

COURAGE TO TEACH®: A Retreat Program of Personal and Professional Renewal for Educators

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Section IV from *Stories of the COURAGE TO TEACH®: Honoring the Teacher's Heart*, by Sam Intrator, Foreword by Parker J. Palmer, Jossey-Bass Publishers, © 2002.

Note: Under the guidance of Parker J. Palmer, author of *The COURAGE TO TEACH®*, the Fetzer Institute created the COURAGE TO TEACH® program, piloting an approach to vocational development called "teacher formation." This approach is rooted in the belief that good teaching flows from the identity and integrity of the teacher. The formation process invites educators to reclaim their own wholeness and vocational clarity, and makes connections between the renewal of a teacher's spirit and the revitalization of public education. This chapter contains numerous quotes from K-12 educators who have participated in COURAGE TO TEACH® programs around the country.

Twenty-five teachers and administrators sit in a circle, giving their full attention as an elementary teacher speaks passionately, and poignantly, about her love for her students and her commitment to reach each and every one of them. She goes on to tearfully describe the personal toll this is taking on her own life—creeping guilt at not having enough time or emotional energy to give to her own family, bone-deep exhaustion, non-stop worrying about the safety of some of her students, the weariness of facing an always burgeoning mountain of papers and projects to grade, a sense of increasing isolation from friends and colleagues because there is simply no more to give. The listeners sit quietly, respectfully, as she finishes, each reflecting on their own version of her story.

The next teacher speaks of the debilitating effects on the morale of his colleagues as more and more pressure is being placed to raise test scores at his school, or else! While teaching was once a labor of love, it is now becoming an onerous task as the nearly singular focus on standardized testing dominates all communications among faculty and administrators. More silence.

The next person to speak, a newly appointed principal, describes her recent attempts to mediate an explosive situation between a student, his parents, and a teacher. In the midst of helping the parties work through their threats and misunderstandings, she has become aware of the heavy burden of responsibility she carries. Yet in the telling of her story, she also is recognizing a growing confidence and inner sense of authority, grounded not in her role as a new principal but in her personal integrity. And on around the circle it goes—each person relating stories and examples of how their complex journey as teachers and leaders has unfolded since the last time they were together a few months ago.

What is this circle in which these teachers sit? Is this a group for "burnt out" teachers and administrators? No. Then why have they come together in this way, when their lives are already over-full with tasks, demands, and responsibilities?

This is the opening circle in a COURAGE TO TEACH® retreat, part of a program in which the same twenty-five educators come together for three days four times a year. Through a process called "formation," educators are invited to reconnect to their identity and profession—their "soul and role"—through the creation of a circle of trust where they can reclaim their own wholeness and vocational clarity, and find renewal. The formation process, as practiced in the COURAGE TO TEACH® retreat program, involves the creation of an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual space in which participants listen and respond to each other with encouragement and compassion.

Why teachers need renewal

Teaching is a calling, a vocation that requires constant renewal of mind, heart, and spirit. Teachers come to the profession inspired by a passion to help others learn. They are drawn to education by an ethic of service and a mission to make a difference in the world by contributing to succeeding generations of youth. Good teachers care, and keep finding ways to connect with students. They do not check their hearts at the door.

Maintaining the passion to teach and lead wholeheartedly takes not only skill, it takes inner strength and spirit. Now more than ever, it takes *courage* to teach. A sampling of passages from applicant's essays attest to this deep need for courage:

"There are times when I'm not sure I can make it, when the pain of so many of the young lives I get wrapped up in threatens to swamp my own life and I fear I will be of no use to anyone. I also know that I reach children and that what I do is of value. When this [COURAGE TO TEACH® Program] brochure arrived, I was astonished. A renewal program for teachers? Inner life? Mine was far beneath my bed, gathering dust." (Elementary teacher, 18-years' experience)

"Friends urge me to move to an 'easier' school, but I want to find a way to cope with the stress and enable myself to continue reaching out to these kids. I know that there are people out there who can do this and thrive. I want to be one of them." (Middle school teacher, 15-years' experience)

"I want to be able to accept the realities of education without having to become disillusioned, bored and disgruntled. I am a young teacher. Twenty years from now, I still want to say with passion that I am doing exactly what I want to do." (Elementary school teacher, 5-years' experience)

"I seek the light to teach better and do more.... To develop collegiality is my main concern.... I find it natural to risk and be spontaneous with students, but it doesn't carry over to other teachers. Some are rigid and negative—psychic poison to me. Others are so overwhelmed and needy I hesitate to share much because they might start 'living' with me. I have only a few teacher partners. I want some more." (Middle school teacher, 25-years' experience)

"I don't need another in-service, nor do I need more opportunities to work on systemic reform. I'm already deeply involved in that! I need the chance to concentrate on my emotional and spiritual growth so that I am able to once again teach truly from the heart." (High school teacher, 18-years' experience)

The American public continues to turn to our schools and teachers to better prepare our children for an increasingly uncertain world. But, how do we better prepare teachers for this task? Typically, educational reform focuses on improving the curriculum and re-organizing schools. Yet while curriculum and re-organization are important, both solid research and common sense affirm that *what a teacher knows and how a teacher makes human connections* are the most dramatic influences on why students learn.

Why does public education struggle with the difficulty of finding and keeping good teachers, principals, and superintendents? Perhaps what is missing is what is most essential: sustained and meaningful support for the persons who are doing the work, day in and day out, often under extremely discouraging circumstances.

To be an excellent teacher is to risk burnout at an early stage in one's career. The isolation from other professionals and the constant need to be "on" while teaching can exhaust and deplete a good teacher's inner resources. We simply cannot afford to lose good teachers through negligence of their need to connect with other teachers in ways that are respectful and trustworthy. (High school teacher, 13-years' experience)

Is not quality public education the foundation of true democracy? Are not children our future? Do we really value all children? If public education is going to be a true road to a meaningful life and healthy community membership, we must nurture educators so they do not despair beneath overwhelming demands, but maintain an inner gyroscope and persevere. We all need to be more attentive to the needs of the soul—our own and that of children. Without this deeper perspective, all the well-meaning reforms will wither along with the teaching staff. (Elementary school teacher, 18-years' experience)

We need the power of collective spirit. We need opportunities for dialogue. We need to be affirmed, to ask important questions, to be in a community that challenges and supports our thoughts, that nurtures our deepest beliefs, that really helps us to sustain and give meaning to the work that we do with students. We especially need these things at this critical time in public education. (Middle school principal, 16-years' experience)

The COURAGE TO TEACH® program

In his book, *The COURAGE TO TEACH®*, Parker Palmer invites us to go beyond the outer surface of structural reform, and to summon the courage to explore the inner landscape of our own lives as educators:

The question we most commonly ask is the "what" question—what subjects shall we teach? When the conversation goes a bit deeper, we ask the "how" question—what methods and techniques are required to teach well? Occasionally, when it goes deeper still, we ask the "why" question—for what purpose and to what ends do we teach?

But seldom, if ever, do we ask the "who" question—who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes?

The COURAGE TO TEACH® program invites teachers and leaders to explore the inner landscape of their lives as educators by going back to the "deep well" of their calling. The program involves seasonal retreats spread over one or two-years and focuses on the personal and professional renewal of teachers, administrators, and others in public education. The retreats are designed primarily for K-12 educators—on whom our society depends for so much, but for whom we provide so little encouragement and support. Each three-day retreat focuses neither on "technique" nor on school reform, but on the inner lives of professionals in education. In large-group, small-groups, and solitary settings, concepts of teacher formation and "the heart of a teacher" are explored through the use of personal stories, reflections on classroom practice, and insights from poets, storytellers, and various wisdom traditions.

The COURAGE TO TEACH® program builds on a simple premise: *We teach who we are.* Teachers who are disconnected from themselves cannot serve their students well—let alone invite the student's unique self into the teaching and learning exchange. Good teachers possess much more than information and technique. They possess "a capacity for connectedness." They offer up their own lives as the loom on which to weave a fabric of connectedness between themselves, their students, their subject, and their world.

Teachers are continually told what to do, how to do it, when, where, etc. The results expected are fleeting and changeable. The methods are often contradictory. When an individual is unable to stop and reflect on the meaning of it all, that individual may become discouraged. COURAGE TO TEACH® allows this reflection to happen in a variety of ways. You owe it to those, from whom so much is asked, to allow them to slow down and gather the courage to continue. (Middle school teacher, 9-years' experience)

Students respect integrity and can sense hypocrisy. To be a valuable and effective teacher, one must know oneself.... COURAGE TO TEACH® helped me gain and celebrate that knowledge. It is essential to be willing to share enough of yourself and to admit areas where there are challenges—to be able to teach from the heart. Students certainly respond and learn more from that safe space. (Elementary school teacher, 9-years' experience)

We are guided in formation work by a clear image of the nature of the human soul. The soul is like a wild animal: it is tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient, and yet it is exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is to go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit silently for an hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge, and out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek

As an African-American woman my voice was never fully respected. For so many years, I squelched my own voice as being not as important as theorists, professors, and principals. I would talk the way other people would expect me to so that I would be accepted. But it was destroying me. My COURAGE TO TEACH® facilitator was the first professional person that actually listened and valued my voice. I realized that my voice had never been heard before and that my voice is valuable. Now with my students, I ask real questions, ones directed uniquely to them. I ask them to listen carefully to their own words. It is awesome what they come up with when they speak deep from within themselves. (Elementary school teacher, 20-years' experience)

Courage to Teach is not a Band-Aid. It deals with the very core of the issue of education—the soul of the teacher that touches the soul of the student. Without caring for the heartwood of a tree, the branches will fall off, the bark will peel and the roots will rot. Without caring for the soul, the teacher will become frustrated, ineffective and the students will fail. (High school principal, 12-years' experience)

This image of the "strong shy soul" has practical implications for what goes on in a formation retreat. From the outset, teachers come to understand that this is not a "share or die" event. When working in small groups a few simple and straightforward ground rules allow educators to sit quietly with each other: no advising, no fixing, no saving, no setting straight. Instead, they listen to each other at a depth that will "hear each other into speech"—a listening that can be enhanced by asking honest, open questions that might evoke more of what the speaker is trying to say. What each person most deeply wants is not to be fixed or saved but simply to be heard, to be received.

I've been involved in a lot of professional development programs at the local, state, and national level, both conducting them and participating in them. The thing that was so significantly different was that this retreat was for

me. There was no other product than my own growth. Yet I've never worked harder and grown more in my life! I was there to rediscover myself and my lifework. (High school principal, 20-years' experience)

Almost all professional development opportunities are other-directed, looking at the skills that someone else has developed. COURAGE TO TEACH® helped me understand that one of the most powerful things I can do to improve is to spend time going inside. There is enormous power, creativity, imagination, insight, perspective... all those things that I can bring to a class lesson. In trusting myself, I get the most true and authentic outcome with students. (Middle school teacher, 26-years' experience)

Courage to Teach is work that really exemplifies a very deep belief that I have about education, which is that you make the world better one person at a time, one student at a time. One principal renewed and re-inspired and recommitted affects potentially thousands of people where they live and breathe everyday. (High school principal, 22-years' experience)

Honest exploration of personal and professional beliefs demands trust, and trust requires boundaries. So one challenge in developing the COURAGE TO TEACH® program was to find a way of bounding the formation space that would draw teachers into exploring their lives—but would do so without giving offense or creating barriers in a society that is both secular and religiously pluralistic. To do so, we turned to the metaphors offered by the cycle of the seasons. The seasonal metaphors have proven to be powerful ways of framing the questions closest to the soul without making anyone feel trapped in a doctrinal or dogmatic box.

The COURAGE TO TEACH® program begins in the fall, the season when nature is scattering seeds for the growth that is yet to come. In this season we ask people to reflect on "the seed of true self," telling stories from their childhood or from their first moment of awareness that they felt called to teach—and from those stories they start to reclaim the birthright gifts and passions that put them on this vocational path. In the winter season we raise questions about darkness and death, dormancy and renewal. Some of the seeds we brought into the world are now underground, and may indeed have died. But others are in a time of dormancy, awaiting a time of fresh possibilities. Spring is the season of rebirth, so in the spring we reflect on "the flowering of paradox." It is a great paradox that what once seemed dead is now alive—and not only alive but quite beautiful! Summer is the season of embodiment and abundance. In this season we invite teachers to explore who they are and who they are becoming.

Facilitators talked about cycles and seasons. We focused on the seasonal themes of dormancy, renewal, paradoxes, community, abundance, harvesting, and gleaning. The themes were powerful ways to provide a framework to build wholeness and acceptance. For me personally, it was about learning to accept that I could not only plant and harvest but there is also a time to stop and rest, even to cry. It's not just the "test-able" or even observable work that you're doing with students. There are also intangible things important to the harvest of good teaching and learning, other things that can make a lifetime of difference. (Elementary teacher, 5-years' experience)

For over a century public education in the United States has been dominated by the "factory model." Standardization and uniformity of so-called "measurable outcomes" are the assumed hallmarks of good schools. But the work of human formation is much more akin to farming or gardening than it is to manufacturing. The manufacturer starts with "raw material" and adds value to it through a controlled and predictable process. But the farmer—who works not with raw material but with living organisms—must start all over each year through an eternal return of the seasons, and must embrace the fact that not everything that happens in that cycle is under his or her control: the rains may not come, or the hail may wipe out the crops.

Seasonal themes invite a different "way in" to education and professional development. The seasonal metaphors rid us of the hubris that we can control human growth. And they help us understand how interdependent we are with all the life forces around us—an understanding that can help us grow into the kind of teachers who choose to spend a whole lifetime cultivating the young. A few lines from the poem, *Seven of Pentacles*, by Marge Piercy—a poem we use in formation retreats—speak to the way things grow in the natural world:

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.
More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.

Elements of COURAGE TO TEACH[®] Retreats

To provide a concrete sense of what happens in COURAGE TO TEACH[®] retreat programs, and how the formation process may differ from other approaches to personal and professional development, we will more fully describe six key elements of the formation approach.

- Evocative questions
- Silence
- Paradox
- Birthright Gifts
- "Third things"
- Clearness Committees

Evocative Questions

At the outset of a retreat, and at various points in mid-stream, we offer a reflective question as a way of "checking in" with each other. The questions are designed to evoke a deeper level of sharing and to reveal the larger context within which we are working—and they often come in pairs to allow teachers to reflect on the complexity of the connections between their vocation and their selfhood.

For example, the question "What aspects of your identity and integrity feel most supported and engaged by the work you do?" is asked hand-in-hand with, "What aspects of your identity and integrity feel most threatened or endangered by your work?" This paradoxical pair requires more depth and thoughtfulness than the question, "What do you like most or least about your work?"

Before they answer the question in the large group, we invite teachers to take some time for reflection and journal writing. Then, rather than marching around the circle with each person sharing in turn, we invite people to speak only if and as they feel ready, and we invite silence into the spaces between each person's reflections.

I have experienced the practicality of setting aside time and space to address the deepest questions for educators (How can we nurture our personal powers so that we can be our best on behalf of our students?) The questions we are addressing have been at the edges of my mind since I became a teacher, but after more than a decade, I've let the questions take center stage, and with the help of our COURAGE TO TEACH[®] group, have moved from the questions to strategies, to subtle - but I think profound - changes in my teaching (and family) relationships. (High school teacher, 13-years' experience)

Silence

Words are not the only medium of exchange and learning in formation work. We share and grow in silence as well—not only because the silence gives us a chance to reflect upon and absorb what we have been saying and hearing, but because the silence is itself a sort of speech from the deepest parts of ourselves, of others, of the world. Though it is startling at first to teachers who are accustomed to being "task-oriented" and making "maximal use of minimal time," we often begin our group sessions with a few minutes of silence—and we invite quiet pauses in the midst of our conversations and activities. This helps create a slower, more reflective pace for discussion and enables participants to listen within themselves as much as they listen to the ideas and contribution of others.

Silence. Going to a place to listen. Not saying anything. The quiet is so important, so soothing. I now use silence to center myself and to nurture my students. I make a greater effort to listen and connect on a personal level with colleagues as well. (Elementary school teacher, 14-years' experience)

I have continued the practice of silence and reflection in my daily life. I recognize the need for taking time to explore my inner thoughts and feelings, so that I can be more helpful to my students and my family as well. I know and appreciate the close connections between seasonal cycles and human cycles as we live our lives. I feel more balanced. (High school counselor, 25-years' experience)

Paradox

Like the field that a farmer prepares in order to grow a crop, a formation space must possess several critical qualities if it is to respect and germinate the seed of true self. These qualities, like so much in the inner world, take the form of paradox—that is, the holding together of things that seem on the surface to be opposites or contradictions but that, more deeply understood, complement and co-create each other.

Paradox is at the very center of the inner landscape of life: you cannot know light without darkness, silence without speech, solitude without community. And the poles of a paradox form a continuum along which almost anyone can find his or her current condition, and thus find a level of comfort with what the group may be exploring at any given time.

In creating a formation space, we are guided by the following six paradoxes:

1. The space should be bounded and open.
2. The space should be hospitable and "charged."
3. The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group.
4. The space should honor the "little" stories of the students and the "big" stories of the disciplines and tradition.
5. The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of community.
6. The space should welcome both silence and speech.

[Readers will find these six paradoxes further explored in Chapter III of Parker Palmer's book, [*The COURAGE TO TEACH®: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*](#).]

An illustration of one of these paradoxes—that a formation space should be both hospitable and "charged"—may be helpful. An hospitable space is one that people find not only comfortable but warmly inviting, not only open but safe and trustworthy, a reliably non-judgmental space in which people can find the security they need to sustain challenging journeys. At the same time, the space must be "charged" if the journey is to be real and rewarding. There must be a sense of electricity, of risk, of stakes, of the danger inherent in pursuing the deep things of the human soul. This charge is not a "special effect"—it comes with the territory. We only need to bound or define the space with topics of genuine significance, and refuse to trivialize them in any way.

These paradoxes are not captive, of course, to a formation retreat. They are also at the heart of all vital and engaging teaching and learning environments.

Paradox has been the essence, to reconcile discordant elements. There are so many dichotomies that I now play with rather than take sides on, playing on the edge between them and keeping that balance. As a high school teacher, management and containment were my goals. There were problems to be solved. Now it is more a mystery and my job is to inspire kids to delve into that. Instead of having them push against me, to have them pull me through these things. The hard work of teaching is easy again. (High school teacher, 17-years' experience)

In our state, there is a huge pressure to meet the standards. As an administrator, it is my responsibility to make sure our school is right up there. It's a huge pressure on teachers. I ask them to remember: Why are we here? What are we doing this for? I hold out for my teachers that if we go for quality, our scores are going to be high. We teach to quality rather than the tests and we have been successful. (Elementary principal, 20-years' experience)

Birthright Gifts

Most of us have great difficulty acknowledging our strengths and gifts, but we have no trouble listing our weaknesses or failures. It's as if we have blinders on, especially to ourselves.

When we begin to explore "seeds of true self" in a formation retreat, it becomes crucial to uncover, or recover, *our own* particular gifts, strengths, and sensibilities. Referred to by the Quakers as "birthright gifts", these are not the skills we went to college or graduate school to get, nor are they the areas in which we have worked so hard to excel. Rather, they are the qualities that are part of our essence, qualities that have often been apparent to others since we were young children, but which we ourselves may have ignored, devalued, or simply taken for granted. ("It's so easy for me. I thought everyone could do it.")

To honor the individual teacher's soul, we must also honor each teacher's unique gifts. Given the beleaguered state of most teachers, and the teacher-bashing that too often goes on in the media and public forums, naming and claiming birthright gifts is often experienced by teachers as one of the most empowering aspects of the retreats.

Courage to Teach seeks to honor the individual teacher by providing an opportunity to reflect and understand his or her own birthright gifts. We honor ourselves by taking the time four times each year to retreat to a place where it is safe to take risks. There we can examine our values, fears, concerns, and commitments. Best of all, we are

accountable to ourselves, not to an outside entity. Being responsible to my calling to help kids is why I became a teacher in the first place. (High school teacher, 13-years' experience)

I am deeply concerned about the future of public education. It takes a lot of courage to be a teacher today... and to be a student. Much of the difficulty comes from a society and a system that asks teachers to be alienated from themselves. If there is to be any lasting revitalization of public education, it will come through encouraging teachers to be whole again, and teach with their unique gifts. In natural response to that, they will encourage students to be whole, and learn with their unique abilities. (Teacher educator, 20-years' experience)

The concept of birthright gifts really came through. It was not only affirming but helped me look at children differently. It helped remind me that it's not just about what a kid can produce, but to go up to a child and say, "You are always fascinated when we talk about bugs." Or, "You always know how to make people laugh and smile. That's really special!" (Elementary school teacher, 5-years' experience)

Why is this so important? Because when we are in touch with our own giftedness we are much more likely to notice and draw out the gifts in others—the children we work with, and our colleagues. By being more attentive to students' gifts and lifting them up, not only is the student-teacher relationship enhanced but the opportunity for mutual respect and learning is increased. We've found that when we ask people to talk about teachers that made a difference in their lives some interesting patterns occur. One is that it is hard to get people to stop talking! The other is that the most memorable teachers seem to fall into two categories: those that ignited a passion for learning or a particular subject, and those that noticed and encouraged my unique gifts or skills, and who saw in me things I couldn't yet see in myself.

"Third things"

In facilitating dialogues about vocation, about teaching, about the seasons in our lives and in our work, we use poems and teaching stories from diverse voices and traditions. Stories and poems create a mediating "third party" presence by putting a subject in the center of the circle that establishes a plumb line for the dialogue that is owned neither by the facilitator nor by the participants. Its meanings can be imputed or interpreted but never controlled. Truth is not a point, or even a line made of many points. Instead, truth is a fabric, or quilt, or collage, a rich pattern of meaning that is generated by the whole group, a pattern in which every member of the group can find him or her self.

In addition, this "third thing" help us to speak indirectly about things that we might have great difficulty saying head-on, to discover and speak important things about ourselves without referring to ourselves. The shy soul, we believe, appreciates opportunities to do what Emily Dickinson advises: "Tell the truth, but tell it slant."

Take, for example, the first four lines of May Sarton's poem, "Now I Become Myself," a poem we often use in the fall retreat to engage people with "the seed of true self":

*Now I become myself.
It's taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
worn other people's faces...*

Even in those few lines, many people experience deep resonance with their own experience. The images draw them deeply into a dialogue about how long it takes to become ourselves, how much turbulence we encounter along the way, how often we mask ourselves in someone else's image.

While we use some tried and true "third things" in COURAGE TO TEACH[®], this is not a curriculum-based model and facilitators are also encouraged to discover and use their own teaching texts. Generally good third things are relatively brief, accessible, and to the point. They also usually contain within them aspects of both the personal and the universal, allowing for exploration of the "little" stories of individuals while also being capable of expanding to encompass larger archetypal themes.

A poem about fear lead to an amazing conversation about the fears in our own lives. Very capable and accomplished professionals shared openly and honestly. People with multiple graduate degrees and years of experience and awards in their professions shared their fear of being inadequate. Their fear of failure. Their fear of letting people down. Sharing that vulnerability, in a way I still don't completely understand, helped to strengthen all of us. But somehow knowing we were all indeed quite human and quite apprehensive about being able to meet the challenge of educational leadership actually made us bold to keep on trying. (High school principal, 26-years' experience)

Clearness Committees

The Clearness Committee is a centuries-old practice invented by the Quakers to arrive at greater clarity, or reach a place of discernment, regarding a personal decision, an issue, or dilemma. While at its heart a communal process of discernment, it is grounded in the belief that there are no external authorities on life's deepest issues. There is only the authority that lies within each of us waiting to be heard.

In the Clearness Committee a small group of five or six people gather together for the express purpose of asking illuminating questions to the person who is bringing forward an issue or dilemma for which they are seeking clarity. Committee members interact with the "focus person" only by asking open and honest questions—questions that are without a hidden agenda, questions that are real and honest and not intended to "lead" in a certain direction, questions that will help the focus person remove the blocks to his or her inner truth and to discover his or her own wisdom.

The benefits of this practice are not only for the focus persons. Those on the Committee learn a great deal about deep listening—listening within themselves as they are forming good questions, attending to their own inner dialogue and attempting to keep their internal agendas at bay, listening with respect and caring to the unfolding story of another human soul. Most people emerge from a Clearness Committee having actually observed a person's "inner teacher" at work, and often for the first time. The experience of the Clearness Committee confirms that human beings have an inward source of authority that does not need to be prodded with external answers and "fixes," but needs only to be given a chance to speak and to be heard.

Clearness Committees have helped us learn a way of being together that honors each person's way of knowing. We have seen the power that authentic questions, thoughtfully posed, have to help each of us get in touch with an inner teacher who is able to show us the way to the clarity we seek. It has been a challenge for teachers and administrators to learn to ask questions we don't know the answers to. We are told before each Clearness Committee that no one needs to be fixed, and we have learned the truth of those words. The Clearness Committee is such a powerful way of respecting and reinforcing a person's fundamental integrity. (High school teacher, 20-years' experience)

How teacher formation is foundational to educational reform

What difference does a retreat experience of the sort described above make in the lives of K-12 educators, their students, their schools, and the larger public education system that is in such difficulty?

First, it is important to note that the principles and practices of the Courage to Teach program are not limited to the "hothouse" atmosphere of the guided retreat. Teachers who participate in the program often take the principles and practices that underlie formation and adapt them for a variety of settings, frequently with promising results. For instance, here are several examples reported by COURAGE TO TEACH[®] alumni:

A high school English teacher begins her department meetings by inviting one faculty member to open the meeting by talking for five minutes about his or her passion for teaching English, or current areas of "aliveness" in teaching. The result has been a much greater sense of connection and collegiality within the department, as they now have a space to share what matters most to them.

An elementary teacher begins her fifth-grade class each week in a "community circle" by asking an evocative question to the group (e.g., "How are the themes of the story we are reading—joy, loss, discovery, etc.—also happening in your own life?"), and creating a sense of safety for the children to speak about what is really on their minds and hearts and to be heard by the other children.

A middle school teacher actively introduces seasonal metaphors in her teaching—drawing on what is happening in the natural world, but also making the connection to the human cycles of change that the seasons represent. Using stories of nature, cultural stories from different traditions, poetry and art activities that highlight the deeper meanings of the seasons, students are encouraged to see their lives as part of a larger whole.

A high school teacher introduces the concept of paradox to his class, explaining how two things that are seeming opposites can be understood as "both/and" rather than "either/or". Students are encouraged to look at paradox in their own lives—identifying personal paradoxes such as dependent/independent, work/play, student/teacher, thinking/feeling, active/passive—and then to consider the larger "whole" encompassed by these paradoxes. In this

way, the notions of complexity and wholeness are introduced in a way that helps students move beyond simplistic and dualistic thinking.

A high school teacher works with students to help them identify their birthright gifts. Because it's often through the eyes of others that we recognize our own birthright gifts, the students are asked to interview two of their friends, their parents and/or grandparents, or another trusted adult and teacher who knows them well. The interview questions are open-ended and focus on stories or anecdotes that these persons share with the student. Some questions relate to what they have noticed about the student, not just what they're good at but "how" they are in the world—what's important to them, how they interact with others, the kinds of roles they play with their family or friends. Out of these interviews and their own journaling, the students begin to construct their personal Coat of Arms, which includes a section on their birthright gifts.

A group of teachers come together for collegial support not only to enhance good teaching but also to create a place for deeper dialogue about what it means to be a teacher, and why they do what they do. At each meeting one or two teachers are invited to present an issue or dilemma arising from their teaching, usually one that is at the intersection of their "soul" and "role". Using a modified Clearness Committee process, the other teachers respond by asking honest, open questions to help the individual uncover his or her own deeper understanding of this issue.

In addition to the compelling ways COURAGE TO TEACH[®] approaches have been absorbed into participants' life and teaching practices, a further impact extends into the complex arena of educational reform. Two evaluation studies found the following lasting effects on the part of COURAGE TO TEACH[®] participants:

- The COURAGE TO TEACH[®] program rejuvenates teachers and renews their passion for teaching.
- Teachers who go through these programs undertake new leadership roles in education, often crediting their enhanced leadership skills and their capacity to assume new challenges and risks to participation in the program.
- Participants often describe how their COURAGE TO TEACH[®] experience lead them to initiate more collegial relationships when they returned to their school site.
- Although the COURAGE TO TEACH[®] program does not explicitly set out to change classroom practice, all of the teachers queried believe that the experience improved their classroom practice in significant ways through the development of genuine connections with their students and their "teaching from the heart." Most felt that their students had tangibly benefited by the changes.
- Teachers felt that the program helped them to develop more reflective habits in their teaching practice, allowing them to become more critical practitioners who could stop and reflect on their own teaching.
- Teachers felt that they live more mindfully and more balanced lives.

These themes—passion for teaching, teacher leadership, collegial relationships, improved classroom practices, reflective habits, mindful and balanced living—are among those most often repeated in the education reform literature about what is most essential for good schools, good teaching, and good learning. Many observers of teachers have said that until we provide dynamic, supportive, and intellectually challenging conditions for our educational personnel we will not be able to carry out our vision for creating dynamic, supportive, and intellectually challenging schools. Both research and common sense suggest that to be sustaining and renewing, we must provide opportunities for teachers and leaders to further develop, explore, and renew their core mission and purpose.

Why do so many carefully planned reform efforts fail to achieve their well-intended outcomes? Why is it that many initially successful reforms have difficulty enduring, often losing ground as their champions become depleted by overwhelming demands? Educators we have met through COURAGE TO TEACH[®] are more than ready to shoulder the leadership tasks of change— *when they have reclaimed their sense of personal wholeness and vocational calling*. In teacher formation retreats, educators come together as colleagues, steadfastly reclaiming their identity and integrity as teachers. Enormous potential for positive change is rediscovered—leading to greater depth and vitality in student-teacher relationships, renewed collegial practices in schools, and the revitalization of teachers as leaders in public education.

How do you get teachers inspired and invested, willing and wanting to give their best, able to dig into their hearts and intellects for a cause? You value the teacher in a way they trust and believe in. This is delicate territory. COURAGE TO TEACH[®] explores and maps this territory. It has profoundly altered my comfort-discomfort continuum. I see my job as a treasure and an honor and am uncomfortable with less than my best. In short, I am working harder and enjoying it more.... What difference does this program make for students? At first my students are uncomfortable with the degree of earnest effort a class from me now requires. As time passes they willingly, and with begrudging joy,

"lean into" out tasks of learning. COURAGE TO TEACH[®] instigated a renaissance in my practice of teaching. I remembered my idealistic self. For a profession having difficulty retaining talented people, the importance is obvious. (Middle School Teacher, 25-years' experience)

I consider myself a merchant of hope whenever I share my story about beginning my formation work. I can only testify to the impact the [COURAGE TO TEACH[®]] program had on my life. I know that my teaching has become more humane. I have found an authentic way to clear my thoughts of the many conflicting voices that deform rather than inform my work on a daily basis. I am not feeling burned out but "on fire" in terms of reaching out and embracing the many paradoxes of my teaching life. This program is a must for teachers who are so busy reaching out that they have forgotten the need to reach within and bring forth something worthy of their students' attention. This takes courage and that is what the program provides. COURAGE TO TEACH[®] provides a time to retreat, remember, and respond to the needs of your soul. (High school teacher, 29-years' experience)

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