The Heart of Higher Education

A Call to Renewal

by Parker J. Palmer & Arthur Zajonc

Parker Palmer is a master teacher who founded the Center for Courage & Renewal and wrote classics that speak to the heart of vocation and teaching including The Courage to Teach and Let Your Life Speak. Arthur Zajonc is a respected physics professor who also has a special interest in contemplative pedagogy and so is well placed to help make the new science and new teaching methods accessible for other teachers. Together with Megan Scribner, their shared passion for the craft of teaching and cultivating the character of students makes this an inspiring volume.

Their focus is a philosophical basis for integrated teaching and learning. Their aim is to bring a renewal of soul, meaning and purpose into tertiary education. They want to invite discussion about reshaping higher education to both nurture the inner world of students and address the huge problems of our world. Following Wendell Berry, they assume that good work and good citizenship come from making good human beings. Thus they want to invite students and faculty to engage character formation as well as intellectual development. They celebrate universities that send students and faculty together into needy parts of the world to see its pain and start to dream about its healing. They want to help the next generation not just get qualified to get well-paid jobs but to be prepared—in mind, soul and spirit—to discover and pursue their vocations.

An integrated approach calls for a rediscovery of so-called ‘soft’ methods of education: community, conversation, spirituality, hospitality, emotion, self-awareness, contemplation. Rather than specialising in narrow disciplines, it encourages integration across the spectrum of inter-disciplinary studies. Instead of dividing things to study their constituent parts, an integrated approach follows the new science and its newfound awareness of the amazing interrelatedness of the world. There have been profound changes in science over the last century. These have started to filter into new perspectives on organic leadership and networked business, but Parker and Zajonc show the implications for our integrated education. We can value relationships, community, experience and interdependence because this is how the world exists.

One of the most inviting concepts of the book is contemplative pedagogy. The authors invite learners to get in touch with their intuition and listen and look contemplatively at their subjects. This is countercultural in our frantic busy society, but essential for really understanding our world and our selves. Part of good teaching is to follow Rilke’s encouragement to “have patience with everything unresolved in your heart” and “stand guard over the solitude of the other” (p. 105, 114). Integrative education is more about contemplation and imagination than learning stats of technical information. Zajonc comments: “Thus education is at its heart not the conveyance of information concerning objects, but a leading of the inquiring minds of our students through the manifold layers of experience and reason to occasions of epiphany, that is to the exacted experience of genuine insight. This is the joy of discovery that brightens students’ faces and for which we teachers are rightly grateful” (p.89).

The book includes a collection of practical suggestions and inspiring stories. One teacher found it transformative to listen to music at the start of each class to help students care about their souls. Others use poetry to ignite the imagination. Creative assessment can help students reflect on their experience as well as their reading. And some of the most innovative new programs involve service learning and internships in community development. It’s one thing to learn about challenges of global poverty and environmental crises, but another to experience firsthand and develop a thoughtful response. Palmer comments, “If higher education does not help people learn how and why to take the risks of love, its moral contributions to the world will fall far short of its potential” (p.39).

This is an important book for those involved in teaching, governance or learning in higher education. It is about helping teachers get in touch with their vocation of helping students to explore the “big questions and worthy dreams” of their vocations. Parker and Zajonc’s conversation on these important themes is an invitation to reflect further and continue to converse— with our colleagues, students and neighbourhoods— about how we can renew the heart of higher education.