



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Risky Stuff: Friends

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Every now and then I read a book for which I have such resonance and affection that I wish I had written it. One such book is *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, by Parker Palmer. Parker Palmer teaches that

*the bad days of teaching create a kind of suffering that only comes from attempting work that is loved, revered – work where our passions find expression and release.*

For many of us, teaching is the work our souls must have. (K. Cannon) When soul-rich teaching days are bad, then the teacher is anguished. Palmer encourages that when teachers endure unswerving bad days that that teacher

*must not attempt to escape, but instead, to get out of trouble, go deeper in*

Yes! I agree! Or I used to agree. Before the quarantine I thought Palmer's words noble, admirable, aspirational and attainable. Now, in the midst of the yet on-going Covid pandemic, the unrelenting social violence against BIPOC people, the renewed awareness of war around the globe, the uptick of mental illness, the supply chain shortages, grieving, languishing and so on - while I am not rethinking this nobility, I am stymied by it in new ways.

In the struggle with teaching-while-in-Covid, a refrain uttered by colleagues is the wish, need,

outcry for withdrawal, maybe even surrender. In multiple forms, colleagues have reported their suffering with these words:

*I want to quit teaching every day.*

The series of bad days is stretching-out too long, too far, too much. A response of going deeper, doing more, reifying commitment, is not working. Colleagues do not possess the fortitude to meet their espoused loyalty. For many, the fires of passion have burned out. Some days, I count myself in this number.

Lovers of the *Courage to Teach* are encouraged to read beyond the aforementioned pithy quotes, and focus on the grand picture of teaching and the teaching life for which Palmer speaks. We must remember that Palmer also wrote,

*If we want to grow as teachers -- we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives -- risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract.*

During the pandemic, the practice of nurturing an inner life, rather than for growth, might now be practices of survival.

While it would have been better to have risked habits and practices of talking to each other about our inner lives before the current on-going crisis and malaise, doing it right now might slow our undoing.

A foundation stone of the Wabash Center is our cohort groups. We have learned that the critical role of the cohort groups lies in providing space for dialogue, networking, and relationship building. Participants often find old friends, make new friends, and deepen friendships (see our website for upcoming opportunities).

Friends are the folks to whom we can pour out our hearts with the assurance that our words will not be weaponized against us at tenure or promotion processes. My hunch is that without friends in the industry of teaching, or friends beyond the industry of teaching, a teaching soul cannot make it alone, especially during this pandemic. It is in the intimacy of friendship where our inner life is discussed so that the suffering of our bad teaching days does not devour us.

I have a friend I depend upon. We speak regularly. During the isolation of quarantine, we spoke every day – sometimes more than once a day. We needed to check-in, to be checked-on, and to feel connected.

One of my favorite ways that we interact is to always say to each other such yammering of truth telling and troublemaking as ---

*you have done enough/you are enough/go take a nap/tell them no/did you eat today/ are you hydrated/go outside and sit/ set your alarm clock so you stop working/ you don't have to reply to that email/that deadline can be renegotiated/I'll call you later...*

These statements are not so much advice as they are gestures of soul tending and care. It takes friends to help with the daily work of refusing and resisting the messaging which tells us we should be fodder for the machine of misogyny, racism and the faltering capitalist democracy. We risk friendships because the alternative is madness.

Mostly - my friend and I laugh! We laugh at our own foolishness, the foolishness of people who have annoyed, disappointed or angered us. We laugh about the absurdity of war and we laugh when a new binge worthy show is announced on Netflix. We remind one another not to take our jobs so seriously that we hurt ourselves, press ourselves too hard. We acknowledge that teaching in a pandemic has exacerbated the already hard struggle. On the days we want to quit, we never try to talk the other out of it.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/03/risky-stuff-friends/>