



Nat Damon:

Welcome to season two of Reach. Teach. Talk. It has been almost a year and a half since our final episode of season one and a lot has happened in the world since then. We ended the season about three months into the pandemic. We are still in the throes of this pandemic, and in education and learning, we're only beginning to see and be able to forecast the impact of this pandemic on students, on teachers, on parents. We have certainly lived during the remote period of time with school being home and home being school, the environment of the school has become porous. We are now, in many cases, witnessing our students back in school, yet masked up, in most cases, and keeping socially distant. But this is the now normal.

Nat Damon:

When we hear teachers who are looking for restoration, when we're hearing parents who are nervous about their students, about their kids, about what they're bringing home in terms of not just related to the pandemic, but isolation, the idea of having been physically separated from peers, from teachers, from other mentors for so long. Nobody has been able to grow alone. Everybody has had to rely on others in ways that have been unprecedented. That reliance on others is what we call relational trust.

Nat Damon:

Parker Palmer has written 10 books and he is... Just any teacher here in the audience, you know his name. You've read his works. You've listened to his podcasts. My father gave me the courage to teach back in 1997 when I started out teaching. This book has been my benchmark as a teacher and a reminder of why I do what I do and what it is about teaching when you put the content aside and you really focus on the relationships. So without much further ado, Parker Palmer, welcome to Reach. Teach. Talk. We are thrilled to have you here today.

Parker Palmer:

Well, thank you Nat. As a big admirer of your work, I'm delighted to be here with you. Thank you.

Nat Damon:

Thank you. I'd love to get started actually and just ask for when you talk about relational trust, how would you define relational trust and also what would you... Particularly in the context of being a teacher?

Parker Palmer:

Well, in your intro, Nat, you said something important. You said relational trust is a very nuanced phenomenon and we want to explore its nuances. So that is to say, it's not easy to nail down. It's not easy to create a one size fits all formula for how to get there. I think we come into relational trust in a

variety of different ways. I'm struck by the fact that when you and I started talking 15 minutes before we began recording, we established some relational trust by sharing personal notes, family stories, asking each other how it's been going.

Parker Palmer:

That's an important entree into any kind of relationship that might move toward relational trust, which is something I'm feeling right now as we have the opportunity for an open and vulnerable conversation. So I think, for me, relational trust has a kind of operational definition, which is you know you've established relational trust when two or more people are willing to invest personally in the force field that's being created between them. To invest personally, rather than standing back behind a wall, being masked, trying to play their cards close to their vest, they're willing to risk something by investing in a relationship that is characterized by trust.

Parker Palmer:

Now, that doesn't mean that I'm going to share my bank account with you or my credit card number or my social security number. What it means is that I have somehow recognized that what goes on, what's happening between us has some importance, however small in the grand scheme of things, and you seem willing to invest in it, to make yourself vulnerable to it so I want to reciprocate. That ups the odds that something good is going to happen, that there will be some fruits of this particular moment of shared labor.

Parker Palmer:

Nat, I could go on and on broader scopes, narrower scope, but I've always felt that there are sort of two sources of creativity in life. One is what goes on within us and the other is what goes on between us. So relational trust is doing the inner work, I think, necessary to come to those in between us spaces and make the very best of them.

Nat Damon:

Is part of what you're referring to, the idea of the undivided self, which you speak about often?

Parker Palmer:

Yeah. I think, as you know, I have a kind of a longish discourse on the divided life and how it is that having been born whole, as each of us is whole integral persons, with no wall of separation between our inner and outer lives, we start learning fairly early in life that it's sometimes not safe, maybe often not safe to let what's going on within us out into the space between us, because we're going to get punished or we're going to get dissed or we're going to get mocked or ridiculed or shunned if we do.

Parker Palmer:

Sadly, there's a lot, I think, in our educational system that perpetuates that building of a wall between our inner and outer reality. Well, if I'm divided from myself, there's no way I can't be divided from other people. If I'm sitting here right now in this conversation because the examples, the best examples are realtime examples, right? So if I'm sitting here right now in this conversation worried about leaking something that you're going to exploit and run with, I'm not going to bring that wall down. My life becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, because the more walled off I am, the more fearful I become, and the more fearful I become, the higher and wider and thicker I need to build that wall.

Parker Palmer:

So it's a kind of mad spiral down into a very dark rabbit hole where we end up with kind of nature, red in tooth and claw, social Darwinism everywhere we look, rather than the kind of trust that we need to create in order to build good stuff in any sphere of life. I think it's important to name that it's not just education. I think in every human relationship, we are asking a fundamental question about whoever it is we're relating to. That is, is what I see on the outside of this person more or less congruent with what's on the inside? Does this person seem to be showing up as him or herself with reasonable degree of candor and transparency?

Parker Palmer:

When the answer to that question is yes, then everything sings. That's, again, this sense I can invest myself in a relationship where the other person is not hiding behind a wall or wearing a mask. When the answer is no, I can't trust that what I see is what I get. Everything falls apart. Everything goes to hell in a hand basket. That's what often happens in personal relationships. That's what happens in business relationships. That's what happens in politics. I mean, it's happening on this very day as we speak, a new batch of headlines is being written about a breakdown of relational trust between citizens and leaders and between citizens themselves. So it's crucial that we break through on this problem in every way we possibly can.

Nat Damon:

What can teachers do to build relational trust? I'm thinking about, again, in this pandemic context, right, where also teachers are.... Sometimes they've got a full classroom. Most often, they don't. A lot of students are out right now and coming back and forth. So you don't have the reliance on a full class everyday to be able to build that trust, that relational trust. Yet, despite that, I'm wondering how as a teacher is relational trust truly built and strengthened? Because you're touching on the idea of vulnerability. You're touching on the idea of your authentic self being your external self, your internal, your external, your undivided self therefore. Is there anything that you've seen or that in your experience as a teacher and as a professor that you've seen is really helpful in building relational trust with your students?

Parker Palmer:

Well, let's start with a word about the obstacle or an example of an obstacle, and then let's move on that to see what the answer or a answer to your question might look like. As you may know, for 25 or 30 years, I've been developing a nonprofit called the Center for Courage & Renewal and doing Courage To Teach retreat series with K through 12 teachers, whom I regard as our culture heroes and among our true first responders to the social issues of our time. I've learned a lot from those teachers as those decades have rolled by.

Parker Palmer:

One of the things I've learned, and this from a person who never has had a course in education, don't have a degree in education, didn't go to a school of education, one of the things I've learned from the teachers I work with is that very often in teacher education, they are taught tips, tricks and techniques, methodologies, strategies for teaching, and the self who teaches is largely ignored, the self who teaches. In our retreats, one of the things they learn that is helpful is to more fully bring themselves to teaching.

Parker Palmer:

I remember one teacher who had this revelation in maybe our very first retreat. She said, "We've talked in here so much about the self who teaches. In between retreats, I've realized that myself is heavily defined by my sense of humor, and yet I've never felt at liberty to release that in the classroom." She was hiding behind a wall thinking it was unprofessional to laugh with her student. She said, "In the time between retreats, I've gone back to class and unplugged myself, let the humor roll, and it's going so much better for me and for them."

Parker Palmer:

Well, it's a small example, but I think if we think about it in terms of the obstacle we have to climb over, which is this objectification of teaching as everything to do with tips, tricks and techniques, and nothing to do with selfhood, I'm not dissing technique, but it's not fundamental. It's not the primary driver of anything. Show me a doctor who uses only technique and another one who uses technique plus personal connection. I guarantee you, that second doctor will be a deeper and more profound healer of his or her patients than the one who clings to methodology only.

Parker Palmer:

So whatever you have as a personal gift, and it doesn't have to be a sense of humor, it's not about entertaining people, it's about being real. Just one more thing about that. I'm not arguing that we should reveal our deepest secrets or the things that we're most embarrassed about or the most fundamental wounds of our life. I have my own story there of three deep dives into depression, and for a long time, I couldn't talk about that because it wasn't fully integrated enough into my sense of who I am that it would be safe to talk about that.

Parker Palmer:

It took me 10 years after my first experience of depression to start writing and teaching about it. Because I knew it needed to be more fully integrated into a comfortable sense of who I am, so that I could stand in front of a group or write a published page that said, "Yeah, I'm all of the above. I am my gifts and my strengths and I am also this deep dive into darkness where I wasn't sure I wanted to live anymore." But you don't do that just sort of off the cuff or on day number one.

Parker Palmer:

Yet when you get to the point where you can acknowledge some of your own limits, when teachers can acknowledge the things they don't know as well as what they know, when teachers can acknowledge their limits as well as their potentials, what do they do? They create an environment for students who are wrestling with all of those same questions that suddenly feel safer to the students, because if the teacher can go there, I'll be okay going there too. If this is part of the teacher's reality and kids are pretty discerning about what's real and what ain't in older folk, if this is part of the teacher's reality, then it's okay for it to be part of my reality as well.

Parker Palmer:

Two years ago, Nat, I would not have believed that you could do it on Zoom. But I now have two years of working extensively on Zoom with folks in all kinds of situations, some really hardcore social change situations, for example, where lives were on the line, where suffering is intense, where people are feeling inadequate to the task, where this constant sense is I'm not enough for this job, I don't have enough, I can't do enough, I'm feeling crushed. I have found that on Zoom, it is as possible to be

transparent, to be vulnerable, to be candid in these thoughtful, measured, bounded ways and heal each other. It's been quite amazing to me.

Parker Palmer:

I'm talking now about around the world, across many cultures, working these past two years with people and situations that at almost age 83 now, I could not have traveled to. But in this manner, I've been able to connect with. I'm not saying it's easy. I wish we could be face to face, but I don't think that the technology is for where it's available and I wish it were available more widely to everyone, but when the technology is available, I don't think it's a deal breaker in terms of establishing relational trust. I've seen too many good things happen.

Nat Damon:

So much of what you just shared I'm nodding because it resonates with my year last year. I was running a middle school as an interim. I was an interim middle school director at a school here in LA. I spent about seven months at that time actually running it from Boston and because we were remote and I had personal reasons to be in Boston that kept me there. So I come in and it's this idea of building relational trust where you don't know how tall anybody is, you don't know what they look like from the neck down, they don't know me from the neck down. When you hit leave meeting, it's over. You've had your chance at that time and until next time, it's done.

Nat Damon:

I was really skeptical, Parker, about this job and how successful I might be in this role, because I couldn't imagine building relational trust with the faculty, my peer administrators, and then ultimately with the students. I'm not sure honestly how it went. I mean, it went. But I remember thinking, "Okay, I'm going to write a letter to the teachers every day. If nothing else, I'm just going to do this every day." Even if it's something that they don't read, it doesn't matter. It's them knowing that I'm thinking of them and them knowing that I've got just this thought that that maybe might help them as they start the day or not.

Nat Damon:

That was kind of also my security blanket, because as long as I wrote something every day, I knew I was making efforts toward building trust. About halfway through the year, I was making phone calls before winter, the winter vacation, and I was calling the teachers individually and just having a chat before we left for our first two week vacation. I got some feedback from a teacher saying, "Those letters are really well intended and they're good, but I can't say that I've read more than 10% of them because I'm just hanging on. I just need to focus on my class. It almost feels like work to feel like I'm expected to read these letters."

Nat Damon:

Then the teacher said, "But Nat, what really mattered to me in terms of our working relationship is when you devoted that faculty meeting a month ago toward just throwing out an agenda and just checking in, how are you? Let's talk. and Nat, you shared part of your struggles as our administrator and that made me feel closer to you."

Parker Palmer:

Those are beautiful examples, Nat. I do think that the letter, it may not be that everybody read it. But it certainly was a sign that you care and you care on a regular basis, not just once as a bullet point in your

opening presentation. That makes a difference. Then mixing the work with the expressions of being, with opportunities for people to say, "This is who I am right now. This is how it's feeling. This is what I'm struggling with." That's vulnerable for professionals, but I think maybe one of the good things we're learning in this situation is that it's very important for people lifting heavy loads to be vulnerable with each other about how tired they are, about how discouraged they are.

Parker Palmer:

One of the things that has always amazed me, Nat, about retreat groups is that, and I'll liken them here to these gatherings where we explore our own emotions, a retreat group of 30 people can get together with essentially the same problem, I'm suffering from no child left behind or race to the top or whatever. Nobody in the room has a fix, a solution, the solution for that problem. But at the end of a retreat where that has been woven into the fabric of conversation, the solution seems to be that we feel less alone with it because we've realized that everyone in the room has the problem and we realize that it's not our inadequacy or weakness that has kept us from solving the problem. It's a shared dilemma.

Parker Palmer:

I think ultimately that the most comforting word you can hear when you say, "I've got this issue," some issue or another, in whatever dimension of my life is you can hear other people say, "Welcome to the human race. I have it too. Welcome to the human race." So that we normally we have a problem and then we double down on our problem by saying, "I'm the only one in the universe who has it." But in these conversations, we realize it's a shared condition and we inspire each other to persist.

Nat Damon:

The weaving in of isolation to where we've been in the past two years plus, and looking at community and its role in building relational trust through struggle, through shared experience, through empathy. It makes me think about something you've mentioned in the past about we're human beings. We're not human doings. We're not human succeedings. We're beings. We're human beings. We be together. Just hearing what you just shared may made me think, it re-sparked why I went into teaching, Parker.

Nat Damon:

My dad was a teacher and the last thing I wanted to do was just imitate my father. I love my father, but as a growing young adult, I wanted to individuate myself. I thought that if I was a teacher, I would just be defaulting to something that's familiar because I grew up with my father as a teacher. Yet, I was also a camp counselor and I was also somebody who learned in his teenage years that this idea of overnight camp for me was my first true experience in building relational trust and it helped me to individuate and it also helped me to fall in love with teaching as a profession.

Nat Damon:

The reason why, and I'll take a step back and explain, is that at the camp that I went to as a camper and that I was a camp counselor at, it was called Camp Becket out in Western Massachusetts in the Berkshires, beautiful area of the world, all boys YMCA camp. What I remember more than archery and waterfront and campfires is cabin chat. Every night, all eight of us campers in our cabin would be in our bunks after brushing our teeth and all of that, it'd be dark out, and the counselor would come in with a candle and he would sit in the middle of the cabin on the floor. We'd be in our bunks. We'd have cabin chat and cabin chat was a highlight of your day, a challenge of your day, and then an unanswerable question. You're not right. You're not wrong.

Nat Damon:

The darkness and the focus on the candlelight, it channeled us to focus on listening and to truly listen to our brothers, we would say in the cabin. There was vulnerability there, oftentimes, not just when a kid would talk about, a camper would talk about his hardship of the day, the challenge, but also in answering a thoughtful question. There was a lot of safety in that environment. I think about cabin chat a lot when I think about a healthy, optimal relational classroom because... In this conversation it's helping me to shape what are those elements that made it so effective and that I want to replicate in my classroom and that I'm looking for when I walk into other people's classrooms.

Parker Palmer:

Yeah, absolutely. It's a very touching story about your camp experience, Nat, a kind of story that carries, I think, a lot of messages, a lot of truth. What it makes me think of is how ancient that kind of ritual is in the human experience. I mean, for how many centuries, maybe millennia have people sat around campfires at night to ward off fears of the dark, to tell stories, to inform each other about what's going on and what we're looking at tomorrow and to generate hope that as Kris Kristofferson used to sing, we can make it through the night. It's a wonderful image and it's precisely the kind of thing we need to be doing, again, mindful of the fact that professional education educates us away from these simple, grounded human things that we need to reclaim because we know we need them.

Nat Damon:

Simple, human and grounded yet you don't see it in every classroom, and it's not necessarily, as you say, it's not necessarily fostered by the schools, the teaching schools, yet it is. So if you were to ask most students, you ask them, who's your... You never want to ask who's your favorite teacher, because it's never a pecking order in a spectrum like that, but more like who's your most impactful teacher right now, right?

Parker Palmer:

Yeah. Just tell the story of a teacher who has had an impact on your life. Yeah.

Nat Damon:

They might start by saying kind of the Robert Williams kind of performer teacher at first or the nice teacher or something, yet ultimately, they always come back to the teacher that might actually really be challenging them right now. But what makes that teacher so impactful, it's not just that they expect a lot from me, but that they believe in me.

Parker Palmer:

Right.

Nat Damon:

That communication of belief, Parker, is so nuanced. You can't learn how to communicate belief in any sort of class, I don't think. I really don't.

Parker Palmer:

No.

Nat Damon:

It can only take place when you shaped the classroom ethos to be one that supports vulnerability, hope, empathy, right?

Parker Palmer:

Right. We absolutely know that, I think. In my case, I know, and I've never met a person who's disagreed with this, my great teachers were the teachers who saw more in me than I saw in myself. They found all kinds of ways to communicate that. It wasn't just by attaboys and oh, you're fantastic. Rarely was it that way. That can sound pretty hollow. But they would invite me to share in some little piece of research they were doing. They would ask my opinion. They would give me tasks that I didn't think I was up to and then mentor me in how to do them.

Parker Palmer:

They conveyed their confidence in sort of grown up ways rather than infantilizing me by giving me a participation medal or something. I guess the word is pronounced infantilizing me by giving me a participation medal. So I think that's so very important, and again, so very grounded, human and simple. The world is full of what I call secrets hidden in plain site that we just need to recover and start doing.

Nat Damon:

Let's all look for those secrets hidden in plain site. As we wrap up this conversation, along these lines of really encouraging relational trust and helping to maybe hopefully give a shot in the arm for the teachers and the educators who are listening to this episode, is there any final words that you would like to share to this audience about, that may have been said or not, about just words of hope about this period of time that we're going through right now and how through relational trust, there is... It will be better?

Parker Palmer:

Well, Nat, first of all, thank you for the conversation and power to the teachers who are listening in on this. Know that we're thinking about you and that we're grateful for you. So I think I'd like to share something that is a way in which I have derived hope over the years. I've been a devoted student of great social movements around the world of our time and before our time. When you study social movements, let's just take the black liberation movement in the United States, which goes much deeper than the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century, it goes all the way back to 1619, a lot of things that I hope folks are aware of that shaped and misshaped this country of ours.

Parker Palmer:

What is overwhelming to me is I think about that is the way generation after generation after generation of people, mostly in this case enslaved Africans on these shores who had very, very few degrees of freedom, used what few degrees of freedom they had to take the next possible positive, creative step up towards something better. When you look at the young black people of the mid-20th century who changed the lay in the law of the land by gathering in places like Selma, Alabama and bravely, non-violently witnessing and following the consequence of their actions to the bitter end, when you think of those people that have been so transformative in our world, they built upon 12, 13, 14 generations of ancestors taking that long march, small slow steps at a time.

Parker Palmer:

Is it too slow? Sure, it is. Am I counseling endless patience? Not as a norm, but as something we have to have in order to get anything done. I take inspiration from that, that social change happens in incremental ways. We have to value the small, slow steps any one of us can take, rather than throwing up our hands and saying, "This whole thing is so overwhelming that I'm just going to bow out. I'm going to find the exit door." If that had happened historically, nothing would've changed. I take inspiration from people whose lives were a lot rougher than mine is, inspiration to get up every morning and ask myself, "What can I do today? No matter how small and how slow, I want to do it."

Nat Damon:

That is to me a real definition of hope right there, the idea of when you were saying breaking it down into and really honoring the steps you're taking, the steps that we're taking, instead of being put off and fearful of just the vast amount, the sheer amount of work to be done. That is to me a concrete way of establishing a hope filled mindset.

Parker Palmer:

Every little bit counts. If we can reclaim our conviction that that's the case, because it is the case, I think we'll continue to fight the good fight and take this somewhere worth taking it.

Nat Damon:

Taking it somewhere that is heart forward, courage being the heart forward, the power of the heart, the core, leading with the heart, right?

Parker Palmer:

Right.

Nat Damon:

Courage to Teach, most perfectly apt title for the most, for me, the bible of my teaching foundation, which is going right up here on shelf next to The Wounded Leader, which is a whole other conversation we could have, the idea of the vulnerability that comes from acknowledging and really taking a deep study into our wounds and how that helps us not just to heal those wounds, but to present ourselves with authenticity and in a way that can engender relational trust.

Parker Palmer:

That's true.

Nat Damon:

That's another conversation. We have to wrap this one up now.

Parker Palmer:

I hope we'll have it, Nat. Thank you so much for this one.

Nat Damon:

I'm so grateful. Thank you so much, Parker Palmer. Anybody who's listening, please visit our website, reachacademics.com for more information on Parker Palmer, more information on the Center For Courage & Renewal, and about his biography. We have a full expose about Parker Palmer on the

website. So please visit that and stay tuned for more episodes. But what an episode we just had, what a conversation. Thank you once again, Parker, for joining us and taking the time.

Parker Palmer:

Thank you.

Speaker 1:

You've been listening to Reach. Teach. Talk. With Nat Damon. If you'd like to recommend a guest for a future episode, you can send your suggestion or questions to nat@reachacademics.com.