

The Grace of Great Things

Reclaiming the Sacred in Knowing, Teaching, and Learning

by Parker J. Palmer

We all know that what will transform education is not another theory or another book or another formula but a transformed way of being in the world. In the midst of the familiar trappings of education—competition, intellectual combat, obsession with a narrow range of facts, credentials—we seek a life illumined by spirit and infused with soul. This is not romanticism, as John Cobb (President of the Naropa Institute and host of the Spirituality in Education conference) has properly cautioned us.

I saw the other day a remarkable documentary called *The Transformation of Allen School*. Allen School is an inner-city school in Dayton, Ohio. It was for many years at the bottom of the list in that city by all measures. There were fifth graders who had parole officers. The dropout rate was incredible and saddening. The failure of those students in every aspect of their lives sickened the heart. And along came a new principal, a principal who—it's relevant to note—came from the Philippines, a culture which has an inherent respect for things spiritual in a way American culture does not. And he brought the teachers together and said to them, in substance, as his very first proclamation as principal, that:

We have to start to understand that the young people we are working with have nothing of external substance or support. They have dangerous neighborhoods. They have poor places to live. They have little food to eat. They have parents who are on the ropes and barely able to pay attention to them. The externals with which American education is obsessed will not work in this situation.

But these students have one thing that no one can take away from them. They have their souls. And from this day forth in this school, we are going to lift those souls up. We are going to make those souls visible to the young people themselves and to their parents and to the community. We are going to celebrate their souls, and we are going to reground their lives in the power of their souls. And that will require this faculty recovering the power of their own souls, remembering that we, too, are soul-driven, soul-animated creatures.

And in a five-year period, that school, the Allen School in Dayton, Ohio, rose to the top of every dimension on which it had been at the bottom, through hard work, through disciplined work, but through attentiveness to the inward factors that we are here to explore. This is not romanticism. This is the real world. And this is what is desperately needed in so many sectors of American education.

As we go into these five days together, let us remember one thing about the soul. It is like a wild animal: tough, self-sufficient, resilient, but also exceedingly shy. Let us remember that if we go crashing through the woods, screaming and yelling for the soul to come out, it will evade us all day and all night. We cannot beat the bushes and yell at each other if we expect this precious inwardness to emerge. But if you are willing to go into the woods, and sit quietly at the base of a tree, that wild animal will, after a few hours, reveal itself to you. And out of the corner of your eye, you will glimpse something of the wild preciousness that this conference is looking for.

I ask guidance for myself and, as Quakers say, hold this entire conference in the light, to be here, to be present to each other in the right spirit, speaking our truth gently and simply, listening respectfully and attentively to the truth of others, grounded in our own experience and expanded by experiences that are not yet ours, compassionate toward that which we do not yet understand, not only as a kindness to others but for the sake of our growth and our students and the transformation of education. Amen.

In preparing these remarks, I've asked myself what are we trying to do here? We know it's about spirituality and education, but what does that mean? For whatever it's worth, these are the images that have come to me as I've tried to put a larger frame of personal meaning around this conference.

I think we are here to seek life-giving forces and sources in the midst of an enterprise which is too often death-dealing—education. It may seem harsh to call education death-dealing, but I think that we all have our experience of that.

I am always astonished and saddened by the fact that this country, which has the most widespread public education system in the world, has so many people who walk around feeling stupid because they feel that they are the losers in a competitive system of teaching and learning. It is a system that dissects life and distances us from the world because it is rooted in fear.

Everyone here has had his or her own encounter with the forces of death: racism, sexism, justice denied. In my life, one of my face-to-face encounters with the forces of death was in two prolonged experiences of clinical depression, passages through the dark woods that I made when I was in my 40s, devastating experiences when it was not clear from one day to the next whether I wished to be alive, or even *was* still alive—the darkness, face-to-face, immersed in it, hardly a spark of life.

It was a depression partly due to my schooling, partly due to the way I was formed in the educational systems of this country to live out of the top inch and a half of the human self, to live only with cognitive rationality and with the powers of the intellect, out of touch with anything that lay below that top inch and a half: body, intuition, feeling, emotion, relationship.

I remember one time a therapist and spiritual guide saying words that were eventually salvific for me. He said, “You seem to keep imaging your depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush you. Why don’t you try imaging it as the hand of a friend trying to press you down to ground on which it is safe to stand?” And that image has always stayed with me of this movement from the world of abstraction, the hot-air balloon that education so falsely represents as the good life, down to the ground—in my tradition, the “ground of being”—on which it’s not only safe to stand but safe to fall, and you can get back up.

Well, at some point in that journey with depression, I was given by a friend some words from that extraordinary novel by T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*. This is a passage in which the young Arthur, king to be, in his depression, his dark night of the soul has sought counsel from Merlin, the magician, who was his mentor. And I want to read these wonderful words which created a spark of light for me in the midst of that death-dealing episode of my life. Speaking to the young Arthur, Merlin says:

The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies. You may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins. You may miss your only love. You may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it, then: To learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.

“Learning is the thing for you.” I read those words, and I began to understand that in the midst of death, there is life in learning. I could not do much in the darkness of my depression. I couldn’t work. I couldn’t connect with other people. But I could start to learn what was in there. I could grope around in the darkness and learn what and who was there. And, of course, those of you who have been on that journey know that part of what I found and learned about there was what Thomas Merton calls true self.

What Merlin knows, as he advises the young Arthur, is that education at its best—these profound human transactions called knowing, teaching, and learning—are not just about information, and they’re not just about getting jobs. They are about healing. They are about wholeness. They are about empowerment, liberation, transcendence. They are about reclaiming the vitality of life.

The question that we must wrestle with, I think, is why there is so little life-giving power in our culture when we use the words education, teaching, learning. Why are those words and the things they point to in our culture so flat, so dull, so banal compared to Merlin’s understanding?

Of course, there are many answers to that question: the industrial model of schooling that is still with us from the 19th century, the diminishing effects of professionalism in teacher training, the way education devolved into political rhetoric and serves the purposes of power.

But the answer I want to explore is a different one. I want to propose that education is dull because we have driven the sacred out of it. Merlin, the magician, understood the sacredness at the heart of all things, and learning was a natural derivative of that. I want to explore what it might mean to reclaim the sacred at the heart of knowing, teaching, and learning; to reclaim it from this essentially depressive mode of knowing which honors only data, logic, analysis, and a systematic disconnection of self from the world, self from others.

As I launch into this inquiry, I want to remind us all that the marriage of education and the sacred has not always been a happy one. It has not always produced creative offspring. Ask Galileo. Ask a Muslim child subjected to American school prayer. Ask anyone whose family or history was touched by the Nazis' murderous attachment of the sacred to blood, soil, and race.

There are real dangers in this enterprise when the sacred gets attached to the wrong things. There are real dangers when the sacred gets institutionalized and imposed on people as one more weapon in the objectifying forces of this or any other society.

But we need to have the courage to jump into the midst of that mess. The Nazi story, the murderousness of the Third Reich, is not only about the attachment of the sacred to the wrong things by a political system of power; it's also about German higher education refusing to get involved with those kinds of issues, distancing itself, clinging to logic and data and objectivism as a way of staying disengaged from the social reality of its time.

We can no longer afford a system of education that refuses to get engaged with the mess. We must be willing to join life where people live it. And they live it at this complicated intersection of the sacred and the secular. So with that acknowledgment of the mess on whose edge we stand, let me move ahead.

What do I mean by the sacred? I was laughing to myself in preparing this talk, remembering my first yearning for the sacred, which was only a word for me when I was young. I had merely heard it in church, and I wanted an experience of it.

In college I ran across a book by Rudolph Otto called *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto has a remarkable description of the sacred in which he uses phrases like *numinosity* and *mysterium tremendum*. It was my first Latin, and I was so proud of it.

What I was laughing about when I was preparing these remarks was the title of the book, *The Idea of the Holy*. I could only have an *idea* of it because I didn't have an

experience of it. And over the years, I've struggled to move from the level of idea to the embodied life.

I remember a night in the middle of one of those devastating depressions when I heard a voice I've never heard before or since. The voice simply said, "I love you, Parker." It was not a psychological phenomenon, because my psyche was crushed; it was the numinous. It was *mysterium tremendum*. But it came to me in the simplest and most human way: "I love you, Parker."

That experience has opened me to the definition of sacred that I want to explore. It is a very simple definition that says that the sacred is that which is worthy of respect. As soon as we see that, the sacred is everywhere. There is nothing, when rightly understood, that it is not worthy of respect.

I have had a rare experience of the numinous, and I treasure it. But I do not have a steady flow of that experience. And I cannot count on it to be my sustaining reminder of the sacredness of life. But I can practice respect on a minute-by-minute basis, especially towards those things that somehow arouse my anger, my ire, my jealousy, some strong ego reaction that reminds me to reach deep for respect.

How it would transform academic life if we could practice simple respect! I don't think there are many places where people feel less respect than they do on university campuses. The university is a place that has learned to grant respect to only a few things: to the text, to the expert, to those who win in competition.

But we do not grant respect to students, to stumbling and failing. We do not grant respect to tentative and heartfelt ways of being in the world where the person can't quite think of the right word or can't think of any word at all. We don't grant respect to silence and wonder. We don't grant it to voices outside our tight little circle, let alone to the voiceless things of the world.

Why? Because in academic culture, we are afraid. It is a culture of fear. What are we afraid of? We are afraid of hearing something that would challenge and change us. The great German poet Rilke has this amazing line in which he says, "There is no place at all that is not looking at you. You must change your life." There is no place at all that is not talking to me. I must change my life.

But I don't want to hear those voices because I am afraid of change. And so in academic culture, I am carefully buffered, carefully walled off, through systematic disrespect, from all of those things that might challenge me, break me, open me, and change me. It is a fearful culture.

One of the things we have to do is to remember the counsel at the heart of every great spiritual tradition: Be not afraid. Be not afraid. Interesting words. The words do not say you're not supposed to *have* fear. I have fear. I have fear as I stand here before

you. How am I doing? Do they like me? Am I delivering on all the preparation I've put into this talk?

I'm fearful. I have fear. But I don't need to be here in my fear. I don't have to speak to you from my fear. I can choose a different place in me, a place of fellow feeling, of feeling traveling, of journeying together in some mystery that I know we share. I can "be not afraid" even while I have fear.

If we could reclaim the sacred—simple respect—in education, how would it transform our knowing, teaching, and learning? I would like to suggest several answers, but I want to preface them by telling a story, not from the world of religion, not from the world of education, but from the world of science, because I think there is much for us to learn from the world of science about the very things that we care about. Science is not the enemy, not great science.

I want to tell you about a great scientist whom some of you will know. Her name was Barbara McClintock. Barbara McClintock died a few years ago in her early 90s. Her obituary was on the front page of The New York Times in the place usually reserved for heads of state. She was the greatest American biologist of the 20th century and, arguably, the greatest American scientist of the 20th century.

In her obituary, she was eulogized by one of her colleagues, a geneticist from the University of Chicago, as "a mystic who knew where the mysteries lie but who do not mystify." I like that very much. To be mystics who know where the mysteries lie but who do not mystify—I presume that's part of *our* task.

Barbara McClintock, as a young woman, became fascinated with genetic transposition. She wanted to know how genes moved, carried their messages from one place to another. In her day, there were none of the instruments and chemical procedures that my biologist son works with as he works with DNA. There were only hunches, hypotheses, clues, and the powers of human imagination—the mystical capacity to identify with the other and still respect its otherness.

Barbara McClintock exercised the mystical capacities at the heart of her work in genetic science, but the price she paid for that was to be marginalized by her profession. Her work was scoffed at. Her work was distrusted. She could not get grants. She could not get articles published. She could not get laboratory space—until she won a Nobel Prize in science, and then her dance ticket started getting filled.

Another scientist named Evelyn Fox Keller came along when McClintock was in her early 80s and said, "I would like to write your intellectual biography, your story as a scientist. Tell me," she said, "How do you do great science?"

Barbara McClintock, who was one of the most precise empirical observers and one of the most analytic logical thinkers that we have ever had in American science,

thought for a moment and said, “About the only thing I can tell you about the doing of science is that you somehow have to have a feeling for the organism.”

Then Keller asked her question again. “Tell me, how do you do great science?”

McClintock, who was at that age when all that’s left is to tell the truth, thought for a moment about these ears of corn that she had worked with all her life, because they were cheap and plentiful, and she said, “Really, all I can tell you about doing great science is that you somehow have to learn to lean into the kernel.”

At that point in the book, Evelyn Fox Keller, herself a physical chemist, writes a sentence that I regard as brilliant and luminous. She says, “Barbara McClintock, in her relation with ears of corn, practiced the highest form of love, which is the intimacy that does not annihilate difference.”

When I read that, tears came to my eyes. I thought, McClintock had a relation with ears of corn that I yearn to have with other people. And she knew it was possible to have that kind of relationship with all creatures and all forms of being. Sacredness. Simple respect. Intimacy that does not annihilate difference. A mystic who did not mystify but who knew where the mysteries lie. Here was a scientist—Nobel Prize winning, responsible for the genetic breakthroughs which we now live with, in the late 20 th century, a heroine of her own arena—who practiced the highest form of love in the doing of science itself.

Well, I think the story stands on its own, but let me just mention a few things out of it that would transform education if we could embody in our knowing, teaching, and learning, this simple sense of the sacred that Barbara McClintock brought to her work and science.

First, if we could recover a sense of the sacred in knowing, teaching, and learning, we would recover our sense of the otherness of the things of the world, the precious otherness of the things of the world.

One of the greatest sins in education is reductionism, the destruction of that precious otherness by cramming everything into categories that we find comfortable, ignoring data, ignoring writers, ignoring voices, ignoring information, ignoring simple facts that don’t fit into our shoebox, because we don’t have a respect for otherness. We have a fear of otherness that comes from having flattened the terrain and desacralized it. A people who know the sacred know otherness, and we don’t know that anymore.

When we teach about third-world cultures in ways that confine them, make them measure up to *our* standards of what greatness or excellence is supposed to be like, we ignore their powerful richness. These cultures have more to teach us than we have yet to understand or imagine about real values, about community, about respect, about the sacred, yet they come out, by our measures, as shabby, dirty, dusty, lacking in merit.

Too many students have learned, through that reductionist model, a disrespect for the otherness of the things of the world.

We do it with great literature too. This is done not only on the right; it's done on the left as well. We do it with great literature where the story itself may convey powerful messages about the human condition, but because its author does not measure up to current tests of rightness or credibility, the text gets dismissed. A writer named David Denby has said, "What a convenient way of making the professor and students superior to the text," by not respecting the otherness of that voice and engaging it on its own terms. So the first thing that a people who know the sacred would know in education is the precious otherness of the things in the world.

But the second thing that such a people would know is the precious inwardness of the things of the world.

Barbara McClintock respected ears of corn in their integrity as an alien nation, as an otherness that she needed to respect if she was to do good science. But at the same time, she believed that an ear of corn had an inwardness to it, had a mind. She once said, "I learned to think like corn." The corn thought, and you could learn to think like it. And her great science didn't mystify that. It built on that and used her intuitive capacities to enter the mind of corn in a way that led to breakthrough scientific discoveries.

We don't respect the inwardness of the things we study, and we therefore do not respect the inward learnings that those things have for us.

I have thought often and painfully about the education about the murderous history of the Third Reich that I got in some of the best colleges in this country. I was taught its history by good historians, some of whom were award-winning. But I was taught the history of Nazi Germany in a way—and I've never known how to say this—that made me feel that somehow all of that murderousness had happened to another species on another planet.

My teachers were not revisionists. They weren't saying it didn't happen. It happened. They taught the statistics and the facts and the theories behind the facts, but they presented them at such objective arm's length—just the facts and only the facts—that it never connected with the inwardness of my life, because the inwardness of those events was never revealed to me. All was objectified, all was externalized, and I ended up morally and spiritually deformed as a consequence of that objectification.

There are two things that I failed to learn from the history courses that I took on Nazi Germany that I should have learned and learned painfully only in later years. One was that the very community I grew up in on the North Shore of Chicago had its own fascist anti-Semitic tendencies. I grew up in Wilmette, Illinois, and if you were a Jew who lived in that area, you didn't live in Wilmette and you didn't live in Evanston and

you didn't live in Kenilworth. You lived in Glencoe, because a fascism was at work which said, "We don't want to live with you."

I should have been taught that. My little story and the inwardness of my life should have been connected with the inward dynamics of that history in a way that would have helped me understand my own time, my own place, and my own involvement in the same evil, because without that, there was no way for me to grow morally.

And, of course, the second thing I didn't learn which takes me even more deeply inward, is that I did not learn that there is within me, in the shadow of my own soul, a little Hitler, a force of evil, that when the difference between me and thee gets too great, I will find some way to kill you off. I won't do it with a bullet or a gas chamber, but I'll do it with a category, a dismissal, a word of some sort that renders you irrelevant to my universe and to my life: "Oh, you're just a _____." It is a dismissal that we do with such facility in academic life to render each other and each other's truth irrelevant to who we are.

I taught not long ago for a year at Berea College in Kentucky. Some of you will know this remarkable institution devoted to the young people of Appalachia. They charge no tuition because these kids have no money. I taught a course in which I attempted to parallel the big story that I was teaching with the little stories of their lives, and not only to parallel the big story with the little story but to connect and interweave the two.

As part of that second objective, I asked my students to write autobiographical essays connected with the ideas of the big story we were considering. I wanted them to see that the big story was their story. And I wanted their little stories to correct the way the authors of this particular text had written the big story, because the whole Appalachian experience had been omitted from this text on American life.

At the end of the first session, a young man came up to me, and he said, "Dr. Palmer, in these autobiographical papers that you want us to write, is it okay to use the word 'I'?" I said, "Of course, it is. I invite you to use that word. I don't know how you would be able to fulfill the assignment if you didn't. But help me understand why you needed to ask the question." And he said, "Because I'm a _____ major, and every time I use the word 'I' in a paper, I'm downgraded one full grade."

This goes on all the time in education. Recovering the sacred might be one path towards recovering the inwardness without which education does not happen.

Third, by recovering the sacred, we could recover our *sense of community* with each other and with all of creation, the community that Thomas Merton named so wonderfully as the "hidden wholeness." I have become increasingly convinced that this recovery of community is absolutely at the heart of good teaching.

I'm amazed by the fact that good teachers use a million different techniques. Good teaching isn't about technique. I've asked students around the country to describe their good teachers to me. Some of them describe people who lecture all the time, some of them describe people who do little other than group process, others describe everything in between.

But all of them talk about people who have some sort of connective capacity, who somehow connect the students and the subject being studied and the students to each other.

One young woman told me she couldn't possibly describe her good teachers because they were all so different from each other, but she could easily describe her bad teachers because they were all the same.

I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "With my bad teachers, their words float somewhere in front of their faces like the balloon speech in cartoons."

I thought this was an extraordinary image, and I said, "Do you mean that somehow with bad teaching, there is a disconnect between the stuff being taught and the self who is teaching it?" And she said, "Absolutely."

There is a distance, a coldness, a lack of community because in a secularized academy, we don't have the connective tissue of the sacred to hold this apparent fragmentation and chaos together. Merton is right. It's a wholeness, but it's a hidden wholeness. It's so easy to look on the surface of things and say there is no community here at all. But if you go deep, the way you go when you seek that which is sacred, you find the hidden wholeness. You find the community that a good teacher evokes and invites students into, that somehow weaves and reweaves life together.

Community goes far beyond our face-to-face relationship with each other as human beings. In education especially, this community connects us with what the poet Rilke called the great things of the world and with the grace of great things.

We are in community with all of it: the genes and ecosystems of biology (as Barbara McClintock knew herself to be), the symbols and reference of philosophy and theology, the archetypes of betrayal and forgiveness and loving and loss that are the stuff of literature, the artifacts and lineages of anthropology, the materials of engineering with their limits and potentials, the logic of systems and management, the shapes and colors of music and art, the novelties and patterns of history, the elusive idea of justice under the law. We are in community with all of these great things. Great teaching is about knowing that community and feeling that community and sensing that community and drawing your students into it.

I had a teacher at Carleton College who changed my life, but he lectured nonstop. We would raise our hands and try to get a word in edgewise, and he would say, "Wait a minute. I'll get to that at the end of the hour." He wouldn't have gotten to it at the

end of the week, the month, the year. Thirty years later, my hand is still up! He's dead, unfortunately, but I'm still engaged with what he said.

I wondered what was this magic that made me feel so deeply related to the world of social thought that he was teaching, even though he, himself, was basically a shy and awkward person who didn't know how to connect with me on the social level.

He would make a vigorous Marxist statement, a puzzled look would come over his face, and he would step over here and argue with himself from a Hegelian viewpoint. It wasn't an act. He was really confused.

And I realized years later what the deal was. He didn't need us to be in community! Who needs 18-year-olds from the North Shore of Chicago when you're hanging out with Marx and Hegel and Troeltsch and other really interesting people? But he opened a door to me that had never been opened before, a world of imagination and thought that I had no idea existed, and it was an enormously gracious act. He was an amazing man who carried a community within himself, a community of people long gone.

(This is a mildly political comment, but I'm amazed at this controversy surrounding Hillary Clinton and her conversations with Eleanor Roosevelt. After all, the heart of the liberal arts is the ability to talk to dead people. People pay \$25,000 a year to learn how to have conversations with the dead. It's called being liberally educated!)

Fourth, if we recovered a sense of the sacred, we would recover the *humility* that makes teaching and learning possible.

Everyone in academia knows what Freeman Dyson meant when he said, about the development of the nuclear weaponry that threatened to destroy the earth, "It is almost irresistible, the arrogance that comes over us when we see what we can do with our minds." So much arrogance that we will keep turning the crank until we destroy the earth itself. It is only with humility, the humility that comes from being in the presence of sacred things and knowing the simple quality called respect, that real knowing, teaching, and learning are possible.

A couple of years ago, Watson and Crick, the discoverers of the DNA molecule, celebrated the 40th anniversary of that discovery. Those of you who have read the book, *Double Helix*, know that it's about all of the anti-virtues of academic life: competitiveness, ego, greed, power, and money.

But when they were interviewed on the 40th anniversary of the discovery of DNA, James Watson said, "The molecule is so beautiful. Its glory was reflected on Francis and me. I guess the rest of my life has been spent trying to prove that I was almost equal to being associated with DNA, which was a hard task."

Then Francis Crick—of whom Watson once said, "I have never seen him in a modest mood"—replied, "We were upstaged by a molecule."

Finally, if we recovered a sense of the sacred, we would recover our capacity for *wonder and surprise*, an absolutely essential quality in education. I know what happens when we get surprised in an academic context. We reach for the nearest weapon and try to kill the surprise as quickly as we can, because we are scared to death.

I will never be able to comprehend why people so devoutly believe that competition is the best way to generate new ideas, because I know from experience what happens in competition. In competition you do not reach for a new idea, because a new idea is risky. You don't know how to use it. You don't know where it's going to take you. You don't know what flank it may leave open. In competition, you reach for an old idea that you know how to wield as a weapon, and you smite the untruth as quickly as you can.

We have flattened our landscape. My image of this objectivist landscape in higher education is that it is so flat, so lacking in variety, so utterly banal that anything that pops up and takes us by surprise is instantly defined as a threat. Where did it come from? Where did it come from? It must be from underground. It must be the work of the devil.

The sacred landscape has hills and valleys, mountains and streams, forests and deserts, and is a place where surprise is our constant companion—and surprise is an intellectual virtue beyond all telling. Those are some things I think we might bring back if we pursued the themes of this conference in our lives and education.

I want to say one final word about the journey toward recovering the sacred, about getting from here to there. I do not believe that we can rightly ask or hopefully ask our institutions to manifest the qualities of the sacred that I have been talking about. I don't think institutions are well suited to carry the sacred. I think distortion happens when the sacred gets vested in an institutional context or framework.

I think institutions have their utility. They have jobs to do. We all have important vocational decisions about whether to be inside or outside institutions and how to do that dance because we all know their power of co-optation. But I don't believe that what we're talking about here is going to be carried by the Roman Catholic Church or the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends or the University of Colorado at Boulder or even the Naropa Institute. I believe these are things we carry in our hearts into the world in solitude and in community.

I have been doing a small study of social movements that have transformed the landscape: the women's movement, the black liberation movement, the gay and lesbian identity movement, the movement for freedom in Eastern Europe and in South Africa. I will not trouble you with all of the details of how movements evolve. I just want to say a word about the starting point of social movements as I understand it.

I believe that movements start when individuals who feel very isolated and very alone in the midst of an alien culture, come in touch with something life-giving in the

midst of a death-dealing situation. They make one of the most basic decisions a human being can make, which I have come to call the decision to live “divided no more,” the decision to no longer act differently on the outside than one knows one’s truth to be on the inside.

I call it the Rosa Parks decision, because she is emblematic for me and for many people I know of the historic potentials of a decision that can feel very lonely and very isolated. Rosa Parks was prepared for that day on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, December 1, 1955. She was prepared in many ways. She had gone to the Highlander Folk School where Martin Luther King also learned nonviolence. She was the secretary of the NAACP in her community.

But we all know that the day—the moment—she sat down, she had no assurances that the theory would work, that the strategy would succeed, not even assurances that people who said they were her friends would be there for her in the aftermath of that action. It was a lonely decision made in isolation, but a decision emblematic of that being made by many other individuals in that place and time, for which she has risen to be the exemplar. It was a decision that changed the lay and the law of the land.

I’ve often asked myself where people find the courage to make a decision like that when they know that the power of the institution is going to come down on their heads? How do they find the courage to make a decision like that when they know it could easily lead to loss of status, loss of reputation, loss of income, loss of job, loss of friends, and, perhaps, loss of meaning?

The answer comes to me through studying the lives of the Rosa Parks and the Vaclav Havels and the Nelson Mandelas and the Dorothy Days of this world. These are people who have come to understand that no punishment that anybody could lay on us could possibly be worse than the punishment we lay on ourselves by conspiring in our own diminishment, by living a divided life, by failing to make that fundamental decision to act and speak on the outside in ways consonant with what we know to be true on the inside.

And as soon as we made that decision, amazing things happen. For one thing, the enemy stops being the enemy. When Rosa Parks sat down that day, it was partly an acknowledgment that by conspiring with racism, she had helped create racism. By conspiring with death-dealing education, we help to create death-dealing education. But by deciding to live divided no more, we help change all of that.

When the police came on the bus that day, they said to Rosa Parks, “You know if you continue to sit there, we’re going to have to throw you in jail.” And her answer is historic. She said, “You may do that.” An enormously polite way of saying, “What could your jail possibly mean compared to the imprisonment I’ve had myself in for the last 43 years, which I break out of today?”

I don't know where you are on your journey. My journey is constantly toward trying to understand what it means to live divided no more. And I think if we come out of this conference understanding that decision better in the context of education, we will have done something well worth doing.

The article is an adaptation of the keynote address delivered at the conference on Spirituality in Education, sponsored by the Naropa Institute May 30-June 3, 1997. Audiotapes of the Conference are available from Sounds True, P.O. Box 8010 , Boulder CO 80306.

About the Author: Parker J. Palmer, founder and Senior Partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a world-renowned writer, speaker and activist. He has reached millions worldwide through his nine books, including the bestselling *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Courage to Teach*, *A Hidden Wholeness*, and *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Parker holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, along with eleven honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press. In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. In 2011, he was named an Utne Reader Visionary, one of “25 people who are changing your world.”)