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The Heart Is As Important As the Mind for Higher Education Renewal

Reviewed by Megan A. Scanlon

Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajonc, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2010. 256 pages. ISBN: 978-0-470-48790-7

In *Villa Incognito*, Tom Robbins writes:

It doesn't matter how sensitive you are or how damn smart and educated you are, if you're not both at the same time, if your heart and your brain aren't connected, aren't working together harmoniously, well, you're just hopping through life on one leg. You may think you're walking, you may think you're running a damn marathon, but you're only on a hop trip. The connection's got to be maintained (p. 104).

The *Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal: Transforming the Academy through Collegial Conversations* dedicates itself to maintaining this connection by asking if "current education efforts address the whole human being—mind, heart, and spirit—in ways that best contribute to our future on this fragile planet?" Authors Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc explore the steps colleges and

universities can take to experience a mind, heart, and spirit connection, while questioning the "imagined, habitual, or real barriers preventing our educational communities from actualizing meaningful dialogues around spirit, purpose, and transformation" (p. vii).

The book emerged from a series of conversations; the authors felt something was missing in higher education, namely, integrative education. "Integration has been an enduring goal in education for a long time. In the cathedral schools of twelfth century Europe, the Seven Liberal Arts were...intended to produce the 'good and perfect man'" (p. 7). As a philosophy and practice, it is influenced by individuals such as the Dalai Lama, who maintains, "Education can guide, but the heart must lead" (p. 163), as well as mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, physicist Albert Einstein, and poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who said, "Do not search now for the answers, which could not be given to you because you would not be able to live them. It is

a matter of living everything” (p. 105). Thus, the authors champion that integrative education

...begins with the premise that we are embedded in a communal reality and then proceeds to an epistemological assertion: we cannot know this communal reality truly and well unless we ourselves are consciously and actively in community with it as knowers (p. 27).

Man of letters Horace Walpole wrote, “This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel” (Cunningham, 2012, p. 366). Consequently, the reviewer’s mentor once told her that it’s a sign of intelligence to hold two competing and contradictory ideas and still function. *Heart* demonstrates its intelligence in thinking and feeling by acknowledging the inherent disorder embedded in any institution (and in life) with stories of those who have found their own rhythm; those who recognize the power of higher education and take “thoughtful risks” about what is worth trying. In this way others may be able to heighten awareness of their own unique rhythm.

Indeed *Heart* does warn that “disengaged forms of learning are likely to lead learners toward disengaged lives” (p. 31). A divided academic life runs the risk of unprecedented levels of apathy and detachment, dangerous in that an isolationist attitude hampers efforts to collectively solve the most pressing needs of our time. Yet, the authors’ intentions are not to set boundaries on integrative education by defining it; rather the book is an invitation for lively and meaningful conversation about transformative education, as:

...one of the virtues of conversation, as opposed to declaration, is that you do not need a precise definition to make headway: the nuances of a good conversation allow you to probe complex problems without reducing them to single dimensions or sound bites (p. 6–7).

Heart bestows powerful and motivating examples about optimizing the higher education experience. The authors uphold that we in higher education can make conscious decisions to reinforce the value of human relationships, engage in meaningful, holistic ways, focus on collaboration, and illuminate our interconnectedness. When applied, this rhetoric arguably influences positive internalized behaviors. It promotes spaces for

empathy and generosity, and cultivates an attitude of empowerment and ownership.

Palmer and Zajonc maintain:

The change we seek within the academy is not one that flows from administrative mandate, but one that arises in the energized space between caring and thoughtful human beings. When personal agendas subside, and genuine interest in the other is established, than a quality of mutual attentiveness emerges that can become the safe harbor for the new and the unexpected that may become a seedbed of educational renewal (p. 12).

Heart embodies these energized spaces between caring and thoughtful human beings by facilitating to the reader a sense of hospitality and openness:

Learning spaces need to be hospitable spaces not merely because kindness is a good idea but because real education requires rigor. In a counterintuitive way, hospitality supports rigor by supporting community, and the proof can be found in everyday classroom experience (p. 29).

Heart challenges the reader to consider how we know what we know; are we objective, subjective, or both, and how does what we think we know affect how we approach the world and each other? *Heart* acknowledges the dance between objectivity and subjectivity, but in an interview about subjectivity in journalism, the late journalist Tim Hetherington arguably said it best:

All journalists should realize that true objectivity is impossible and therefore what I am always looking for in my work is this relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, for me the work is the mixture of the two, but I think its slightly weighted to what is outside of myself, and I put the weight on that thing because I think we all share this planet and that we have to work out strategies—I have to work out strategies to communicate to you, because I share this planet with you, and it’s important that we don’t just look at the world through a subjective nihilist lens that we try and look at the world through a kind of objective lens

because we have to share it (<http://vimeo.com/19959885>).

We DO share this planet, and insight into what shapes an individual's worldview is a tool to inform behavior and actions, and there is nothing more tangible than how behaviors and actions affect lives. This is exemplified in Palmer's example in learning about the Holocaust. He felt that he learned about it in an "academically antiseptic way, at objectivist's arm's length." Survivors weren't invited to class, personal stories weren't ever told, films of Holocaust monstrosities never viewed. He felt the material was taught dispassionately, as if "these things had happened to some other species on some other planet" (p. 32). Thus, to the critics who say emotions have no place in the classroom, *Heart* replies:

Academics who want to factor out "subjective emotions" in favor of data-based "objective knowledge" will, at the same time, blithely ignore fifty years of research about the importance of attending to emotions if we want to liberate the mind (p. 42).

Furthermore, in Chapter 1, Palmer promptly addresses the critics of integrative education, not wanting to flee from criticism, an action he considers, "one of the saddest and most self-contradictory features of academic culture" (p. 23). Other critiques include: Integrative education is too messy; academics and spirituality don't mix; and its philosophical foundations are weak. Palmer essentially agrees with the latter, not in that philosophical underpinnings cannot be "mounted," but because:

Many of us have not done our homework on these issues in a way that allows us to engage our critics in a constructive dialogue.... (O)ur challenge is to become more conversant with these things and more articulate about them, in dialogue with the critics (p. 24).

Heart in its entirety rises to this challenge, specifically through the excellent, applicable, and moving accounts given in the appendix. For instance, Dennis Huffman, a program supervisor at Prince George's Community College, connects professors (more than two-thirds are part-time) using the power of poetry. To convey his gratitude

to the faculty and enliven their community, Huffman delivered weekly poems with messages of thanks in the faculty mailboxes. A turning point in his self-conscious, unsure effort came when "A gruff old math teacher getting off the elevator... snarled, 'Hey! Where's my poem? I really needed it this week.'" (p. 206).

Heart selected instructive appendix examples to combat barriers such as being lost in a crowd at a big school. The story of Jon Dalton, former VP of Student Affairs at Florida State, speaks to the power of consistency. To make a large school accessible and more personal, Dalton set up a table every Wednesday at the school's flea market. Wondering what a guy in a suit was up to, students eventually began to say hello, ask for advice, give advice, invite him to parties, etc. Anything he couldn't respond to himself was generally quickly resolved with a phone call to another department. "Always, always they were grateful that I listened and tried to help.... I observed how this symbolic act helped to create a more positive student culture. I never tried to measure the impact scientifically; I didn't have to" (p. 197).

In *Cannery Row*, John Steinbeck (1945) writes:

It has always seemed strange to me.... The things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling, are the concomitants of failure in our system. And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest, are the traits of success. And while men admire the quality of the first they love the produce of the second (p. 164).

Heart accounts for Steinbeck's traits of success and shares wonderful examples of "the concomitants of failure": building community, illuminating the things we admire in others, and a generosity of spirit.

In a *New York Times* op-ed about biking accessibility in New York City, musician David Byrne says:

I got hooked on biking because it's a pleasure, not because biking lowers my carbon footprint, improves my health or brings me into contact with different parts of the city and new adventures.

But it does all these things too.... (The reward is emotional gratification, which trumps reason, as it often does (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/27/opinion/sunday/this-is-how-we-ride.html?pagewanted=all>).

The most important thing *Heart* does is invite readers to consider listening to our internal barometers, and to share in conversation that which we find joyful and meaningful. Bachelard (1994) quotes Rilke: “These trees are magnificent, but even more magnificent is the sublime and moving space between them, as though with their growth it too increased” (p. 201). In the “moving space” between listening and sharing, and between connecting our heads and our hearts, there is an energy that has the power to generate positive, integrated effects in higher education, in our

communities, and in the spaces we inhabit.

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About the Reviewer

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