

2012

Book Review: The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Jamie, "Book Review: The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal" (2012). *Staff Publications - Student Life*. 47.

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The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal

By **Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajonc**

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010, 237 pp., \$24.95, ISBN: 978-0-470-48790-7

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In *The Heart of Higher Education*, authors Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajonc, a sociologist and physicist, respectively, practice what they preach. The second subtitle for their short book is *Transforming the Academy Through Collegial Conversations*, and their ability to converse with each other and the reader is commendable. The ease of the conversation, though, perhaps glosses over the significant claims they make to renew a higher education system that has lost what they believe is its true purpose: to enable students to “learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings” (p. 3). To address this missing aspect of higher education Parker and Zajonc propose a reinterpretation of a common phrase, focusing on “integrative education,” which they have dubbed “collegial conversations.” These conversations, when approached as the authors suggest, may begin to plant the seeds of reform that over time will grow into institutions capable of meeting the challenges of the next century.

The book is divided into six chapters, in which Palmer provides chapters 1, 2, and 6, while Zajonc provides chapters 3, 4, and 5. As would perhaps be expected, Palmer, the sociologist, takes a meta-approach to the subject. He opens the book with a brief look at the philosophical aspects of integrative education, in which he lists the five common critiques of integrative education (chapters 1 and 2). His final chapter (chapter 6) is an exploration of practical steps toward creating a faculty environment conducive to collegial conversations. Zajonc moves from making a case for the credibility of personal experience (chapter 3), to pedagogical examples of objective subjects engaging what are normally considered less educational subjective experiences (chapter 4), and finally defining his methodology or praxis as “contemplative pedagogy,” the art of creating space for reflection in the classroom. Showing few deficiencies in semantic complexity, he attempts to flesh out the implications of Palmer’s broad philosophical framework (chapter 5).

As the stated aim of the authors is to produce a robust philosophical framework for integrative education, perhaps the most adequate way to describe how they attempt to tackle the subject is as follows: Palmer deals with the ontology, epistemology, pedagogy, and ethics of integrative education, while Zajonc focuses on praxis. Through the explication of philosophical terminology, in often perplexing (and perhaps counterintuitive to their argument) dialect, their argument focuses on a rather simple concept that is often assumed to be too difficult to implement in the academy: namely, the university of the future will move beyond its obsession with purely objectivist content delivery into the educational world of experience, from bystander (objective exploration) to friend (relational experience). Palmer writes,

Higher education looses upon the world too many people who are masters of external, objective reality, with the knowledge and skill to manipulate it, but who understand little or nothing about inner drivers of their own behavior. Giving students knowledge as power over the world while failing to help them gain the kind of self-knowledge that gives them power over themselves is a recipe for danger . . . we need to stop releasing our students into the wild without systematically challenging them to take an inner as well as an outer journey. (p. 49)

These words encompass the deep value of relational connection, of the educational importance of experience noted continuously throughout this book. For Palmer and Zajonc, this is the outcome of true integrative teaching—relationships based on an “epistemology of love” that acts as a bridge between the intellect and the feelings, “between objectivity and participation” (p. 98).

Palmer and Zajonc have provided constituents of higher education in America a treatise on the philosophical rationale for integrative education. For them, integrative education conjures up images of relationship and storytelling, rather than “parallel teaching” or “interdisciplinary studies.” In one sense, their solution is quite simple, and this is perhaps one of the greatest contributions this book has to offer. Those involved in an institution of higher education have most likely experienced the effects of disciplinary silos, administrative prerogatives, and the individualistic culture encouraged by American forms of education. These are not secrets being discovered for the first time, but issues endemic to the educational endeavor of colleges and universities. And so Palmer and Zajonc’s solution—to merely inhabit a posture of invitation, of hospitality, and “invite each other to tell our stories,” so that “we have a chance to create community in the simple act of saying, ‘I see you’” —seems simultaneously inviting and impossible (p. 139).

Additionally, such an approach to the classroom, to the issues of the content distribution/consumption model so pervasive in classrooms across the educational spectrum, is perhaps impossible in light of the growing expectations of measurable outcomes required by accrediting organizations. It is also not a stretch to say that measuring one’s inner state is, objectively speaking, impossible. Yet the pull of experience and story upon the lives of current students is undeniable—many professors have had to wrestle the demon of a student’s vanishing engagement once the movie clip or personal story has ended. It is this encounter with the other, this relational opening that only occurs in a classroom where contemplation is an option, where space is provided (for listening, for hospitality, for differences in opinion to be expressed without fear of judgment), that Palmer and Zajonc believe true action in the world is born.

In the beginning of the book, the authors state that such an approach to reform within higher education is likely to be seen as unattainable, merely an impossible ideal out of touch with reality. Their thesis is that collegial conversations, or a correct understanding of integrative education, can change the trajectory of a given institution, one story at a time. Yet such an approach requires a few things that are not endemic to the life of an average academic: a gracious outlook toward the views of the other; a belief in the power of the narrative to induce change; vulnerability in an environment that overvalues certainty. As Palmer writes, academics are “driven not so much by egomania as by ingrained habits of discourse that make talking with each other far less than it could be, sometimes creating outcomes that drive us apart instead of bringing us together” (p. 131).

Palmer and Zajonc practice what they preach in their book, *The Heart of Higher Education*, and provide an example of how integrative education can be done, at least in print. But they are not colleagues at the same institution, trying to decipher a way forward in a shared context,

which makes it difficult to state whether or not their method will work. The only way to truly know is to talk to someone else about it, to break down the walls that have for so long separated fields of academic inquiry, and begin to tell stories—stories of what has been, what is, and what might be. For from shared stories communities are born, communities that just might be able to transform institutions of higher education, and even more importantly, transform the teacher and the student, and in so doing, entire institutions.