14 On Attentive Love in Education: The Case of Courage to Teach

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Introduction

About 10 years ago, I found myself in a fairly deep, dark, and anxious funk; I was disheartened and depressed (see Liston, 2000, 2002). I had been an elementary and middle school teacher in both large urban and small town settings, attended graduate school to examine the problems and promises of public education, contributed to the inquiry on schooling and teaching, and had become a recognized scholar in my field. But, it wasn't working. My scholarship sat on the shelves in libraries; my university students faced the same damn obstacles I had encountered as a teacher; and the university's intellectual and professional arena around teacher development seemed dry, arid, and uninspiring. Many of our teaching candidates headed off to their classrooms passionate andprepared (in the progressive tradition[1]), and yet new and veteran teachers would walk into my Masters' classes discouraged and depleted. More and more it seemed that experienced and practicing teachers in Colorado's Front Range came to the university looking for intellectual, professional, and emotional sustenance in the teacher education curriculum—but they didn't seem to be receiving the nourishment they sought. I went searching for ways to address their distress and my discomfort.

I sensed that there was something ill-conceived about the way we were approaching the headaches and heartaches of teaching and teacher education. We seemed to be fooling ourselves that we had in our hands (or on the horizon) surefire curricular, instructional, or institutional solutions. We seemed impelled to go forward with (really) only a glimmer of an understanding of ourselves and those who we aspired to teach. And, we seemed to have embraced conceptions of teaching, learning, and reason that left the realm of affect and emotion in ourselves, and in

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[1] Many teacher candidates are prepared within a progressive, rather than traditional, orientation and this preparation factors into the headaches and heartaches of beginning classroom teachers. Those prepared within the progressive child-oriented approach usually find themselves employed in fairly traditional and skill-focused schools. The relationship between schools of education and K-12 public schools has a long and complicated history. See for example Labaree (2004), Clifford und Guthrie (1988) and Zeichner (2009).

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our students, behind. I knew that I had become a teacher and a scholar as much for the desires of my heart as the inclinations of my head, but somehow, the heart had been left behind.

So, I explored the work of philosophers, sociologists, educational researchers, and literary scholars who were examining the forgotten terrain of emotion. I began to develop a framework that underscored the role of emotion, and awareness of the affective dimension of our personhood and relationships, in teaching and learning. I discovered Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* in which he recognizes the potentially depleting work of a profession that requires working with one's head, heart, and soul to engage and transform young lives. Over time, I became a facilitator of Courage to Teach/Lead professional development retreats.[2] I also began to pursue a more contemplative and mindful approach to my professional and personal challenges. I read and engaged with the work of Thomas Keating and his practice of "centering prayer" (see Keating, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 1999), as well as others writing in a more contemplative vein.

One of the outcomes of this scholarly and experiential exploration was a growing appreciation and understanding of *love* as an essential affective/emotional dimension of teaching and learning. As a result of my own personal experience, contemplative forays, and examination of the scholarly literature on reason and emotion, I came to understand the centrality and complexity of love in teaching and learning (see Liston, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2012). In fact, it is now difficult for me to conceive of teaching without this complex notion of love. It is a multifaceted concept, one that includes a romantic love of learning (the lure of learning in teaching), an attentive love toward self and others (especially students and colleagues), and an enlarged love with transcendent capacities to deal with the emotional heartache and appreciate the beauty of teaching and learning.

In teaching, we inevitably confront obstacles to expressing this lure of learning and attending to students. Schools tend not to encourage or support these loving engagements. At times, the obstacles can lead to frustration, discouragement, and even despair. In this essay, I explore the thesis that love and attention to inner, other, and outer realms are central to teaching and learning, and that many teachers who have the potential to be excellent teachers leave teaching because of the institutional obstacles that contort and distort their loves and their ability to grow them. There is a great deal of pain and suffering in those departures. In the first part of the essay, I focus on Keating's contemplative approach and note the role of love. Next, I sketch the basic outlines of attentive love utilizing the insights of three philosophers: Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil, and Sara Ruddick.

The Courage professional development and renewal program of Parker Palmer, that uses his text and is delivered in the form of retreats, recognizes these dynamics of love slighted and lost, helps teachers live with the accompanying grief, and provides the tools and pathways of understanding to handle the inevitable tensions that come with teaching.[3] Thus, in the second part of this essay I focus on the interaction of love and attention within the Courage to Teach work as one example that aims to attend to the inner life of the teacher and the cultivation of these twin qualities, as the "work before the work" in educational reform and renewal. Here, I identify and elaborate several contemplative elements, grounded in attentive love, that are present in Courage renewal work. In particular, I highlight aspects of facilitator modeling, the Courage circle of trust framework (see http://www.couragerenewal.org/approach/), and the Courage practice of clearness committees. Through these elements, participants in Courage retreats come to grapple, and more capably deal with, the professional issues that bedevil them. Attentive love,

[2] http://www.couragerenewal.org/programs/facilitator-prep

[3] The Center for Courage and Renewal (formerly the Center for Courage to Teach) is the organization that developed around the efforts to address Palmer's insights into and experiences with teachers. In the section on Courage work, I will describe this effort more completely and focus on the Courage work with teachers rather than the work with other serving professions.

especially its contemplative features, plays a key role here. Retreat participants come to know themselves better and discern the troubling and engaging features of their professional terrain, and they come to do so as a community of loving-kindness that supports one another and reaffirms that teachers are "not alone."

Contemplation and Love

What is love, and how is it related to attention and teaching? To begin to explore these questions, I begin with Thomas Keating's (1996a, 1996b) approach to the contemplative journey. Keating posits the contemplative journey is, at its core, "an exercise of letting go of the false self" (p. 20). In a trilogy of texts, he plumbs the depths of a particularly Christian approach to meditation (Keating, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). The journey Keating delineates is a nuanced, demanding, and attentive process. Keating's efforts to portray the central tenets of centering prayer are extensive and substantive. Here, I utilize Keating's (1996a) pointed elaboration of centering prayer, which is best conveyed and understood as a discipline that is

> … designed to withdraw our attention from the ordinary flow of our thoughts. We tend to identify ourselves with that flow. But there is a deeper part of ourselves. This prayer opens our awareness to the spiritual level of our being. This level might be compared to a great river on which our memories, images, feelings, inner experiences, and the awareness of outward things are resting. Many people are so identified with the ordinary flow of their thoughts and feelings that they are not aware of the source from which these mental objects are emerging. Like boats or debris floating along the surface of a river, our thoughts and feelings must be resting on something. They are resting on the inner stream of consciousness, which is our participation in God's being. That level is not immediately evident to ordinary consciousness. Since we are not in immediate contact with that level, we have to do something to develop our awareness of it. It is the level of our being that makes us most human. The values that we find there are more delightful than the values that float along the surface of the psyche. We need to refresh ourselves at this deep level every day. Just as we need exercise, food, rest, and sleep, so also we need moments of interior silence because they bring the deepest kind of refreshment." (pp. 34–35)

Keating further describes the methods of centering prayer as well as the extraneous noise and distinct kinds of thoughts, which frequently accompany this meditative process (pp. 109–115).

Central to this meditative practice is a particular quality of attentiveness: It is an attentiveness to and a process of letting go of the false self, and a resulting understanding of the true Self—or "no self" (1999, p. 44). It usually entails an individual sitting (or walking) in silence—employing a sacred word to attune and reorient the individual to the meditative method. For Keating, centering prayer is a process that results in seeing much of our own, and the world's, engagements as shining, usually thin (but sometimes quite thick) chimera (i.e., the false self) that tend to lure us away from what really matters (true Self). Throughout his written work, Keating underscores the continual and ongoing nature of this contemplative process and contrasts it with a putative achievement of "mindfulness bliss."[4] Keating maintains that centering prayer allows us to tap into the inner stream of consciousness, "the level of our being that makes us most human," where we find the values that matter most. Others who practice the meditative and contemplative arts have tapped into this inner stream and uncovered a wealth of understanding.

Love is a central theme in Thich Nhat Hanh's approach to mindfulness. In *Teachings on Love*, Hanh (1998) comments extensively on the variety of ways in which love constitutes part of this "inner stream." Hanh writes:

> Mindfulness is the energy that allows us to look deeply at our body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness and see clearly what our real needs are, so we will not drown in the sea of suffering. Eventually love fills our mind and our will, and all our actions from that time on manifest love. (p. 15)

[4] This is a point worth underscoring. Sometimes, the putative and received notion of "meditation" or "mindfulness" is one that construes contemplation as an approach that magically dissolves daily tensions and dilemmas and delivers the practitioner transcendent bliss. Keating emphasizes throughout his works that centering prayer will not deliver an unending state of bliss, but instead enables individuals to see themselves, others, and the world more clearly. This discerning function of centering prayer coincides with the attentive love I elaborate later.

Hanh claims that the practice of mindfulness taps into the significance of love. He writes about the importance of self love, love between individuals, the role of love in understanding others, deep listening, and loving speech. His love meditations encourage an awareness that knowing oneself is "the first practice of love" and that through looking deeply and attending fully to another person's pain, the doors of love and understanding can be opened (see Hanh, 1998, Chaps. 3 and 4). Hanh joins the company of many others in recognizing this connection between mindfulness and love. Thomas Keating, Joanna Macy (1991), Henry Nouwen (1996), and Thomas Merton (2004) have also elaborated the multiple connections between contemplation and love. These authors (and others) provide rich tools for exploring the conceptual terrain of loving, teaching, and living.

Within the last decade contemplative and mindful practices have gained a small and notable foothold in segments of US culture. For some individuals, contemplative and meditative practices provide rich pathways through which to explore and dwell in life's pains, paradoxes, beauty, and intrigues. Unfortunately for some teachers and a segment of the larger public, these meditative explorations appear thoroughly spiritual, more or less religious, and seem to utilize concepts that do not seem to be appropriate for educational contexts.[5] In short, some shy away from mindfulness practices due to religious connotations, whereas others do not see the "payoff" in exploring professional concerns.[6] It seems to me that within the academic and university settings, scholarly acceptance of and inquiry into mindfulness practices, although now growing in some disciplinary sectors (see Zajonc, this volume), has been limited and approached with some skepticism. And, scholarly investigations of emotion and reason have been, and continue to be, relatively sparse, and discussions of love nearly absent.[7]

Explorations of Love in Teaching: Conceptual and Experiential

A decade ago I realized that something new was needed for teachers and educational scholars to help explore this important terrain of emotion and reason. Personally and professionally, I have pursued two distinct routes: (1) conceptual and phenomenological understandings of teaching's emotional and intellectual struggles, and (2) an experiential exploration of teachers' frustrations, delights, and heartaches in the daily course of teaching in schools. The first route was more intellectually focused while the second route was more experientially engaged. As part of the second path, I participated in, and later became a facilitator of, Courage to Teach/Lead retreats.[8]

As a scholar, I sought out and developed further elaborations of teaching's emotional terrain as well as the distinct kinds of love present in teachers' lives (e.g., Liston & Garrison, 2004). In order to accomplish this intellectual task, I turned to the realms and discipline I knew best: teachers' narrative accounts and philosophical analysis. I attempted to discern the ways reason and emotion intermingled and elaborated three distinct *teaching loves*: the lure of learning in teaching, attentive love toward students, and an enlarged love to deal with teachers' despair. This elaboration of teaching's loves enabled me to develop a set of concepts that could integrate teachers'

[5] See Rachel Kessler's *Soul of Education* as well as more popular press items: San Francisco parents… https://www.facebook.com/pages/SF-Parents-Against-TM-in-Public-Schools/201123776750702; and Olesen, http://educationcurrent.wordpress.com/

[6] This observation is based on my experience working with teachers and administrators in Colorado's Front Range.

[7] During the last 10 years, greater attention has been paid to emotions in many academic fields. David Brooks' *The Social Animal* (2011) is a helpful introduction to the psychological research on emotion. The Stanford online encyclopedia provides a help overview of recent developments in the philosophy of emotion. See http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/emotion/

[8] In our Colorado Courage organization, we have worked with teachers and educational leaders, clergy and lay religious leaders, foundations' staff, and others in the serving professions. Here, as I noted earlier, I focus on the work with teachers and educational leaders.

experiences with my growing understanding of both the contemplative and scholarly terrains.

Experientially, I pursued a further understanding of teachings' loves and heartaches through Courage to Teach/Lead retreats, first as a participant and then as a facilitator. Over time, I became aware of the ways in which Courage professional development attempts to address the three various teaching loves. Here, I will focus on the ways in which Courage retreats attune participants to features of what I have called "attentive love." In the Courage setting, attentive love acts as a bridge concept and set of experiences and practices, connecting teachers to a more contemplative orientation. Courage retreats are, for some participants, an introduction to and initial engagement with a contemplative orientation via practices that encourage attentive love.[9]

Attentive Love in Teaching and Facilitating[10]

In attempting to understand the role of attentive love in educational practice I turned to three western philosophers—individuals who had addressed the western split dividing reason and emotion—philosopher and mystic Simone Weil; novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch; and mother, feminist, and philosopher Sara Ruddick. In the last century, these three philosophers developed and articulated conceptual elements of attentive love.

In various writings, Weil (1951, 1963, 1981, 1998) elaborates the qualities of *attention* and the role it plays in developing a spiritually and deistically oriented attentive love. For Weil, attentive love serves as a sort of antidote to the force, power, and gravity that pervade our material lives (Springsted, 1986). Based in part upon Weil's elaboration, Murdoch and Ruddick articulate their conceptions. In Murdoch's (1971) first substantial philosophical text, *The Sovereignty of Good*, she transforms Weil's deistic understandings of attentiveness into a non-deistic but nevertheless spiritual view of love, beauty, and the Good. Sara Ruddick, a philosopher and mother, explores the commingling of reason and emotion in one of life's most precious and difficult endeavors, that of being a parent. In *Maternal Thinking*, she takes Weil's and Murdoch's spiritually aligned conceptions of attentive love and elaborates a more secular view (Ruddick, 1995). In the next section, I will highlight elements of attentive love with minor references to both teaching and Courage facilitation. In the subsequent section, I explore more fully these elements within Courage retreats.

Elements of Attentive Love

As a way of connecting individuals with each other and within themselves, attentive love entails the following: (1) the presumption that good exists within each individual (e.g., shared humanity and goodness); (2) the attempt to discern and see others (colleagues and students) more clearly and justly (mindfully, with great respect and ethical awareness, as well as attention to others); and (3) the understanding that in order to see more clearly we need to reduce the noise of our selves (emotional self-awareness and regulation, and a less self-centric/more altruistic perspective).

Attentive love in teaching is frequently a struggle and a sacrifice. It is a struggle and a sacrifice to see beyond our egoistic selves so as to see students more clearly with empathy, noninstrumental understanding, and compassion. But, it is not only struggle. Attentive love provides a healing place from which to attend to others and ourselves. It is a stance that provides a place of relief and restoration—a boat mooring of sorts.[11] In Courage retreats facilitators attempt to attend lovingly to the participants.

[9] I should underscore that the presentation and analysis of Courage retreats is one I have developed and is neither necessarily shared by the Center for Courage and Renewal nor by all facilitators. I have shared this text with other facilitators and many acknowledge features of attentive love in the Courage retreat settings. Here, I am advancing my own views.

[10] Elsewhere I have elaborated this notion of attentive love in relation to critical pedagogy and reverence in teaching. See Liston (2008, 2012).

[11] Susan Kaplan helped to clarify this point in her reading of the manuscript.

Presumption of Goodness

It is not unusual for any of us to overlook the actual and potential "good" that exists within others. And, it is not unusual for teachers to mistakenly perceive the struggles and qualities of their students. As teachers we frequently see the world and students through our own anxieties and fears. When teaching is construed (for us or by us) as controlling and directing others, discerning this good is not a priority or a need. When teaching is defined solely as drilling and skilling kids to achieve higher standardized test scores, we do not honor students. But, when teaching is viewed as a way to help others take part in the challenges and pleasures of understanding our political, cultural, and natural worlds, and become more capable in transforming these worlds, then we frequently need to affirm and understand (as much as we can) our students' goodness. In Courage to Teach retreats, a central goal is to reengage the teachers' sense of wonder about learning, teaching, and themselves. Part of that engagement with wonder depends on an affirmation of good within themselves and their students.

It is an act of faith and a persistently reinforced belief that we seek to understand, to reach out beyond ourselves for "that which is good." It is a desire that may not always be consciously present and certainly conflicts with other desires and needs. But, it is a yearning that defines, in part, what it means to be human. It is a desire that Simone Weil captures quite well. She writes, "At the center of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and never [adequately] appeased by any object in this world" (Weil quoted in Bell, 1998, p. 71).

A yearning for transcendence, a longing for something greater than ourselves is what Weil uncovers in her exploration of love. For her, we long to reach beyond ourselves, to see and to participate in something larger than ourselves. Another element in our students' and colleagues' goodness is the expectation that, in this world, they will be treated decently. Weil writes:

> At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being. (Weil quoted in Bell, 1998, p. 71)

Weil maintains that each and every human being is sacred. When teaching, we connect students with material that has, among other purposes, the potential to take them beyond themselves, to attend to the world and themselves more clearly, and to act in ways that are decent and loving. In teaching, we can attend lovingly to the good in our students so that they, in turn, can develop their search for the good. In facilitating we attend lovingly to the good and underlying sense of wholeness in our teachers and educational leaders and when that occurs these teachers and leaders can develop their own inner journey and search for the good.

Discerning Things Clearly and Justly

Sara Ruddick (1995) writes in her book *Maternal Thinking* that attentive love "implies and rewards a faith that… to the loving eye the lovable will be revealed… Attentive love, or loving attention, represents a kind of knowing that takes truthfulness as its aim but makes truth serve lovingly the person known" (1989, pp. 119–120). In teaching, this requires that we look with loving, clear-sighted attention to our students to connect them with the educational tasks at hand. Attentive love in teaching readies students for an engagement with the worlds around them through the curriculum. In elementary settings when students are young and skills undeveloped, in high school when students have become numb to learning, or at most any educational level when beginning a new topic of study, we, as teachers, need to prepare students for the tasks, challenges, and pleasures of learning. Attentive love enables teachers to see the student more clearly and identify what preparation and/or further connections should occur. In Courage facilitating, we utilize "circles of trust," "third things" (frequently, pieces of poetry), and "clearness committees" to dig more deeply into our selves, allow others to be "heard into speech," and enable a grand diversity of views to be voiced.

So what are the qualities of this attentiveness? Iris Murdoch (1971) claims that we attend throughout the moments of our days. We look at our students and observe their mannerisms, frustrations, interests, anxieties, dress, and fascinations. We hear their concerns. Murdoch writes:

> In particular situations 'reality' as that which is revealed to the patient eye of love is an idea entirely comprehensible to the ordinary person. The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are "looking," making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results (1971, pp. 40 and 43).

Teachers are constantly observing and noting students' characteristics and features. Attentive teachers can speak volumes about their students. In order to see and speak those volumes, these teachers have to suspend temporarily their own expectations, bracket their agendas, and set aside their concerns so as to apprehend the student's reality on his or her own terms. This is not an easy task; it requires effort, discipline, and—at times—sacrifice. In facilitation, I have found that this attention to participants follows a similar path. In order to see retreat participants more clearly, I have to suspend my expectations and framings in an attempt to see the participant more clearly. Murdoch reminds us that attending lovingly to others is a complicated endeavor:

> Human beings are far more complicated and enigmatic and ambiguous than languages or mathematical concepts, and selfishness operates in a much more devious and frenzied manner in our relations with them…. Our attachments tend to be selfish and strong, and the transformation of our loves from selfishness to unselfishness is sometimes hard even to conceive of…. The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really looking. The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy, and despair…. It is a task to come to see the world as it is. (1971, p. 91)

When engaged in intellectual and pedagogical pursuits, our selfish desires can obstruct our understandings. We can impose our meanings on historical reconstructions or, because of our frustrations of the moment, fail to grasp a mathematical algorithm. Our egos can get in the way. In our pedagogical interactions, we may be much more prone to see obscurely. It is difficult to see our students unencumbered by the noise of our teacher egos. Our own conceptions, anxieties, satisfactions, and dreams can get in the way. There is in teachers, as humans, the inclination to see the world as they want to see it, not to view it with attentiveness and loving kindness. It is a struggle to see others and the world with loving, clear-sighted attention. It is an effort to reduce the noise of our egoistic selves. Courage retreats attempt to enable teachers and educational leaders to attend to themselves, students, and colleagues with loving, clear-sighted attention. The retreat process, especially the clearness committee, facilitates this clarity of vision. Intuitively many teachers and leaders approach students in this fashion but have lost (or never fully practiced) this orientation to themselves and colleagues.

Reducing the Noise of the Self

It is an effort to attend to students. The struggle is not that attentive love requires attending to each and every student in all of our class sessions. Rather it is a task to suspend our own expectations, bracket our own agendas, and set aside our concerns so as to see the matter at hand from our students' point of view. The degree of difficulty varies. With some students, we are able to see fairly clearly the obstacles and issues at hand, and we can facilitate their learning. With others, it may take a few days of trying on different interpretations, distinct framings, so as to see the student before us with clear-sighted attention. And yet with others, we have to examine not only their situation but ourselves; we have to look at what in us is getting in the way of seeing them more clearly. Lisa Delpit, the accomplished literacy scholar, writes about this quality of attention as a form of listening, as a way of attending to others when differences become obstacles. She writes that when this occurs we need:

> a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to

> exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (1998, p. 297)

How do we put our beliefs on hold to attend to the other before us? How do we reduce the noise of our egos? Sara Ruddick and Iris Murdoch lay out some rudimentary features: we talk with others; we attempt to see the good in the situation or student; and we refocus our attention on an object which is a source of contemplation and energy.

There are times when in order to see the student or situation more clearly we have to refocus our gaze, look away in an effort to gain some distance and detachment from the current scene. Murdoch talks of prayer and reorientation as two options. Not all of us are spiritually oriented. However, I think we have within us the power to redirect our gaze on something of value. In this vein, Murdoch writes: "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." (1971, p. 56)

Conversations with others, refocusing on the good within the situation or student, and a reorientation of our gaze allows us a degree of detachment from the noise of ourselves. None are, for sure, guaranteed methods. Nevertheless, all seem to provide a measure of redirection, detachment, and reengagement. Within the larger contemplative community, there are a great number and variety of mindfulness practices that facilitate this redirection and place of detachment, with meditation, centering prayer, tai chi, and yoga among them.[12] In what follows I will detail features of the Courage retreat principles and structure that encourage these aspects of attentive love and, as such, introduce teachers to the meditative arts and mindfulness.

[12] See http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree.html

Courage Retreats and Attentive Love

Many teachers engage in attentive love with their students; it is a form of care and support that frequently develops quite naturally. However, school structures and cultures all too often obstruct this loving disposition. Courage to Teach retreats support an engagement with attentive love and remind teachers that it is possible to care in this fashion not only for students and colleagues, but also to attend lovingly to themselves (see Palmer, Jackson, Jackson, & Sluyter, 2001; Palmer, 2004). In this section, I elaborate how certain features of the Courage Retreat encourage the development of attentive love in educators.

Attentive love is practiced in Courage retreats in a number of distinct ways. It is modeled by facilitators in their personal dispositions and interactions, as well as in providing a supportive, inviting, and safe place for participants to explore their professional heartaches and joys. Attentive love is also present in the circle of trust format—in the norms ("Touchstones") that guide this group and individual reflective process.[13] It is also embedded within the "clearness committee"—a time of intense personal reflection and community support for the self-identified "focus" person.[14] In what remains, I describe further the ways in which facilitator modeling, the circle of trust norms and practices, and the clearness committees encourage attentive love. However before I discuss those three domains, it will be helpful to briefly describe the elements and structure of a Courage retreat.

Courage Retreats

Although the length and duration of Courage retreats vary from a 2-h local introduction, a half- or whole-day "sampler," all the way to a two-night getaway located within a retreat setting, the basic elements of Courage retreats are fairly stable and established. Generally, a retreat experi-

[13] See Appendix 1 for a delineation of commonly used "Touchstones".

[14] See http://www.couragerenewal.org/clearnesscommittee/ for Parker Palmer's description of the Clearness Committee process.

ence includes one or more circle of trust[15] sessions (90–120 min long). Each session incorporates time for individual reflection as well as small group (dyads or triads) interactions. In the circle, skilled facilitators create a quiet and purposeful space in which the noise within and around us can subside, enabling each participant to hear his or her own inner voice. Participants explore the intersection of their personal and professional lives, making use of their own stories, as well as insights from poets, storytellers, memoirs, and a range of wisdom traditions. It is a process which affirms the integrity of the retreat participants with an understanding that each participant is capable of articulating his or her own voice—in community with others.

In a circle of trust, the group (10–25 individuals) sits in a circle with a centerpiece that serves as a visual focal point and has as a central substantive focus—a poem, a brief text, or a musical piece. "Touchstones" (group norms) guide the interactional process. The poems or "third things" (the third element in addition to the participants and the facilitator) tend to highlight tensions and perspectives on life's inner journey. It is common that the circle begin with a moment of silence, followed by a facilitator's introduction to and reading of the text, and then a segment of time is devoted to participants' responses and connections to the text—their distinct, heartfelt, and personal ruminations. It's important to note that the interactional format of the circle is not a conversation between or among participants but instead a "sharing into the circle." It is important to add that individuals share if they are so moved. Following the circle sharing, a time for solitary reflection and journaling is offered, and this is frequently followed by small group interactions focused on the fruits of the individual reflective process. Within the small groups individuals are encouraged to take the time to allow each person to talk, followed by questions and conversation on the personal issues raised and significant themes covered. Sometimes, the entire retreat group is reconvened after the small group interactions.

In addition to the circle format, retreats may also offer opportunities to form clearness committees. In a clearness committee, one person who wishes to share a particularly pressing issue, one that occurs at the intersection of soul and role, invites others to join him or her in an exploration of that issue. In a clearness committee, the members first listen to the focus person's description of the problem and then are invited to pose "open and honest" questions. Generally, this process encourages a deep reflection on the part of both the focus person and the members of the committee. It requires discipline and discernment to identify powerful open and honest questions—questions that are neither curiosity nor agenda driven, and ones that will encourage the focus person's inner dialogue. Moreover, the questions are not expected to solve the dilemma for the focus person but rather to facilitate a deeper understanding of the issue and its inner dimensions.

Courage retreats are not limited to circle and clearness committee formats, but these two components form the backbone of many extended (1–3 days) retreat experiences. Along with facilitator modeling, these two programmatic structures are modalities through which aspects of attentive love are conveyed.

Facilitator Modeling

In my professional life, Courage facilitation has been a gift. Although I am inclined to look upon children as sacred beings and am open to seeing them more clearly and justly, adults have always presented a challenge to me. I am less likely to attend with care and attention to an adult's entangled features and dispositions, to discern who they are, to view them attentively and lovingly. Participating in and facilitating Courage retreats has changed (some of) that. Facilitators attempt to support and embody the values that define the retreat space and honor each participant's "inner source of truth"—their sacred nature.[16] One overarching goal and cornerstone of the circle process is the creation of a trusting community. Without a

[15] See http://www.couragerenewal.org/approach/

[16] See Appendices 1 "Touchstones" (http://www.couragerenewal.org/touchstones/) and 2 "Key Principles of Formation" (http://www.couragerenewal.org/approach/).

trusting environment, it is difficult to engage in the courage work or the practice of attentive love.

Facilitators work to create a retreat space that is inviting and safe. The ways in which this is accomplished vary widely among facilitators but frequently include a retreat location of natural beauty; the creation of a meeting space that is pleasant to behold through the use of centerpieces and other design elements; the initial gift of a personal welcome card and chocolate; and the facilitator's willingness to show up as a whole person acknowledging strengths and frailties. All of these elements, when offered with integrity and clear intention, contribute to the creation of a retreat space that is inviting, safe, and contained. This safe space is enhanced further when facilitators are able to communicate their individual sense of vulnerability as well as the need for participants to approach their own individual vulnerabilities as well as those of others. When this vulnerable terrain is voiced by facilitators, it seems to contribute strongly to a sense of retreat trust and participants' willingness to attend lovingly to themselves and others. I'll explain further.

Vivian Gussin Paley (1986) is fond of noting that when we attend to young children (preschool and early elementary students) we notice that their concerns revolve around three fs: friendship, fantasy, and fairness. A good education, in Paley's estimation, honors those early childhood dispositions. Over time, in my work as a facilitator, I have noticed that adults can be welcomed warmly and honestly by acknowledging our strengths and vulnerabilities—our own age-appropriate three fs. At some point, I came to embrace the realization that we adults tend to make mistakes or "fuck up."[17] On good days we learn to *f orgive* ourselves and those around us, as well as embrace a *f aith* in ourselves and others that enables us to reengage. These have become my adult, developmentally appropriate, three fs. The Courage work, with its emphasis on personal formation, supports these three fs. Central to the Courage notion of "formation" are a set of "key principles of formation."[18] One of the principles is that:

> At the heart of formation is the understanding that there is a "hidden wholeness" at work in the natural world, in our lives, in our work—a hidden wholeness that often takes the form of paradox. Working with paradox helps us to see how things that are seemingly opposites, when more clearly understood, actually complement and co-create each other. You cannot know light without darkness, silence without speech, solitude without community. Understanding and exploring paradox is central to the pedagogy underlying this approach to inner work (see Appendix 2)

The paradox inherent in the notion that positive personal growth comes from serious personal challenges and mistakes, along with the notion that we have within us a "hidden wholeness" to deal with these paradoxes, has supported my adult-oriented three fs and informed my attentive love toward self and others. We are most vulnerable when we are facing our frailties and weaknesses. The three fs, in conjunction with the recognition of a hidden wholeness, allow facilitators to face and embrace these small truths.

With this framing I, as a facilitator, am more inclined: to see the good within my adult participants; to attempt to view participants more clearly and justly; and to quiet the noise within me. Without an understanding of paradox and our hidden wholeness, as well as a forgiveness toward and faith in my own and others' inevitable fuck-ups, I might have a tendency to run roughshod over others. When we, as facilitators, live and inhabit these realizations, we model for others a stance worth inhabiting, one that attends lovingly to others.

Circle of Trust

A circle of trust is guided by several touchstones, and here I will highlight two of them. However before I do, it is important to convey the key assumptions that guide facilitators in their creation of a circle of trust—or as Palmer calls it—the

[17] I apologize to any reader who might be offended by such language. In my Irish Catholic, working class cultural heritage it is a term used, perhaps, too freely. Here, I use it to acquire my first "f" and to capture and evoke the associations and frustrations that attend our inevitable minor and more serious mistakes and misjudgments.

[18] See Appendix 2.

formation space.[19] Earlier I noted that facilitators work to create a retreat space that is inviting and safe. They also attempt to design settings that are engaging and challenging. In the Courage repertoire, six paradoxes guide the creation of circles of trust and the retreat space. Here are some of the paradoxes that a facilitator of formation must know how to cultivate if the space is to bear good fruit:

1. The space must be open and yet bounded.
2. The space must be hospitable yet "charged."
3. The space must invite the voice of the individual and yet hold it in creative tension with the voice of the group.
4. The space must honor personal stories and yet expand them with archetypal stories of tradition.
5. The space must support solitude and yet surround it with the resources of community.
6. The space must invite and encourage speech yet invite and encourage silence as well (Palmer, n.d.).

In Courage work, these paradoxes guide the individual's formation process. In order for participants to discern their inner truths, to enter into a contemplative space, and to attend to themselves and others lovingly, the tensions must be inhabited. In the circle of trust aspects of these tensions are highlighted by the touchstones.

Two touchstones that guide the circle process and encourage an attentive orientation include: "When the going gets rough, turn to wonder" and "Trust and learn from the silence." Certainly other touchstones provide boundaries and norms for the circle and encourage attentive loving, but these two touchstones seem especially to encourage participants to be more mindful and loving.

"When the Going Gets Rough, Turn to Wonder" When my professional or personal life becomes entangled and gnarly, I frequently get hijacked by the entanglements. When I become hijacked, I don't search for the good in others or attempt to see them clearly. The "turn to wonder" touchstone reminds participants that when reading and responding to a piece of personally provocative poetry or hearing another person's tale that triggers a potent remembrance, the turn to wonder may help gain a bit of detachment and lead toward further discernment.

As a participant in or a facilitator of a circle of trust, I continually remind myself that rough times need not produce tough and hardened lives. The circle's poetry and other third things frequently invite participants into the frustrations of life's outer and inner journeys. The turn to wonder touchstone requests that we not get caught in those frustrations. Instead, we are invited to a more cognitively and affectively flexible stance.

"Trust and Learn from the Silence" In Courage retreats, we try to befriend silence. Today's aural world is filled with all sorts of noise. This noise resonates in the external world and reverberates within each individual's inner life. The admonition to trust and learn from the silence sets the stage for inner reflection, and it is also a critical element in the circle's life. Palmer (2004) writes that:

> …silence is a vital ingredient in a circle of trust, reminding us again of how countercultural these practices really are … Our culture is so fearful of the silence of death that it worships nonstop noise—perhaps as a secular sign of "eternal life!" In the midst of all that noise, small silences can help us become more comfortable with the Great Silence toward which we are all headed. Small silences bring us "little deaths," which, to our surprise, turn out to be deeply fulfilling. For example, as we settle into silence where our posturing and pushing must cease, we may experience a temporary death of the ego, of that separate sense of self we spend so much time cultivating. But this "little death," instead of frightening us, makes us feel more at peace and at home. (pp. 159–161)

Accepting silence into the warp and woof of the circle slows down the tempo of the retreat and beckons each individual to dwell in a newly found space.

I recall one retreat series in which a younger teacher used her iPod and earplugs during times of silent reflection. I understood that for some individuals music can become background noise and set the stage for reflection, but I also thought that dwelling in silence was something that might be useful for this individual. I chose not to say

[19] Thanks to Estrus Tucker and Susan Kaplan for suggesting the inclusion of these formation principles.

anything or intervene. During our second or third retreat, she forgot her iPod at home and so was left without musical resources during times of silence. At one point during the music-less experience, she looked up at me and commented that this newfound silence was an experience she had not had before—one that altered significantly her retreat experience. This time she ventured into silence, and she had a distinctly different experience. I had the sense that this time she was on an inner journey. Palmer (2004) comments that

> … silence brings not only little deaths but also little births—small awakenings to beauty, to vitality, to hope, to life. In silence we may start to intuit that birth and death have much in common. We come from the Great Silence without fear into this world of noise. Perhaps we can return without fear as well, crossing back over knowing that the Great Silence is our first and final home. (p. 161)

Befriending silence in retreat can open doors to a loving attentiveness. I can quiet the noise of self and others so that greater clarity is within reach.

Clearness Committee

The clearness committee is a discernment process[20] and requires committee members to formulate open and honest questions to a set of issues or dilemmas posed by the focus person. Frequently, the focus person will come to the committee with a dilemma that entails a conflict between his or her "role and soul." Such conflicts usually entail a significant crossroad between external role-based expectations and internal soul-driven desires. The conflict may be an unresolved sense of loss or grief—a personal or professional loss that affects their daily living and work life; or it may entail an experience of conflicting inner desires and distinct professional paths—do I follow up this new job opportunity which will allow me to develop new capacities (that I may or may not have), or do I stick with what I know to be tried and true. In a clearness committee, a group of 4–6 individuals gather to support the inner reflection, the inner journey, of a focus person. For the duration of time (2 h generally), committee members are prohibited from:

> …trying to advise, fix, save, or set this person straight. For two hours, they are allowed to speak to the focus person only by asking honest, open questions—questions that have no hidden agenda, questions that are not advice in disguise, questions that are not intended to lead in a certain direction—only questions that can help the focus person remove the blocks to inner truth and discover inner wisdom. (Palmer, 1998, p. 141)

Learning to ask open and honest questions is a demanding and discerning process. It requires that we attempt to attend lovingly to another individual's story and dilemma and pose questions that encourage an inner dialogue for the focus person. Participants learn the distinctions among questions that attempt to fix the person's problem; give advice in question guise; or frame the issue with a particular set of assumptions. In the retreat experience, the committee members gain practice and experience at discerning which questions represent open and honest responses. Facilitators use a variety of simulations along with conceptual elaborations to distinguish those questions that are most helpful. Some of the guidelines for open and honest questions include posing:

- Questions that the questioner could not possibly anticipate the answer to
- Questions that assist the focus person to explore his or her concerns rather than satisfy the committee member's curiosity
- Questions that go to the person as well as the problem—questions about feelings as well as facts
- Simple and direct questions[21]

In order to formulate such questions, the committee member inevitably engages in a process of discerning which questions are more about his or her own curiosity, his or her need for fixing, or his or her framing of the person's conundrum. In order to formulate powerful questions, the committee members need to attend to their own motivations for, engagements with, and interests in the questions they raise. Frequently, members are advised that "If you

[20] http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/clearness-committee

[21] Adapted from a Courage Handout entitled "Open Questions" (n.d.).

aren't sure about the question, be quiet, wait, and if it keeps surfacing, ask it."[22] This process of discernment requires that the committee members attempt to see clearly and identify the good within the focus person. In order to accomplish that feat, they need to quiet the noise of their own entanglements with the issues. These are features and acts of attentive love.

Conclusion

Courage retreats provide teachers and educational leaders many gifts. In today's educational world, these gifts are sorely needed. Although standards and assessments are critical pieces of the schooling picture, they are not the only critical elements. Since the passage of, and the creation of the infrastructure for "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), commentators have been highlighting the missing elements. Many teachers and scholars argue capably that the NCLB vision of schooling grossly simplifies and frequently misdirects the complex process of schooling, teaching, and learning (see Ravitch, 2010; Smoot, 2010). Within this conversation scholars and teachers point to the need to return to rich curricula and passionate and caring teaching. Courage retreats provide at least two missing critical gifts. Courage reawakens and affirms in teachers a sense of attentive love toward students, colleagues, and most especially themselves.[23] It allows teachers to recall what once may have been an intuitive response within the classroom and provides a set of norms and practices that support this loving attentiveness toward self and others. Courage retreats also introduce teachers and leaders to a more silence-filled and contemplative stance to teaching's and life's dilemmas. As noted earlier, mindfulness practices frequently tap into the significance of love. Courage retreats represent another significant pathway to love, one that may lead participants to a more mindful and contemplative space. Courage work is certainly an affirmation of and engagement with attentive love; in many ways, it is best described as courageous love.[24]

Appendix 1: Touchstones (http://www.couragerenewal.org/touchstones/)

- *Be present as fully as possible.* Be here with your doubts, fears, and failings as well as your convictions, joys, and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.
- *What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand.* This is not a "share or die" event! During this retreat, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.
- *Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth.* Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting, or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using "I" statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.
- *No fixing, saving, advising, or correcting each other.* This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us in the "helping professions." But it

[22] Ibid.

[23] In many ways, this attentive love toward self can lead to an enlarged love—especially when the situation is critical and the need is great. When a teacher despairs, the attentive love toward himself/herself and, particular, others can be expanded to an enlarged love toward their life situations and their immediate and expanding contexts. Enlarged love is, in many ways, attentive love practiced with a larger, more generalized scope and addressing a significant and demanding need. See Liston (2000).

[24] I am deeply indebted to the Courage organization, Parker Palmer, Marcy Jackson, Rick Jackson, Cindy Johnson, Terry Chadsey, and many others for their creation of a powerfully supportive community and the elaboration of a set of principles and practices to engage in and live by. When I was introduced to the Courage community, I immediately felt, but could not articulate, a powerful sense of care, love, and attention. These folks model this stuff day in and day out. I also want to thank Susan Kaplan, Vern Rempel, Michele Seipp, Estrus Tucker, and Paul Michalec for reading earlier drafts of this essay. Their critical and supportive comments improved the text.

is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.

- *Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions* instead of counsel, corrections, etc. With such questions, we help "hear each other into deeper speech."
- *When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.* If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her to this belief?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?" Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.
- *Attend to your own inner teacher.* We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions, and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.
- *Trust and learn from the silence.* Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.
- *Observe deep confidentiality.* Nothing said in a circle of trust will ever be repeated to other people.
- *Know that it's possible* to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

Appendix 2: Key Principles of Formation

1. *Everyone has an inner teacher*.

   Every person has access to an inner source of truth, named in various wisdom traditions as identity, true self, heart, spirit, or soul. The inner teacher is a source of guidance and strength that helps us find our way through life's complexities and challenges. Circles of Trust give people a chance to listen to this source, learn from it and discover its imperatives for their work and their lives.

2. *Inner work requires solitude and community*.

   In Circles of Trust, we make space for the solitude that allows us to learn from within, while supporting that solitude with the resources of community. Participants take an inner journey in community where we learn how to evoke and challenge each other without being judgmental, directive, or invasive.

3. *Inner work must be invitational*.

   Circles of Trust are never "share or die" events, but times and places where people have the freedom within a purposeful process to learn and grow in their own way, on their own schedule and at their own level of need. From start to finish, this approach invites participation rather than insisting upon it because the inner teacher speaks by choice, not on command.

4. *Our lives move in cycles like the seasons*.

   By using metaphors drawn from the seasons to frame our exploration of the inner life, we create a hospitable space that allows people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives to engage in a respectful dialogue. These metaphors represent cycles of life—such as the alternation of darkness and light, death, and new life—shared by everyone in a secular, pluralistic society regardless of philosophical, religious, or spiritual differences.

5. *An appreciation of paradox enriches our lives and helps us hold greater complexity*.

   The journey we take in a Circle of Trust teaches us to approach the many polarities that come with being human as "both–ands" rather than "either–ors," holding them in ways that open us to new insights and possibilities. We listen to the inner teacher and to the voices in the circle, letting our own insights and the wisdom that can emerge in conversation check and balance each other. We trust both our intellects and the knowledge that comes through our bodies, intuitions, and emotions.

6. *We live with greater integrity when we see ourselves whole*.

   Integrity means integrating all that we are into our sense of self, embracing our shadows and limitations as well as our light and our

gifts. As we deepen the congruence between our inner and outer lives, we show up more fully in the key relationships and events of our lives, increasing our capacity to be authentic and courageous in life and work.

7. *A "hidden wholeness" underlies our lives*.

   Whatever brokenness we experience in ourselves and in the world, a "hidden wholeness" can be found just beneath the surface. The capacity to stand and act with integrity in the tragic gap between what is and what could be or should be—resisting both the corrosive cynicism that comes from seeing only what is broken and the irrelevant idealism that comes from seeing only what is not—has been key to every life-giving movement and is among the fruits of the Circle of Trust approach.

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