Parker J. Palmer Reflects on a Lifetime of Learning with Executive Editor, Frank Shushok Jr.

Frank Shushok, Jr.
Long-time activist Parker J. Palmer discusses the trajectory of his unexpected career and the importance of finding what you “can’t not do” in order to have a rewarding life.

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Shushok: Thank you for visiting with me today. One of the privileges of serving as Executive Editor of About Campus is the opportunity it gives me to interview some of my heroes. Although we had never met before today, your work, and thus your life, has been challenging and encouraging me for decades. I’m certain many About Campus readers will feel the same way. I thought the timing of our interview is terrific, given you just celebrated your 77th birthday this past Sunday. I’d love to begin our time by asking you to reflect on how the 30-year-old Parker Palmer is different from the 50-year-old Parker Palmer and now the 77-year-old Parker Palmer. What are some of the most salient lessons growing older has taught you?

Palmer: Thank you, Frank. I’m delighted to take a little stroll down memory lane with you—although at my age, that could be a very long walk, and we may have to stop at a couple of B&B’s! Over the long haul, there are several lasting lessons. One that I’m always eager to communicate with young people is that there’s really no way to predict how your path is going to unfold. What my life has turned out to be is very different than what I thought it would be when I was 30. I always tell young people, “When your elders say you have to decide at age 18, 20, or 22 what you are going to do with your life, tell them as politely as possible to ‘get a life!’ Or at least to think back on their own path.”

Becoming a Community Organizer

WHEN I WAS 30 YEARS old, I had just finished a PhD in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. I spent most of the 60s in Berkeley, having come there with the thought that I would go into an academic career. But the cities were burning and my heroes had been assassinated, and it seemed to me that it would be better to use my sociology on the streets than in the classroom. So, I became a community organizer, working on diversity issues in Washington, D.C. Things unfolded from there in an unpredictable way.
I guess you could say that at 30, I started experimenting with my life. I’ve always loved the title that Gandhi gave his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. I think you can invest your life in experimenting with truth—your own truth, the world’s truth, and the truth about where the most fruitful intersections between you and the world might be. Looking back, those are the questions I began exploring and was getting a few answers to at that time.

When I was 30, what I was doing felt daunting and scary to me. People asked why I was taking such a different path when I “had been prepared for an academic career.” In many ways, I had been groomed by my mentors to be first a professor, then a young dean, then the young president of a liberal arts college like Carleton where I was an undergraduate. People asked me, “Why are you throwing your life away by becoming a community organizer?” That’s a question I was asking myself! The only answer I could find was a double negative: “What I’m doing is something I can’t not do.” Was I crazy-wild about being on this unpredictable career path, without a steady paycheck, and all the risks inherent in that, while I’m helping to raise three kids? Was I eager to wake up each morning to face a day of deeper uncertainty? Was I glad to risk falling off the radar of higher education? No, I wasn’t running enthusiastically toward any of that! Still, there was something in me that said, “You can’t not do this.”

I think you can invest your life in experimenting with truth—your own truth, the world’s truth, and the truth about where the most fruitful intersections between you and the world might be.

Around this time, I started writing and talking about what I saw as the need for “humanism”—or to use an even more dangerous word, “spirituality”—in higher education. At the time, spirituality in education was not a popular topic: it required getting out on a number of limbs and taking risks that weren’t well supported. Yet, I felt so strongly that higher education was increasingly offering students thin soup, when their hungers and the needs of the world are so great, and the great tradition of higher learning has more nourishing things to offer.

I learned pretty early on that “spirituality” wasn’t a word that I could utter in most secular academic settings without getting ridden out of town on a rail—which is an honor, of course, just not one you want. But I soon learned that I could talk about “epistemology” and take people to the same place that I wanted to go with the word spirituality. I think the challenge when I was 30—one I have been working on ever since—is how to translate the things that are really important to us into the *lingua franca* of whatever community we are working in. How do we use language to build bridges instead of walls?

When I actually did get around to talking about spirituality, I would say to people, “Before you stop
listening, let me explain what that word means to me: spirituality is any way you have of responding to the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than your own ego.” I think that’s a pretty good operational definition of spirituality. It’s open and neutral (as a good definition should be) in the sense that the question of how to get connected with something larger than one’s own ego has been answered historically in a wide variety of ways, for better and for worse, a lot worse. The Third Reich, for example, was an answer to that question. That answer was inherently evil, but it swept up a lot of Germans who were in a spiritual identity crisis that was both personal and national. Their sense was, “If I can embrace this notion of Aryan superiority, then I’m joined with something transpersonal, which is going to bring meaning to my life.” What it brought, of course, was an enormous amount of death in the most tragic ways. And, to say the obvious, there are other ways of answering the question that are more life-giving.

Higher education needs to give students opportunities to sort out these questions of meaning and purpose, to learn to distinguish the wheat from the chaff. Just look at the current presidential campaign. We have at least one candidate out there who is calling people to a kind of crypto-fascism in response to the problems they, and we, have. A key characteristic of a would-be leader of a fascist movement is that he doesn’t really need a solution to anyone’s problems—all he needs is a scapegoat to blame and a blustering promise to eliminate that scapegoat. There are lots of people who uncritically fall in line and cheer and say, “Oh great, as soon as those people are gone, then our lives will be fine.”

These are essentially spiritual questions, as well as political and economic questions. Higher education makes a terrible mistake by being so afraid of them that we exclude them from the curriculum, making it possible to help students learn to winnow truth from falsehood in this arena.

This concern for the depth dimension of higher education—humanism, spirituality, whatever you want to call it—has actually become a larger movement itself over the last 45 years of my life.

What’s particularly interesting for me personally is that when I gave that talk I was in the middle of one of the clinical depressions that I’ve written and talked about. I have often thought that the reason the talk was successful was that “I wasn’t there”—in the sense that my ego wasn’t there. In depression, your ego is dead and gone. I had enough of myself left to write the talk and deliver it, but I was in one of those places where you don’t have any choice but to get out of your own way. That’s an important thing to do generally, but it’s hard to do when you’re feeling full of yourself. Well, I was at a point in life when there was not much of “me” left, and I think that’s why what I said had a certain purity to it that resonated with people.

That was the moment in my professional life when everything changed. I started getting invitations to talk all over the country and to give workshops. That talk just opened the floodgates to the independent

The Crystallization of a Career

MY CAREER DIDN’T REALLY COME together until I was almost 50 years old. I’m one of those lucky people who can identify a particular moment in time when my career began to crystallize. It happened when I was invited to address the annual gathering of the National Association of Higher Education in Chicago in 1987. For reasons I will never fully understand, a 1000 deans and presidents gave me a standing ovation, one that went on and on, for a talk about “Community, Conflict and Ways of Knowing”—which was really a talk about the love of learning and of learners. That talk, and the audience response, was documented in the September/October 1987 issue of Change Magazine.
career that I’ve been pursing as a writer and traveling teacher for the last 30 years.

In the early 1990s, I planted the seeds for what is now called the Center for Courage & Renewal. To get a look at the scope of our work, folks can visit the site: http://www.CourageRenewal.org. Right now, I’m devoting a lot of time and energy to Courage & Renewal retreats for young leaders and activists—people under the age of 40 who are doing important things, people from whom I’m learning so much. In addition to my writing, the last 25 years of my life have been devoted to developing Courage & Renewal work in this country and around the world. This has given me a huge community of discourse—of teaching, and action—because the folks we work with are not only in K-12 education and higher education, but also in the nonprofit world, in health care, philanthropy, ministry, and the law. These folks are doing heavy lifting in our society that needs to be supported from the inside out.

As I argue in my book, The Courage to Teach, it’s not about tips, tricks, and techniques—it’s about having your identity and integrity firmly in hand as you go about whatever work you’re doing. So my work through the Center is about creating “safe space” in retreat settings where people in the helping professions can “rejoin soul and role” and find forms of community that support them in bringing identity and integrity into the workplace. Wendell Berry is one of my favorite poets, and he has a poem that ends with the line that I live by. In “The Wild Geese,” he says, “What we need is here.” I deeply believe that to be the case: what we need to deal with the world’s madness is within us (in the soul) and between us (in community) and it’s always available. I’d love to see higher education devote more time and energy to putting students on this path.

At age 77, I think finding your vocation is all about finding out what you can’t not do! That’s a slow, incremental process, and experiment in being as faithful as you know to the gifts you have, taking risks along the way—even when others don’t understand you—and trusting life’s resourcefulness, which includes not only the resourcefulness that’s within you, but the kind that can be generated between you and other people in community.

Shushok: One of the things that has struck me about your writing is its hopeful tone even when the learning seems to be embedded in troubling times of life. I imagine there are lots of people who will read this interview and feel like their life is in a space of trouble. What encouragement could you offer them, and what did you learn from your own times of sorrow and trouble?

Hope and Darkness

PALMER: AS A WRITER AND as a reader, I’m always turned off by writers who speak as if there aren’t any troubles. That kind of exhortation or cheerleading does me no good whatsoever. If you want to write or speak encouragingly from a place of hope, you are obligated to acknowledge “the troubles” or what you say will come across as unreal and inauthentic. My own struggles, my own failures as a teacher, for example, are almost always part of the picture. I’ve never talked to a teacher, including the very best of them, who didn’t say, “I have days when teaching utterly baffles me, days when I feel a great need to find an honest way to make a living at something I know how to do!”

For me, clinical depression has been the deepest and most terrifying kind of darkness. But each time I’ve emerged from that horrific place, I’ve realized that my healing and well-being depends in part on showing up in the world as who I really am, my darkness as well as my light. One line I wrote that seems to get quoted a lot is: “Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.” When I speak with young people about this, I say that at age 77, I can’t imagine a sadder way to die than with the knowledge that I had spent all these years on the earth without ever showing up as who I really am. What a waste that would be!

“I am all of the above. I am my gifts and the light I am able to shed, and I am my darkness and my despair.” And really, aren’t we all?

After my first bout of depression—and I’ve had three serious ones: two in my 40s and one in my 60s—it took 10 years before I felt able to speak about it and write about it publicly. That was not because I was embarrassed by it. It was because I realized that I had not yet fully integrated my depression into my sense of self, into my own understanding of who I am. It would be dangerous to go public before I felt completely comfortable in saying, “I am all of the above. I am my gifts and the light I am able to shed, and I am my darkness and my despair.” And really, aren’t we all?

There’s an old tale about the Rabbi who says we all should have a coat with two pockets. In one pocket is gold to remind us how precious we are—in the other pocket is dust to remind us how transient and
insignificant we are. My notion of what it means to be whole is a version of that same principle. And, to be totally candid, showing up in the world acknowledging my darkness as well as my light is an act of self-therapy. If I am able to be fully present with all that I am, my weakness as well as my strength, I'm less likely to have to go down the rabbit hole of depression again. There are no guarantees about this, of course: there's a lot of mystery about the causes of depression, and some forms are strictly genetic or biochemical, and must be treated as such with antidepressants. I've been lucky to be able to get some relief from antidepressants during each of my depressions, but then to be able to get off of them and find well-being in other ways. But if a person has the kind of depression that requires being on antidepressants for that long haul, then that's what you need do to take care of yourself.

A big learning for me coming out of depression is that anything a person can do to take care of himself or herself is not a selfish act. It's ultimately being done on behalf of other people, because when you are in that state, you really can't be present for others. You're barely in the world as yourself. Depression is not so much like being lost in the dark as it is like having become the dark. At the depths of depression, there is no separate self that can stand back and say, “Oh, I see what's happening to me. I can analyze this. I can read some good books about it and get some perspective on it.” You cannot sit in “the balcony” of your life and observe what's happening. The only voice you can hear is the voice of depression, and what it tells you is devastating.

**Human Connection**

**AS I WROTE IN** Let Your Life Speak, the only thing that helped me were a few people who weren't afraid of me in my depression. I tell a story of the friend who came to my house every afternoon, a man slightly older than I whom I trusted. Having asked my permission, he sat me down in a chair, took off my shoes and socks, and massaged my feet. He didn't try to give me advice or fix me or save me—when people are trying to do that it just makes you more depressed. Other people would say, “Please Parker, get outside and smell the flowers and feel the sunshine, you'll feel a lot better.” Well, in depression you know intellectually that it's a beautiful day outside, but you can't feel an atom of that in your own body, and that's depressive in itself. My friend somehow found the only place in my body where I could feel connected to other people, and let me know every day that I was still in the world, that I still had a human connection in that simple way. Most people treat depression as if it was an infectious disease, and they don't want to get near you.

I think I know why that is: they think they need to have an answer for you, and not having one, they feel inadequate. I sympathize with that. But what people have to understand is that trying to “fix” things is not the way to help a depressed person. You help with a simple thing called presence—which I sometimes liken to sitting at the bedside of a dying person. Nobody sits at the bedside of a dying person thinking, “Now let's see, what's the fix for this? How can I bring this person back to life?” You sit there instead with a kind of simple presence, reverence, love, respect. I've never been on my literal deathbed, but my experience of depression gave me a sense that when someone is willing and able to sit with you that way, that person is silently conveying to you a quiet confidence that you have what it takes to make this very difficult journey, a journey we can only make by ourselves. So again, it's the principle that “what we need is here,” inner resources that are evoked by wise souls who know what their limits are under these circumstances.

I think you and I and all real educators share an abiding belief that people can change, and that learning from life as well as books is an enormous human capacity. There's a marvelous passage in T. H. White's The Once and Future King where the wizard Merlin is talking to the young Arthur who will one day become the monarch. Arthur, having a difficult time, and Merlin—trying to help him understand that even when all seems lost, if you can learn you can find your way through—says, “Learning is the thing for you!”

That's the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds.
There is only one thing for it then — to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting.

Lessons of Depression

I’VE LEARNED A LOT FROM depression. Among other things, I’ve learned how to function when the faculties that I normally depend on are no longer reliable. In depression, your intellect doesn’t do the trick—you can’t think your way out of it. Your ego is gone, shattered. Your emotions are dead: depression is not feeling sad—it’s the terrifying realization that you can’t feel anything at all. Your will, the other faculty that we rely on, is reduced to very small things, like hauling yourself out of bed at 10:30 in the morning instead of 11:00, and maybe being able to ride your bike for 10 minutes instead of 5 before you have to retreat to your room. You learn to value small steps.

You also learn that beyond those four faculties that we spend most of our time developing and relying on, there is, for me at least, way back in the thickets, this spark of life that I came to call the soul. Different people call it different things. Humanists call it identity and integrity. Ascetic Jews call it the spark of the divine. Thomas Merton called it true self. Buddhists call it big self. It doesn’t matter to me what you name it, because no one knows its true name: it’s the “being” in human being. It was in depression that I learned that we have within us a very real and alive faculty that can save us. There were times there was only that little tiny spark of life, way back in the thickets, that kept me going another day, that answered the question, “Is this the day to end it all?” As long as I could feel that little spark from time to time, the answer was, “No.”

Change is Possible

I BELIEVE THAT PEOPLE CAN change. And that belief is not only at the core of dealing with personal problems but of dealing with the social problems that face us.

Then he said, “A few years ago, as I was sitting in my office on Capitol Hill, and a man about my age named Elwin Wilson walked in with his 40-something son at his side. He said, “Representative Lewis, I’m one of the men who nearly beat you to death in Rock Hill that day. I’ve come to tell you that not a day has passed in my life that I didn’t realize the wrongness of what I did. Not a day has passed when I haven’t felt the need to come and apologize and ask your forgiveness. Now I’m an old man, and I have to do this before I die. I’ve come to ask, will you accept my apology? Will you forgive me?”

John Lewis said, “I stood. I forgave him. We embraced. We wept. Then we talked for a long time.”

As we passed through the countryside that used to be a killing ground for the Klan, I heard John softly say, “People can change. People can change.” At that moment, I knew that I’d seen right to the center of the heart of a peace-maker, a social change activist, a wounded healer.

If you don’t believe people can change, then you either have to give up or start blowing things up, and neither one is the road to a better future. So, people can change. If John Lewis can believe that, you and I can believe that, too.
Shushok: I’ve been thinking a lot about your book, Healing the Heart of Democracy, particularly what you call “the courage to create politics worthy of the human spirit.” I have encountered a lot of colleagues, educators, and students, who wonder if we can change the trajectory of the ongoing presidential election. It seems negative, it seems not hopeful, it seems counterproductive to peace and justice. My guess is you have some counsel or advice for those of us who are working with college students these days and walking through a presidential election that has taken turns that are frankly sobering.

Palmer: The first thing I want to acknowledge is that I myself vacillate between hope and despair—that’s a very human thing to do. The whole history of our democracy is riddled with these ups and downs, these great swings between hope and despair. We dare not forget that this country began by creating despair for a lot of people. This romanticism about the fact that we began as the Garden of Eden flies in the face of historical fact.

The founders, whom we tend to lionize, were actually highly exclusionary people, to use the most polite phrase I can think of. The “We” in “We the People of the United States” did not include Native Americans, enslaved human beings, women, or white men who did not own land. “We” meant only people who were like the founders, and that’s a pretty narrow sense of “we.” When we look at today’s racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and failure of empathy toward the least among us, the first thing we need to say is, “All of that was spliced into our nation’s DNA from the get-go.” To imagine that we’re looking at some kind of downhill slide from a utopian starting point—well, that’s just a lie, and you can’t get out of a mess by embracing a lie.

**What are We Going to Do?**

**SO LET’S GET REAL ABOUT** the fact that what we’re experiencing now has been the experience of every generation of Americans. The question is, what is our generation going to do about it? Hope springs from the possibility that we will take that question seriously, and act on it. In higher education, of course, the first thing one wants to do is study things, think about things, and talk about things in open and hospitable spaces, facilitated by teachers who know what they are doing. The university ought to be a place where people learn that victory does not go to the person who shouts the loudest, but to the person who can get things straight. Usually, that’s not just one person—it’s a collective movement toward getting a better grip on complicated realities and that elusive thing called “truth.”

The intergenerational piece of this is awfully important. We need each other. The younger have some energy for change. The elders have some experience at being tenacious or faithful in the face of discouragement. We need to be sharing notes with each other, and supporting and encouraging each other across those lines. It troubles me that on college campuses there are too few elders who are willing to talk about the role of failure and struggle in their lives—and the tenacity that has seen them through—in ways that would be helpful to young people, who think that struggle and failure are the end of the road, when in fact they are not.

I want to go back to the founders. For all of their blindness to diversity, and the bad DNA they gave us in that regard, they created a system of government that was designed to find a way forward by holding the tensions of diversity—if we know how to use it. They **had** to design such a system, because despite the fact that they looked as alike as peas in a pod, they thought very differently about what ought to be done. At the Constitutional Convention of 1787, 30 percent of the delegates walked out without signing the document. That interests me because 30 percent is about the proportion of people in my own family with whom I have a hard time talking politics—which means that I have an all-American family, right? From the beginning, it’s been about 30 percent who just can’t hold the tension. Today let’s say it’s 40 or 45 percent who can’t hold the tension, people who’d rather throw insults or Molotov cocktails at the opposition than have a reasoned debate. That still leaves well over 50 percent who know how to do business, and in a democracy, that’s more than enough. So not all is lost.

So let’s get real about the fact that what we’re experiencing now has been the experience of every generation of Americans. The question is, what is our generation going to do about it?

Because the founders couldn’t agree among themselves on the way forward, they created a system of government with one characteristic that makes it unique and extraordinarily important in human history. They created a system in which tension and conflict are regarded not as the **enemy** of a good social order, but as the **engine** of a better social order. They
put a tremendous emphasis on a “more perfect union.” They understood they had not established utopia, and they needed to create a mechanism that would allow us to keep moving forward toward something better.

**Work Toward Better Answers**

**The Historian Joseph Ellis Has** noted that the U.S. Constitution and government were not designed to solve problems, but to keep the salient problems on the table long enough that we could keep working toward better and better answers. That’s exactly what we do when we are functioning at our best. That’s why women, African Americans, Native Americans, and white men who own no land now have the vote, a “We the People” the founders couldn’t have imagined and some would not have approved. The founders designed a system of government that has had the capacity to turn around and tell its creators that they got it wrong—and that’s a remarkable and hopeful fact about American democracy.

Do injustices that remain in the system? Yes, of course. Many. My own state of Wisconsin is among those where draconian laws make it difficult if not impossible for some people simply to vote. Reversals are possible, but reversals of reversals are possible as well, so change for the better really depends on change agents hanging in there despite all the discouragements and frequent feelings of failure. When I talk to audiences about all this, I put forward a simple question. I invite people to think of someone they admire because this person lived by high values, like the spread of love or truth or justice. Then I ask them, “Was that person able to die saying, ‘I’m sure glad I devoted my life to that, because now everyone in the world can check it off their to-do list forever’?” Obviously the answer to that has to be “No.” No Rosa Parks, or Nelson Mandela, or Václav Havel, or Martin Luther King Jr., has ever been able to die saying, “I took care of that vital issue for all people for all time.”

We stand in what I call the tragic gap, the gap between how things are and how they might be. These are issues with which no kind of activism will ever be ultimately “effective” in the sense of ending the problem, be it racism, sexism, homophobia, or whatever. So, as activists, we need to find another standard by which to live—not to replace effectiveness, but to supersede it. If we don’t have such a standard, we will stop taking on issues like love, truth, and justice. Instead, we will take on smaller and smaller tasks, because they’re the only ones you can be “effective” with.

One of the most powerful examples of our time involves what’s going on in public education. We are no longer interested in “educating” a child. That’s a task that takes forever—and you may not know the outcomes for 5, 10, 20, or 30 years, when someone wakes up saying, “Oh, now I see what that 8th grade teacher was trying to tell me,” or, “Now I see why I should really, really value that 5th grade teacher or that high school teacher who saw more in me than I saw in myself.” These days all we’re interested is getting kids to pass tests, because that’s an achievable task on which we can be “effective.” We don’t much care if we have to achieve it by “teaching to the test”—which makes a mockery of education—or even by flat-out cheating and changing answers on the test sheets. We’ll do whatever we need to do because we are so dedicated to results—or, more precisely, to creating the appearance of results, whether or not they are real.

If I can say at the end of the day, at the end of my life, that within my own limits and frailties, I was more or less faithful to my own gifts, to the needs that I saw around me, and to the places where my gifts might meet those needs, then I think I can check out with a sense of satisfaction.

What’s the standard that should supersede effectiveness? I think the word is “faithfulness,” and I don’t mean anything high and mighty by that. If I can say at the end of the day, at the end of my life, that within my own limits and frailties, I was more or less faithful to my own gifts, to the needs that I saw around me, and to the places where my gifts might meet those needs, then I think I can check out with a sense of satisfaction. But if I’m wedded to results, and getting everything taken care of before I kick off, I’m going to die in despair. These are important questions that we don’t explore with each other or our students often enough.

**Shushok:** What do you think the questions are that we ought to be asking ourselves as educators, especially those of us working on college and university campuses?

**Palmer:** I think that good educators are asking the questions I have in mind all the time, and that
includes this one: “What’s happening in our world these days that I need to keep up with for the sake of the rising generation?” I realize that some faculty are much closer in age to the rising generation than I am, but there are a lot of faculty in mid-life who came up in a world that’s quite different from the one in which their students were raised.

The Context of Higher Education

FOR EXAMPLE, MY GENERATION SPENDS a lot of time trying to assess the meaning of the loss of traditional institutions, the kind we grew up in. Young people don’t miss those institutions, because they’ve been on the decline since before the young were born—instead, they are trying to figure out what new institutions for a new world should look like. My generation spends a lot of time working on bridging the divides we see between races, and ethnicities, and people of different sexual orientations or gender identification. The young people I work with don’t even notice those so-called lines of separation between us. They walk across them as if they weren’t there, which means they are not there for them! The young people I know are at home with diversity in a way that some members of my generation never will be, and others have to struggle to achieve. I think we ought to be asking the question, “How is the context of higher education changing in ways that we need help from our students to understand?”

“How do we educate professionals who understand that the personal identity and integrity they bring to work are at least as important as the skills and knowledge needed to do that work?”

I also think we ought to be asking, “How do we help form professionals who have not only the knowledge and skill to qualify for excellence in their fields of practice, but who know what it means to live from the inside out? How do we educate professionals who understand that the personal identity and integrity they bring to work are at least as important as the skills and knowledge needed to do that work?”

Let me take medicine as an example. The training of physicians has so often been like the training of mechanics—with unwell human beings understood as broken machines—but there’s a big movement afoot these days to change that dance. We have clinical evidence that doctors who show up as whole people and treat their patients as whole people are better healers than doctors who approach their patients as malfunctioning mechanisms to be fixed. I have personal experience with this from my own, thankfully rare, stints in hospital rooms. For one doctor, I was “the aorta in Room 103,” and for another doctor I was a person named Parker Palmer, who needs to be engaged as a whole human being. I’ll let you guess which doc evoked the whole range of my own healing powers on the journey toward renewed health!

The Human Element

WE OUGHT TO BE THINKING about how we can build the human element into all of our courses, even those in fields where the connection is not as obvious as it is in medicine. In a history course, for example, if we are teaching the history of the Third Reich, we ought to be helping students understand that the human self has at least a little “fascism of the heart” that needs to be understood and dealt with if educated people are going to contribute to a better world. We all have a tendency to dehumanize those who are different from us, who challenge our taken-for-granted view of the world. To put it plainly, we all have a tendency to want to “kill off” the other, not with a bullet or a gas chamber, but with a word of dismissal or diminishment that sort of renders them irrelevant to our lives. That kind of “fascism” is very much alive among educated people, and it’s a clear sign that education is failing to reach us at the required depths.

These humanistic questions are still very much on the higher education agenda—and they become increasingly urgent as higher education becomes more powerful by the “business model.” This too often means taking us out of the deep end of the pool and back into the shallows, where all that counts is the bottom line and satisfying the customer, avoiding anything that would disturb people while they are shopping. So you are not supposed to rattle people’s cages on a college campus, because that might upset the folks who are paying the bills. Well, that’s not education, that’s monkey business, and we ought to be speaking against it. But even more importantly, we ought to be speaking in favor of a higher education that creates human beings.

Shushok: Parker, you’ve given me way more time than I’ve asked, and I’m so grateful for that. There’s so much of value in what you are saying. I wonder just to
close, if you could offer any last words to those who will be reading what you have to say.

**Palmer:** I want to express gratitude for the many educators who are deeply dedicated to teaching and learning—and to raising up the next generation, no matter what age they are—in a way that lights up the whole human self, not just the brain. Candace Pert was a neurobiologist who died a few years ago. I once heard her say that while the brain is located in the cranium, the mind is located throughout the body, and it draws on everything we have—emotion, intuition, dreams, relationships, problem-solving capacities, bodily knowledge, and so on. So I’m grateful for all those educators who want to educate the mind and not just the brain. I’m also grateful for all the administrators who are trying to create the safe space for real education to go on, leaders who are not selling out to a cheap version of the “business model.” I know that’s not easy these days with all of the economic pressures higher education is under.

Finally, I feel deep gratitude to those members of the rising generation who are willing to hold the complexities of their own lives, and reach out across lines to form learning partnerships between themselves and the older generation. A lot of that is going on. It’s quiet, it doesn’t capture headlines, but it’s very promising, and for all of it, I’m grateful.

**Shushok:** Let me express my deep, deep gratitude for your life’s work, and the way you’ve influenced me personally and so many of my colleagues, and how we pay it forward in our work with students. I’m just so thankful that you took the time to talk with About Campus readers and inspire us!

**Palmer:** Thank you, Frank. I’m honored by your interest, and grateful for this opportunity.