

Excerpt from Chapter 3
The Hidden Wholeness

Paradox in Teaching and Learning:
Paradox and Pedagogical Design

4. *The space should honor the “little” stories of the individual and the “big” stories of the disciplines and tradition.* A learning space should not be filled with abstractions so bloated that no room remains for the small but soulful realities that grow in our students’ lives. In this space there must be ample room for the little stories of individuals, stories of personal experience in which the student’s inner teacher is at work.

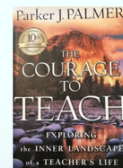
But when my little story, or yours, is our only point of reference, we easily become lost in narcissism. So the big stories of the disciplines must also be told in the learning space—stories that are universal in scope and archetypal in depth, that frame our personal tales and help us understand what they mean. We must help students learn to listen to the big stories with the same respect we accord individuals when they tell us the tales of their lives.

5. *The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of community.* Learning demands solitude—not only in the sense that students need time alone to reflect and absorb but also in the deeper sense that the integrity of the student’s inner self must be respected, not violated, if we expect the student to learn. Learning also demands community—a dialogical exchange in which our ignorance can be aired, our ideas tested, our biases challenged, and our knowledge expanded, an exchange in which we are not simply left alone to think our own thoughts.

But there are forms, or perversions, of community that are inimical to deep solitude, that do not respect interiority and are invasive of the soul. When the group norm asserts, however subtly, that everyone must speak, or must speak in a common voice, then both speech and dissent are stifled, the solitude of the individual is violated, and no learning can occur.

An authentic learning community is not just compatible with solitude; it is essential to a full realization of what the inner teacher is trying to tell us. In a community that respects the mystery of the

soul, we help each other remove impediments to discernment. Given certain sensibilities and safeguards, nourished and protected by a teacher, a learning community can help us see both barriers and openings to the truth that lives within us.



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Reflect & Discuss

“The principle of paradox can guide us in thinking about learning environment dynamics, and in designing a teaching and learning space that can hold the community of truth.”

—Parker Palmer

- * Share examples of teaching environments where these paradoxes are honored.
- * What are some ways we have tried holding these paradoxes in our own teaching. What are the challenges? Rewards?
- * What happens when we try avoiding these paradoxes in order to avoid the suffering the tension may bring?

