

# Divided No More

*For the Invisible College*

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7 May 1994

Parker Palmer has been teaching at Berea College for a year and I heard him speak last September about being "divided no more". This is the moment in the life of an individual when no fear of external reprisal can equal the anguish of internal duplicity. It is the moment when one must be true to oneself, no matter the consequences. Rosa Parks was divided no more when she kept her seat on a bus in Montgomery and sparked the civil rights movement.

Sometime in 1993, I became "divided no more" about higher education. Because my desire to fit in is such a well established feature of my personality and because of my deep appreciation for the fine work so many people are doing in higher education, this surprised, even scared me a little. But it has also strengthened me, given me more courage, and I hope, more character.

The tensions I feel working in higher education are about much more than the struggle to integrate service and learning on campus. In fact I hardly know where to begin to critique higher education, how to catalogue the immense and complicated landscape of its failures. What's wrong with the academy goes much deeper, I believe, than the people or even the structure. It goes to the very core of thought itself, to a flawed and corrupt view of the world, to a paradigm that at the very least has long outlived its usefulness.

That strange world view has broken up our lovely universe into compartments, which in higher education we name departments. It has pretended to separate the observer from the observed and worshipped something called objective knowledge, imagining pridefully that it is devoted to the "truth". In doing so it has disdained the subjective, the personal, and the human, and has allowed us as a species to justify the slaughter of innocents in the name of abstractions like science and progress. Even science, in quantum physics and brain research, has now refuted this destructive world view.

In higher education we also slaughter the innocents. We slaughter curious minds and hearts with our insistent devaluing of the knowledge, experience, interests and learning styles of the individuals before us, with our ridiculous devotion to deadening rituals of memorization and regurgitation, our shameful and pompous pretensions of objectivity and truth. "*Education*", said Yeats, "*is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire*". How many educated men and women do you suppose are donning cap and gown this graduation season?

The ardor of my complaint is matched only by the ardor of my belief in the tremendous potential of higher education. We have an immense power to transform our communities, our country, and our world, to say nothing of students. For the primary "customers", our students, these precious college years could and should be utterly transformative. Students are so ripe for it, are in the prime moment of their quest for vision and for direction. Indeed higher education is transformative for many students. But I submit that the degree to which it is transformative is much more a function of the intelligence, adaptability and generosity of our students than it is a function of the genius of our curriculums or the greatness of our teaching.

In my own administration and teaching I am, like many people, marginalized. But I have been more philosophical about this since I read John Duley's article in an old NSIEE journal extolling the virtues of the "margin". You can make comments with a red pencil in the margins! Over time I have come to the point where I am no longer trying very hard to transform my college. I am not proud that my spirit has been broken in this regard. It is sort of a tragedy for both me and the college, since Berea has lost much of my fire and dedication, which have now become focussed on

Students for Appalachia or transferred elsewhere. Back when I was trying hard to make a maximum contribution to the ongoing life of my institution I was vilified by many faculty. It was, I know now, more political than personal, but I was deeply wounded. Now I am grateful for that pain. Without that anguish I could never have become divided no more.

Having said all of this you might be surprised to hear that I absolutely love my work at Berea College. I am grateful to my college for trusting me to take a struggling Students for Appalachia and mold it into a model campus service program. I'm thankful that I have a fair amount of freedom to travel and to support the growing national and community service movement. I love teaching once a year and being able to experiment with service-learning in my *Leadership for Social Change* class.

The tensions I feel in my actual teaching and leadership on campus are perhaps best illustrated by two readings that directly contradict each other, and that have to do with language, with words. The first is a poem by the Native American poet Red Hawk entitled *Words Are Not Actions*:

I have known some  
especially in the university,  
who thought that if they gave a fine talk  
or wrote a long article for the journals,  
this made them men of action.

The Indians knew better.  
Before a warrior went into battle  
he would not speak.  
He would go into the sweat lodge with others;  
they would drum and sing and pray.  
Then for three days he would go into solitude,  
preparing his heart for his death.  
When he came out, ready to ride,  
his woman would hand him axe and bow.  
No word was spoken.

The Indians had a saying:  
words fall down on the ground  
like shit from the dogs;  
deeds rise up in the sky  
like the spirit leaving the body.

The second is by the great philosopher Wittengstein, who said, simply,

"Words are Deeds".

As a man of action, I sometimes feel like a complete outsider in the academy. As a man of words, I like to think that my talks and articles make a difference. In spite of the ambiguity, I feel like I'm where I need to be for now. I hope the contradiction keeps me poised on a sharper edge of self honesty.

Trying to make sense of my place in higher education has led me to feel that my legitimate job--no, my sacred duty--is: first, to connect students with the living world, second, to work with them to help solve our great common problems, third, to develop citizens of high conscience for our democracy, fourth, to prepare individuals for useful and meaningful careers, and fifth, to lay strong foundations of broadmindedness and greatheartedness in my students that will manifest as happiness and service over the course of a lifetime.

I'd consider it a blessing to have a network of colleagues in the higher education community to both challenge and encourage me, personally and professionally, and to help define and shape the vision I share with John Wallace and many others of a New Kind of American College.