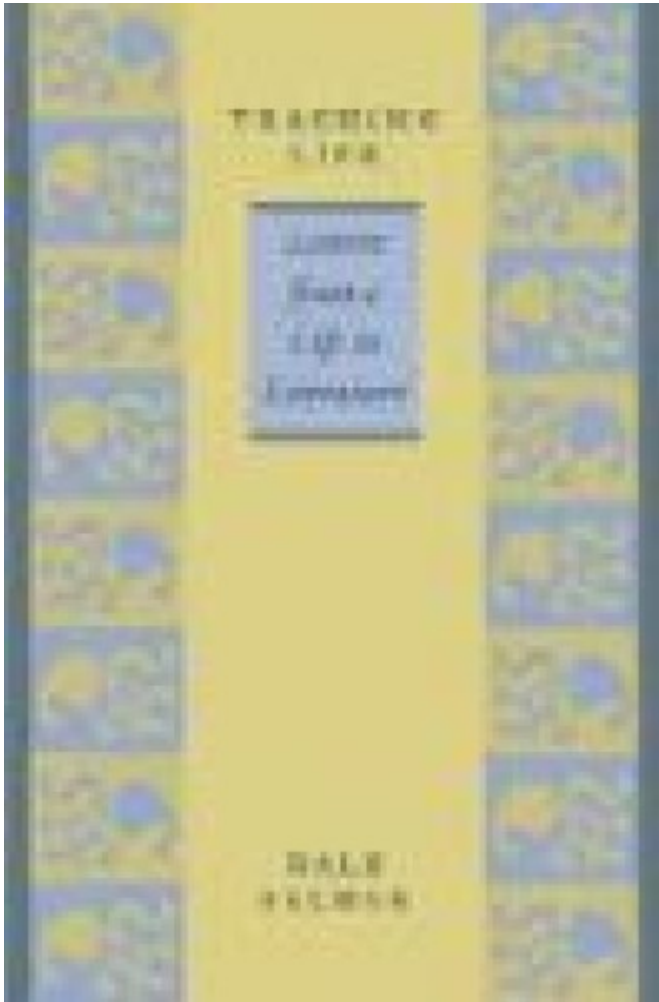


# A heart for teaching

By [Shirley Hershey Showalter](#) in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue

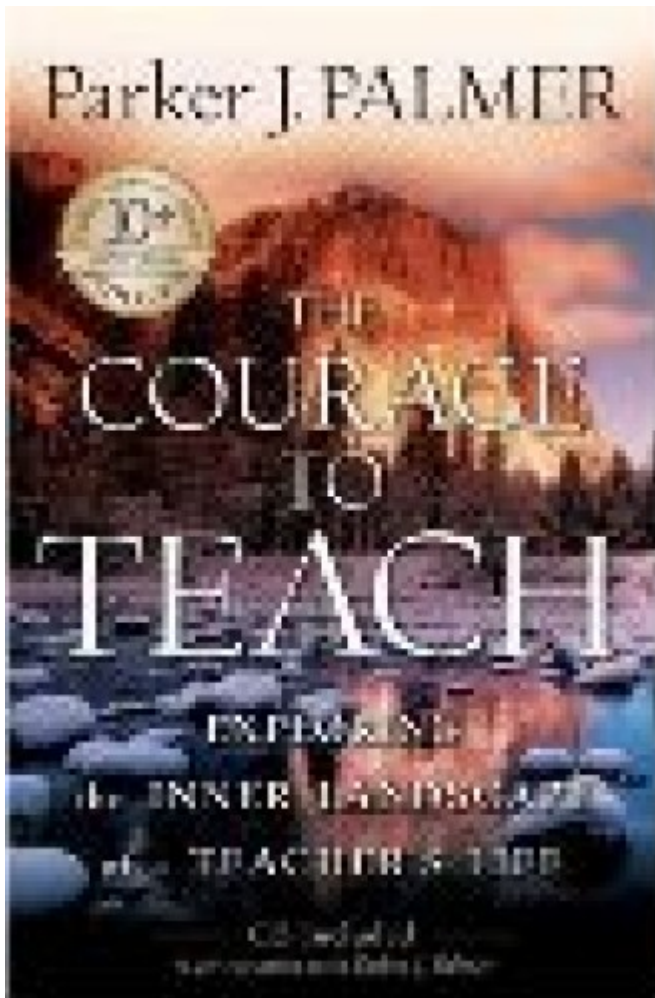
## In Review



## Teaching Life: Letters from a Life in Literature

Dale Salwak

University of Iowa Press



## **The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life**

Parker J. Palmer  
Jossey-Bass

A young man stood in the doorway, his curly head cocked at a rakish angle, a big grin on his face. "I'm going to grad school so that one day I can have your job," he announced.

This moment from my own life helps me understand why Dale Salwak chose to write a teaching memoir addressed to a former student. A tragedy prompted the idea. A professor of English at Citrus College, Salwak was expecting a visit in his office from a 20-year-old student, whom he calls Kelly in the book. She failed to show up, and he soon learned that a van had smashed into her Volkswagen, killing her instantly. As Salwak thought about how he would have continued in the role of mentor if Kelly

had lived, he composed the series of midlife reflections that became *Teaching Life*.

Salwak imagines Kelly as a young faculty member following him into the profession. With wisdom and grace, he guides her with 16 chapters written in the form of letters. True to his title, he teaches life by weaving the day-to-day rhythms of scholarship and the classroom into reflections on personal and spiritual life outside the academic world.

Salwak thus combines one of the oldest literary devices, the epistolary form, with an emerging genre, the academic memoir. Like a wise apostle Paul counseling timorous Timothy, Salwak guides Kelly into the depths of a life lived in books and with young people and colleagues.

Though he does not compare himself to Paul, Salwak unapologetically uses an astonishing number of biblical and spiritual allusions. In the chapter titled “A Pastor’s Heart,” he takes the reader to the center of his philosophy:

Expect the best of yourself and your students, and that’s generally what you’ll receive. Teach as if your life (and theirs) depends upon it—because it does. Pour all of yourself into your work. Most days you will leave campus emotionally and mentally exhausted because teaching is a giving out—of yourself, of your knowledge and understanding, and of the truth.

He refers to the classroom as sacred space, the professor as a shepherd, the syllabus as a “covenant of trust.” He emphasizes the value of service and the need for a Sabbath. He shares personal faith stories and describes his course on the Bible as literature. His career in a secular institution does not seem to be at odds with his calling.

Salwak has amassed an amazing number of teaching quotations and weaves them together in unobtrusive ways, and his fierce desire for excellence ignites the same aspirations in the reader, whom he addresses in a spirit of inclusive, expansive love. Reading Salwak, one would think the culture wars never existed. Allan Bloom, Norman Cousins and Anna Quindlen all serve the author’s purpose.

For all the book’s strengths as advice literature, it does have some flaws. The biggest is that Kelly, the object of the book’s attention, does not come alive. Salwak ironically advises Kelly to focus on “the person you care about most” (friend, spouse, sibling—someone “to whom your soul is knit”) as though that person is present in

the classroom: “This imagined audience of one gives you a focus; it puts a human face on your purpose for being there in the first place—to share the joy of learning.”

Great advice, but does the author apply it to himself in writing as well as teaching? Nowhere in this book does the reader sense that Kelly comes close to being a person Salwak cares deeply about. His soul is not knit to hers. What did she long for? How does he know? In the introduction Salwak describes Kelly as “a metaphor for all my students.” But a person is not a metaphor, and surely not all of Salwak’s students aspire to become professors. If they did, Salwak would have to face the uncomfortable issue that confronts all academic mentors: Is it ethical to encourage a young person to go into debt to prepare for a career that may never resemble one’s own wonderful life as a tenured full professor? Salwak does not address the issue, but all young people who read the book need a good mentor on this subject also.

Whereas Salwak approaches his vocation with a pastor’s heart, Parker Palmer proclaims his with prophetic vision. In 2007 Jossey-Bass issued a tenth-anniversary edition of *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer’s academic memoir and a profound meditation on the teaching life. Palmer pioneered this field; he linked spirituality and education first with *To Know as We Are Known* and later with *Let Your Life Speak* and *A Hidden Wholeness*.

Both Salwak and Palmer recognize the importance of the inner life, and both books make a great contribution to the spirituality of education. Palmer’s many books have had a great influence on all levels of education and have now begun to penetrate other professions through the work of Palmer’s Center for Courage and Renewal.

In the tenth-anniversary edition of *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer uses literature, especially poetry, as a way to invite the soul’s presence. The poems he chooses, such as William Stafford’s “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,” inevitably point to mystery and paradox.

Though Palmer sees the darkness in the American educational system, a current of joy runs through all his books. He calls teachers to live “divided no more” and to instead “rejoin soul and role,” to create “circles of trust” in community and to find the courage to teach, including the courage to speak truth to the power in institutions when necessary.

Palmer’s own courage can be seen throughout his books. He tells as many failure stories as success stories. He manages to guide without giving any advice, and the

people whose stories he tells are just as multifaceted and complex as he is.

The young man who stood in my doorway to declare his desire to have a job like mine fulfilled that dream. He teaches at my alma mater, has just published his dissertation and is enjoying a Fulbright in Croatia. I'll be sending him my underlined copies of these two books along with this injunction: "Combine the pastor's heart and the prophet's vision and you will always have the courage to teach!"