

Hello, my name is Katie Byrnes. I direct our Baldwin Center for Learning and Teaching here at Bowdoin. And today I'm going to be reading from one of my favorite books, "The Courage to Teach" by Parker Palmer. And this is a book that I first read before I started teaching high school about 20 years ago. And I have re-read it many, many times since then.

So I'll be reading a section from chapter three, which is titled "The Hidden Wholeness: Paradox in Teaching and Learning."

Holding the Tension of Opposites.

Holding the tension of paradox so that our students can learn at deeper levels is among the most difficult demands of good teaching. How are we supposed to do it? Imagine yourself in a classroom. You ask a well-framed question and then you wait and wait as the great silence descends. You know you should wait some more, not jump, but your heart pounds then sinks, and finally feels helpless and out of control. So you answer your own question with an emotional mix of anxiety, anger, and authoritarianism that only makes things worse. Then you watch as the opening to learning offered by the silence vanishes and teaching becomes more and more like running headlong into walls.

That scenario, which could apply to holding any of the paradoxes, not just silence and speech, suggests a simple truth. The place where paradoxes are held together is in the teacher's 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. In particular, we must teach our hearts a new way to understand the tension we feel when we are torn between the poles.

Some clues to such an understanding is found in E. F. Schumacher's classic text "Small Is Beautiful." "Through all our lives we are faced with the task of reconciling opposites, which in logical thought cannot be reconciled. How can one reconcile the demands of freedom and discipline in education? Countless mothers and teachers in fact do it, but no one can write down a solution. They do it by bringing into the situation a force that belongs to a higher level where opposites are transcended. The power of love. Divergent problems, as it were, force us to strain ourselves to a level above ourselves. They demand and thus provoke the supply of forces from a higher level, thus bringing love, beauty, goodness, and truth into our lives. It is only with the help of these higher forces that the opposites can be reconciled in the living situation."

Schumacher's words helped me understand that the tension that comes when I try to hold a paradox together is not hell-bent on tearing me apart. Instead it is a power that wants to pull my heart open to something larger than myself. The tension always feels difficult, sometimes destructive, but if I can collaborate with the work it is trying to do, rather than resist it, the tension will not break my heart. It will make my heart larger.

Schumacher's illustration of this point is brilliant because of his true to ordinary experience. Every good teacher and every good parent has somehow learned to negotiate the paradox of freedom and discipline. We want our children and our

students to become people who think and live freely. At the same time, we know that helping them become free requires us to restrict their freedom in certain situations. Of course, neither our children nor our students share this knowledge.

When my 13 year old announces that he will no longer attend religious services or a student submits a paper on a topic other than the one I assigned, I'm immediately drawn into the tension. And there is no formula to tell me whether this is a moment for freedom or discipline or some alchemy of both. But good teachers and good parents find their way through such minefields every day by allowing the tension to pull itself, to pull them open to a larger and larger love. A love that resolves these Solomonic dilemmas by looking past the tension within ourselves towards the best interest of the student or the child.

As always with profound truths, there's a paradox about this love. Schumacher says that a good parent or teacher resolves the tension of divergent problems by embodying the transcendent power of love. Yet he also says that resolving the tension requires a supply of love that comes from beyond ourselves, provoked by the tension itself. If we are to hold paradoxes together, our own love is absolutely necessary, and yet our own love is never enough. In a time of tension, we must endure with whatever love we can muster until that very tension draws a larger love into the scene.

There is a name for the endurance we must practice until a larger love arrives. It's called suffering. We will not be able to teach in the power of paradox until we are willing to suffer the tension of opposites, until we understand that such suffering is neither to be avoided nor merely to be survived, but must be actively embraced for the way it expands our own hearts. Without this acceptance, the pain of suffering will always lead us to resolve the tension prematurely because we have no reason to stand the gaff.

We will ask and answer our own questions in the silence of the classroom, thus creating more silence. We will ride roughshod over the dissenting voice that confounds our learning plan. Even though we said we welcomed questions. We will punish the student who writes outside the assignment, no matter how creatively, to bring him or her back in line. We cannot teach our students at the deepest levels when we are unable to bear the suffering that opens into these levels. By holding the tension of opposites, we hold the gateway to inquiry open, inviting students into a territory in which we all can learn.

How to do this is not a question that can be answered for it is done in the teacher's heart. But holding the tension of opposites is about being, not doing. But some words from Rilke may help. "They offer no technique for embracing suffering, because one does not exist, but they offer hope for what might happen if we tried." The words are from the "Letters to a Young Poet," in which Rilke writes as a teacher. He had received a series of respectful but demanding letters from a neophyte who admired his work and sought advice on how to follow in his path.

Rilke not only took the time to respond, but did so with astonishing generosity. In one exchange, the young poet presses the older one with question after urgent question, and Rilke responds with this counsel: "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 answer."

His words could easily be paraphrased to speak to the condition of the teacher whose heart is unable to hold the tension of opposites in the classroom. Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart. Try to love the contradictions themselves. Do not now seek the resolutions which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the contradictions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the paradox.

The hope Rilke gives me lies partly in his notion that on some distant day I might find that I have lived my way into a more competent understanding of how to hold the tension of paradox that I have in this moment. Surely he is right about that. Having lived into the tensions of teaching for some time now, I am better able to hold paradoxes together than I was years ago, but my deeper hope comes with Rilke's words and the point is to live everything. Of course, that is the point. If I do not fully live the tensions that come my way, those tensions do not disappear. They go underground and multiply.

I may not know how to solve them, but by wrapping my life around them and trying to live out their resolution, I open myself to new possibilities and keep the tensions from tearing me apart. There's only one alternative, an unlived life. A life lived in denial of the tensions that teaching brings. Here I play a masked professional role pretending outwardly that I have no tensions at all, while inwardly all those tensions I pretend not to have are ripping the fabric of my life.

Pretending is another name for dividedness, a state that keeps us from cultivating the capacity for connectedness on which good teaching depends. When we pretend, we fall out of community with ourselves, our students, and the world around us, out of communion with the common center that is both the root and the fruit of teaching at its best. But when we understand that the point is to live everything, we will recover all that is lost.

Thank you.

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