

Divided No More

A Movement Approach to Educational Reform

by Parker J. Palmer

I travel the country talking with faculty about the reform of teaching and learning, I meet many people who care about the subject and who have Compelling visions for change. But after we have talked a while, our conversations take an almost inevitable turn. “These are wonderful ideas,” someone will say, “but every last one of them will be defeated by the conditions of academic life.”

That claim is usually followed by a litany of impediments to institutional reform: Teaching has low status in the academy, tenure decisions favor those who publish, scarce dollars will always go to research (or to administration, or to bricks and mortar), etc. No matter how hopeful our previous conversation has been, these reminders of institutional gridlock create a mood of resignation, even despair and the game feels lost before play has begun.

The constancy of this experience has forced me to think more carefully about how change really happens. I have found myself revisiting an old but helpful distinction between; an *organizational* approach and a *movement* approach to change. Both organizations and movements are valuable, worthy of leadership, and channels for change and a healthy society will encourage symbiosis between the two (indeed, reform-minded administrators often welcome movement energies). But when an – organizational mentality is imposed on a problem that requires movement sensibilities, the result is often despair. I believe that some of us are making precisely that mistake when it comes to the reform of teaching and learning.

The organizational approach to change is premised on the notion that bureaucracies—their rules, roles, and relationships define the limits of social reality within which change must happen. Organizations are essentially arrangements of power, so this approach to change asks: “How can the power contained within the boxes of this organization be rearranged or redirected to achieve the desired goal?” That is a good question except when it assumes that bureaucracies are the only game in town.

This approach pits entrenched patterns of corporate power against fragile images of change harbored by a minority of individuals, and the match is inherently unfair. Constrained by this model, people with a vision for change may devote themselves to persuading power-holders to see things their way, which drains energy away from the vision and breeds resentment among the visionaries when “permission” is not granted. When organizations seem less interested in change than in preservation (which is, after

all, their job), would-be reformers are likely to give up if the organizational approach is the only one they know.

But our obsession with the organizational model may suggest something more sinister than mere ignorance of another way. We sometimes get perverse satisfaction from insisting that organizations offer the only path to change. Then, when the path is blocked, we can indulge the luxury of resentment rather than seek an alternative avenue of reform and we can blame it all on external forces rather than take responsibility upon ourselves.

There is a part of human nature that would rather remain hopeless than take the risk of new life. It is not uncommon for academics to be driven by this “death wish,” even (and perhaps especially) the most idealistic among us. The most vigorous resistance to the movement model may come from reformers who have been defeated on one front and are too weary to open another. Sometimes it is easier to live with the comfort of despair than with the challenge of knowing that change can happen despite the inertia of organizations.

The Movement Way

But there is another avenue toward change: The way of the movement. I began to understand movements when I saw the simple fact that nothing would ever have changed if reformers had allowed themselves to be done in by organizational resistance. Many of us experience such resistance as checkmate to our hopes for change. But for a movement, resistance is merely the place where things begin. The movement mentality, far from being defeated by organizational resistance, takes energy from opposition. Opposition validates the audacious idea that change must come.

The black liberation movement and the women’s movement would have died aborning if racist and sexist organizations had been allowed to define the rules of engagement. But for some blacks, and for some women, that resistance affirmed and energized the struggle. In both movements, advocates of change found sources of countervailing power outside of organizational structures, and they nurtured that power in ways that eventually gave them leverage on organizations.

The genius of movements is paradoxical: They abandon the logic of organizations in order to gather the power necessary to rewrite the logic of organizations. Both the black movement and the women’s movement grew outside of organizational boundaries—but both returned to change the lay, and the law, of the land. I believe that the reform of teaching and learning will happen only if we who care about it learn to live this paradox.

“What is the logic of a movement? How does a movement unfold and progress? I see four definable stages in the movements I have studied—stages that do not unfold as neatly as this list suggests, but often overlap and circle back on each other:

- Isolated individuals decide to stop leading “divided lives.”
- These people discover each other and form groups for mutual support.
- Empowered by community, they learn to translate “private problems” into public issues.
- Alternative rewards emerge to sustain the movement’s vision, which may force the conventional reward system to change.

I want to explore these stages here, but not simply in remembrance of things past. By understanding the stages of a movement, some of us may see more clearly that we are engaged in a movement today, that we hold real power in our hands a form of power that has driven real change in recent times. Knowing our power, perhaps we will have less need or desire to succumb to the sweet despair of believing that organizational gridlock must have the last word.

Choosing Integrity

The first stage in a movement can be described with some precision, I think. It happens when isolated individuals make an inner choice to stop leading “divided lives.” Most of us know from experience what a divided life is. Inwardly we feel one sort of imperative for our lives, but outwardly we respond to quite another. This is the human condition, of course; our inner and outer worlds will never be in perfect harmony. But there are extremes of dividedness that become intolerable, and when the tension snaps inside of this person, then that person, and then another, a movement may be underway.

The decision to stop leading a divided life, made by enough people over a period of time, may eventually have political impact. But at the outset, it is a deeply personal decision, taken for the sake of personal integrity and wholeness. I call it the “Rosa Parks decision” in honor of the woman who decided, one hot Alabama day in 1955, that she finally would sit at the front of the bus.

Rosa Parks’ decision was neither random nor taken in isolation. She served as secretary for the local NAACP, had studied social change at the Highlander Folk School, and was aware of others’ hopes to organize a bus boycott. But her motive that day in Montgomery was not to spark the modern civil rights movement. Years later, she explained her decision with a simple but powerful image of personal wholeness: “I sat down because my feet were tired.”

I suspect we can say even more: Rosa Parks sat at the front of the bus because her soul was tired of the vast, demoralizing gap between knowing herself as fully human and collaborating with a system that denied her humanity. The decision to stop leading a divided life is less a strategy for altering other people's values than an uprising of the elemental need for one's own values to come to the fore. The power of a movement lies less in attacking some enemy's untruth than in naming and claiming a truth of one's own.

There is immense energy for change in such inward decisions as they leap from one person to another and outward to the society. With these decisions, individuals may set in motion a process that creates change from the inside out. There is an irony here: We often think of movements as "confrontational," as hammering away at social structures until the sinners inside repent and we contrast them (often invidiously) with the "slow, steady, faithful" process of working for change from within the organization. In truth, people who take an organizational approach to problems often become obsessed with their unyielding "enemies," while people who adopt a movement approach must begin by changing themselves.

I meet teachers around the country who are choosing integrity in ways reminiscent of Rosa Parks. These faculty have realized that even if teaching is a back-of-the-bus thing for their institutions, it is a front-of-the-bus thing for them. They have realized that a passion for teaching was what animated their decision to enter the academy, and they do not want to lose the primal energy of their professional lives. They have realized that they care deeply about the lives of their students, and they do not want to abandon the young. They have realized that teaching is an enterprise in which they have a heavy investment of personal identity and meaning and they have decided to reinvest their lives, even if they do not receive dividends from their colleges or from their colleagues.

For these teachers, the decision is really quite simple: Caring about teaching and about students brings them health as persons, and to collaborate in a denial of that fact is to collaborate in a diminishment of their own lives. They refuse any longer to act outwardly in contradiction to something they know inwardly to be true that teaching, and teaching well, is a source of identity for them. They understand that this refusal may evoke the wrath of the gods of the professions, who are often threatened when we reach for personal wholeness. But still, they persist.

What drives such a decision, with all its risks? The difference between a person who stays at the back of the bus and "sits on it" and one who finally decides to sit up front is probably lost in the mystery of human courage. But courage is stimulated by the simple insight that my oppression is not simply the result of mindless external forces; it comes also from the fact that I collaborate with these forces, giving assent to the very

thing that is crushing my spirit. With this realization comes anger, and in anger is the energy that drives some people to say: “Enough. My feet are tired. Here I sit.”

These people have seized the personal insight from which all movements begin: No punishment can possibly be more severe than the punishment that comes from conspiring in the denial of one’s own integrity.

Corporate Support

But the personal decision to stop leading a divided life is a frail reed. All around us, dividedness is presented as the sensible, even responsible, way to live. So the second stage in a movement happens when people who have been making these decisions start to discover each other and enter into relations of mutual encouragement and support. These groups, which are characteristic of every movement I know about, perform the crucial function of helping the Rosa Parks of the world know that even though they are out of step, they are not crazy. Together we learn that behaving normally is sometimes nuts but seeking integrity is always sane.

Often, when I offer a workshop on the reform of teaching and learning, a professor will come to me privately and say: “I agree with you about these things but I am the only one on this campus who feels that way.” Later in the day, two or three more faculty will take me aside and say the same thing. By evening I have spoken to eight or ten people who are committed to good teaching but are quite sure they are alone in these convictions on their campus.

While stage one is strong on many campuses, stage two is less well developed. Faculty who have decided to live “divided no more” are often unaware of each other’s existence so weak are the communal structures of the academy, and so diffident are intellectuals about sharing such “private” matters. It is difficult for faculty to seek each other out for mutual support. But it is clear from all great movements that mutual support is vital if the inner decision is to be sustained and if the movement is to take its next crucial steps toward gathering power.

Where support groups do exist, they assume a simple form and function. Six or eight faculty from a variety of departments agree to meet on a regular but manageable schedule (say, once every two weeks) simply to talk about teaching. (The mix of departments is important because of the political vulnerability faculty often feel within their own guild halls.) They talk about what they teach, how they teach, what works and what doesn’t, and most important of all the joys and pains of being a teacher. The conversations are informal, confidential, and, above all, candid. When you ask these people how they manage to add one more meeting to their crowded schedules, the answer often is: “This kind of meeting is not a burden, but a relief. It actually seems to free up my time.”

Some of these groups have evolved ground rules for conversation, and on the evidence of other movements such rules are vital if these groups are to flourish. **Rules may be especially vital in the academy, where real conversation is often thwarted by a culture that invites posturing, intimidation, and keeping score.** Ground rules cannot create new attitudes, but they can encourage new behavior.

For example, the ground rules may say that each person gets an opportunity to speak but when the others respond, they may respond only with questions that will help the speaker clarify his or her inner truth. They may not criticize, give advice, offer pity, or say “tsk, tsk” when it turns out one has not read the latest book. The questions-only rule encourages real listening by banning one-upping, amateur psychoanalysis, quick “fixes,” and all the other ways we have of walling ourselves off from each other. Of course, people are always free to ask for help with the problems they face. But problem-solving is not the primary purpose of these gatherings. Their purpose is to wrap the individual’s inner decision in a resolve that can only come from being heard by a supportive community.

At the moment, I suspect, more women than men are coming together on campus in support groups of this sort. The reason, I think, is simple: Women who care about teaching are involved in two movements at once—one in support of teaching, another in support of women in the academy so they have double need of communal sustenance. Perhaps they have heard and heeded the admonition of Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Going Public

The third stage of a movement has already been implied. As support groups develop, individuals learn to translate their private concerns into public issues, and they grow in their ability to give voice to these issues in public and compelling ways. To put it more precisely, support groups help people discover that their problems are not “private” at all but have been occasioned by public conditions and therefore require public remedies.

This has been the story of the women’s movement (and of the black liberation movement as well). For a long time, women were “kept in their place” partly by a psychology that relegated the pain women felt to the private realm—grist for the therapeutic mill. But when women came together and began discovering the prevalence of their pain, they also began discerning its public roots. Then they moved from Freud to feminism.

The translation of private pain into public issues that occurs in support groups goes far beyond the analysis of issues; it also empowers people to take those issues into

public places. It was in small groups (notably, in churches) that blacks were empowered to take their protest to the larger community in songs and sermons and speeches, in pickets and in marches, in open letters and essays and books. Group support encourages people to risk the public exposure of insights that had earlier seemed far too fragile for that rough-and-tumble realm.

I am using the word “public” here in a way that is more classical than contemporary. The public realm I have in mind is not the realm of politics, which would return us to the manipulation of organizational power. Instead, to “go public” is to enter one’s convictions into the mix of communal discourse. It is to project one’s ideas so that others can hear them, respond to them, and be influenced by them and so that one’s ideas can be tested and refined in the public crucible. The public, understood as a vehicle of discourse, is pre-political. It is that primitive process of communal conversation, conflict, and consensus on which the health of institutionalized power depends.

Many would argue, of course, that our public process is itself in poor health and cannot be relied upon for remedies. These critics claim that there is no longer a public forum for a movement to employ. But historically, it is precisely the energy of movements that has renewed the public realm; movements have the capacity to create the very public they depend on. However moribund the public may be, it is reinvigorated when people learn how to articulate their concerns in ways that allow indeed, compel a wider public to listen and respond.

Today, educational reform is becoming a focus of public discourse, and will become an even sharper focus if the movement grows. Many books have been written on the subject, and some for better or for worse have become best-sellers. Speakers roam the land planting seeds of change in workshops and convocations. New associations advance the cause of change in national and regional gatherings (and faculty who feel isolated on their own campuses seek them out as desert nomads seek oases). Well-established national associations have taken reform as an agenda.

Even more remarkable, the movement for educational reform has been joined by publics far beyond the walls of the academy. Parents, employers, legislators, and columnists are calling for more attention to teaching and learning, and their calls are insistent. Recently, a coalition of major accounting firms used the language of collaborative learning to press the agency that accredits business schools toward the reform of business education. At moments like that, one knows that “going public” can make a difference.

Because this activity does not always have direct political impact, some skeptics may call it “mere words.” But this criticism comes from an organizational mentality. By giving public voice to alternative values we can create something more fundamental than political change. We can create cultural change. When we secure a place in public

discourse for ideas and images like “collaborative learning,” we are following those reformers who minted phrases like “affirmative action” and made them the coin of the realm. **When the language of change becomes available in the common culture, people are better able to name their yearnings for change, to explore them with others, to claim membership in a great movement and to overcome the disabling effects of feeling isolated and half-mad.**

Alternative Rewards

As a movement passes through the first three stages, it develops ways of rewarding people for sustaining the movement itself. In part, these rewards are simply integral to the nature of each stage; they are the rewards that come from living one’s values, from belonging to a community, from finding a public voice. But in stage four, a more systematic pattern of alternative rewards emerges, and with it comes the capacity to challenge the dominance of existing organizations.

The power of organizations depends on their ability to reward people who abide by their norms even the people who suffer from those norms. A racist society depends on a majority who are rewarded for keeping the minority “in its place” and on a minority willing to stay there. But as members of either group discover rewards for alternative behavior, it becomes more difficult for racism to reign. An educational system that ignores human need in favor of a narrow version of professionalism depends on a reward system that keeps both faculty and students in their place. But as soon as rewards for alternative behavior emerge for either group, it becomes more difficult for reform to be denied its day.

What are the alternative rewards offered by a growing movement? As a movement grows, the meaning one does not find in conventional work is found in the meaning of the movement. As a movement grows, the affirmation one does not receive from organizational colleagues is received from movement friends. As a movement grows, careers that no longer satisfy may be revisioned in forms and images that the movement has inspired. As a movement grows, the paid work one cannot find in conventional organizations may be found in the movement itself.

Ultimately, as a movement grows, conventional organizations are more and more likely to create spaces where movement-style work can be done. Forty years ago, anyone working openly for “equal opportunity” might have had a hard time getting paid work of any sort. Today, many organizations are required to pay someone to serve as their Equal Employment Opportunity officer. Similarly, black and feminist scholars whose insights have long been unwelcome in the academy are not only employable today, but are often recruited with vigor.

In stage one, people who decide to live “divided no more” find the courage to face punishment by realizing that there is no punishment worse than conspiring in a denial of one’s own integrity. That axiom, inverted, shows how alternative rewards can create cracks in the conventional reward system and then grow in the cracks: People start realizing there is no reward greater than living in a way that honors one’s own integrity. Taken together, the two axioms trace a powerful vector of a movement’s growth from rejecting conventional punishments to embracing alternative rewards.

These alternative rewards may seem frail and vulnerable when compared to the raises and promotions organizations are able to bestow upon their loyalists. So they are. Integrity, as the cynics say, does not put bread on the table. But people who are drawn into a movement generally find that stockpiling bread is not the main issue for them. They have the bread they need and, given that, they learn the wisdom of another saying: “People do not live on bread alone.” We live, ultimately, on our integrity.

As we explore this fourth stage, where movements return to intersect with organizations, it is important to recall that a healthy society is one in which organizations and movements are related symbolically as the case of black and feminist scholars will show. Without movements, such scholars would not be bringing new life to organizations; without organizations, such scholars would not have found ways to sustain careers.

But now that black and feminist scholars have found an academic niche, the need for the movement is not gone. Organizations often employ critics in order to contain them. By placing these scholars in air-tight departments, the academy may yet be able to keep them from breathing new life into the places where education is oxygen-starved. Indeed, the academic culture often inhibits black and feminist scholars themselves from teaching in ways that honor their own insights. The movement has succeeded, but the movement is still needed.

Of course, the educational reform movement is not fulfilled when the academy grants a toehold to nontraditional scholars, any more than the black liberation movement is fulfilled by a society that “allows” blacks to make a life on its margins. The movement will persist until the obvious is acknowledged: Teaching has as much right to full status in the academy as any other academic function research, athletics, administration, lobbying, fund-raising and it may have even more right than some! Teaching simply belongs in the academy, and there is no need to defend that claim.

The defense, if any, must come from those who have promoted a concept of higher education so bizarre that it can ignore the question of how and why we teach and learn. We are at a moment in the history of education when the emptiness of that concept is clear a moment when real progress on reform is possible. There is much to be done that I have not named here, from revisioning teaching as a legitimate form of scholarship (building on the superb work of the Carnegie Foundation) to developing

more sophisticated strategies for change. But in the midst of those complexities, we must remember that all great movements start simply: A few people feel the pain of the divided life and resolve to live it no more. In that resolve is the power to live our moment to its full potential.

Postscript

Though the stages I have sketched here have historical warrant, they obviously comprise an “ideal type,” a schematic version of how movements happen that is smoother and more hopeful in the writing than in the living. Movements offer no guarantees of success. But neither do organizations, nor life itself. What movements do offer is a creative channel for energies that might otherwise be extinguished. They offer us an alternative to the despairing cynicism that is the constant snare of contemporary professional life.

Different people will find themselves at different gages of a movement. Some will want to make a decision against dividedness, some will need to join with others for support, some will have to learn how to “go public,” and some will try to find alternative rewards. Every stage has a contribution to make not only to the cause, but to the person.

At every stage of a movement there is both power to help change happen and encouragement for disheartened souls. Wherever we are on this journey, a step taken to renew our spirits may turn out to be a step toward educational renewal—once we understand the movement way.

About the Author: Parker J. Palmer, founder and Senior Partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a world-renowned writer, speaker and activist. He has reached millions worldwide through his nine books, including the bestselling *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Courage to Teach*, *A Hidden Wholeness*, and *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Parker holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, along with eleven honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press. In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. In 2011, he was named an Utne Reader Visionary, one of “25 people who are changing your world.”)

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