

Understanding the Wakonse Movement

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Parker Palmer's The Courage to Teach is a "must" read for anyone who identifies with teaching. It speaks in important ways to those who are concerned with enhancing teaching at their institution.

In the book Palmer offers an insightful sketch of the four stages of a grassroots movement. The first stage is characterized by a small number of people making inward decisions to live "divided no more". They find they are uncomfortable not being in synch with who they are. They know they want a change. In a second stage, they discover others who feel the same way. Then, as the numbers increase, they go public with their convictions. In a final stage, they commit to finding a system of alternative rewards to sustain their vision of the movement.

The brief history of Wakonse follows closely these four stages. It began as a grassroots movement in 1989. Faculty and colleges across the country may well see themselves in some stage within the movement. I borrow freely from Palmer in this brief sketch of where we have been and where we are going. I hope it helps clarify the subtle impact the conferences seem to have on many of the participants.

In the late 1980's, a number of us, all members of the academy but in different academic disciplines, came to realize we shared similar reservations about our work. We had been many decades in the profession but it didn't seem to be as much fun as it once was. Perhaps we simply were older, or perhaps the academy had simply changed somewhat in thirty years. We were clear about our love for teaching and learning, but that was not what was being talked about in our departments or the university

in general. Something clearly was not right. We loved our jobs but we were dismayed by the lack of attention to teaching. We had found one another as colleagues at a Danforth inspired leadership conference for college aged students on Lake Michigan. There, enthusiasm and idealism and our role in presenting ideas and ideals to eager and engaging students may have pushed us to commit to rethink what we were doing in our classes. The love of teaching and learning as it was flourishing in a camp setting made some of us yearn to have it that way back on campus. Why not? We were practicing our craft and loving it. We were being appreciated for it as well - it was academic life as we imagined it ought to be. It was what we aspired to do when we entered the profession. Life was good. Ideas flowed as did our spirits. Could we not create a community this supportive back home?

Stage 1 - Divided No More

In reading Parker Palmer's book, The Courage to Teach, one can recognize that some of us were making an inward decision to live "divided no more." We were embarking on finding a center for ourselves outside of our institutions - our departments, our colleges, our universities - as we began to find ways to support one another with our dreams for ways to bring together those who cared about teaching as the most important part of their professional lives.

Stage 2 - Communities of Congruence

A bit of support from the Kellogg Foundation pushed us ahead and we began what has become the annual Wakonse Conference on College Teaching held every May at the same camp setting where the idea first

took root. Many know that place as the Miniwanca Conference Center, a rustic but beautiful site on Lake Michigan. While our conferences attract a hundred colleagues every year, an equally impressive outcome has been the creation of regional Wakonse Conferences - East, West, North and South. We know others are in the making. Many campuses now have an impressive array of monthly campus activities that give meaning to the idea of a community of scholars committed to teaching.

Stage 3 - Going Public

We can recall all too well the early impressions of what was happening with the movement. Some felt it was a subversive group. Some characterized it as a remedial school for those needing help with teaching. Some saw it as a reactive group for those not comfortable with the increased attention being given to grants and research on campuses. A few saw it as a movement to increase the visibility and importance of teaching on the college campus. A few saw it as a place where faculty would become connected with others who shared their enthusiasm for teaching.

Wakonse, a Lakota Indian word meaning "to teach, to inspire" is a confusing name for those on the outside. In fact, as we have gone public, we have those who suggest we change it. It connotes accurately what we are about: we want to inspire others through teaching. We are committed to staying the course with the name and our mission.

Stage 4 - Finding a System of Alternative Rewards to Sustain the Movement's Vision

Wakonse Fellows on the University of Missouri's campus have become a collective group that rally around any activity that supports teaching. We help create leave time for faculty to work on ways to enhance their teaching. We hold celebrations for

Fellows who earn promotions, teaching awards or tenure. We provide a forum for writing about teaching. We hold renewal retreats at mid-semester. We call attention to any event that makes mention of the importance of teaching and we are careful not to put down any competing activity like research. We are a movement to increase visibility for teaching but not at the expense of other activities. As Palmer has put it so clearly, we simply want to keep pressure on the system to change the standard reward system. Our vision is not one that clashes with any institutional vision, but it is one that wants to keep teaching in the forefront where it belongs.

"The excitement is in the journey, not in the arrival" as a Chinese proverb suggests, and we are at the beginning of a truly exciting journey. The Michigan conference for many becomes a return to childhood associations with camp, campfires, storytelling, personal renewal, new ideas and new friends: a memorable and idealized time for most. One's love of music, books, ritual and stories is heightened. The conference has all the elements of a good story: serious plot, interesting characters, good times, suspense, an intriguing beginning to an experience that unfolds in mysterious ways and gives many a new look at what they do for a living. Wakonse encourages one to consider living "divided no more" in support of teaching. It also provides inspiration for personal and professional renewal of a commitment to teaching.

*Palmer, Parker (1998). The Courage to Teach. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

