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Palmer, Zajonc, and Scribner's "The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal" -Book Review

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Parker Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, and Megan Scribner
The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010 pb 255pp \$24.95
ISBN 978-0-470-48790-7

Regular readers of Parker Palmer will find some familiar material in *The Heart of Higher Education*, but they will find that he has recast it and connected it in some new and interesting ways. And he has engaged with others in a conversation that puts new legs under some of his enduring ideas. Those who know *To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983) will recognize the epistemology Palmer outlined there, where both teacher and students approach the subject, rather than the students having to go through the teacher, so to speak, to get to the material they want to learn. Palmer took pains in that book to point to the epistemic humility his model implied for teachers.

All Palmer's readers will recognize in this new title the idea running through *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), that great classrooms function as communities of trust. In the several chapters he contributed here, Palmer combines these two ideas to argue that hospitable, conversational classrooms are the key to the kind of integrative education for which most students hunger and in which many teachers and professors long to be involved. Palmer and Zajonc want to "re-ensoul" education (p. 3). In their view, that entails offering education that offers space for teachers and students to be undivided people who bring both the cognitive and the affective, the objective and the subjective, to learning and teaching. When teachers and learners can bring these dimensions—which the academy often sets up as opposites—together, when they can do their work knowing that "knowing and loving significantly overlap each other" (p. 29), integrative education can result. In Palmer's own words, "Colleges and universities need to encourage, foster and assist our students, faculty and administrators in finding their own authentic way to an undivided life

where meaning and purpose are tightly interwoven with intellect and action, where compassion and care are infused with insight and knowledge” (p. 56). Sentences such as these bear witness to Palmer’s ability to speak truth that most educators know but have not articulated.

Palmer is aware that the kind of education he describes in the first two chapters of this book will face criticisms and objections, and he catalogues and responds to five such concerns. In his defense of undivided or integrative learning, he builds on and repeatedly reminds his readers of his view that an ontology is realized in an epistemology, which shapes a pedagogy, which leads to ethical outcomes. That’s a mouthful, but it is true, and Palmer’s deft treatment makes it seem simultaneously profound and commonplace. Furthermore, this set of connections provides a useful framework for any teacher wanting to see how worldviews shape what happens in classrooms.

Arthur Zajonc, physicist and friend of Palmer’s, contributed three chapters this book. A lack of depth in physics may lead to difficulties in following some details of his argument. Nevertheless, most readers will grasp his overall point: that modern science, with its concern for objectivity, has done a great job of analyzing parts but has often missed the whole. On Zajonc’s account, science needs to consider both the objective and the subjective to yield full insight into the object—that is, the subject—of study. Zajonc wants the academic disciplines to “reconceive themselves according to a post-reductionist paradigm in which lived experience, connection, and complexity are given far more attention” (p. 82). Zajonc’s chapters, while they do seem to presume some scientific background that some of his readers may lack, are nevertheless readable and lively. He uses stories well and might prod some of his readers to read more science. Few seem as capable as Zajonc at introducing the lyricists to the empiricists.

Unlike many books that result from conferences, *The Heart of Higher Education* is not simply a collection of the best papers. It is a completely reworked, stand-alone book that drew some of its resources from a conference. Throughout their chapters, Zajonc and Palmer make reference to each other’s chapters and to the stories that Megan Scribner collected and edited (starting at p. 175). Those stories from classrooms narrate the kind of integrative and hospitable education that Zajonc and Palmer call for in their chapters. These stories alone justify the book and will leave readers wondering how to implement new practices in their own teaching.

Fans of Parker Palmer's writing will enjoy this book. Anyone interested in seeing education re-ensouled will find it inspiring and instructive. *The Heart of Higher Education* recognizes winsomely and persuasively the character of the world God made and the people in it.

Ken Badley