

## Chapter II

# *A Culture of Fear*

## *Education and the Disconnected Life*



Day after day up there beating my wings  
with all of the softness truth requires  
I feel them shrug whenever I pause:  
they class my voice among tentative things,

And they credit fact, force, battering.  
I dance my way toward the family of knowing,  
embracing stray error as a long-lost boy  
and bringing him home with my fluttering.

Every quick feather asserts a just claim;  
it bites like a saw into white pine.  
I communicate right; but explain to the dean—  
well, Right has a long and intricate name.

And the saying of it is a lonely thing.

—WILLIAM STAFFORD, "LIT INSTRUCTOR"

### AN ANATOMY OF FEAR

If we want to develop and deepen the capacity for connectedness at the heart of good teaching, we must understand—and resist—the perverse but powerful draw of the “disconnected” life. How, and why, does academic culture discourage us from living connected lives? How, and why, does it encourage us to distance ourselves from our students and our subjects, to teach and learn at some remove from our own hearts?

On the surface, the answer seems obvious: we are distanced by a grading system that separates teachers from students, by departments that fragment fields of knowledge, by competition that makes students and teachers alike wary of their peers, and by a bureaucracy that puts faculty and administration at odds.

Educational institutions are full of divisive structures, of course, but blaming them for our brokenness perpetuates the myth that the outer world is more powerful than the inner. The external structures of education would not have the power to divide us as deeply as they do if they were not rooted in one of the most compelling features of our inner landscape—fear.

If we withdrew our assent from these structures, they would collapse, an academic version of the Velvet Revolution. But we collaborate with them, fretting from time to time about their “reform,” because they so successfully exploit our fear. Fear is what distances us from our colleagues, our students, our subjects, ourselves. Fear shuts down those “experiments with truth” that allow us to weave a wider web of connectedness—and thus shuts down our capacity to teach as well.

From grade school on, education is a fearful enterprise. As a student, I was in too many classrooms riddled with fear, the fear that leads many children, born with a love of learning, to hate the idea of school. As a teacher, I am at my worst when fear takes the lead in me, whether that means teaching in fear of my students or manipulating their fears of me. Our relations as faculty colleagues are often diminished by fear; fear is nearly universal in the relations of faculty and administration; and fear is a standard management tool in too many administrative kit bags.

After thirty years of teaching, my own fear remains close at hand. It is there when I enter a classroom and feel the undertow into which I have jumped. It is there when I ask a question—and my students keep a silence as stony as if I had asked them to betray their friends. It is there whenever it feels as if I have lost control: a mind-boggling question is asked, an irrational conflict emerges, or students get lost in my lecture because I myself am lost. When a class that has gone badly comes to a merciful end, I am fearful long after it is over—fearful that I am not just a bad teacher but a bad person, so closely is my sense of self tied to the work I do.

My own fear is matched by the fear within my students, though in my early years of teaching I conveniently forgot that fact. From where I stood, exposed and vulnerable at the front of the room, my students seemed enviously safe, hidden behind their notebooks, anonymous in the midst of the crowd.

I should have remembered from my own experience that students, too, are afraid: afraid of failing, of not understanding, of being drawn into issues they would rather avoid, of having their ignorance exposed or their prejudices challenged, of looking foolish in front of their peers. When my students' fears mix with mine, fear multiplies geometrically—and education is paralyzed.

If we were to turn some of our externalized reformist energies toward exorcising the inner demons of fear, we would take a vital step toward the renewal of teaching and learning. We would no longer need to put our lives on hold while waiting for structural change. By understanding our fear, we could overcome the structures of disconnection with the power of self-knowledge.

What is the fear that keeps us beholden to those structures? Again, the answer seems obvious: it is the fear of losing my job or my image or my status if I do not pay homage to institutional powers. But that explanation does not go deep enough.

We collaborate with the structures of separation because they promise to protect us against one of the deepest fears at the heart of being human—the fear of having a live encounter with alien “otherness,” whether the other is a student, a colleague, a subject, or a self-dissenting voice within. We fear encounters in which the other is free to be itself, to speak its own truth, to tell us what we may not wish to hear. We want those encounters on our own terms, so that we can control their outcomes, so that they will not threaten our view of world and self.

Academic institutions offer myriad ways to protect ourselves from the threat of a live encounter. To avoid a live encounter with teachers, students can hide behind their notebooks and their silence. To avoid a live encounter with students, teachers can hide behind their podiums, their credentials, their power. To avoid a live encounter with one another, faculty can hide behind their academic specialties.

To avoid a live encounter with subjects of study, teachers and students alike **can hide** behind the pretense of objectivity: students

can say, "Don't ask me to think about this stuff—just give me the facts," and faculty can say, "Here are the facts—don't think about them, just get them straight." To avoid a live encounter with ourselves, we can learn the art of self-alienation, of living a divided life.

This fear of the live encounter is actually a sequence of fears that begins in the fear of diversity. As long as we inhabit a universe made homogeneous by our refusal to admit otherness, we can maintain the illusion that we possess the truth about ourselves and the world—after all, there is no "other" to challenge us! But as soon as we admit pluralism, we are forced to admit that ours is not the only standpoint, the only experience, the only way, and the truths we have built our lives on begin to feel fragile.

If we embrace diversity, we find ourselves on the doorstep of our next fear: fear of the conflict that will ensue when divergent truths meet. Because academic culture knows only one form of conflict, the win-lose form called competition, we fear the live encounter as a contest from which one party emerges victorious while the other leaves defeated and ashamed. To evade public engagement over our dangerous differences, we privatize them, only to find them growing larger and more divisive.

If we peel back our fear of conflict, we find a third layer of fear, the fear of losing identity. Many of us are so deeply identified with our ideas that when we have a competitive encounter, we risk losing more than the debate: we risk losing our sense of self.

Of course, there are forms of conflict more creative than the win-lose form called competition, forms that are vital if the self is to grow. But academic culture knows little of these alternative forms—such as consensual decision making—in which all can win and none need lose, in which "winning" means emerging from the encounter with a larger sense of self than one brought into it, in which we learn that the self is not a scrap of turf to be defended but a capacity to be enlarged.

If we embrace the promise of diversity, of creative conflict, and of "losing" in order to "win," we still face one final fear—the fear that a live encounter with otherness will challenge or even compel us to change our lives. This is not paranoia: the world really is out to get us! Otherness, taken seriously, always invites transformation, calling us not only to new facts and theories and values but also to new ways of living our lives—and that is the most daunting threat of all.

Our multilayered fear of the live encounter is not simply a personal emotion that teachers and students bring into the classroom one by one. It is also a cultural trait at work in every area of our common life. We practice a politics of fear in which candidates are elected by playing on voters' anxieties about race and class. We do business in an economy of fear where "getting and spending" are driven by consumer worries about keeping up with the neighbors. We subscribe to religions of fear that exploit our dread of death and damnation. In a culture where fear is the air we breathe, it is hard to see how deeply fearful our education is—let alone imagine another way to teach and learn.

This chapter focuses on pathological fear, so it is important to remember that fear can also be healthy. Some fears can help us survive, even learn and grow—if we know how to decode them. My fear that I am teaching poorly may be not a sign of failure but evidence that I care about my craft. My fear that a topic will explode in the classroom may be not a warning to flee from it but a signal that the topic must be addressed. My fear of teaching at the dangerous intersection of the personal and the public may be not cowardice but confirmation that I am taking the risks that good teaching requires.

Fear can also play a positive role in students' lives. When Albert Camus writes, "What gives value to travel is fear," his words could easily apply to the forays that good teachers make with their students across landscapes of alien truth.<sup>2</sup> Camus speaks of the fear we feel when we encounter something foreign and are challenged to enlarge our thinking, our identity, our lives—the fear that lets us know we are on the brink of real learning: "It is the fact that, at a certain moment, when we are so far from our own country . . . we are seized by a vague fear, and an instinctive desire to go back to the protection of old habits. . . . At that moment, we are feverish but also porous, so that the slightest touch makes us quiver to the depths of our being. We come across a cascade of light, and there is eternity."<sup>3</sup>

The fear that makes people "porous" to real learning is a healthy fear that enhances education, and we must find ways to encourage it. But first we must deal with the fear that makes us not porous but impervious, that shuts down our capacity for connectedness and destroys our ability to teach and learn.

I want to examine three places where that shutdown occurs: in the lives of our students, in our own self-protective hearts, and in our

dominant way of knowing. We will be freed from these pathologies neither by technique nor by structural reform but rather by insight into how and why fear dominates our lives.

## THE STUDENT FROM HELL

The fear that shuts down the capacity for connectedness is often at work in our students. If we could see that fact clearly and consistently—and learn to address our students' fears rather than exploit them—we would move toward better teaching. But seeing is never simple, and the lenses through which many teachers view the young these days tend to distort who, and how, our students really are.

When I ask teachers to name the biggest obstacle to good teaching, the answer I most often hear is "my students." When I ask why this is so, I hear a litany of complaints: my students are silent, sullen, withdrawn; they have little capacity for conversation; they have short attention spans; they do not engage well with ideas; they cling to narrow notions of "relevance" and "usefulness" and dismiss the world of ideas.

If my report seems exaggerated, here is the banner from a recent brochure announcing a national conference on teaching and learning:

### IT'S A FACT

Many students have no direction and lack motivation.  
These students have little knowledge of the social skills necessary  
for teamwork and negotiation.

They're bored and passive in situations calling for action,  
and belligerent and destructive in contexts requiring reflection.

When I inquire about the causes of these alleged faults, I hear another standard litany, this time one of societal ills. Absentee parents and the vanishing family, the deficiencies of public education, the banality of television and mass culture, the ravages of drugs and alcohol—all are held to blame for the diminished state of our students' minds and lives.

As impressive as this list is, the ferocity with which some faculty insist that today's students are vastly inferior to those of their own generation makes one wonder whether social change alone can

account for such dramatic decline. Perhaps the DNA itself has degenerated within the past quarter century!

Whatever tidbits of truth these student stereotypes contain, they grossly distort reality, and they widen the disconnection between students and their teachers. Not only do these caricatures make our lives look noble in comparison to the barbaric young, but they also place the sources of our students' problems far upstream from the place where our lives converge with theirs. Criticizing the client is the conventional defense in any embattled profession, and these stereotypes conveniently relieve us of any responsibility for our students' problems—or their resolution.

Some years ago, I met the dean of an experimental college who was guiding that project into its second year on the campus of a major university. He had just come from a faculty meeting, and it was clear from his demeanor that things had not gone well.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The faculty spent most of the morning complaining about the quality of our students. They said that this program would 'never work if we did not recruit young people who were better prepared.'"

"What did you tell them?"

"I listened as long as I could," he said, "but they could not get off their blame-the-student shtick. Finally I said that they sounded like doctors in a hospital saying, 'Don't send us any more sick people—we don't know what to do with them. Send us healthy patients so we can look like good doctors.'"

His analogy helped me understand something crucial about teaching: *the way we diagnose our students' condition will determine the kind of remedy we offer*. But we teachers spend little time thinking with each other about the condition of our students, about the maladies for which our teaching is supposed to be the cure. We have nothing to compare with the "grand rounds" common in hospitals, where doctors, nurses, therapists, and other professionals collaborate in diagnosing a patient's need. Instead, we allow our "treatment mode" to be shaped by the thoughtless stereotypes of students that float freely in faculty culture.

The dominant diagnosis, to put it bluntly, is that our "patients" are brain-dead. Small wonder, then, that the dominant treatment is to drip data bits into our students' veins, wheeling their comatose forms

from one information source to the next until the prescribed course of treatment is complete, hoping they will absorb enough intellectual nutrients to maintain their vital signs until they have graduated—and paid their tuition in full.

That caricature highlights a truth: our assumption that students are brain-dead leads to pedagogies that deaden their brains. When we teach by dripping information into their passive forms, students who arrive in the classroom alive and well become passive consumers of knowledge and are dead on departure when they graduate. But the power of this self-fulfilling prophecy seems to elude us: we rarely consider that our students may die in the classroom because we use methods that assume they are dead.

I once led a faculty workshop where the conversation had turned toward students, and many participants were complaining about how silent and indifferent they are. The workshop was being held in a glass-walled conference room at the core of a new classroom building, and the curtains that might have shut off our view of the surrounding hallways had been left open. In the midst of the student-bashing, a bell rang and the classrooms surrounding the conference room began to empty out. The halls quickly filled with young people, talking to each other with great energy and animation.

I asked the faculty to observe the evidence before us and then asked them to explain the difference between the students they had been describing and the ones we were now seeing: “Is it possible that your students are not brain-dead? Is it possible that their classroom coma is induced by classroom conditions and that once they cross the threshold into another world, they return to life?”

We need a new diagnosis of our students’ inward condition, one that is more perceptive about their needs, less defensive about our own role in their plight, and more likely to lead to creative modes of teaching. I want to suggest such a diagnosis by telling another teaching story from my own experience.

I had just finished a two-day faculty workshop on a Midwestern university campus. Amid high praise for the work we had done together—which, I was told, had given people deeper insight into the pedagogical arts—I was ushered into a political science class where I had agreed to be “teacher for an hour.”

I should have left while the leaving was good.

There were thirty students in that classroom. It is possible that twenty-nine of them were ready to learn, but I will never know. For in the back row, in the far corner, slouched the specter called the Student from Hell.

The Student from Hell is a universal archetype that can take male or female form; mine happened to be male. His cap was pulled down over his eyes so that I could not tell whether they were open or shut. His notebooks and writing instruments were nowhere to be seen. It was a fine spring day, but his jacket was buttoned tight, signifying readiness to bolt at any moment.

What I remember most vividly is his posture. Though he sat in one of those sadistic classroom chairs with a rigidly attached desk, he had achieved a position that I know to be anatomically impossible: despite the interposed desk, his body was parallel to the floor. Seeking desperately to find even one redeeming feature in the specter before me, I seized on the idea that he must practice the discipline of hatha yoga to be able to distort his body so completely.

At that point in my life, I had been teaching for twenty-five years. Yet faced with the Student from Hell, I committed the most basic mistake of the greenest neophyte: I became totally obsessed with him, and everyone else in the room disappeared from my screen.

For a long and anguished hour I aimed everything I had at this young man, trying desperately to awaken him from his dogmatic slumbers, but the harder I tried, the more he seemed to recede. Meanwhile, the other students became ciphers as my obsession with the Student from Hell made me oblivious to their needs. I learned that day what a black hole is: a place where the gravity is so intense that all traces of light disappear.

I left that class with a powerful combination of feelings: self-pity, fraudulence, and rage. On the heels of a highly touted workshop on teaching, I had put on a stunningly inept demonstration of the art. The regular teacher had taken my presence as an excuse to skip his own class, so my travesty had gone unobserved by any peer, as usual. But my self-respect was gravely wounded, and I knew whom to blame: it was the fault of the Student from Hell. Self-pity and projected blame—the recipe for a well-lived life!

I was desperate to get out of town, but I had to suffer through one more event, dinner with a few faculty at the president's house. There, the workshop received fresh praise, but now the praise was painful, driving me deeper into feelings of fraudulence. When the president announced the arrival of the college van that would haul me to the airport, I was flooded with relief.

I went out to the driveway, tossed my bags into the back seat of the van, climbed into the front seat, and turned to greet the driver.

It was the Student from Hell.

I am a religious person, so I commenced to pray: "I have sinned, I do sin, and given attractive opportunity, I will probably sin again. But nothing I have ever done or plan to do merits this punishment—an hour and a half in a van with the Student from Hell."

We backed out of the driveway and wound our way through the neighborhood, staring ahead in silence. When we reached the freeway, the driver suddenly spoke: "Dr. Palmer, is it OK if we talk?"

Every atom in my body screamed "No!" But my mouth, which was trained in the suburbs, said, "Sure, fine, yes, you bet."

I will always remember the conversation that followed. The student's father was an unemployed laborer and an alcoholic who thought that his son's desire to finish college and become some sort of professional was utter nonsense.

The young man lived with his father, who berated him daily for his foolishness: "The world is out to get people like us, and college is part of the scam. Drop out, get a fast-food job, save whatever you can, and settle for it. That's how it's always been, and that's how it'll always be."

Daily this young man felt his motivation for college fading away. "Have you ever been in a situation like this?" he asked. "What do you think I should do about it?"

We talked until it was time for my plane to take off, and for a while afterward we corresponded. I do not know whether I helped him—but I know that he helped me. He helped me understand that the silent and seemingly sullen students in our classrooms are not brain-dead: they are full of fear.

The Student from Hell is not born that way but is created by conditions beyond his or her control. Yes, one or two of them may have been sent here directly by Satan to destroy Western civilization

as we know and love it. But this particular student—whose plight represents many others—forced me into a deeper understanding of the student condition, one that is slowly transforming the way I teach.

Students are marginalized people in our society. The silence that we face in the classroom is the silence that has always been adopted by people on the margin—people who have reason to fear those in power and have learned that there is safety in not speaking.

For years, African Americans were silent in the presence of whites—silent, that is, about their true thoughts and feelings. For years, women were similarly silent in the presence of men. Today all of that is changing as blacks and women move from the margins to the center and speak truths that people like me need to hear.

But young people remain marginalized in our society—and their plight has worsened since the 1960s as we have become more and more fearful and dismissive of our youth. Implicitly and explicitly, young people are told that they have no experience worth having, no voice worth speaking, no future of any note, no significant role to play.

Is it any wonder that students, having received such messages from a dozen sources, stay silent in the classroom rather than risk another dismissal or rebuke? Their silence is born not of stupidity or banality but of a desire to protect themselves and to survive. It is a silence driven by their fear of an adult world in which they feel alien and disempowered.

Of course, some of our students are not young in years. Some have returned to school in midlife and may even be older than their teachers. But the fear in our younger students has its counterpart in our older students as well. Nontraditional students often return to school because of an experience that puts them, too, on the margins—a divorce, the failure of a career, the death of a spouse. We think of them as more expressive and self-confident than their younger peers, but perhaps their years have merely given them more practice at keeping their fears tucked away. Inwardly, these students relate to teachers as "elders," even if the age difference is reversed, and they may easily be as apprehensive about how we will respond to them as younger students tend to be.

If I want to teach well in the face of my students' fears, I need to see clearly and steadily the fear that is in their hearts. No technique

could have altered my classroom debacle with the Student from Hell, because the trouble began in a more inward, less tractable place, in my failure to read him and his behavior perceptively. I read that student not in the light of his condition but in the shadow of my own (a point to which I will return shortly), and my self-absorbed misreading led me into one of my lowest moments in teaching.

The behaviors generated by fear—silence, withdrawal, cynicism—often mimic those that come with ignorance, so it is not always easy for me to keep believing, when I look at some of my students, that anxiety rather than banality is what I am looking at. I need to keep renewing my insight into my students' true condition in spite of misleading appearances.

It is not easy, but it is rewarding. As I have come to understand my students' fears, I have been able to aim my teaching in a new direction. I no longer teach to their imputed ignorance, having rejected that assessment as both inaccurate and self-serving. Instead, I try to teach to their fearful hearts, and when I am able to do so, their minds often come along as well.

I now understand what Nelle Morton meant when she said that one of the great tasks in our time is to "hear people to speech."<sup>4</sup> Behind their fearful silence, our students want to find their voices, speak their voices, have their voices heard. A good teacher is one who can listen to those voices even before they are spoken—so that someday they can speak with truth and confidence.

What does it mean to listen to a voice before it is spoken? It means making space for the other, being aware of the other, paying attention to the other, honoring the other. It means not rushing to fill our students' silences with fearful speech of our own and not trying to coerce them into saying the things that we want to hear. It means entering empathetically into the student's world so that he or she perceives you as someone who has the promise of being able to hear another person's truth.

In the story of the Student from Hell there is a powerful image that offers a clue about how to hear students into speech: that young man found his voice when he was literally "behind the wheel." Sitting passively in the classroom while I held forth, he was reduced to silence. But given a real responsibility, put in charge of my schedule and my safety, he found a voice to speak of significant things.

As I find ways to put my students behind the wheel, I will encourage more and more of them to find their voices and speak for themselves. There are methods that can help me do this, and I will explore some of them later in this book. But before I can use those methods with integrity and with effectiveness, I must understand the fear within my students' hearts—and the fear that is in my own.

## THE TEACHER'S FEARFUL HEART

Why do we have so much trouble seeing students as they really are? Why do we diagnose their condition in morbid terms that lead to deadly modes of teaching? Why do we not see the fear that is in their hearts and find ways to help them through it, rather than accusing them of being ignorant and banal?

On one level, the answer is simple: our conventional diagnosis allows us to ignore our failings as teachers by blaming the victims. But there is a deeper reason for our blindness to our students' fears, and it is more daunting: we cannot see the fear in our students until we see the fear in ourselves. When we deny our own condition, we resist seeing anything in others that might remind us of who, and how, *we* really are.

If you were reading between the lines in my story of the Student from Hell, you know that there are two morals to that tale. One is about the fear in the student; the other is about the fear within me.

Looked at "objectively," it is hard to believe that I was afraid of that young man—thus demonstrating the limits of objectivity. There I was, at a small university in the Midwest from which I would soon take leave, having gained the approval of the people who had hired me, on whom my livelihood depends. There I was in my early fifties, career in full flight, doing work I find rich in meaning, blessed with health and family and friends. There I was, face to face with a forlorn young man in his early twenties who had no apparent power over me—and I was so afraid of him that I lost my bearings, my capacity to teach, my sense of self and self-worth.

In unguarded moments with close friends, we who teach will acknowledge a variety of fears: having our work go unappreciated, being inadequately rewarded, discovering one fine morning that we

chose the wrong profession, spending our lives on trivia, ending up feeling like frauds. But many of us have another fear that we rarely name: our fear of the judgment of the young.

Day after day, year after year, we walk into classrooms and look into younger faces that *seem* to signal, in ways crude and subtle, "You're history. Whatever you value, we don't—and since you couldn't possibly understand the things we value, we won't even bother to try to tell you what they are. We are here only because we are forced to be here. So whatever you have to do, get it over with, and let us get on with our lives."

That is how we sometimes *interpret* the signals our students send when, in truth, they are usually signals of fear, not disdain. Until I learn to decode that message, I will be quick to cast too many of my students in the role of the Student from Hell—and I will never learn to decode it until I understand my own fear of the judgment of the young.

Erik Erikson, reflecting on adult development, says that in midlife we face a choice between "stagnation" and "generativity."<sup>5</sup> Erikson's notion can be useful even if you are a young teacher, once you understand that teachers age at a geometric rate: my best guess is that most teachers reach midlife by the time they turn twenty-nine! When one returns to work each fall and finds one's students the same age they were last year, middle age comes long before its time.

Stagnation is the state chosen by teachers who are so threatened by students that they barricade themselves behind their credentials, their podiums, their status, their research. Ironically, this choice for stagnation mirrors the disengagement of the students these teachers fear. Having been wounded by fearful young people who hold their teachers at arm's length, these teachers fearfully fend off their students, thus feeding the cycle of fear.

It not unusual to see faculty in midcareer don the armor of cynicism against students, education, and any sign of hope. It is the cynicism that comes when the high hopes one once had for teaching have been dashed by experience—or by the failure to interpret one's experience accurately. I am always impressed by the intensity of this cynicism, for behind it I feel the intensity of the hopes that brought these faculty into teaching. Perhaps those hopes can be rekindled, because the intensity is still there: rightly understood, this sort of cynicism may contain the seeds of its own renewal.

The way of renewal, according to Erik Erikson, is called generativity. It is a lovely and exact word because it suggests two related dimensions of a healthy adult identity.

On one hand, it suggests *creativity*, the ongoing possibility that no matter our age, we can help co-create the world. On the other hand, it suggests the endless emergence of the *generations*, with its implied imperative that the elders look back toward the young and help them find a future that the elders will not see. Put these two images together, and generativity becomes "creativity in the service of the young"—a way in which the elders serve not only the young but also their own well-being.

In the face of the apparent judgment of the young, teachers must turn toward students, not away from them, saying, in effect, "There are great gaps between us. But no matter how wide and perilous they may be, I am committed to bridging them—not only because you need me to help you on your way but also because I need your insight and energy to help renew my own life."

I have thought a great deal about my fear of the Student from Hell, and it seems to have two parts. One of them I hope to lose some day, but the other I hope always to have with me.

The fear I want to get rid of is rooted in my need to be popular with young people—a need that may be endemic among people who become teachers but one that keeps us from serving our students well. This fear is pathological. It leads me to pander to students, to lose both my dignity and my way, so worried that the sloucher in the back row doesn't like me that I fail to teach him and everyone else in the room.

But I hope never to lose the other part of my fear—the fear I feel when I am not in life-giving communion with the young. I hope never to encounter an alienated student sitting in the back row of a class and act as if he or she did not exist: when the Student from Hell ceases to be relevant to me, my life becomes less relevant to the world.

Reflecting on my experience with the Student from Hell, I reproach myself for having failed to teach well that day. But it is also true that *something* that I did in that classroom made it possible for that young man to approach me a few hours later about one of the deepest dilemmas of his life. Something I did helped draw that young man into a relationship where he was able to speak his truth.



Perhaps what reached him, despite my fear and my ineptitude, was my yearning for a generative relationship, my yearning “not to be cut off.” It is easier to forgive myself for failing the rest of those students when I name what may well be true: that my passion to connect with one student somehow got through to him and eventually empowered him to speak. When he spoke, he addressed not only his own need but my need as well—my need to stay connected with the life of the rising generation.

Good teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young, and hospitality is always an act that benefits the host even more than the guest. The concept of hospitality arose in ancient times when this reciprocity was easier to see: in nomadic cultures, the food and shelter one gave to a stranger yesterday is the food and shelter one hopes to receive from a stranger tomorrow. By offering hospitality, one participates in the endless reweaving of a social fabric on which all can depend—thus the gift of sustenance for the guest becomes a gift of hope for the host. It is that way in teaching as well: the teacher’s hospitality to the student results in a world more hospitable to the teacher.

One of the blessings of teaching is the chance it gives us for continuing encounters with the young, but whatever eventually blesses us may at first feel like a curse! We are more likely to survive the curse and arrive at the blessing if we understand that we may be as afraid of our students as they are of us—and then learn to decode our own fears, as well as theirs, for the sake of creativity in the service of the young.

## OUR FEARFUL WAY OF KNOWING

The personal fears that students and teachers bring to the classroom are fed by the fact that the roots of education are sunk deep in fearful ground. The ground I have in mind is one we rarely name: it is our dominant mode of knowing, a mode promoted with such arrogance that it is hard to see the fear behind it—until one remembers that arrogance often masks fear.

A mode of knowing arises from the way we answer two questions at the heart of the educational mission: How do we know what

we know? And by what warrant can we call our knowledge true? Our answers may be largely tacit, even unconscious, but they are continually communicated in the way we teach and learn.

If we regard truth as something handed down from authorities on high, the classroom will look like a dictatorship. If we regard truth as a fiction determined by personal whim, the classroom will look like anarchy. If we regard truth as emerging from a complex process of mutual inquiry, the classroom will look like a resourceful and interdependent community. Our assumptions about knowing can open up, or shut down, the capacity for connectedness on which good teaching depends.

The mode of knowing that dominates education creates disconnections between teachers, their subjects, and their students because it is rooted in fear. This mode, called *objectivism*, portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know.

Why? Because if we get too close to it, the impure contents of our subjective lives will contaminate that thing and our knowledge of it. No matter what “it” is—an episode in history, a creature from the wild, a passage in great literature, or a phenomenon of human behavior—objectivism claims that we can know the things of the world truly and well only from afar.

For objectivism, the subjective self is the enemy most to be feared—a Pandora’s box of opinion, bias, and ignorance that will distort our knowledge once the lid flies open. We keep the lid shut by relying exclusively on reason and facts, logic and data that cannot be swayed by subjective desire (or so the theory goes). The role of the mind and the senses in this scheme is not to connect us to the world but to hold the world at bay, lest our knowledge of it be tainted.

In objectivism, subjectivity is feared not only because it contaminates things but because it creates relationships between those things and us—and relationships are contaminating as well. When a thing ceases to be an object and becomes a vital, interactive part of our lives—whether it is a work of art, an indigenous people, or an ecosystem—it might get a grip on us, biasing us toward it, thus threatening the purity of our knowledge once again.

So objectivism, driven by fear, keeps us from forging relationships with the things of the world. Its modus operandi is simple: when

we distance ourselves from something, it becomes an object; when it becomes an object, it no longer has life; when it is lifeless, it cannot touch or transform us, so our knowledge of the thing remains pure.

For objectivism, any way of knowing that requires subjective involvement between the knower and the known is regarded as primitive, unreliable, and even dangerous. The intuitive is derided as irrational, true feeling is dismissed as sentimental, the imagination is seen as chaotic and unruly, and storytelling is labeled as personal and pointless.

That is why music, art, and dance are at the bottom of the academic pecking order and the "hard" sciences are at the top. That is why every "soft" discipline in the curriculum has practitioners doing research that is more objectivist than thou: literary scholars who count adverbs rather than explore meanings, psychologists who analyze the data of human behavior as if people had no more inner life than Styrofoam.

Years ago, Alfred North Whitehead declared that "inert ideas" were the bane of higher education, deadening the process of teaching and learning for students and teachers alike.<sup>6</sup> But for objectivism, the only good idea is an inert idea that like the lepidopterist's prize butterfly is no longer elusive and on the wing but has been chloroformed, pinned, boxed, and labeled. This way of knowing may render the world lifeless—but that, say its proponents, is a small price to pay for what they call objective truth.

I have not forgotten that objectivism originated, in part, to save us from the evils of reckless subjectivity. The victims of the Black Death would have benefited from the objective knowledge that their suffering was caused by fleas from infected rats, not by offenses against God. The countless women burned at the stake because someone called them witches bear mute testimony to the cruelties that subjectivity can breed.

Objectivism set out to put truth on firmer ground than the whims of princes and priests, and for that we can be grateful. But history is full of ironies, and one of them is the way objectivism has bred new versions of the same evils it tried to correct. Two examples come quickly to mind: the rise of modern dictatorships and the character of contemporary warfare.

A good case can be made that objectivism, which intended to free people from the clutches of arbitrary power, has sometimes conspired with other forces to deliver modern people into the clutches of totalitarianism. As people became convinced that objective answers to all questions were possible—and as specialists emerged who were glad to give those answers—people began to distrust their own knowledge and turn to authorities for truth. Thus the stage was set for "authorities" with a political agenda to seize power at moments of social vulnerability, proclaiming, "I alone know the truth that will save you! Fall in and follow me."

The cruelties of modern warfare are another outcome of objectivity run amok, just as the cruelties of the witch-hunt were the consequence of subjectivity gone mad. Many Americans found the Gulf War acceptable, even popular, because it was fought with a technology that allows us to do violence to others at distances that keep us safe. We killed tens of thousands of Iraqis in the Gulf War, but all we saw were shadowy images of destruction—images that were applauded in TV rooms throughout the land, so grateful are we for the capacity to kill at great remove.

Contrast this with the war in Vietnam, which we were forced to fight up close, subjectively, a war considerably less popular with the American people than the objectivist war in the Persian Gulf. In Vietnam, our soldiers came face to face with the enemy, our civilians came face to face with the deaths of fifty thousand Americans, and we sank into a national slough of guilt and grief. When President Bush declared that our victory in the Persian Gulf had finally allowed us to "kick the Vietnam syndrome," he was celebrating the triumph of objective detachment over subjective intimacy.

Why does objectivism conspire with totalitarianism and violence? From the outset, the objectivist impulse was more than a quest for truth: it was a fear-driven overkill of the subjectivity that made the premodern world dangerous. Objectivism was never content to quarantine subjectivity in order to stop its spread. It aimed at killing the germ of "self" to secure objective truth—just as dictators kill dissenters to secure the "public order," and warriors kill the enemy to secure the "peace."

"Killing the self" is not an image of my invention. It can be found at the heart of the objectivist literature itself. A century ago,

when objectivism was in full flower, the philosopher Karl Pearson wrote an influential book called *The Grammar of Science* in which he made a classic case for objective knowledge, arguing that "the habit of forming a judgment upon . . . facts unbiased by personal feeling is characteristic of what may be termed the scientific frame of mind."<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, Pearson accompanied his classic case with a classic Freudian slip: "The scientific man has above all things to strive at self-elimination in his judgments."<sup>8</sup> Some may call it ambiguous diction, but I call it prophecy: in the century since Pearson wrote, objectivism has pursued its goal of eliminating the self with considerable success when a student must ask if he can use "I" in an autobiography.

My case against objectivism has been normative to this point: objectivism, fearful of both the knowing self and the thing known, distances self from world and deforms our relationships with our subjects, our students, and ourselves. But an even more telling case can be made against this mode of knowing: it fails to give a faithful account of how knowing actually happens, even at the heart of science itself.

No scientist knows the world merely by holding it at arm's length: if we ever managed to build the objectivist wall between the knower and the known, we could know nothing except the wall itself. Science requires an engagement with the world, a live encounter between the knower and the known. That encounter has moments of distance, but it would not be an encounter without moments of intimacy as well.

Knowing of any sort is relational, animated by a desire to come into deeper community with what we know. Why does a historian study the "dead" past? To reveal how much of it lives in us today. Why does a biologist study the "mute" world of nature? To allow us to hear its voice speaking of how entwined we are in life's ecology. Why does a literary scholar study the world of "fiction"? To show us that the facts can never be understood except in communion with the imagination.

Knowing is how we make community with the unavailable other, with realities that would elude us without the connective tissue of knowledge. Knowing is a human way to seek relationship and, in the process, to have encounters and exchanges that will inevitably alter us. At its deepest reaches, knowing is always communal.

The now-famous story of biologist Barbara McClintock illuminates the fact that we know by connecting with the world, not by disconnecting from it. McClintock, who died in 1992 at age ninety,

became fascinated early in her career with the mysteries of genetic transposition. Though her research was often dismissed as wildly unorthodox, she pursued it into discoveries that changed the map of modern genetics, and she was honored in 1983 with a Nobel Prize.

McClintock did not objectify her subject, did not approach it with the textbook notion that her task was to analyze it into data bits. Instead, she approached genetic material on the assumption that it could best be understood as a communal phenomenon. As one writer has said, McClintock "made a crucial discovery by recognizing that the genetics of living organisms is more complex and interdependent than anyone had believed. By observing how genes function in their environment rather than regarding them merely as isolated entities, she discovered that bits of genes can move about on chromosomes."<sup>9</sup>

When Evelyn Fox Keller interviewed McClintock in order to write her biography, it became clear that the communal premise of McClintock's work went well beyond the relationship among genes: it included the relationship between the genes and the scientist who studied them.

Keller wanted to know, "What enabled McClintock to see further and deeper into the mysteries of genetics than her colleagues?" McClintock's answer, Keller tells us, is simple: "Over and over again she tells us one must have the time to look, the patience to 'hear what the material has to say to you,' the openness to 'let it come to you.' Above all, one must have 'a feeling for the organism.'"<sup>10</sup>

Of course, McClintock's science was distinguished by precise analytical thinking and impeccable data; one does not win a Nobel Prize without them. But data and logic and the distance they provide are only one pole of the paradox of great science. When McClintock, arguably the greatest biologist of our century, is asked to name the heart of her knowing, she invariably uses the language of relationship, of connectedness, of community. As one commentator puts it, McClintock "gained valuable knowledge by empathizing with her corn plants, submerging herself in their world and dissolving the boundary between object and observer."<sup>11</sup>

Keller sums up McClintock's genius, and the genius of all great knowing, in a single, luminous sentence: McClintock, in her relation to ears of corn, achieved "the highest form of love, love that allows for intimacy without the annihilation of difference."<sup>12</sup>

These remarkable words describe not only the heart of Barbara McClintock's science but also the heart of every authentic relationship that a human being might have—with history, with nature, with other people, with things of the spirit. They describe a way of knowing and of living that has moved beyond fear of the other into respect for, even a need for, its otherness.

The real agenda driving objectivism is not to tell the truth about knowing but to shore up our self-aggrandizing myth that knowledge is power and that with it we can run the world. People often lie in an effort to deny their fears—and objectivism lies about both our knowledge and our power in hopes of avoiding the distressing evidence before our own eyes: we are ruining, not running, the world.

Modern knowledge has allowed us to manipulate the world but not to control its fate (to say nothing of our own), a fact that becomes more clear each day as the ecosystem dies and our human systems fail. Indeed, by disconnecting us from the world, objectivism has led us into actions so inharmonious with reality that catastrophe seems inevitable if we stay the course. Objectivism, far from telling the truth about how we know, is a myth meant to feed our fading fantasy of science, technology, power, and control.

If we dare to move through our fear, to practice knowing as a form of love, we might abandon our illusion of control and enter a partnership with the otherness of the world. By finding our place in the ecosystem of reality, we might see more clearly which actions are life-giving and which are not—and in the process participate more fully in our own destinies, and the destiny of the world, than we do in our drive for control. This relational way of knowing—in which love takes away fear and co-creation replaces control—is a way of knowing that can help us reclaim the capacity for connectedness on which good teaching depends.

## BE NOT AFRAID

Fear is everywhere—in our culture, in our institutions, in our students, in ourselves—and it cuts us off from everything. Surrounded and invaded by fear, how can we transcend it and reconnect with

reality for the sake of teaching and learning? The only path I know that might take us in that direction is the one marked “spiritual.”

Fear is so fundamental to the human condition that all the great spiritual traditions originate in an effort to overcome its effects on our lives. With different words, they all proclaim the same core message: “Be not afraid.” Though the traditions vary widely in the ways they propose to take us beyond fear, all hold out the same hope: we can escape fear's paralysis and enter a state of grace where encounters with otherness will not threaten us but will enrich our work and our lives.

It is important to note with care what that core teaching does and does not say. “Be not afraid” does not say that we should not *have* fears—and if it did, we could dismiss it as an impossible counsel of perfection. Instead, it says that we do not need to *be* our fears, quite a different proposition.

As a young teacher, I yearned for the day when I would know my craft so well, be so competent, so experienced, and so powerful, that I could walk into any classroom without feeling afraid. But now, in my late fifties, I know that day will never come. I will always have fears, but I need not be my fears—for there are other places in my inner landscape from which I can speak and act.

Each time I walk into a classroom, I can choose the place within myself from which my teaching will come, just as I can choose the place within my students toward which my teaching will be aimed. I need not teach from a fearful place: I can teach from curiosity or hope or empathy or honesty, places that are as real within me as are my fears. I can have fear, but I need not be fear—if I am willing to stand someplace else in my inner landscape.

We yearn for a different place to stand, and I know of no better description of that yearning than the Rilke poem quoted at the head of the Introduction:

Ah, not to be cut off,  
not through the slightest partition  
shut out from the law of the stars.  
The inner—what is it?  
if not intensified sky,  
hurled through with birds and deep  
with the winds of homecoming.<sup>13</sup>

"Cut off" is our customary state of being. But there is within us the constant yearning for connectedness, a yearning—"Ah!"—to live without the slightest partition between our souls and the distant stars, between ourselves and the world's otherness. We yearn for community with the other because we know that with it we would feel more at home in our lives, no longer strangers to one another and aliens to the earth.

But the "homecoming" of which Rilke speaks has two qualities that make it quite different from our conventional image of home. First, it is inner, not outer. This home is not a place that we can own—but by the same token, we cannot be banned from it, and it cannot be stolen from us. No matter where we are or what condition we are in or how many obstacles are before us, we can always come back home through a simple inward turning.

Second, when we make that inward turn, the home we find is not a closed and parochial place in which we can hide, from which we can neither see nor be seen. Instead, this home is as open and vast as the sky itself. Here we are at home with more than our own familiar thoughts and those people who think like us. We are at home in a universe that embraces both the smallness of "I" and the vastness of all that is "not I," and does so with consummate ease. In this home, we know ourselves not as isolated atoms threatened by otherness but as integral parts of the great web of life. In that knowing, we are taken beyond fear toward wholeness.

In response to the question "How can we move beyond the fear that destroys connectedness?" I am saying, "By reclaiming the connectedness that takes away fear." I realize the circularity of my case—but that is precisely how the spiritual life moves, in circles that have no beginning or end, where, as Eliot writes, we "arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time."<sup>14</sup> The only question is whether we choose to stand outside of the circle or within it.

How do we get into that circle? When we are gripped by the fears that keep us disconnected, what will move us toward joining hands with others? The truth is that the circle is already in us.

In the human psyche, apparent opposites chase each other around in circles all the time: love and hate, laughter and tears, fear and desire. Our intense fear of connectedness, and the challenges it brings, is pursued by an equally intense desire for connectedness, and

the comforts it offers. For all the fearful efforts we make to protect ourselves by disconnecting, the human soul yearns eternally for connection: "Ah, not to be cut off . . ." We can get into the circle that is already within us by abandoning ourselves to the yearnings that run just behind, or ahead of, our fears.

Sometimes all it takes is a simple step. In a group of experienced K-12 teachers I worked with for two years was a high school shop teacher, six feet six inches tall, weighing 240 pounds, athletic and deep of voice. No one ever thought of this man as afraid, not even the man himself.

For several years, the principal at his school had been pressing the teacher to attend a summer institute on technology. The shop curriculum, said the principal, had to be modernized, and quickly, or the students would be lost in the past.

Nonsense, this fearless teacher replied. The technology touted at that institute is probably just a fad. Even if it isn't, high school students need to learn the basics—hands-on work with materials and tools. There will be plenty of time later on for fancy refinements of their technique.

The shop teacher and his principal became locked in a demoralizing cycle of demands and refusals, each exacerbating the other. Their relations grew adversarial and strained. As the shop teacher participated in our group, that brokenness weighed heavy on his heart.

Then one day the shop teacher came to a meeting and told us that the cycle had been broken. His principal had called him in to make his demands once more. This time, instead of arguing the merits of the traditional shop curriculum, the teacher looked at his principal and said, "I still don't want to go to that institute, but now I know why. I'm afraid—afraid I won't understand it, afraid my field has passed me by, afraid I am a has-been as a teacher."

There was a silence, and then the principal spoke: "I'm afraid, too," he said. "Let's go to the institute together."

They did, and they reclaimed and deepened their friendship, and the shop teacher feels he is making progress toward modernizing the curriculum and revitalizing his vocation.

This teacher's breakthrough did not directly involve adopting a new technique for teaching; indeed, it did not directly involve *doing*

anything at all. His breakthrough was into a new way of *being*, into the realization that he could have fear but did not need to be fear—that he could speak and act from a place of honesty about being fearful rather than from the fear itself.

The shop teacher honored a yearning within himself that was just behind, or ahead of, his fear, the yearning not to be cut off from his principal, his students, his world of work, or his teacher's heart. Sometimes the way beyond fear is just that simple.

## Chapter III

# The Hidden Wholeness

## Paradox in Teaching and Learning



There is in all visible things  
an invisible fecundity,  
a dimmed light,  
a meek namelessness,  
a hidden wholeness.  
This mysterious Unity and Integrity  
is Wisdom, the Mother of all,  
*Natura naturans.*

—THOMAS MERTON, "HAGIA SOPHIA"<sup>1</sup>

### THINKING THE WORLD TOGETHER

The culture of disconnection that undermines teaching and learning is driven partly by fear. But it is also driven by our Western commitment to thinking in polarities, a thought form that elevates disconnection into an intellectual virtue. This way of thinking is so embedded in our culture that we rarely escape it, even when we try—and my own words will prove the point.

In earlier chapters, I tried to correct several imbalances in the way we approach teaching. To correct our overemphasis on technique, I stressed the teacher's identity and integrity. To correct our obsession with objective knowledge, I stressed subjective engagement. To correct our excessive regard for the powers of intellect, I stressed the power of emotions to freeze, or free, the mind.

My intent was to rebalance the scales. But in a polarizing culture, it is hard to do that without slamming the scales in the opposite