

Session 3 – Building a Courageous Community

Materials:

- Agenda charted on the board or chart paper, or provided as a handout
- Handout: [“It Takes Courage to...” poem](#)
- Handout: [“Courageous Educators: Leaning into the Discomfort”](#) by Jasmine Scott, or
- Handout: A segment of Parker Palmer’s on “Institutions and the Human Heart” from [The Heart of a Teacher](#)

Opening: On Courage

“Courage is the most important of all virtues because without courage, you can’t practice any other virtue consistently.” - *Maya Angelou*

“Courage doesn't mean you don't get afraid. Courage means you don't let fear stop you.” - *Bethany Hamilton*

Invite participants to reflect on one, or both, of these two quotes. Ask some volunteers to share their reflections in a large group setting. Ask participants to be mindful of brevity, or to “say just enough.”

Note on Quote Sources:

Maya Angelou was an award-winning author, poet and civil rights activist. In 1969, she made history with her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, becoming the first Black woman with a nonfiction bestseller.

Bethany Meilani Hamilton is an American professional surfer and writer. In 2003, when she was only 13 years old, she survived a shark attack in which she lost her left arm. A few months later, she returned to surfing and turned pro in 2007.



Talk Participants Through Today's Agenda

- Opening: On Courage
- Check Agenda
- "It Takes Courage To..." Poem
- Grounding Practice
- Courage in Education Article and Discussion
- Closing: On Courage

It Takes Courage To...

Explain that in today's session we'll explore a poem about courage.

Distribute the handout, [It Takes Courage to](#)

Explain that you'll invite participants to read the poem out loud collaboratively. Invite the first volunteer to read the first stanza. Then as participants feel moved, they can volunteer to pick up where their colleague left off— one after the other. When the full poem has been read out loud, ask participants to sit with the poem for a bit and then consider what will take courage for them.

Using the prompt, "It will take courage for me to..." invite participants to jot down any lines, words, or phrases that speak to them from the poem as they begin to create their own courage poem using the existing poem lines as building blocks. For example, they might start with language from the 2nd stanza, "It will take courage for me to" "make waves," "to find wholehearted ways." Then from the 3rd stanza they may add lines that may continue with "to say I was wrong" and maybe some from the 6th stanza "to trust what courage can do and give [myself] time to find out." Say to participants that "no poem is wrong because you are expressing the vulnerability of what it will take courage for you to do."

Now invite them to write their next stanza using the prompt, "It has taken courage for me to..." Invite participants to jot down any lines, words or phrases from the poem that captures what it has taken courage for them to do. In this way, vulnerability of participants is acknowledged and we are celebrating each other's humanity.

Give participants 3-5 minutes to create their own courage poems, letting them know that when they're done, they'll be sharing out parts of their poems with a colleague in a pair share.

Pair Share

Count off by twos, having *ones* and *twos* pair up for a pair share. Explain that in their pairs, each participant will share as much, or as little, of their courage poems as they wish while their partner pays close attention, practicing what is sometimes called mindful listening—being fully present with what the other person shares. Invite participants to decide who will share first. Remind them that their sharing doesn't have to be perfect or complete. They don't need to do anything beyond sharing the lines from their poem. Give each partner sufficient time to share before coming back to the large group. One way to know when participants have had sufficient time is when the hum of conversation dies down.

Large Group Share

When the group reconvenes, invite a few participants to share what the experience of sharing and listening was like for them.

Use the following engaging skills below to practice validating what was shared:

- I hear that you feel...
- I can see that from your perspective you think...
- I'd probably feel ____, too...

Facilitator Note: This can be a powerful activity for people, activating their strong emotions. Say something to this effect and invite participants to breathe through the activity and ground themselves. Deep abdominal breathing (also known as belly or diaphragmatic breathing) can help to reduce stress and strong feelings.

According to the [Harvard Health Blog](#): "One way to change our reaction to modern stress is to learn how to belly breathe instead of chest breathe. Belly breathing stimulates the vagus nerve, which runs from the head down the neck, through the chest, and to the colon. This activates your relaxation response, reducing your heart rate and blood pressure and lowering stress levels."

We'll get into this in more detail as we encourage people throughout this guide to develop a grounding practice that works for them. This is so that, when the going gets tough,

when courageous, painful, uncomfortable conversations are called for, people have a practice to draw on to stay as present as possible.

Grounding Practice

Mindful and grounding practices can be helpful in different situations and we'll touch on them throughout this guide. They can be useful when transitioning from one activity, or space, to another to help us show up more fully in the moment. They can also be a benefit to us when we're experiencing stress and our thinking gets clouded due to overwhelming feelings. This can be distracting, preventing us from being present with each other and our students. It can also prevent us from making thoughtful decisions.

At times like these, it can help to turn to mindful and grounding practices to "soothe" the brain and release some of our stress. Ideally, we want to have these grounding, mindful practices to prevent us from getting too agitated, anxious and overwhelmed in the first place, but they can also serve as a practice to come back to when we get triggered and pushed off balance.



If needed, guide the group through a breathing (or other grounding) activity in which you invite them to place the soles of their feet on the ground, place one hand on their stomach and one on their heart as you invite them to breathe in through their nose and out through their mouth. Encourage people to pause between the inbreath and outbreath and to try to have the out breath be slightly longer than the in breath.

Some people might want to stand up, stretch and move their bodies. Encourage people to do what feels right for them. Whatever they choose, invite people to pay attention to their bodies and their breath.

Validation That Human Beings Are Holistic

Explain to the group that we invite people to show up as their full selves—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual—which contrasts with the way most of us are socialized to show up in the rest of our lives. When at work, we are often asked to compartmentalize or create clear boundaries between the personal and the professional. Many of us are expected to show up “professionally” which often means we are *discouraged* from showing up emotionally.

Validate participants for showing up during your time together as their full selves, embracing their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual facets equally, which can feel risky and challenging.

We believe in honoring the full humanity and experiences of those engaged with us in our work. We encourage you to start doing the same at your school, and not just in this space, if you're not doing so already—even if it means leaning into discomfort.

Courage in Education

Invite participants to read one, or both, of the articles at the end of this session:

- 1) [Courageous Educators: Leaning into the Discomfort](#), by Jasmine Scott
- 2) A segment of Parker Palmer's on "Institutions and the Human Heart" from [The Heart of a Teacher](#).

Both talk about higher education but make important points about what courage could look like in K-12 education as well.

Reflection questions to consider for [Courageous Educators: Leaning into the Discomfort](#):

- What are your thoughts, feelings, connections, and reflections on this article?
- What aspects of the transformative work that Jasmine Scott describes in her article would you like to see more of in your school? Why?

Reflection questions for [Institutions and the Human Heart](#):

- What are your thoughts, feelings, connections, and reflections on this article?
- What aspects of the vulnerable work that Parker Palmer describes in his article would you like to see more of in your school? Why?

Closing, Option 1: On Courage

Invite participants, one after the other to share one line from their "It Takes Courage" poem, co-creating a new poem on courage together.

Closing, Option 2: Parker Palmer on Courage

Invite participants to reflect on Parker Palmer's quote on courage below:

"If we want to grow as teachers – we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives – risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract."

Additional Resources: Session 3

Additional Written Resources:

[“A Talk to Teachers”](#) by James Baldwin

[“Ease Anxiety and Stress: Take a \(Belly\) Breather”](#) by Matthew Solan

Additional Video Resources | Parker Palmer on The Courage to Teach:

[10. The Emotional Life of Children – The Courage to Teach Guide](#) by Parker Palmer

[12. Ways of Knowing - The Courage to Teach Guide](#) by Parker Palmer

Handout: [Courageous Educators: Leaning into the Discomfort](#), by Jasmine Scott

At some point in your life, you may have heard the phrase, “ignorance is bliss.” I’ll take a moment to validate that – ignorance *is* bliss. Ignorance is blissful because it allows us to view the world through a skewed lens, detached from the lived experiences of those in our respective communities. As an educator, I believe that when we fail to address ignorance in our students and peers, we are reinforcing the message that:

It’s acceptable to value individuals in our community differently because of their social identities.

The only perspective that matters is our own.

Connection doesn’t matter; it’s ok to live in a world devoid of human emotion.

As a person committed to creating and constructing inclusive campus environments, reinforcing that message makes me uneasy. And because that sentiment troubles me, **I’ve realized that as an educator is perfectly acceptable to be gritty and raw.**

Tenacity is necessary as we seek to elevate inclusion and social consciousness. I believe that there is a layer of vulnerability that comes with being tenacious. **It’s this realness that allows us to support and validate our students while simultaneously encouraging them to view an issue through a different lens.**

We only begin to master this delicate balance when we commit to our own ongoing personal work, leaning into the discomfort of the unknown. Discomfort feels like exposure, anxiety in the pit of your stomach as you begin to introduce an opinion that differs from the majority. It is uneasiness and awkwardness, not always having the right words to say but knowing that you should be saying something. **Discomfort is seeking critical feedback and modeling the openness that you expect of others.**

Discomfort is also knowing when it’s appropriate to take risks. This past week, I saw an advertisement for on-campus student employment with dining services, titled “Poor College Students.” To say the least, I was appalled. With a single headline the department managed to trivialize the lived experiences of the 46 million Americans who actually live below the poverty line, stigmatize the current student workers employed by dining services, and publicly contribute to the power differential between the staff members and student consumers. It felt important to my being that I say something, but I was also

afraid of the repercussions. I've been labeled somewhat of a spitfire in the department and part of me was worried that offering a thoughtful critique to the upper administration would be the last straw. I stared at my computer screen for 10 minutes before deciding to hit the "send" button in Outlook, forwarding my response to the head of our department. The uneasiness I felt sending that email was nothing compared to uneasiness some of the current student staff members saw when they read that email. **Sometimes discomfort is not always knowing what's going to happen but choosing to engage anyway.** In my particular situation, a few moments of discomfort led to the department removing and revamping those advertisements. As I reflect on that experience, the issue almost feels trivial. **But even the smallest acts contribute to a culture of inclusion and acceptance or disaffirm the identities of our students.**

I've become more at ease with the unknown by engaging in conversations with my peers in brave spaces. My ideal brave space (and I'm lucky to have found it) allows those involved to be offended and to disagree, affirms lived experiences, and encourages us to move away from external definition. We are encouraged to ask critical questions and challenge assumptions because we know that the actual world isn't a brave space. I can lean into the discomfort because I've done (and continually do) the prep work necessary. **Oppression isn't going to be overcome through cowardice.** A more equitable world isn't going to take form by forgoing the discomfort associated with educating ourselves and then others.

You have the power to be courageous in your work as an educator. We can choose to rationalize the ignorant behavior of our students and peers who say that they "didn't know any better" or we can teach them how to be better. **My goal as an educator is to create self-aware, critical thinkers.** Drawing a student into a conversation about current issues is not "multicultural bullying." It's a pivotal moment where we have the opportunity to facilitate a deep examination of how that student is constructing their beliefs and how they are making meaning of their world.

Combatting ignorance and indifference has nothing to do with proving the other party wrong and everything to do with helping others gain understanding. This is the transformative work that we have the privilege to do daily in higher education. Can we commit to being bold and engaging in the unknown? I'm not interested in working in a field of professionals who have become comfortable and complacent. I'm yearning to work alongside individuals with character and strength of purpose.

Handout: [Institutions and the Human Heart](#), by Parker Palmer

My concern for the “inner landscape” of teaching may seem indulgent, even irrelevant, at a time when many teachers are struggling simply to survive. Wouldn't it be more practical, I am sometimes asked, to offer tips, tricks, and techniques for staying alive in the classroom, things that ordinary teachers can use in everyday life? I have worked with countless teachers, and many of them have confirmed my own experience: as important as methods may be, the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more sure-footed our teaching—and living—becomes.

I have heard that in the training of therapists, which involves much practical technique, there is a saying: “Technique is what you use until the therapist arrives.” Good methods can help a therapist find a way into the client's dilemma, but good therapy does not begin until the real-life therapist joins with the real life of the client.

Technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives, and we need to find as many ways as possible to help that teacher show up. But if we want to develop the identity and integrity that good teaching requires, we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract.

I was reminded of that fear recently as I listened to a group of faculty argue about what to do when students share personal experiences in class—experiences that are related to the themes of the course, but that some professors regard as “more suited to a therapy session than to a college classroom.”

The house soon divided along predictable lines. On one side were the scholars, insisting that the subject is primary and must never be compromised for the sake of the students' lives. On the other side were the student-centered folks, insisting that the lives of students must always come first even if it means that the subject gets short-changed. The more vigorously these camps promoted their polarized ideas, the more antagonistic they became—and the less they learned about pedagogy or about themselves.

The gap between these views seems unbridgeable—until we understand what creates it. At bottom, these professors were not debating teaching techniques. They were revealing the diversity of identity and integrity among themselves, saying, in various ways, “Here are

my own limits and potentials when it comes to dealing with the relation between the subject and my students' lives.”

If we stopped lobbing pedagogical points at each other and spoke about who we are as teachers, a remarkable thing might happen: identity and integrity might grow within us and among us, instead of hardening as they do when we defend our fixed positions from the foxholes of the pedagogy wars.

But telling the truth about ourselves with colleagues in the workplace is an enterprise fraught with danger, against which we have erected formidable taboos. We fear making ourselves vulnerable in the midst of competitive people and politics that could easily turn against us, and we claim the inalienable right to separate the “personal” and the “professional” into airtight compartments (even though everyone knows the two are inseparably intertwined). So we keep the workplace conversation objective and external, finding it safer to talk about technique than about selfhood.

Indeed, the story I most often hear from faculty (and other Professionals) is that the institutions in which they work are the heart's worst enemy. In this story, institutions continually try to diminish the human heart in order to consolidate their own power, and the individual is left with a discouraging choice: to distance one's self from the institution and its mission and sink into deepening cynicism (an occupational hazard of academic life), or to maintain eternal vigilance against institutional invasion and fight for one's life when it comes.

Taking the conversation of colleagues into the deep places where, we might grow in self-knowledge for the sake of our professional practice will not be an easy, or popular, task. But it is a task that leaders of every educational institution must take up if they wish to strengthen their institution's capacity to pursue the educational mission. How can schools educate students if they fail to support the teacher's inner life? To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world. How can schools perform their mission without encouraging the guides to scout out that inner terrain?

As this century of objectification and manipulation by technique draws to a close, we are experiencing an exhaustion of institutional resourcefulness at the very time when the problems that our institutions must address grow deeper and more demanding. Just as 20th-century medicine, famous for its externalized fixes for disease, has found itself required to reach deeper for the psychological and spiritual dimensions of healing, so

20th-century education must open up a new frontier in teaching and learning the frontier of the teacher's inner life.

How this might be done is a subject I have explored in earlier essays in *Change*, so I will not repeat myself here. In **"Good Talk About Good Teaching,"** I examined some of the key elements necessary for an institution to host non-compulsory, non-invasive opportunities for faculty to help themselves and each other grow inwardly as teachers. In **"Divided No More: A Movement Approach to Educational Reform,"** I explored things we can do on our own when institutions are resistant or hostile to the inner agenda.

Our task is to create enough safe spaces and trusting relationships within the academic workplace—hedged about by appropriate structural protections—that more of us will be able to tell the truth about our own struggles and joys as teachers in ways that befriend the soul and give it room to grow. Not all spaces can be safe, not all relationships trustworthy, but we can surely develop more of them than we now have so that an increase of honesty and healing can happen within us and among us—for our own sake, the sake of our teaching, and the sake of our students.

Honesty and healing sometimes happen quite simply, thanks to the alchemical powers of the human soul. When I, with 30 years of teaching experience, speak openly about the fact that I still approach each new class with trepidation, younger faculty tell me that this makes their own fears seem more natural—and thus easier to transcend—and a rich dialogue about the teacher's selfhood often ensues. We do not discuss techniques for "fear management," if such exist. Instead, we meet as fellow travelers and offer encouragement to each other in this demanding but deeply rewarding journey across the inner landscape of education—calling each other back to the identity and integrity that animate all good work, not least the work called teaching.