Mark Gonnerman: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and it’s great to see all of you here today for a conversation with Parker Palmer on “The Courage to Teach.” I want, for the sake of the people who are going to hear this on Stanford on iTunes, to introduce Parker Palmer by telling you a little bit about his life, some of which is also in the printed program. I know many of you are here because you are students of his work and are already very familiar with it, so after he and I speak for about forty-five minutes together, we’re going to open up the two microphones in the aisles to audience-inspired discussion, and we’re very much looking forward to that.

Welcome, Parker. It’s great to have you here.

Parker Palmer: Thank you, and thanks to all of you for coming. My granddaughter will be very impressed that I’m on iTunes, [Laughter] so thank you for that.

Gonnerman: A social scientist and philosopher who was born in Chicago on February 28, 1939, Parker Palmer was educated at Carleton College, Union Theological Seminary, UC Berkeley, Georgetown University, where he was on the faculty, Pendle Hill, a Quaker community near Philadelphia founded in 1930, and for many years was on the road as an itinerant teacher and scholar-in-residence whose home base is Madison, Wisconsin, where he lives with his wife Sharon. He is interested in the shape of an integrated life, the meaning of community, teaching and learning for transformation, and the dynamics of nonviolent social change.

Dr. Palmer is founder and senior partner of The National Center for Courage and Renewal, which oversees “Courage to Teach” and “Courage to Lead” programs for people in the serving professions including education, medicine, ministry, law, and philanthropy. (The director of the Center, Rick and Marcy Jackson, are here with us from Bainbridge Island today.)

For fifteen years, he served as senior associate of The American Association of Higher Education, and he now serves as senior adviser to the Fetzer Institute. He is also a writer. He refers to himself as an inveterate re-writer, and you can see that. He loves the craft and the beautiful turns of phrase that appear so often in his books. He’s published a dozen poems, some two hundred essays, and seven books that include several best-selling and award-winning titles, including The Courage to Teach (1998), which has just been

I thought we’d start with a meditation on conversation, and I put this in the printed program because I love it so much and want all of you to have it, and also because the Aurora Forum is built on conversations—the conversations we have here in the hall, on stage, and the conversations that ripple out from here as you go home and to your offices and share what you’ve heard after we’ve gathered together. This is from the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who lived from 1900 to 2002. In his book *Truth and Method*, which was written in 1960:

> We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation....All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it—i.e., that it allows something to 'emerge' which henceforth exists.

Parker, I think you are a lover of this kind of conversation.

**Palmer:** That’s true.

**Gonnerman:** And you’ve said that actually conversation itself is truth.

**Palmer:** Well, I’m one of those who doesn’t want to give up on the word *truth*, deconstructionism notwithstanding. And so in groping for an understanding of what I mean by truth, which is something I’ve had to do because of conversations where people have actually had the temerity to ask me that question, I’ve come up with an operating definition that I’ve sort of lived by and have for many years that truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter conducted with passion and discipline. I’ve never been able to believe that truth resides in the conclusions of the conversation because in every conversation I know anything about, the conclusions keep changing, whether that’s physics or sociology or literature or theology. The conclusions keep changing. So it must be somewhere in the process of conversation itself—in the mystery of community, in the mystery of inquiry, or exchange—that truth resides. And I guess the reason this has at least heuristic value or guidance for me—this definition—is that it says to me that
if I want to be in the truth, I have to be in the conversation, and I can’t say, “I’ll talk with you, but not you.” “I’ll talk with the folks who agree with me but not the ones who disagree with me.” “I’ll talk with the folks who are in my gated community but not somewhere else in the world.” But if I’m serious about wanting to be in truth, I have to hang in with the conversation, and that then points me towards the passion that it takes, and it’s interesting.

I love words. The word *passion* is also rooted in the place that gives us the word *patience*, so there’s something about passion and patience that go together, and there’s something about having passion rightly held that gives you patience because you don’t want to give up. You want to keep at it, you want to stay connected, you want to keep understanding. But it’s also conducted with discipline, and here, of course, I think of, in part, the models that science gives us of the sort of protocols, the ground rules, the disciplines that surround a good conversation, where it’s not, “Well, what do you think about, or what do you feel about subatomic particles today?” There are some ground rules around what we’re able to say and the evidential requirements of saying it and the logic by which we say it. I don’t think science owns the only set of those ground rules, and I think to go in that direction too narrowly is to create artificial boundaries around conversation, and I even know great scientists who would say, “You know, the ground rules by which we operate—the explicit ground rules by which we operate—are the tip of the iceberg. Michael Polanyi, in his great book *Personal Knowledge*, some 50 years ago talked about science as being built on tacit knowledge, the bodily knowledge we have by indwelling the phenomena we’re trying to study, and that there’s a lot on which scientific knowledge is based, or in which it’s rooted, that we can’t even raise to articulation, which gave me a whole new appreciation for students who come to me and say, “I know what I mean but I don’t know how to say it.” I no longer assume that they’re blowing smoke. They may be, but I no longer assume that because I think there are important things that we know what we mean but we don’t know how to say them, and scientists will say the same.

**Gonnerman:** But there’s also a whole vocabulary that would dismiss what you just said about tacit knowledge. It may sound kind of mushy and self-indulgent to think that we might be approaching things that way.

**Palmer:** Well, the only problem I have with that is that it’s wrong [Laughter] and morally deforming. Other than that, I think it’s a perfectly viable position. Obviously, I’m joking, but I think humor is an important part of conversation.

I understand that there are people who want to reject anything that doesn’t fall within the narrow bounds of logic and data, but I also think that if we think deeply about the very operations of science itself—if we read, for example, the autobiographies or the biographies of great scientists … we start understanding that everyone that I’ve ever read about, in any event, has operated, certainly, with observational rigor and with rationality and logical rigor. Those are valued tools and traits, and I love them and I love their fruits.
But behind that also lie other modes of knowing. I often think of Barbara McClintock, the great Nobel prize-winning geneticist who was asked at one point by another scientist, Evelyn Fox Keller, What’s at the heart of your great science that allowed you to come decades before the instrumentation was fully available, decades before the theoretical framework of your science would have pointed you in this direction, that allowed you to come to breakthrough genetic findings that brought us into the genetic revolution, into this new frontier? And Barbara McClintock thought for a minute and she said, “Well, all I can really say is you have to somehow have a feeling for the organism.” A feeling for the organism. Evelyn Fox Keller presses her a little further and she said, “Say a bit more so that people will understand what you mean,” and Barbara McClintock said, thinking about these ears of corn with which she had worked for so many years—this maize—she said, “You know, all I can tell you about that is you have to somehow learn to lean into the kernel.” To lean into the kernel. [Laughter] These quotes, incidentally, are found in a great book by Evelyn Fox Keller called *A Feeling for the Organism*, which I think should be required reading for anyone who wants to explore this territory.

So it’s so fascinating to me that this Nobel prize-winning geneticist, when asked to push into—to drill into—her great science, comes up with metaphors that are feelingful, or emotional, and relational: “leaning into the kernel.” And I don’t know any great scholar in any field who hasn’t had that kind of passion, that kind of feelingful passion about his or her subject, and that kind of relational quality to it and with it. So the subject wasn’t an object to be held at distance. In fact, there’s an amazing line that Keller herself comes up with. She says, “Barbara McClintock, in her relation to ears of corn, practiced the highest form of love, which is intimacy that does not annihilate difference.” When I heard that, I thought, That’s the kind of relation I yearn to have with another person—the intimacy that doesn’t want to absorb you and swallow you and make you into something you aren’t, but that loves you so much it wants you to be fully what you are—intimacy that does not annihilate difference.

When a scientist has that kind of relation with ears of corn, something wonderful is going on—something that doesn’t deny logic or evidence, but also something that cannot be dismissed as some people rather blithely do with the phrase “touchy-feely.” Now, I’m seventy years old, and before I die, I have a single mission on earth. It is to eliminate that phrase from English usage [Laughter] because human knowing, which I profoundly value, and which this institution is all about, simply doesn’t happen solely in the top inch and a half of the human self. Any contemporary neurobiologist will tell you that the brain may be up here, but the mind is distributed throughout the body and in its relationships—that there’s a larger mind at work. We could tell the story just quickly, for example (I can’t be quick about anything) … [Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** That’s one of the really nice things about you. [Laughter] We take our time.

**Palmer:** There’s the slow-food movement.
Gonnerman: This is the slow-conversation movement.

Palmer: I heard yesterday about the slow-blogging movement. [Laughter] I’m going to start one: the slow-old-people movement or something.

We could talk about the story of the fact that 40 or 50 years ago, girls and women were failing to learn mathematics at miserable rates. There was a theory—some of you are old enough to remember—as to why that was the case. And the theory went like this: women’s brains are not structured in such a way as to make computation possible. I’m not arguing that. I’m simply conveying the message. And along comes a woman named Sheila Tobias who says, Folks, this is a no-brainer. The reason girls and women are failing at mathematics is because they’re told from a very young age that girls can’t do math. So they walk into math classrooms paralyzed by an emotion called fear that shuts down the brain’s capacities. Their brains have full capacity, but the fear shuts them down, which we all know experientially to be the case for any one of us. She said if we can create a generation and another one and another one of math pedagogues who take the emotional component—the touchy-feely component—as seriously as the cognitive component, we will have women learning math at rates that at least equal, and will often outstrip those of men, and that is what has happened over the last 40 years. And that’s because a scholar had the courage to swim upstream against a culture that says emotions are piffle. They may be all right for the therapist’s office or for the religious community or for the home place, but not for this serious business called education. Well, if they don’t have a place in this serious business called education, we’re not being serious about education. And the truth is that we’re not, and I’d really like to kind of underscore that point while I have an opportunity.

We have 40, 50 years of very solid research that shows that affect is intimately linked with cognition, and to put it one way, that emotional health or an aware level of emotional function is intimately linked with the capacity for the brain to do its work well. We have research—solid research—that points in this direction. Why is it, then, that in higher education, which claims to be a research-based enterprise, that body of research is systematically ignored as we work on pedagogical issues where emotions are dismissed very often as touchy-feely? Well, I’ll tell you why, and it’s one of the great ironies: the research itself takes academics out of their emotional comfort zones, so they don’t want to pay any attention to it. We don’t pay attention to facts that challenge our emotional limits, which sort of proves the case, I think. I sort of lost myself around the corner there [Laughter], but I think I just proved the case. We can talk about that later. But there’s irony upon irony in this, and the simple point is, in learning as in everything else, when we are at our best, we operate as whole persons, not divisible into compartments and components.

Gonnerman: And therefore the strategy that many people might use of blaming the students for things not happening in the classroom is to avoid looking at the conditions they are working in, which may be conditions that are laden with fear.
Palmer: Well, absolutely, Mark. We were talking about this over lunch in what I thought was a very interesting way about your experience and mine of university life. I’d forgotten about it until just now, but I remember a moment over on the Berkeley campus when I was a graduate student there, and I had the good fortune to meet a wonderful professor named Joseph Tusman—some of you may remember Joe Tussman—who was creating an experimental college on the Berkeley campus at that time. It was a college of a more integrated nature than the mainstream offerings at Cal. And he came out of a faculty meeting one day and I was going to have lunch with him and he looked kind of down and a little upset. I said, “What’s happened, Professor Tussman?” He said, “Well, I just finished a faculty meeting in which the basic message my faculty gave me is that if I would only send them a better class of students, they could be a lot better teachers.” [Laughter] We spent the lunchtime talking about this. I remember him saying, “This would be like doctors saying ‘Send me well people so I can look like a good physician.’” [Laughter] And, of course, what we have to do is look into the conditions that make for whatever the pathology or the illness is.

In my experience, a lot of higher education is riddled with fear. It’s why I devoted a whole chapter to that topic in The Courage to Teach. I think we all bring our own lenses to these things. I was the first person in my family to go to college. I didn’t have a great intellectual heritage. I ended up in a challenging college and in challenging graduate programs where I felt a lot like a stranger in a strange land. I was always working my way through fear, and I was very aware of those professors who exacerbated my fear or those situations that exacerbated my fear and those who somehow addressed it in a way that helped me hold the task at hand in a more creative and high-potential way. I started looking at my own students through those lenses, and I started realizing that one of the great tasks if you’re teaching is to not only understand your students’ fears that may be blocking learning (because you have power over them, you have authority over them, you sort of hold the keys to the kingdom in their eyes; you learn ten years later that that’s really not the case, but it sure seems that way at the time), and then you have to also understand your own fears. And if you don’t get hold of both pieces of that puzzle, that fear just starts bouncing around the room and amplifying and multiplying until it shuts everything down. And “learning” becomes a teacher who is trying to control the environment by giving a lecture non-stop so that nothing surprising comes up that might trigger the teacher’s fears, and students who are keeping their heads down taking notes saying, “Yes, ma’am; Yes, sir,” and feeding back whatever they think the professor wants to hear in order to stay in their emotional comfort zone.

So no risk, no learning. I’m not sure I believe in no pain, no gain, because I’ve gained a lot through pleasure and joy, but no risk, no learning; no risk, no growth—that one I’m pretty clear about. So the fears of students are pretty easily identifiable. I’ve just named some of them. The professor has authority, the university is like this rite of passage without which young people feel they can’t get anywhere in life and, to some extent—I think unfortunately in our society—that’s true.

The professors’ fears are of a different nature, and one way I have of understanding that, and it came to me only as I grew older—but all of you will, believe me, young people, all
of you will grow older—one way I came to understand the professors’ fears is that as you grow older, you have a deepening fear of what I call the judgment of the young—the judgment of the young. There’s this yearning in an older person to receive the blessing of the younger generation, and when you look out at a classroom full of young faces that seem to be apathetic or indifferent or show-me-your-stuff, in fact that’s not what’s going on. They are wearing the mask of fear, and you can’t decode that. Your own fears kick up big-time and you start shutting down, and then this dance of death starts happening in the classroom.

So I think that decoding fear is a huge enterprise in higher education. And we don’t need to stop there because the last eight years in our society we haven’t had enough people out there decoding the fear to help us reclaim democracy when fear was being manipulated to turn citizens into consumers of stuff and propaganda and bad decisions and incompetent administration of bad decisions, to make things even worse. We desperately need for higher education to take this level of human emotional life seriously because it’s not touchy-feely and it’s not only about good teaching and good learning. It’s also about being a citizen in a democracy who is not manipulable by fear but who can find a voice and speak truth to power and do what citizens are supposed to do and need to do and must do if we’re going to reclaim this very fragile democratic experiment. So yes, I think this is a huge topic, and touchy-feely needs to go.

Gonnerman: Let’s go back into the classroom. You alluded to this earlier, but what’s a remedy for this? You mentioned putting the subject matter at the center—that that shifts things around dramatically.

Palmer: Well, it can, but first of all, let me say en route to that, Mark, and yes, I do have an emphasis in The Courage to Teach on the notion that good education—a good classroom—has three parties to it, as it were. There’s the teacher, there’s the student, and there’s the subject, and ultimately I believe neither in student-centered education nor in teacher-centered education, but in subject-centered education. In the book, I end up borrowing a phrase from the German poet Rilke, who wrote about Rodin’s sculpture. He spoke of “the grace of great things.” When I saw that phrase, I thought, Well, that’s how Barbara McClintock saw ears of corn. That’s how a great scholar sees whatever it is that he or she is studying: as a great thing that’s full of grace, that draws them in and intrigues them and fascinates them and has this strange attractor quality. And what a good teacher does is to put not themselves nor the students in the center of the learning circle, but that great subject, and it’s that great subject, then, that makes a demand on all of us. To me, some of the greatest moments in teaching are when the students have listened to me long enough, if I’m holding the subject with respect and presenting it in and of itself rather than always, always in terms of my comfort zone in the ways it doesn’t challenge me, but I’m also putting out the ways it does challenge me. So they’ve heard enough of that to begin to be able to see the subject on their own, and then they check and correct me, given what they know about the subject independent of me, right? Does that make sense? That the conversation has to be not one that I control in a way that protects me from my own fearfulness, but one where the ultimate plumb line is the subject itself, and everything we do gets measured against the demands that that subject is making upon us.
Are you asking the right questions? Are you testing the answers you’re getting? Are you looking at me—the subject—from every possible angle? Are you not buying into whatever the current orthodoxy in the field is? Because no inquiry has ever advanced by embracing orthodoxy, whether it’s religious or secular.

And there are a lot of orthodoxies around, believe me. They aren’t all in religious life. There are a lot of them in the university; there are a lot of them in every academic field. There are definitions of heresy in each of those fields, too, and ways of burning people at the stake. So we have to be very sensitive to that.

But I think before we get there, what we need in the university and in K-12 education … we haven’t touched directly there, yet, but I care enormously about K-12 education, and much of the wonderful work of my colleagues at the Center for Courage and Renewal are doing around the country now with about 25,000 people in the serving professions over the last decade, has been with K-12 educators and school leaders. I think of these people, actually, as our culture heroes. In fact, the true first responders in our society are dealing with the overflow of all of the social problems (that everyone else is ignoring or doesn’t care enough about) into the lives of our kids, and they’re dealing with them on a daily basis in a way that few other adults in this society are, and they’re way too often getting abused for their efforts rather than supported in the way that they should. So I have a passion about teaching and learning in the K-12 arena. It’s been a huge gift to me to get to know that world in the last decade through this Courage and Renewal work.

I think what we need in K-12 education and what we need in higher education is communities of colleagues coming together to help each other—know what they know individually but don’t know collectively—about these complex realities of the classroom, whether we want to talk about it in terms of subject-centered education or dealing with the affective dimension as well as we deal with the cognitive dimension. I’m excited by the growing role that I think teaching and learning centers have had in higher ed over the last decade.

**Gonnerman:** Michele Marincovich, director of our Center for Teaching and Learning, is here tonight with members of her staff.

**Palmer:** I’m very grateful for their sponsorship of this opportunity because I think the teaching and learning centers, the best of them around the country, have become the catch basins for the kind of collegial conversation about teaching and learning that we desperately need to have to, again, keep teasing out this very mysterious business, for which there is no formulaic answer. There is no technique du jour that is going to solve the problems. That’s why I say in this book that good teaching can’t be reduced to technique. I’ve never denied that technique is worthwhile and important, but it can’t be reduced to technique. Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher invested in a communal process that needs to be modeled first among teachers in order to bring it to life in a classroom setting.

So subject-centered education is something I believe in very deeply.
**Gonnerman:** But you also are alluding here to privatization of professional life within the university, and people not connecting and sharing experiences and issues around these ideas you care so deeply about.

**Palmer:** Yes. I’m afraid that for a long time it’s been kind of what I call the Greta Garbo culture in higher ed: “I want to be alone.” Turn to someone older than you and ask what that means. [Laughter] I don’t think she twittered. That’s a word I learned just yesterday, so I may have just said something untoward. I have no idea. [Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** People don’t really want to be alone, do they? Sometimes we have this paradox here of solitude and community.

**Palmer:** Yes. I think the kind of “I want to be alone” that has characterized academic culture is pretty pathological. I don’t think it’s the rich, deep condition called solitude, which we all must learn to enter as an existential reality of every human life—places that I must go by myself that no one, however much they love me, can go with me. And the great paradox of true community, of relationship: it’s generative and life-giving rather than codependent or collapsing in on each other. So solitude and community are rich terms. But there has been an isolation in academic life, and I’m afraid that it permeates K-12 education as well.

One of the most important pieces of research that I know in recent years about K-12 education, which I think is also applicable to higher education, is a piece of research done by two scholars who were then at the University of Chicago, Anthony Bryk, who is now on the Stanford campus as the new president of the Carnegie Foundation for Teaching and Learning, which I think has made huge contributions to this enterprise over the years, and Barbara Schneider, his then colleague at the University of Chicago. To put it very briefly, in this complex, rich, and, I think, very important piece of research, they study school improvement, school reform, in the city of Chicago during the decade of the 90s. And they looked at many variables asking the question, Which ones made the difference between the schools that ended up in the 90s serving kids better and the schools that ended up plateau-ing or serving them worse no matter what you put into those schools? They looked at money and governance and curriculum and technique and all the usual suspects, and they found that the variable that made the biggest difference between those two sets of schools was none of those usual suspects—none of those external factors. Instead, it was a variable called “relational trust.”

If your school had high levels of relational trust in the leadership cadre that cared about that, you were much more likely to serve kids well by the end of the 90s, just in terms of standardized test scores. And if your school didn’t have relational trust or a leadership cadre that cared about nurturing it…. There are so many things in that study that really fascinate me. It’s a Russell Sage Foundation publication, and I urge you to look at it. It’s called *Trust in Schools*, and it’s available on Amazon. I wish I had known about it or had access to it when I wrote my book. But what interests me about it a lot is that they found that the power of relational trust applied whether you threw a lot of money at a school or
the school was unfairly resource-deprived. So you could throw a lot of money at a school that had low levels of relational trust and nothing good would come out of the other end. Or you could have a school that was unfairly deprived of material resources, but if they had high levels of relational trust, something good would happen for kids as they worked together over the 90s. Well, you know, there’s a sense in which, Who doesn’t know that, right? But there’s an answer to that question. We don’t know it even though we know it. We all know that. We all know that you can throw a million dollars at a school, or at any enterprise, where people don’t trust each other and nothing good will come out the other end. They’ll simply fight about the money. They won’t co-create with it. We know that in our gut but we don’t credit that knowledge operationally. Indeed, we dismiss leaders who want to work on the relational trust variable as doing touchy-feely stuff that doesn’t count: Why aren’t they out raising money? Let us just have our little internecine warfare and go get us the loot. We’re just so dumb.

Gonnerman: How do you get there? How do you build relational trust?

Palmer: Well, you know, what’s interesting about building relational trust and breaking us out of this “I vant to be alone” mythology.... Incidentally, I believe this is true, I think I have this right: in the Trust in Schools study, they looked at three sets of relationships: teacher to teacher, teacher to administrator, and teacher to parent. And I always ask people, Where do you think it was hardest to establish relational trust? Most people say it was teacher to administrator. No. Teacher to parent? No. Teacher to teacher is where it was hardest because of the silos out of which professionals operate. So when we operate in silos and when we operate under conditions of competition (which certain legislation that shall go unnamed lest I get red in the face; recent legislation that impinges on public schools has actually ratcheted up competition rather than collaboration), when we do that and people are operating in isolation from one another, isolation breeds distrust because isolation keeps us from knowing those things about one another that allow us to be mutually empathetic and mutually resourceful.

You mentioned that I lived in a community called Pendle Hill, a Quaker adult study center, for eleven years as a teacher and as dean of studies. I came out of that eleven years of rather rigorous formation with a few simple things that I’ve now understood in my bones. And one of them is: the more that you know about another person’s journey, the less possible it is to dislike or distrust them. It’s a simple human thing that is one of those secrets hidden in plain sight that we need to start getting hold of.

So how you establish relational trust is, among other things, doing very simple stuff that allows people to get to know each other and know each other’s resources. Start a staff meeting with six or eight people by giving each person two minutes to tell a simple story. Tell a story about an elder in your life who meant something to you when you were a kid. Tell a story about the first dollar you ever earned. Tell a story about the best vacation you ever had. It takes fifteen minutes. People at first say, Why are we wasting time on this and not doing the business? But as you keep weaving this fabric of relationship, as you keep creating more resilience through the simple opportunity for people to get to know each other, you create a community of practice that works together better, that has
more flexibility in times of crisis, that has more of the trust that actually creates institutional and mission-related success. The truth of our institutions is that we work alongside people for five, ten, twenty years, and we don’t know any more about them at the end of those twenty years than we did the day they walked in. We just don’t. Except in rare cases of friendship, that’s the way it works. And that’s institutional dysfunctionality and it accounts for some of our mission failures in this society.

We can’t operate without trust, and we now have some very wonderful research that demonstrates the power of that in education especially. We incidentally have another bunch of research. Teachers College of Columbia has been publishing some of this recently. Again, the secret is hidden in plain sight. But thank God some researchers are lifting it up and validating it in this way with discipline and passion. We now know through that research that a teacher who establishes trust with a child is much more likely to teach the content of that course more effectively and have it register with the child at a deeper level than if the child is saying, I can’t trust this person as a person, so why would I trust what they’re telling me about knowledge? It just makes sense to me.

Gonnerman: We’re going to open up the microphones now, so if you have a contribution to make, please line up behind one of the microphones. But before we get to those questions, I have one more. There is the fundamental level of self-trust, and you’ve written quite a bit about that in terms of how you overcome the feeling of alienation or divisiveness in your own life. It was interesting to note, when I was reading your biography, that as a sociologist, you became interested from the start at the gap between public and private presentation of self. It seems like so much of your work has been about closing that gap and doing what you call “merging a role and soul.”

Palmer: Well, that’s a very deep-reaching question, and you can thank your lucky stars that I have shorter and simpler answers to the really deep questions [Laughter] because they take me into that quiet place where you have to really reach for something. You know, there’s an old axiom about our enemies, and the axiom is that my enemy is someone on whom I’m projecting something that I can’t abide about myself. I’m projecting my shadow. America projects its collective shadow on this country or that or this ideology or that or this religion or that. As time goes on, we’re always finding an enemy to carry that which we don’t trust or can’t abide about ourselves because we’re not an integrated culture. And on the level of individual life, the challenge is to take a journey toward self-honesty about my shadow as well as my light so that I’m not always projecting that shadow on someone else and saying, That’s the person who is causing my trouble; that’s the person who is the source of my pain, when ultimately I am the source of my pain. Not that other people can’t do bad things to me, but that how I receive that and how I hold that is my choice, and if I hold that in a way that denies that I contain within myself multitudes and all of the potentialities of human kind—that I have a little Hitler in there as well as a source of light, and I do, I call it a fascism of the heart. And I’ve actually seen a fair amount of it in academia as well as in myself, by which I mean a force in me that when the difference between you and me gets too great—when your version of reality or your truth is too painfully challenging to mine—I find some way to kill you off, not with a bullet, not with a gas chamber, but with a phrase of dismissal that
renders you irrelevant to my life. And I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that it’s killing you off. Oh, you’re just a … you name it … humanist, feminist, Buddhist, whatever the other is on which I project my shadow, that unacceptable piece of myself.

And I think it’s a hard and long journey toward that kind of knowledge. It has been for me. I’m not there yet. I don’t think I ever will get fully there. For me, my particular form of that journey into darkness has been several bouts with clinical depression in my adult life—three of them that I’ve written about and spoken about because I think it’s important in this culture of shame to say that the shadow-side experiences are as important as the experiences that we have of the light, that it’s as important to talk about our weaknesses as it is to talk about our strengths, that in fact we join together more in that brokenness than we do in our successes. I’m a great Leonard Cohen fan. I guess if you were at Berkeley in the ‘60s, you sort of have to be. But if you still are when you’re 70, you can be proud of it.

**Gonnerman:** He came to our Forum in October 2007.

**Palmer:** He was just singing in New York the other day … last night, I guess. He has this song where the line is, “Forget your perfect offering/ Ring the bells that still can ring/ That’s how the light gets in/ That’s how the light gets in.” And to me, if we don’t know the crack in ourselves, then we’re always going to be finding it in someone else, and no light is going to get in. We’re just going to live in denial of our own brokenness and of our own darkness. And that’s not a good way to live. You can’t be at home in your own skin that way. Ultimately, I think what I value most in life is the sense I have in certain moments that I’m at home in my own skin and I’m at home on the face of the earth and I’m at home with who you are, and that really feels great.

**Gonnerman:** And that’s the first step, you say, for any movement: people coming together who have found themselves at home?

**Palmer:** Yes. I think people who are on that journey … there’s no perfection in that, there’s no reaching the goal, but if you’re on that journey, if you’re attempting to live what I call “divided no more,” if you’re attempting to say, This is a truth within myself that I’ve sat on for too long that I now need to bring into visibility to at least one other person, to at least a few other people, maybe to a larger public, then I want to know you and I want to learn from you and I find energy in you. And I think that’s the way movements have always happened.

~ ~ ~

**Question from the Audience:** Hello. I come from England and I’ve taught in two schools in England and I also taught in a school in Madrid for three years, so this is a question really about some of the differences between education in Europe and here in the States. I’m currently teaching in a college prep school in San José. One of the key differences I find in teacher-teacher relations has to do with the way the day is organized, has to do with the space in the school, and has to do with politics. I’ll just address a few
of those. When I taught in England and Madrid, all schools I’ve taught in, there’s like a hub which is the teachers’ room, which is arranged as a huge lounge where everyone meets in the morning and we bring in our newspapers. We have our coffee there, there’s a half-hour period. And usually during that time the head will come in and say good morning to everyone and any questions of the day will be discussed there. Then about halfway through the day in England, at any rate, we have to have our tea, so we’ll have a half-hour break. Everyone will again go in to get their tea and cookies and again we’ll have a little bit more about how our lessons went. We’ll talk, “Oh, my class was just awful,” or “I have trouble with that one,” “Yes, yes.” Then also that same big hub is where we have our faculty meetings. Where I currently teach, there’s nothing like that at all, and we don’t have a break at the same time as other people and we are very isolated, I feel, in our little rooms. The e-mail has come in the ten years that I’ve been here, so we communicate a lot by e-mail, which is very impersonal. Then the other big difference is just around the newspapers. In Europe, we’d be sitting there with our newspapers and talking about the government, and in any conversations about politics I just have to be very, very careful, I’ve always found, of what I say. I just think it’s a difference, maybe, in culture. I just wondered if you had any comments about the differences in teacher-teacher relationships in Europe versus here.

**Palmer:** I think that’s a very marvelous set of images that you’ve given us that actually contain important possibilities for what we need to be doing here. We have a terrible problem in this society with the disappearance of public spaces, not only in our schools but all over the country. What used to happen on the city streets doesn’t happen there anymore because the functions of the city streets have moved to malls, which are privately owned, which aren’t public spaces. Think about trying to mount a civil rights movement on the streets in a society that has been “malled.” [Laughter] It can’t happen. So the absence of that generative public space you are naming is intra-institutionally a very significant difference that is also needed in this society at large. So the architecture of schools counts big-time. I have been in some of the more newly designed or recently designed public schools where the learning spaces are more open, and therefore teachers are in each other’s classrooms almost willy-nilly as they move not through long, dark halls and barriered doors, but in much more openly designed spaces with partitions that don’t go all the way to the ceiling. It’s fascinating what architecture can do for that. I also think what you’ve named is what some of the best teaching and learning centers in our universities are trying to do, which is to create a kind of public space for people. We also need tea time here. We just need to re-imagine time here, and we have to start asking ourselves very thoughtful questions about every sentence that begins, “I do not have time for….” because what usually fills in the blank is what feeds the heart, what expands the spirit, what gives us a new sense of opportunity. So since our institutions aren’t going to provide that real quickly or real soon, we need to start creating that for each other, and we can. That’s the neat thing about getting together. We can actually do that.

I’ll just tell you one final quick story about public spaces in England. I was a community organizer in Washington, D.C., when I left Berkeley for five years, and the vexation of the lack of public spaces … if you’re a community organizer, where do people gather?
Where do you find folks? They’re all tucked away in their houses, their doors are triple locked, and there are these pet dogs that are sort of straight out of The Hound of the Baskervilles, [Laughter] the first creature you meet as you walk in the door. So in England I got fascinated with the notion that pubs are public houses. That’s what the word means. And I was a Methodist at the time and we weren’t supposed to drink. I was also a sociologist, so I went in the pubs as a sociologist [Laughter] rather than a Methodist, and I really got to like shandy, I’ll tell you that. But what I love about the pubs is that the whole community is there. The kids are there in strollers, the old people are there, there are folks getting off work. And what’s happening is not people getting bombed or baked or smashed or whatever—I can’t remember the language even—but they’re meeting. It’s the agora, it’s the Forum. So we need more of that. Thank you for bringing the image of it to us.

Gonnerman: It’s interesting. You write in The Courage to Teach that many other campuses—and other work places are now referred to as campuses in this valley and elsewhere—they’re experimenting more with new ways of arranging space and with teaching and learning maybe more than in, say, a university like this.

Palmer: Yes. I think there is more going on in some industries. Of course, there are universities in industries that may outstrip in numbers the people being educated from traditional post-secondary education.

Question from the Audience: I’m on the faculty of the School of Education at St. Mary’s College in Moraga. I was at a National Montessori Teachers Conference in the fall in southern California, and Jane Nelson of Positive Discipline was our keynote speaker. I don’t know how many people are familiar with her. She’s really the queen of logical consequences and kind of carried on Dreikurs, and it was fascinating to hear her say that she’s throwing logical consequences out the window—that no one is doing them other than punishing children. That is her foundation. She was really in her own language talking about what you were talking about—relational trust, real conversation. People were falling off their chairs. This is the queen of logical consequences saying we should just give it up; we seem incapable of doing it without the spirit of punishing. I thought that was fascinating.

Palmer: The very word “consequences,” which obviously has some good meanings also, sounds kind of terminal, doesn’t it, [Laughter] and it may lead to that punitive mode.

Question from the Audience (continued): Exactly. But my question is if you have had any experience or commentary on Montessori. I was really interested when you said any orthodoxy. That was very challenging for me. And the other thing: if you’re familiar with Marshall Rosenberg’s work, The Center for Nonviolent Communication has had a tremendous impact on my teaching and my students. He has that book out, The Compassionate Classroom.

Palmer: Well, these are things that I know just a little bit about—enough to kind of feel simpatico and resonant with, but not enough really to comment on. I do feel that there is
a very large movement going on in which many people are carrying the water that I’m trying to carry here today in many different ways. The work we do at the Center for Courage and Renewal, which is about rejoining soul and role, or about reclaiming identity and integrity and professional and public life (there are many ways to name it) joining the inner and the outer, is work that many people are on to today. And I think there’s an opportunity in our culture right now as we see the way in which duplicity has brought us to our knees with the absence of identity and integrity in public and professional life. The absence of soul in the professions has caused an enormous train wreck that we’re going to be years and years and maybe decades recovering from the downstream consequences I don’t think people have begun to calculate. So there’s at least an opportunity here for more and more people to look at these secrets hidden in plain sight and take them more seriously. There’s a huge need and challenge for our educational institutions and our religious communities at every level to pick this up because there’s a great work of restoration to be done.

And there’s now this moment in history where, in a curious kind of way, the idealism of people who have believed in things of the heart converges with the realism of what our society needs, and I’m always fascinated about the potential of those moments in history. I’m taken back to C. Wright Mills, the great Marxist sociologist and social critic, whose work I have admired very, very much, who once said, “We don’t need to be worried about the crackpot idealists; we need to be worried about the crackpot realists.” And I think we see the truth of that prophecy today: the people who think you can do it all with science. I still can’t get over the fact that Alan Greenspan testified before Congress, this leading light in American economics, and when asked what had taken him most by surprise about our current crisis, said, “The fact that in an unregulated market, human greed would be at work.” [Laughter] Is there something wrong with my antennae here? Did the signal get garbled? So where is that coming from? Well, it’s coming from education, it’s coming from the illusions we create about rationality. I value rationality. I don’t want to say incoherently incomprehensible things. I’ll get there soon enough. [Laughter] I value rationality enormously, but let us lace that with all the other modes of knowing with which human beings have operated, do operate, and must operate, including the best of rationality—that deeper root system. And let us not educate economists who, at age 70, are taken by surprise by greed. Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” and I understand that to be part of the root system of institutions of this sort. Despite the fact that I have a lover’s quarrel with these places, I do love them and I value them profoundly. So Socrates is part of the root system. He says, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” I say: If you choose to live an unexamined life, please do not take a job that involves other people. [Laughter] And I also say to universities: Help us do that inner life examination, right along with, Help us learn about the external world and the skills and knowledge necessary to work with it, because they are two key parts of the same puzzle.

**Question from the Audience:** I want to first thank you for being a source of great inspiration to the work that I do. I think you have already touched upon this in your
answers, but perhaps I’m framing it a little differently. You talk about this human knowing, this inner knowing that we have, and I find that what can keep us from paying attention and listening is oftentimes a hardness on ourselves, a judgment on ourselves which, as you mentioned, we then project outward. I’m curious about what you suggest specifically for how we can breed a culture of being gentle toward ourselves.

**Palmer:** What a wonderful question. Thank you. I want to think about this in context for a moment, and the context is back to education. I think one of the clear practical possibilities is that we can help young people at every level validate the importance of failure and stop making failure a cause of shame or a cause of self-judgment, because we judge it, but present it as exactly what it has been for many of us of a certain age, which is guidance in life—a source of guidance. Gandhi wrote an autobiography called My Experiments with Truth, by which he was talking about his life.

Well, what’s an experiment? An experiment is something that sometimes succeeds but more often fails. And any good scientist will tell you that when an experiment fails, you learn more than when one succeeds because you have now ruled out definitively a certain set of variables, if the experiment was properly crafted, whereas a successful experiment doesn’t necessarily tell you the whole story of how that phenomenon works, right? So life is that way, too. Here’s a story to bring it to ground. I’m doing a faculty workshop a few years back. We had a session in the morning. It was interesting in its own right and worth doing. People were engaged with it. At lunch, I’m sitting with about eight faculty, and for reasons I don’t quite remember, people started telling stories. These are folks in their forties and fifties and sixties. They started telling stories about courses they had failed in college. And every one of those stories was about a discipline that this person thought they wanted to be in, but it turned out not to be what their real passion was. And every one of those failures had redirected them to something they now were doing that they loved doing. So we were telling these stories, we were laughing about them. We were tracing the root system, and I finally said, “Now that I’ve heard from all of you, let me ask a simple question: How many of you have very told those stories to your students?” Not a single hand went up. Not a single hand went up. I said, “It’s even kind of amazing to me that you’ll tell them to each other.” They looked at each other and said, “Yeah, how did that happen?” [Laughter]

Well, there’s a huge tale to be told right there. So, to me, gentleness doesn’t mean falsely making nice. I’m sure it doesn’t mean that to you, either. It means, how do we help ourselves and each other hold life’s hard realities without beating ourselves up about it? One of the things I learned in depression, which has been a school of the spirit for me because, for reasons I will never understand, I had the good fortune to survive, and to me that’s a mystery. That’s deep water for me, and I wrote in Let Your Life Speak that people go around saying; I don’t understand; I will never understand why so and so committed suicide. I understand that. They were exhausted. They couldn’t do it anymore. What I don’t understand is why some people come through and find new life on the other side. I’m not recommending this road to anyone. I’m simply lifting it up as one of many different kinds of hard experiences that people have in which there is deep learning from getting into deep trouble. And one of the things that I learned in my
depressions was that I needed to learn to cut myself a lot more slack about a lot of things. I needed to learn to forget my perfect offering, to ring the bells that still could ring. Because there’s a crack in everything and that’s how the light gets in. So I think part of this is the elders talking truthfully to the young about how it’s been and how we’ve come through, and we don’t do enough of that. If we could do that, we could gentle ourselves a little more and we could help them hold themselves more gently.

**Question from the Audience:** Hi, Dr. Palmer. Thanks for being here. My name is Abby Nathanson, and I work here on campus at the Haas Center. I recently wrote an article entitled “What Would Parker Palmer Do?” [Laughter]

**Palmer:** Bless your heart. I want to meet you afterwards because I have gotten about a hundred e-mails about that article—people wanting to market the wristbands. [Laughter] Can I just tell you one thing I want to do with those wristbands? I want them to be in the form of a Mobius strip. On one side it says, “What Would Parker Palmer Do?” and on the other side it says, “When you find out, do the opposite.” [Laughter]

**Question from the Audience (continued):** In my article, as you might imagine, I talked about the power of hearing about this idea you have about the inner teacher and how motivating and powerful that’s been to me in my work, especially in a field where there’s a lot of ambiguity in teaching sometimes. In my article, I talked about you becoming my inner teacher and having to reconcile this within myself: What is my inner teacher? What is the culmination of the teachings I learn from others? I’m wondering if you have any advice, especially for new practitioners, about how to balance that inner teacher-outer teacher phenomenon and keep growing with the inner teacher in mind?

**Palmer:** Well, thank you for the question, and thank you for the article. I thought it was a lovely piece that appears in the Higher Education Research Institute’s *Spirituality in High Education* newsletter, the most recent edition. It’s a very nice piece of writing, so thank you for that. And I do look forward to the product line that’s going to come out of that. [Laughter] We’ll split the profits. Your people can talk to my people. [Laughter] We’ll work that out.

Well, let me just go back to my own root system on this. I don’t think I ever thought much about the inner teacher, or knew much consciously about the inner teacher, until I landed at Pendle Hill when I was in my mid-thirties with these Quakers who established this adult learning center in 1930. It’s a very interesting place. It’s still there. It’s one of the few intentional communal experiments of that era that has lasted, and it’s lasted partly because it’s formed and bounded and disciplined by some core Quaker practices. It’s that eternal conversation about things that matter conducted with passion and discipline. What I learned from the Quakers is that they do rely in part on the inner teacher in every person. They believe that every human being has within themselves a voice that wants to speak truth, and that it’s possible to hold one’s self in a way, and by this one might mean silence, one might mean meditation, one might mean reflective reading in the Roman Catholic monastic tradition called *lexio divina*, which can be not only with scripture but with poetry or great literature or anything that draws your sense of truth to it. And there’s
A voice that becomes audible as you engage in these practices and that can check and correct other versions of truth that are coming at you from outside, or other demands, claims, pressures, sources of fear, or whatever. For Quakers, it’s been one of the core pieces of attempting to have a nonviolent presence in the world to have that place to revert to in the midst of things that might call out your anger or retribution, or whatever.

But Quakers equally believe, and here we come to the other pole of the paradox, in the absolute necessity of community in which people have a chance to test what they think they’re hearing from the inner teacher, because I have a variety of voices inside of me, and some of those are the voice of fear and the voice of ego and the voice of greed and unregulated need, and all those things that are news to Alan Greenspan [Laughter] but not news to moi. I’ve been hearing them for a long time.

And so Quakers have forms of community in which people pay a particular kind of attention to each other that we try to now replicate in the work we do through the Center for Courage and Renewal, which is informed not by the whole array of Quaker theology. There really isn’t an array of Quaker theology, [Laughter] but there are these principles. And the form of community in which this is held—is a community in which people don’t tell each other what to think, but, to quote Nell Morton, they “hear each other into speech,” and over a period of time in very deep, thoughtful, careful ways, weave a tapestry of truth collectively that you put a thread into one day, and the next day you say, “I need to withdraw that because somebody else has said something that has helped me see that that thread is false for me,” if that makes sense.

So there’s a dialogical process that Martin Buber would have understood from quite a different tradition that helps us test whether what we’re hearing is the voice of the inner teacher or not. And to hold that paradox of community and whatever form of solitude allows you to hear the inner teacher is critical to me.

Now, that community I don’t think has to be huge or organized or in the Yellow Pages. I think it can be two or three people who know how to practice that presence to one another. The danger in our society is that, I think, by and large we only have two models of community, and neither of them serves this purpose. One model is a kind of totalitarian community. You can find it on the right and you can find it on the left, where, “You belong to us as long as you think like us, believe like us, act like us, talk like us, dress like us, dance like us.” That’s totalitarian. Then there’s a form of liberal community where you’re free to say, think, believe anything that you want, but nobody’s paying attention. [Laughter] That’s the form of community that people like me are most accustomed to, and that’s kind of what a lot of universities are like (not to get too personal about it) [Laughter] but it’s the paying attention, it’s the sense that I’m with people to whom I’m somehow accountable. They’re not telling me what to think; they’re not telling me what to believe. But I would feel like a lesser being if I told these people a lie or, another way to put it, in this context, the only person I’m trying to fool is myself, and why would I want to do that? And that takes a deepening of relationship. It takes time, it takes trust. But I know it’s achievable because I’ve seen it. I have it with friends.
and colleagues and other settings. And I think ultimately that’s the direction in which I’d think about your question and your need.

I think that this can be translated into … again, I’ll come back to teaching and learning centers, the best of which I value very highly. I have seen teaching and learning centers where faculty gather to do exactly that kind of sorting and sifting about their own teaching. There’s enough trust among them to confess the failure as well as to share the success. But the success is not presented in a way that makes anyone feel like a lesser being, and the failure is not responded to in a way that makes the presented feel judged. That’s an achievable kind of discourse, and that’s, to me, the sort of teacherly equivalent of what this Quaker process would be. I hope that’s responsive. Thank you.

**Question from the Audience:** My journey has been through total breakdown in my son. I am an academic and have gone through the process which you described. How much of what we are talking about, community versus individual, higher education versus community, resides in the fact that we have separation of church and state? Every time you talk about community, the practices and things are wrested in Quaker or other religious practices that you have been part of or know about. In schools and universities, we are trying to present secularism where it’s head and the heart. I’ve learned this from my students. I was not aware, having come here as a graduate student to Stanford, of how much that separation of church and state separates an individual. And we don’t have anywhere where they can bring that together. I have graduate students in my lab who say, “Tell me what I have to do. Then I’ll go back.” These are kids who have grown up in liberal environments. I would go back to my community, because that’s where I find solace. So it was great for me as a faculty member to learn about why somebody is now orthodox Muslim or orthodox Jew or orthodox Christian. I just happen to have all of them in my lab, for whatever reason, because I have to cross the boundary. I was the orthodox atheist.

So through my son’s journey, I have been looking at why it is that we are so separated in our well-being, and why this integration is so difficult to make happen here. I think somebody started with the communities in schools—how they’re organized in universities, how they’re organized outside. So when I talk to my colleagues in the school of medicine, they say, “Oh, but that is crossing church and state; we can’t do it.” That is the most powerful thing that our country brings—that separation. But our challenge is how to maintain the secular education, which is so important to the community, when they must be separated like a chasm in between?

**Palmer:** Thank you. That’s a very important question and topic. Let me do a little bit of sorting and sifting among the several important points that you made. I’m delighted for the question because I think it gets to something vital.

First of all, I would think about the separation of church and state along a somewhat different track than I think about the separation of heart and head in higher education. I think those are two separate questions. And I think there are all kinds of reasons for the separation of the heart from the head, affect from cognition, that aren’t related to the
issue of the separation of church and state. Separation of church and state may get used as a cheap excuse for rationalizing a nonsensical way of trying to divvy up the human self into organs. One of our favorite hobbies is to think things apart rather than think them whole—think them together. But I think that the separation of heart and head has a lot more to do with a deep-rooted, longstanding, Western intellectual habit of not knowing how to hold paradox—of wanting to think of everything in binary terms: either-or, this or that, yes or no, switch is on-switch is off, rather than both-and. Here again, I turn to great science. Niels Bohr, the great Nobel Prize-winning physicist, who said some amazing things. There’s a lot about his science that I can’t understand and I think that some of his science gets popularized in a way that physicists have told me is off the mark. But here are a couple of things that I’m pretty clear about. I love this story—just to give you a little sense of the man. A visitor walked into his laboratory one day and saw a horseshoe hanging over his work bench. He said, “Niels, you’re a Nobel Prize-winning physicist. Surely you don’t believe in horseshoes.” “Oh,” he said, “No, I don’t believe in that, but they tell me it works whether you believe in it or not.” [Laughter] Now, you’ve got to love a guy like that, right? I’m inclined to believe anything else he says.

Audience Member (continued): I actually shook hands with him in Delhi.

Palmer: Did you? Bless your heart. Well, I’d like to shake your hand, then. [Laughter]

Audience Member (continued): Two degrees.

Palmer: He said the following about paradox. He said the opposite of an ordinary fact is a lie, but the opposite of one great truth may be another great truth. It’s a powerful image of paradox from a man who understood the simultaneity of certain great truths at the heart of his scientific enterprise. It’s a very discriminating statement. He doesn’t say the opposite of one great truth is another. He says it may be. There’s a discernment to be conducted in there. So there’s a whole stream of Western intellectual tradition that helps us understand why we have a hard time holding together the heart and the head as a “both/and,” but again, we have the neurobiologists telling us that it is “both/and”; that the human being thinks as a whole self, etcetera. I won’t rehearse that.

So let me turn from that to the church-state thing, because I think that is a very interesting other issue. First of all, as a Quaker, I have no romance about the good old days before the separation of church and state was established—no romance at all. Some of my spiritual forebears were hanged on Boston Commons by people who weren’t altogether clear about the separation of church and state—who really had conflated those two. So I have no desire to go back. I value that separation very profoundly. It’s a critical element of a democratic society. And while I have no patience with things like the prayer in schools movement, as fomented by certain forms of my own Christian tradition, I don’t either have any patience with ways of thinking about public life that would drive all questions of meaning and purpose out of significant public discourse. That, to me, is as idiotic as the idea that we ought to pray to a particular God in schoolrooms that are state sponsored that host a pluralism of belief and non-belief, all of which needs to be respected in a democracy.
What happens in a society that tries to drive questions of meaning and purpose underground is simply that those questions fester down there, they never see the light of day, they take on the most deformed possible answers, because there is no public discourse or critique going on around them, and the people who hold them have no place to go except underground, where they end up talking with their own kind, and no good can come of that. I mean, people like me are essentially boring if you stay with me for the rest of your life and we agree on everything. That’s boring. And that also gets distorted because each of us has a little piece of the puzzle, and we need each other to put it together. But a society or an educational system that systematically drives that underground….

One of the things I did at Berkeley: I had the great good fortune of having Robert Bellah as my dissertation chair. With his expert guidance, I studied the role of religious symbolism in political modernization in Meiji, Japan, Turkey under Ataturk, and colonial America—a modest little dissertation study that I was able to pull off in … I think I finished it last year. I can’t quite remember. It was the eighteenth revision, as I recall. What happened in Turkey under Ataturk was that there was this very blatant effort—successful, on the surface—to drive all vestiges of traditional religion underground. Ataturk and his people would lead camels and donkeys into mosques so that they could defecate on the holy relics. So it went underground and it’s festered ever since. And so in Turkey, the effort to establish a secular society—and I believe in a pluralistic, non-theocratic society, deeply—but that effort in Turkey has constantly been dragged back and dragged down and hampered and fragmented by underground forces seeking meaning and purpose that they’re deprived of in the public realm.

In the classroom, an analog to this is that in workshops with teachers, every now and then the question comes up … the form of the question you’re asking comes up in a way I hope to demonstrate, when a teacher will say in a teaching and learning workshop, “I simply don’t know what to do. I freeze in my tracks when a statement expressing religious bigotry or racism or sexism gets made out loud. What can I possibly do?” What I always try to work with is, first of all, to say to the teacher: “You have to cultivate an attitude that says, ‘I am glad that came up here rather than back in the dorm where everybody agrees with it, because here at least we have a chance to respond to it—to bring it into discourse,’ and that’s what this university should be about.”

Now, this attitudinal thing sounds like thin soup, but it’s actually critical and key as a place from which to respond. Because if your response is the deer in the headlights response, and you simply try to slap it down or pretend that it wasn’t said, you’re going to drive it back to the same underground into which Ataturk drove all those vestiges of traditional religion in Turkey. And no good is going to come of it because it gets said in the dorm, it gets said in friendship groups, it gets said on the athletic field, it gets said somewhere, and there’s no public discourse that might shed the light of day on it.

I continue to believe that the university is a place where we don’t only deliver the information and memorize what’s in the textbooks, but we also allow the bubbling up of
what’s happening in people’s lives to come into conversation—Gadamer’s conversation—and to get stretched and illumined and sorted and sifted and discerned in those complex ways that these things need. So there are, at least for me, the rudiments of a response here to say, Let’s welcome that pluralism because we’re not afraid of it, and let us acknowledge that if you’re a scientist who has tucked away fundamental religious beliefs that somehow contradict that science you’re doing, you’re living an unexamined life. Please do not take a job that involves other people. [Laughter] I’ll just end there.

[Applause]

Gonnerman: I’d like to thank the Stanford Center for Teaching and Learning for co-presenting this program with the Aurora Forum, and I’d like to thank you, Parker, for providing some key pieces to that puzzle that we’re all working on together.

Palmer: Thank you all very much. Thank you. [Applause]

~ ~ ~

Parker Palmer
A highly respected writer, lecturer, teacher and activist, Parker Palmer speaks deeply to people in many walks of life, including education, medicine, religion, law, philanthropy, the public sector, and social change. He is a senior advisor to the Fetzer Institute and founded the Center for Courage & Renewal, which oversees a “Courage to Teach” program for K-12 educators across the country with parallel programs for people in other professions who are looking for ways to reconnect who they are with what they do. Author of seven books, including the bestsellers The Courage to Teach (now in its tenth anniversary edition), Let Your Life Speak, and A Hidden Wholeness, his contribution has been recognized with ten honorary doctorates and a number of national awards. Named one of the "most influential senior leaders" in higher education, he holds a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. He is a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker) and lives with his wife, Sharon Palmer, in Madison, Wisconsin.

Mark Gonnerman is founding director of the Aurora Forum.

Comments?
We welcome your comments and suggestions via email to auroraforum@stanford.edu or via the feedback form on our website: auroraforum.org.