

Courage to Teach
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- We teach who we are.
- The most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching – and living – becomes.
- If we stopped lobbing pedagogical points at each other and spoke about who we are as teachers, a remarkable thing might happen: 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.
- 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. (A mentor who evoked us.)
- 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?”
- I realize that I was blessed with mentors at every crucial stage of my young life. 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.
- Mentoring 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.
- 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.
- Her obsession as a teacher had not been with helping students learn what they wanted and needed to know but rather with showing the students how smart I was; showing them how knowledgeable I was; and showing them how well prepared I was for class.
- 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.
- 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.
- Frederick Buechner: Vocation is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.
- We can speak to the teacher within our students only when we are on speaking terms with the teacher within ourselves.
- Authority comes as I reclaim my identity and integrity, remembering my selfhood and my sense of vocation.
- Fear is what distances us from our colleagues, our students, our subjects, ourselves.
- Our relations as faculty colleagues are often diminished by fear; fear is nearly universal in the relations of faculty and administration; and fear is a standard management tool in too many administrative kit bags.

- Students too, are afraid; afraid of failing, of not understanding, of being drawn into issues they would rather avoid, of having their ignorance exposed or their prejudices challenged, of looking foolish in front of their peers.
- As long as we inhabit a universe made homogeneous by our refusal to admit otherness, we can maintain the illusion that we possess the truth about ourselves and the world – after all, there is not “other to challenge us! But as soon as we admit pluralism, we are forced to admit that ours is not the only standpoint, the only experience, the only way, and the truths we have built our lives on begin to feel fragile.
- We allow our “treatment mode” to be shaped by the thoughtless stereotypes of students that float freely in faculty culture.
- The behaviors generated by fear – silence, withdrawal, cynicism – often mimic those that come with ignorance, so it is not always easy for me to keep believing, when I look at some of my students, that anxiety rather than banality is what I am looking at.
- Sitting passively in the classroom while I held forth, (student) was reduced to silence. But given a real responsibility, put in charge of my schedule and my safety, (a student) found a voice to speak of significant things.
- I hope never to lose the other part of my fear – the fear I feel when I am not in life-giving communion with the young.
- The teacher’s hospitality of the student results in a world more hospitable to the teacher.
- For objectivism, any way of knowing that requires subjective involvement between the knower and the known is regarded as primitive, unreliable, and even dangerous. That is why music, art, and dance are at the bottom of the academic pecking order and the “hard” sciences are at the top.
- As people became convinced that objective answers to all questions were possible, people began to distrust their own knowledge and turn to authorities for truth. Thus the stage was set for “authorities” with a political agenda to seize power at moments of social vulnerability, proclaiming, “I alone know the truth that will save you!”
- From the outset, the objectivist impulse was more than a quest for truth: it was a fear-driven overkill of the subjectivity that made the modern world dangerous. Objectivism was never content to quarantine subjectivity in order to stop its spread. It aimed at killing the germ of “self” to secure objective truth – just as dictators kill dissenters to secure the “public order,” and warriors kill the enemy to secure the “peace.”
- Knowing of any sort is relational, animated by a desire to come into deeper community with what we know.
- The highest form of love: love that allows for intimacy without the annihilation of difference.
- This relational way of knowing – in which love takes away fear and co-creation replaces control – is a way of knowing that can help us reclaim the capacity for connectedness on which good teaching depends.
- “Be not afraid” does not say that we should not have fears; instead, it says that we do not need to be our fears.
- Each time I walk into a classroom, I can choose the place within myself from which my teaching will come, just as I can choose the place within my students toward which my teaching will be aimed. I can teach from curiosity or hope or empathy or honesty, places that are as real within me as are my fears.
- His breakthrough was into a new way of being, into the realization that he could have fear but did not need to be fear – that he could speak and act from a place of honesty about being fearful rather than from the fear itself.

- The culture of disconnection that undermines teaching and learning is driven partly by fear. But it is also driven by our Western commitment to thinking in polarities, a thought form that elevates disconnection into an intellectual virtue.
- Niels Bohr: the opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth.
- In certain circumstances, truth is found not by splitting the world into either-ors but by embracing it as both-and.
- Paradoxes
 - The knowledge I have gained from thirty years of teaching goes hand in hand with my sense of being a rank amateur at the start of each new class.
 - My inward and invisible sense of identity becomes known, even to me, only as it manifests itself in encounters with external and visible “otherness.”
 - Good teaching comes from identity, not technique, but if I allow my identity to guide me toward an integral technique, that technique can help me express my identity more fully.
 - Teaching always takes place at the crossroads of the personal and the public, and if I want to teach well, I must learn to stand where the opposites intersect.
 - Intellect works in concert with feeling so if I hope to open my students’ minds, I must open their emotions as well.
- The poles of a paradox are like the poles of a battery: hold them together, and they generate the energy of life; pull them apart, and the current stops flowing.
- In a culture that rips paradoxes apart, many people know nothing of the rich dialectic of solitude and community; they know only a daily whiplash between loneliness and the crowd.
- The world of education as we know it is filled with broken paradoxes - and with lifeless results:
 - We separate head from heart. Result: minds that do not know how to feel and hearts that do not know how to think.
 - We separate facts from feelings. Result: bloodless facts that make the world distant and remote and ignorant emotions that reduce truth to how one feels today.
 - We separate theory from practice. Result: theories that have little to do with life and practice that is uninformed by understanding.
 - We separate teaching from learning. Result: teachers who talk but do not listen and students who listen but do not talk.
- I ask each teacher to write brief descriptions of two recent moments in teaching: a moment when things were going so well that you knew you were born to teach and a moment when things were going so poorly that you wished you had never been born.
- But when we are not reminded of and honored for the gifts we bring to teaching, it is easy for us to revert to the dominant pedagogy, even if it has little relation to who we are.
- I made peace with the class by giving up on it.
- In workshops, I insist that participants avoid “What could I have done differently that might have made for a better outcome? To take a hard experience and leap immediately to “practical solutions” is to evade the insight into one’s identity that is always available in the moments of vulnerability – insight that comes only as we are willing to dwell more deeply in the dynamics that made us vulnerable.
- Every gift a person possesses goes hand in hand with a liability.
- The point is not to “get fixed” but to gain deeper understanding of the paradox of gifts and limits, the paradox of our mixed selves, so that we can teach, and live, more gracefully within the whole of our nature.

- But when my students refuse to dance with me, my strength turns to weakness. I get angry, although my relational nature often keeps me from expressing my anger in clean and open ways.
- I want to learn how to hold the paradoxical poles of my identity together, to embrace the profoundly opposite truths that my sense of self is deeply dependent on others dancing with me and that I still have a self when no one wants to dance.
- Although students can tell their own stories, they, like the rest of us, rarely understand the meanings of the stories they tell.
- Protect a student's solitude: inviting the whole truth while refusing to violate the vulnerability of his or her soul.
- The place where paradoxes are held together is in the teachers' heart, and our inability to hold them is less a failure of technique than a gap in our inner lives. If we want to teach and learn in the power of paradox, we must reeducate our hearts.
- Rilke: Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers.
- The therapeutic model exploits our fear of otherness by reducing community to whatever can take familial or friendly form.
- When we reject that with which we cannot become intimate, our lives are diminished. Teaching and learning are undermined when therapeutic community becomes the norm in education.
- What is noble in a quest for the common good may be ignoble in a quest for truth: truth is not determined by democratic means.
- Good education teaches students to become both producers of knowledge and discerning consumers of what other people claim to know.
- Students who have been well served by good teachers may walk away angry – angry that their prejudices have been challenged and their sense of self shaken.
- The hallmark of the community of truth is in its claim that reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it.
- In the Newtonian era, our image was atomistic, taking separate particles rather than substances to be the basic nature of reality. But in our era, nature is understood to be relational, ecological, and interdependent. Reality is constituted by events and relationships rather than separate substances or separate particles.
- We know reality only by being in community with it ourselves.
- The community of truth is an image of knowing that embraces both the great web of being on which all things depend and the fact that our knowing of those things is helped, not hindered, by our being enmeshed in that web.
- We don't seem to mind if civilization goes down the drain, as long as the drain doesn't back up.
- At the center of the communal circle, there is always a subject – as contrasted with the object at the top of the objectivist ladder. This distinction is crucial to knowing, teaching, and learning: a subject is available for relationship; an object is not.
- In the community of truth, the connective core of all our relationships is the significant subject itself – not intimacy, not civility, not accountability, not the experts, but the power of the living subject.
- At its best, the community of truth advances our knowledge through conflict, not competition.
- Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.

- I know of no field, from science to religion, where what we regard as objective knowledge did not emerge from long and complex communal discourse that continues to this day, no field where the facts of the matter were delivered fully formed from on high.
- The firmest foundation of all our knowledge is the community of truth itself. This community can never offer us ultimate certainty- not because its process is flawed but because certainty is beyond the grasp of finite hearts and minds.
- At the center of our attention is a subject that continually calls us deeper into its secret, a subject that refuses to be reduced to our conclusions about it.
- The things of the world call to us, and we are drawn to them – each of us to different things, as each is drawn to different friends.
- We invite diversity into our community not because it is politically correct but because diverse viewpoints are demanded by the manifold mysteries of great things.
- We embrace ambiguity not because we are confused or indecisive but because we understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things.
- We welcome creative conflict not because we are angry or hostile but because conflict is required to correct our biases and prejudices about the nature of great things.
- We practice honesty not only because we owe it to one another but because to lie about what we have seen would be to betray the truth of great things.
- We experience humility not because we have fought and lost but because humility is the only lens through which real things can be seen – and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible.
- We become free men and women through education not because we have privileged information but because tyranny in any form can be overcome only by invoking the grace of great things.
- The health of education depends on our ability to hold sacred and secular together so that they can correct and enrich each other.
- Many critics have noted the growing disrespect inherent in our social relations and the sad implications of such incivility for the future of democracy. But fewer have noticed our growing disrespect for the grace of great things and its implications for the future of teaching and learning and the life of the mind.
- What could be more banal than to stand in the midst of this astonishing universe, sifting its wonders through reductionist screens, debunking amazement with data and logic, downsizing mystery to the scale of our own minds?
- If you introduce a sudden stimulus to an unprepared person, the fight or flight syndrome kicks in. But if you train a person to practice soft eyes, and then introduce that same stimulus, the reflex is often transcended. This person will turn toward the stimulus, take it in, and then make a more authentic response – such as thinking a new thought.
- Modeled on the community of truth, this is a classroom in which teacher and students alike are focused on a great thing, a classroom in which the best features of teacher-and student-centered education are merged and transcended by putting not teacher not student, but subject at the center of our attention.
- By putting the secret that Frost wrote about at the center of the circle, we re-member the passion that brought us into this work in the first place – a re-membering that cannot happen when we and our students sit in that circle alone.
- We can see a world in a grain of sand (hologram). So why do we keep dumping truckloads of sand on our students, blinding them to the whole, instead of lifting up a grain so they can learn to see for

themselves? Why do we keep trying to cover the field when we can honor the stuff of the discipline more profoundly by teaching less of it at a deeper level?

- Each discipline has an inner logic so profound that every critical piece of it contains the information necessary to reconstruct the whole – if it is illuminated by a laser, a highly organized beam of light. That laser is the act of teaching.
- As long as we do not understand that opening a learning space requires more skill and more authority than filling it up, we will lose our battle with guilt, and our teaching will default to covering the field.
- Conceptualizing the course of study, selecting materials, framing assignments and exercises and blocking out the time are decisions. If I do not make these decisions in ways consonant with opening space, the space will disappear before the class begins.
- Though technique-talk promises the “practical” solutions that we think we want and need, the conversation is stunted when technique is the only topic: the human issues in teaching get ignored, so the human beings who teach feel ignored as well.
- "Critical moments" is a simple approach to invite people to share their practice in an open and honest way. I begin by drawing a horizontal arrow on a chalkboard, representing the movement of a course from beginning to end. Then I ask people to name the critical moments they experience along that time line as a course proceeds. By critical moment, I mean one in which a learning opportunity for students will open up, or shut down, depending, in part, on how the teacher handles it. (Not all critical moments are under the teacher's control.) Studying the time line and the data of our own experience we cluster kindred moments together: here is a cluster relating to conflict in the classroom; here is one dealing with the teacher's authority; here is another involving the link between theory and practice. I ask people to choose a cluster that interests them and form a small group around it, offering each member an opportunity to talk about what he or she has done, for better or for worse, in response to the critical moments in question. Our purpose in the small groups is not to critique each other's pedagogy but to speak honestly from our own experience and listen openly while others do the same. As we do, we are exploring technique – but in a non-reductionistic manner. We are learning about a variety of teaching methods without one or another being promoted as the way.
- The conventional norm of “making nice” with each other, folded into the professional norm of competition, creates an ethos in which it feels dangerous to speak or to listen. Then we proceed to multiply that confusion, and the sense of danger that goes with it, by interleaving a third set of norms implicit in conventional and academic culture alike: we were put on earth to advise, fix, and save each other, and whenever an opportunity to do so presents itself, we should seize it.
- This fix-it response kicks in almost reflexively when someone breaks free of the first and second set of norms and actually manages to name a real problem he or she is having.
- If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed; it wants simply to be seen and heard. If we want to see and hear a person's soul, there is another truth we must remember: the soul is like a wild animal – tough, resilient, and yet shy.
- Clearness committee: Write nature of problem, notes on its relevant background, and notes on its relevant foreground. First step forces us to winnow our feelings and facts, allowing the chaff to blow away and getting the issue outside of our heads, into the light of day, where problems often look different than when we recycle them endlessly through our fears and doubts.

- Members of the clearness committee are forbidden to speak to the focus person in any way except to ask that person an honest, open question. After it is over, they must keep the information in confidence and they must never speak to the person about it.
- When we talk about leadership, we have a tendency to contrast communities, which are supposed to be leaderless, with institutions, which need leaders. But it is possible to argue the opposite. Institutions can survive for a while without a leader simply by following bureaucratic rules but community is a dynamic state of affairs that demands leadership at every turn.
- Good talk about good teaching is unlikely to happen if presidents and principals, deans and department chairs, and others who have influence without position do not expect it and invite it into being.
- If leaders are to help create good talk about good teaching, they need to discern the difference between what faculty sometimes says about themselves and what their real needs are.
- Only in the face of massive institutional opposition has significant social change been achieved.
- When organizational assumptions are imposed on problems that require movement sensibilities, because organization are thought to define the limits within which social can happen, the outcome is often despair. Now the question becomes, "How can the power contained within the structures of this organization be rearranged or redirected to achieve the desired goal?"
- Some minorities and some women performed an inner alchemy on organizational resistance, transforming it from social discouragement and defeat to personal inspiration and power.
- Stages of movement
 - 1: Isolated individuals make an inward decision to live divided no more, finding a center for their lives outside of institutions.
 - 2: These individuals begin to discover one another and form communities of congruence that offer mutual support and opportunities to develop a shared vision.
 - 3: These communities start going public, learning to convert their private concerns into the public issues they are and receiving vital critiques in the process.
 - 4: A system of alternative rewards emerges to sustain the movement's vision and to put pressure for change on the standard institutional reward system.
- The power of an authentic movement lies in the fact that it originates in naming and claiming one's identity and integrity – rather than accusing one's enemies of lacking the same.
- When great moments in history are reconstructed with the intentionality that comes only with hindsight, we forget the lone individual in the moment of her decision and the anxiety or doubt she may have felt. And when we forget that, we forget our own power.
- People who confine themselves to organizational infighting often become obsessed with internal enemies and possessed by the demons of institutions. People who start movements do so not because they hate and institution but because they love it too much to let it descend to its lowest form.