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To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education

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Reviews

Palmer, Parker. *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983.

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Knowledge

As I read through Parker Palmer's book, a series of thoughts and questions began to run through my mind. I began asking myself questions such as: How does education coincide with our faith? Has our increase in knowledge helped us or hurt us? What is my motive for continuing education and pursuing knowledge? and What effect does the culture that we live in have on our perceptions? I will address questions like these and the areas of Palmer's book that made these questions arise throughout the course of this review.

The first area on which I wish to focus is the issue of knowledge. Palmer addresses knowledge and its role in our lives throughout the course of the book; however, the areas that sparked my interest the most were found in the first chapter. Palmer begins the chapter by describing a film documentary that illustrates the making and detonation of the first atomic bomb. Through this illustration Palmer poses two questions that I will reflect on in the following paragraphs. The first question relates to the increase in knowledge done solely for the purpose of gaining power. The second question takes a look at the things that have come from the increase of knowledge (Palmer, 1983).

Henri Nouwen, who was instrumental in the development of Palmer's book *To Know as We are Known*, also addresses the temptation to be powerful in his own book, *In the Name of Jesus*. Nouwen tells about the time in his life when he moved from a prestigious position at Harvard to a director role in a community of handicapped individuals. In the depiction of his role in the new community, he admits that his perception of the relationship between knowledge, experience and power was skewed.

Nouwen realizes that true knowledge comes from learning from those around you, and true power is only gained by how you use that knowledge to guide others in your sphere of influence -- rather than climbing the ladder of success and leaving those in your path behind. Our goal in pursuing degrees and positions becomes void if we do not have a love for those around us. Knowledge should not be used for the manipulation and control of others, but rather for the unifying and building of the community around you.

As indicated above, the second area that I want to reflect upon deals with taking a closer look at the fruit of increased knowledge. In the past years, knowledge has increased in immeasurable quantities. This knowledge has affected us in both positive and negative ways. We celebrate and focus on the conveniences and luxuries that this increase in knowledge has brought us, but seldom do we focus on the consequences that the increase of knowledge has brought along with it. Palmer makes reference to some of these consequences such as: the deterioration of the ozone layer, global warming, destruction of the rain forests, pollution of various bodies of water, increase and abundance of illegal drugs, genetic engineering and choosing the gender of a child, abortion and nuclear warfare. He poses this question: "Is our knowledge -- the very knowledge that distinguishes human beings from the beasts -- creating a world far less human, far more beastly, than the natural world itself?" (Palmer, 1983, p. 6).

In struggling with this thought-provoking question and trying to give this increase in knowledge validity, the only place I could turn to for a conclusion was Scripture. Proverbs 24:3-5 states that "By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; and by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. A wise man is strong, and a man of knowledge increases power" (International, 1992, pp. 1049-1050). Based on this verse, there needs to be a balance of knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom is the foundation that allows knowledge to be used in appropriate ways. Palmer writes, "The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation, but at reconciling the world to itself" (Palmer, 1983, p. 8).

Truth

Palmer states, "The personal truth revealed in Jesus is not limited to knowledge of God alone. To allow such a limitation is to succumb to one of secularism's self-protective devices -- the claim that this mode of knowing may apply to our spiritual lives but has nothing to do with the secular knowledge on which modern life depends. To allow such a limitation is to make God one more object among others and to violate the premise of faith that all things were made by God's personal Word" (p. 60). This particular paragraph really impacted me based on where I am today. Over the last two years, I have been working in a Christian institution that is rooted in the Reformed tradition. In that time I have begun to know and embrace the worldview that knowing and worshiping God is not to be compartmentalized from life's daily tasks. I passionately acknowledge what Jesus claims in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no

man comes to the Father except through Me" (International, 1992, p. 1742). He does not say "I am a truth," but He says, "I am the Truth." If Christ is the Truth and He is also the Creator and Sustainer of all things, then how can we not observe Him in all that we do?

Reading this book has reaffirmed my understanding that indeed all things do come from the Lord and therefore do contain truth. As indicated above in Palmer's quote, nothing is formed or has been sustained without the personal command of God's direct Word. I would be putting God in a box if I were to only study His Word and His attributes without acknowledging and worshipping Him through my ability to learn through education, my relationships with the people He has created, and through my love for His beauty in the outdoor cathedral of nature.

Education vs. Spirituality

Dr. Spindle, President of MidAmerica Nazarene University, once summed up education as a spiritual act of worship by saying that every classroom is a sanctuary and every desk is an altar. As we study and learn and increase our knowledge, if doing so in love, we are worshipping God. We need not compartmentalize our lives into separate areas with church and Bible study being the spiritual portions of our lives and then work, relationships, entertainment, hobbies, etc. being the "other parts of our lives." Instead, our lives and our actions need to fit underneath one umbrella of living a life of service and worship for Christ.

In examining the question, "How college student affairs can work exemplify education as a spiritual journey?" based on what I have processed thus far, I think the bottom line is maintaining a complete spiritual act of worship in all we say and do. Palmer points out that this must be done in love. I believe that all too often in the field of college student affairs, we focus more on having well-attended programs, building solid relationships and providing a secure community than we do on the value of education. We need to become conscious of how our departments can align our goals alongside those of the institution and the primary motivation for attending college, which is to provide and receive an education. With that in mind, perhaps our focus needs to be directed more towards exemplifying the relationship between education and spirituality rather than separating the two from each other as the courts have done by banning prayer in the schools. But instead, we must work to join the two fundamentals together to give our students and community a complete, and not fragmented, college experience.

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