

Teaching from the Heart

Suketu P. Bhavsar

Cal Poly Pomona

What parts of me do I need to bring to my teaching so that I can do the most good for my students? This question, deceptively simple, is fundamental for me as an educator. I propose that for the greatest positive impact on the academy, we must strive to be aware of and to present our wholeness in class and in our professional lives. Nothing could be more challenging to academic business-as-usual than consciously, smartly, and habitually cultivating and expressing the complexity of our inner identities as carefully and purposefully as we do our intellectual selves.

My aim in this essay is to stir the honors community to contribute a wide perspective of thoughts, ideas, research, and studies on the importance of wholeness in our professional lives as academics. Building on Sam Schuman's 2013 monograph *If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Education*, I challenge us to explore how the expression of our whole selves enhances or disrupts learning and whether being an authentic person in our professions allows greater intellectual creativity as well as balance in our lives.

I am convinced that it is time for a paradigm shift. The interplay of cognitive and affective processes in learning, decision-making, creativity, and productivity is well-documented, but academia has traditionally privileged cognition and continues to do so, almost to the exclusion of any other considerations. I believe that the time has come for the academy to value the expression of our inner emotional and spiritual identities just as it values the expression of our intellectual, logical, and critical selves. The inner journey is as meaningful in our syllabi,

in our research, and with our colleagues as the intellectual journey. Both journeys brought us to where we are.

J. Parker Palmer describes the value of exploring the heart in his book *The Courage to Teach* (Palmer, 1997). He declares, “We teach who we are” (pp. 1-2), and then he asks, “How can educational institutions support the teacher’s inner life, and should they be expected to do so?” (p. 6). According to Palmer, what we teach, how we teach, and why we teach are indeed important questions, but the most important question of all is “Who is the self that teaches?” (p. 7).

We human beings routinely think with our hearts. Our emotions, far more than our cognition, guide our thoughts and decisions. We decide with our hearts, and then our minds rationalize these decisions (Kahneman, 2011; Schwarz, 2000). Academics, though, are trained and socialized so thoroughly in cognition that we routinely fail to acknowledge emotional or spiritual aspects of our decisions, at least in our academic lives if not our personal lives as well. Because objectivity is so valued, we immediately find a reasoned argument to support our stance, often utterly ignoring the noncognitive parts of our selves. Explaining ourselves in noncognitive terms is risky because it may alienate us within the academic community, but not taking this risk is limiting. I do not mean to downplay the value of cognition and critical thinking but to suggest that richer intellectual activity is possible if we consciously and carefully allow our full selves and our students’ full selves to participate.

For the successful participation of our inner selves in the academic endeavor, we have to know our inner selves. Through developing self-awareness and the language to describe it, we can use the wisdom of our self-knowing to enhance the disciplinary knowledge and skills we traditionally impart to our students. The disciplines have elaborately codified language for

cognitive expression, but the expression of our inner selves is often an unfamiliar, unpracticed realm.

So, perhaps the time has come for us to allow ourselves—and for the academy to encourage us—to express our inner selves in professional interactions without fear, judgment, or repercussion. I am not suggesting acting on whims or laying bare our souls. I am not promoting sloppy thinking or substituting emotionality for careful thought. I am describing a rigorous, painstaking examination of the self and its expression within the academic setting, in harmony with our traditional scholarly selves. I am proposing that our inner spiritual self and our cerebral self are the yin and yang of our academic identity.

Considering Palmer’s question “Who is the self that teaches?” is the first step to reconciling our hearts and minds within our academic journey. To explore this question concretely and then come back to the paradigm shift I suggested, I will narrate three memories of teachers and teaching that have influenced and stayed with me.

The first story is from childhood. In the eighth grade, I learned a couplet attributed to the fifteenth-century Indian mystic, Kabîr. (I can reproduce this couplet only by memory but recommend to interested readers the “Songs of Kabîr” as translated by Rabindranath Tagore in 1915.) As a boy, I pondered the poet’s meaning and asked myself if I felt as Kabîr did about any of my teachers. I continue to think about it in more adult ways, and I wonder what would make any teacher so revered by a student.

**गुरु गोविन्द दोऊ खड़े, काके लागू पाय।
बलिहारी गुरु आपकी, गोविन्द दियो बताय।।**

Guru Govind dou khade, kake lagu paay;
Balihari Guru aapki, Govind diyo batay.

Translation: My Guru (teacher and mentor) and the Lord are here standing before me, whom should I respectfully greet (literally, whose feet should I touch) first? I bestow my affection to you, my teacher—you are the one who showed me the Lord.

It is quite shocking, really, that Kabîr chooses to offer devotion to his teacher before honoring his God. Today, we may be especially amazed at a student offering such emotional devotion to a teacher, which is not what anyone expects in our culture or at this time. But Kabîr's decision and devotion transcend culture and time. Kabîr's quest is to find the Lord, but without his teacher would he even recognize the Lord upon meeting Him? More secularly, Kabîr articulates the reverence he has for the teacher who showed the way, who guided him on the path that made possible the fulfillment of his yearning, attaining the end he ached to achieve.

Kabîr's words speak to the essence of what a teacher offers, the core of what we aspire to achieve as teachers. As a child considering this poem, I was amazed to think of what a teacher could offer me. As a teacher considering this poem, I am amazed to think of what a teacher can offer a student. I think back to teachers and mentors who helped me open my heart and mind to the world, who literally unlocked the cosmos for me. In Kabîr's Guru and in these teachers, I envision the teacher I would ideally like to be to all my students.

My second story is of one such teacher and mentor. As a first-year graduate student at Princeton University, I took my first class in astrophysics from Professor Martin Schwarzschild. He was among the most respected world experts in stellar astrophysics. The first day of class involved a discussion of hydrostatic equilibrium in stars. I had never studied any astrophysics, not having had that option at my Indian university. Further intimidating to me, and to another student from a small U.S. university, was the nonchalance of classmates who had been undergraduates at MIT and Caltech, who seemed to feel that this was all familiar old stuff.

Professor Schwarzschild soon realized that two of us, despite being graduate students, were lost. Rather than ignoring our plight, Professor Schwarzschild compassionately recognized

where our knowledge began. The next time he walked into class, he started his lecture apologetically in his jovial, German-accented, slightly high-pitched voice: “In my excitement we have jumped ahead too much and too fast. Let us stop and start at the beginning. As we know, the sun is a star.” Professor Schwarzschild’s masterful instruction made the difficult topic come alive. We still finished the entire syllabus, and by the end of the semester I had fallen in love with stellar astrophysics. Although I eventually pursued cosmology, a different branch of astrophysics, stellar structure and the evolution of stars are my favorite topics to teach and the ones I teach best.

The next year I worked with Professor Schwarzschild on a research project that involved the perplexing solar neutrino problem, namely that our sun’s core, where nuclear fusion should be occurring, was not behaving as theory predicted. Professor Schwarzschild mentored me throughout, treating me to his undivided attention at our weekly meetings. He taught me to communicate with clarity and concision, providing valuable ideas that led to a paper in a leading journal. We proposed an intriguing solution to the neutrino problem. Professor Schwarzschild, in an act of unselfish generosity, asked that he not be named on the paper. His reason: “People will otherwise attribute and remember this paper as mine, not yours, since right now they recognize my name and know me better.”

Professor Schwarzschild’s kindness was also manifest during this second year when, unrelated to the project, he perceived my feelings of inadequacy and the painful doubts I experienced in Princeton’s demanding academic setting. He saw my homesickness for my family back in India. Most importantly, he saw that I was unhappily trying to fit myself into what I imagined were the nonstop expectations of the high-powered environment. As he provided guidance and encouragement, he admired and validated my instinctive desire for a

more balanced approach to the scholarly life. It is not an exaggeration to say that his compassionate insight and nonjudgmental understanding saved my career in astrophysics.

Martin Schwarzschild brought his whole being to his academic community. His warm laughter rang through the department several times a day, relaxing us all and making the day seem bright and promising. The joy that he communicated did not detract one iota from his scientific achievements or standing. His sensitivity, humility, and humanity remain a model for me as I try to extend forward his gift of compassion.

How do we learn this kind of compassion for our students? How are our hearts opened to our students? Can compassion be learned? I feel that it must be learned. As an assistant professor, just starting my career and learning the art of teaching through trial and error, I made many mistakes. Not the least of the mistakes was my attitude toward the exactness of mathematics and the truth of science. I was a popular teacher, students liked me, and I considered myself a kind person, but I was rigid about the rightness of things and impatient when it seemed to me that students were not thinking critically and logically. My kindness at that time was based on personality rather than compassion.

My third story is about learning compassion as a teacher. My then four-year-old daughter gave an answer to a math question that I asked her one day: "What is half of 12?" We were talking of "half birthdays," and with parental aspiration I wondered if she could divide by two. After about a minute of serious inward reflection, her face lit up and she answered clearly: "TWE!" I had to admit to myself, and to her, that she was exactly right, although it was an answer I had never contemplated in all my years of math.

I remember distinctly how I, the expert assistant professor of astrophysics, felt the next day as I began teaching the two hundred students in my introductory astronomy class. I was

filled with a sense of humility, even feeling a bit sheepish that I was about to “impart knowledge.” Suddenly, unexpectedly, my heart went out to my students, and I experienced an openness to the new things I might learn from them. I had a sobering awareness that I had probably not previously been willing to consider many of the ideas and solutions my students would imagine. The compassion I had felt naturally toward my daughter in acknowledging and accepting her answer the day before manifested itself in this new setting.

Paradigm shifts take a long time. But in honors we can make a beginning by considering how we may bring our hearts’ journeys to our teaching and mentoring. When we plan our semesters, make our syllabi, craft our classes, and mentor our students, we can ask: How can I be a teacher who will be remembered years from now, maybe even with some reverence, when my students achieve what they have strived for? Will I recognize frailty and inexperience, opening my mind to my students’ different or “incorrect” views and be gentle toward their errors? How can I act so that I will be recalled for my kindness and compassion when the content of my classes has long been forgotten? Or...even better...How can I approach my students so that the content itself will take on new and deeper meaning because I offered it from my whole self? I am sure there are readers of this essay who already practice in this way. Please tell us your stories.

I am aware that it may take decades for the academy to accept the expression of the wholeness of ourselves and to validate the inner journey as a partner to intellectual rigor. Even rooted scientific facts took time to become established: the faulty geocentric model of the cosmos persisted for 110 years after Copernicus suggested the heliocentric model. Such is the nature of paradigm shifts, even for facts that can be established by physical verification, and in this essay I propose an idea that is beyond physical tests for validity. I challenge honors to be a

testing ground, to see if the impact of teaching from our whole selves can make a positive difference. I challenge our profession's organization to engage in careful consideration of this change in honors practice, and I challenge readers to contribute thoughts, examples, experiences, successes, and failures to debate why such a paradigm shift is what we need or perhaps to argue instead that it is incompatible with our mission and the purpose of the academy.

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The author may be contacted at spbhavsar@cpp.edu.

Appendix A

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Appendix B

A very short list of possible topics to consider:

- 1) Creating a compassionate classroom where ALL students feel welcome and supported.
- 2) Offering kindness and reassurance.
- 3) Creating a sense of belonging.
- 4) Sharing ideas as well skills in the classroom. As more students come from diverse backgrounds and many are the first in their families to attend university, they may come with more vocational skills than academic skills. For example, nontraditional older students may bring a wealth of experience, interpersonal skills and management skills.
- 5) Being sensitive to cultural issues, nonjudgmental, approachable, and building relationships.
- 6) Teachers and students being self-reflective of their actions and building these skills as a daily commitment.
- 7) A pedagogical commitment that allows educators to criticize institutional and classroom practices that ideologically underserve students.
- 8) Universal Design and accessibility as compassionate practices.

Also, from Kabir

IT is the mercy of my true Guru that has led me to know the unknown;
I have learned from Him how to walk without feet, to see without eyes, to hear without ears, to
drink without mouth, to fly without wings.

BEFORE the Unconditioned, the Conditioned dances: "Thou and I are one!" this trumpet
proclaims.

The Guru comes and bows down before the disciple: This is the greatest of wonders.