent might seem contradictory to the cause. For readers not familiar with the body of ideas that have been subsumed into the integrative education movement, this approach actually detracts from their gaining a clear idea of the major premises of integrative education.

In their conclusion the authors affirm that this book is not intended as comprehensive exposition of integrative education but the start of a conversation. To add strength to the conversation, the book’s appendices provide a series of stories by higher education faculty, administrators, and staff through which they share their own experiences with implementing integrative educational approaches and measures. Jon Dalton, founder and current coeditor of the *Journal of College and Character*, supplies one of the accounts of innovative educators putting ideas into practice. Through these stories readers have access to a series of practical suggestions about ways to incorporate the concepts of integrative education into their own work in the academy.

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