

“The Courage to Learn: Diversity, Community, and Deep Care at UNI”

Fall 2017 Faculty Workshop

Thursday, August 17, 9:00 am

Maucker Union Ballroom

Good morning and welcome. Thank you to Susan Hill for coordinating the New Faculty Orientation earlier this week and our Fall Faculty Workshop today. She also coordinates the New Faculty Colloquium which brings together new faculty to introduce them to the culture of UNI and innovative pedagogies as well as to build community across disciplines and colleges.

In *The Heart of Higher Education*, Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc call for a more integrative education, one that “embraces every dimension of what it means to be human, that honors the varieties of human experience, [that] looks at us and our world through a variety of cultural lenses, and [that] educates our young people in ways that enable them to face the challenges of our time” (20).

When we approximate this blending of a variety of diverse perspectives, of the arts and sciences, of mind, body, and spirit, of objective and subjective, we “honor the hidden aquifer that feeds human knowing [and] we are more likely to develop a capacity for awe, wonder, and humility that deepens rather than diminishes our knowledge. And we are less likely to develop the kind of hubris about our knowledge that haunts the world today” (22).

I offer these opening remarks because I find them relevant to the program today, to our new vision statement, and to the recent incidents at the University of Virginia. I’d like to reflect on all three.

First, today’s program will focus on making the practice of teaching more explicit and transparent to our students so that they can engage the learning process at deeper levels. We must acknowledge that the students of today learn differently than the students of the past. It is our professional obligation to find ways to help these students succeed—even while we maintain rigorous standards and high expectations.

Second, I find Palmer and Zajonc’s call relevant to the new vision, mission, and strategic plan of the university; our vision, quite boldly stated, is that we will be a “diverse and inclusive campus community that provides an engaged education empowering students to lead locally and globally,” and that we will do so “offering personalized attention to students.”

This vision reflects the deep care that exists on this campus for students, for learning, and for our community. I want to unpack this phrase, “deep care.” When we take care of our students, it does not mean dumbing down our classes, or lowering our expectations, or giving everyone easy A’s. Indeed, in the long run, such a learning environment fails our students for they will not be prepared for the world outside of our campus.

Rather, it means holding high expectations, offering rigorous assignments, and making our students uncomfortable at times, all to allow them to explore a potential that they may not know they have. But we do so at the same time that we offer them the necessary scaffolding to be successful, the transparency in our expected outcomes and in our course design so that they become meta-cognitive learners—so that they can learn side by side with us.

Finally, I find this passage from *The Heart of Higher Education* relevant to the recent tragic events at the University of Virginia. What unfolded on that campus was not about the freedom of expression. It was not about a rational debate of ideas. It was not about engaging in different perspectives or cultural world views.

It was, indeed, the exact opposite. It was about ending the flow of ideas, about diminishing others, about asserting knowledge and power in order to dominate and control. These values are antithetical to who we are and what we do as an institution of higher education.

We must, in the face of this tragedy, help our students understand the difference between, on the one hand, arrogantly asserting an ideology in order to advance a limited world view and, on the other, humbly discussing ideas in order to advance our own and others’ understanding and knowledge.

We must do so in very explicit ways in our classrooms, offering students parameters for learning that make it clear that we value different perspectives but that sharing our own views must arise from authentic humility, from an awareness that our own perspective may be flawed, or incomplete, or inaccurate. It must come with deep listening, which occurs when we put aside our own understandings and let new ideas run around inside our minds.

In *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer suggests that “Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves.” These connections, he explains, do

not arise just through our pedagogies and our subject matter, though they provide a basis, but rather through our hearts, taking “heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self” (11).

In these troubling and difficult times, it takes courage to teach, courage to bring your whole self into the classroom, courage to trust the possibility of communal learning where you, as the teacher, are as vulnerable as the students. Parker concludes: “The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require” (11).

And yet...how challenging it is to keep our hearts open at a time when we are continually confronted with a society that seems to disregard common decency, or a nation that cannot engage in meaningful dialogue around our differences, or with students whose lives are fragile, whose selves are brittle, who have everything going against them.

Yesterday, Paula Knudson, our new Vice President for Student Affairs, and I were helping students move in to their residence halls. One young woman came frantically into Gilchrist Hall looking for a phone. She had dropped her cell phone and it had died. Her grandparents were supposed to meet her to help her move in. She was late. She didn’t know where to go, or what to do. She didn’t seem to have parents available to help her through this transition. She was melting before my eyes.

I handed her my cell phone, and she luckily remembered her grandparent’s number. She made contact with her grandparents and Paula took her over to her Hall and got her set up.

What courage it must take for many of our students to be here. What courage it takes for every one of you to care so deeply.

Every day, the heart must be revived and strengthened to face the many challenges before us. Thank you for what you do. Thank you for being here and listening. And thank you for believing.

References

Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

Palmer, Parker J. And Arthur Zajonc. *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.