



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"The Courage to Teach"
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Rev. Jen Raffensperger

When I think of stories about my favorite teachers, I feel blessed and lucky to be able to say there are too many to recount. So I'm going to share a short one that does not reflect well on me, because it sticks out in my memory as being such a deep reflection on the role and calling of teaching.

In my senior year in high school, I signed up for calculus. I'd never had any particular problem with math before, but calculus was another story. I didn't get it, and worse? I didn't really try. When it wasn't easy, I checked out. Part of this was the fact that it was my senior year, that I was already partially "checked out" of the whole process, that I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life but I was pretty sure it wasn't going to require calculus. Instead, I tried to get my teacher to let me be a student aid for the art teacher during that period - that meant she had to let me drop the class. Now I had an existing relationship with my calculus teacher because she was the faculty sponsor of the school's "It's Academic" team, which I was a member of. She knew I was smart. She could certainly see much more of my potential than I was able to. And she did NOT let me want to go be an art aid. At one point she asked me to step into the hallway to have a discussion with me.

I'm not going to sugarcoat this - I was kind of a jerk to her. I dismissed her, and her care and her concern and her ability to see what I could not, I dismissed those inherent wonderful things about her - instead of dismissing calculus itself, which was what I should have done. She was in tears during this conversation. She did not let me transfer. I failed calculus by virtue of not doing a damn thing for the rest of the year.

Could I argue that she really should have just let me move out of her class? I could. And I did, for years. But that's beside the point. The point is how very much she cared about my success. She cared so much about who I was and who I had the potential to become, and I brushed her off. Because at seventeen, I was not emotionally aware enough to understand why this was so important to her.

Teachers care *so much*.

They kind of have to, to keep doing that job, to keep answering that call even in the face of deeply challenging times for teachers in every level of public education in this country.

And of course, as we celebrate the start of the school year, and the start of religious education for the year, and the hiring of our new shared DLRE, we are thinking a lot about classroom teaching specifically. But in our [chalice lighting](#) today the Rev. Jason Cook reminds us to consider the many ways we are taught:

“Let our time of worship be an acknowledgment
Of the never ending journey toward truth and meaning,
And our appreciation of those we learn from along the way.”

You have all heard the one about how if you give someone a fish you feed them for a day, and if you teach them to fish you feed them for a lifetime? Well I think we all know that teaching and learning, that human relationships, are a bit more “both-and” than that simple aphorism. For instance, why not give a person a fish so that they are no longer hungry, and will be more able and ready to learn about all those fishing skills you'd like to pass on to them? Right. But there is wisdom within that saying as well - learning enriches us in the long term.

When and how we learn, and from whom, changes throughout our lives, and changes from day to day. Our [reading](#) from Parker Palmer addresses those

working within more formal learning institutions - our classroom teachers, and we'll come back there soon.

For now, however, I want us to spend a moment reflecting on how we can nurture a sense of curiosity for the world around us and those living within it. We can learn in many places. And we each find ourselves with many opportunities to teach on any given day, as well. When we hold the door for someone whose arms are full, we are teaching by example. We are reinforcing good lessons taught to us by those who came before us. And when we give our attention to those who are coming along after us - well, they have a lot to teach us too, just as we have a lot to teach them.

Learning and teaching is absolutely not an entirely linear or chronological construct! We can learn from our elders and we can learn from those younger than us. We can teach our peers and can be taught by them. We can wrestle together with hard questions, with thorny problems, and we can make and upload a video to explain the latest dance trend, or use a video chat app to have someone show us how to put together that flat-packed bookshelf. We have more ways to learn and share knowledge than ever before - but I wonder how often we stop to consider the spiritual nature of both teaching and learning? The internal work that it requires for us to engage with it fully?

To learn something new means admitting we didn't know about it before, or the information we had was incorrect. And that can be humbling to admit when you were wrong, or when you just didn't know.

When I made my calculus teacher cry, I was refusing a gift she offered me. She observed something in me that I could not see within myself.

In today's reading from author, educator, and activist Parker Palmer, we are asked to consider the vital role that self-knowledge plays in any relationship of teaching and of learning.

“In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life – and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject – not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth.”

I looked it up so you don't have to - “congeries” means “a disordered jumble”!
If you didn't already know that, we've learned something together today!

If I try to teach someone something I only understand in abstraction, as a vague and disordered jumble, then I am denying something within myself and something within the other person.

What, then, of spiritual knowledge, of “religious education,” of learning and teaching something that many may already perceive as abstraction, as a vague and disordered jumble?!

This is where the practice of embodied spirituality comes in. When we take a deep breath, when we place our feet flat on the floor, when we bow our heads in prayer, when we take ourselves to the meditation cushion, when we partake of a sacrament, when we light a candle or a chalice, when we move our prayer beads through our fingers, when we bless ourselves with water, when we give thanks for a meal, when we clasp hands with our neighbor, when we feel the rising despair within us at bad news and when we feel the elation lifting our souls with joyous news - those are spiritual moments. They connect us with a sense of something larger than ourselves.

Within Unitarian Universalism we acknowledge that the free and responsible search for truth and meaning is the responsibility of each one of us - and that we have a path to deeper learning and growth when we do this together in

community. What can you see within me that I cannot see within myself?
What can I remind you of that you may have forgotten about yourself?

Learning and teaching must encompass a deep knowledge of the self. A readiness to admit the places where we know we have more to learn. A readiness to admit that we are not yet able to teach others, and a readiness to say yes when we know we are in a place to share knowledge that we have, to teach, and to engage in expansive growth.

Back to Parker Palmer: “Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge – and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.”

The convolutions of my inner life! If I’d had such a phrase when I was seventeen I might have been able to apply it to my calculus teacher - who, yes, saw things in me that I did not see in myself. But she also did not see me completely. This is not said to excuse my behavior - I have learned the long, hard way to treat people better than I treated her. But her lens was so focused on her own subject, on a certain prescribed way of being that I as a middle-class white student of privilege was supposed to embody (as reflected in the number of AP classes I was supposed to take) that she did not focus on a deeper truth within herself.

In that instant, I would say, we both had incomplete self-knowledge that blocked us from true empathy. We both refused gifts that our interaction could offer us.

Whether spiritual or practical, whether math or science or literature, whether esoteric or popular, it is good to acknowledge the wealth of the world and of

each other. And it is good when we gather in spiritual community to practice self-knowledge, to learn to be a supportive partner to those on their own paths. And it is good, so good, to learn to admit when we are wrong, when we have made a mistake, when we have projected the convolutions of our inner lives onto others.

Sometimes we are learners and sometimes we are teachers, and both are profoundly sacred roles. Let us continue to reflect on the ways we are called to growth and change, internal and external. May we reflect our knowledge and our compassion to one another and to everyone we encounter. And may we give thanks for every teacher who brought their gifts into our lives.

So may it be.