

WHOLLY TEACHING

A Sermon Delivered to

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Even if you're pretty familiar with the oeuvre of Francis Ford Coppola, you might not be familiar with the film *Rumble Fish*. Coppola wrote the screenplay during his days off from filming *The Outsiders*, like *Rumble Fish* from a novel by S.E. Hinton. The novelist had a hand in writing both screenplays as well and portrays a nurse in the *Outsiders* and a hooker in *Rumble Fish*. *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish* were bookended by critical and audience Coppola flops *One from the Heart* and *The Cotton Club*.

Rumble Fish is told from the perspective, like most of Hinton's novels, of a street smart but articulate gang member, this one named Rusty-James, who is torn between his loyalty to his ideals and the responsibilities of growing up. The film starred Matt Dillon who played a similar role in *the Outsiders* as Rusty-James and Mickey Rourke as his older brother, The Motorcycle Boy. Nicholas Cage played Rusty-James' betrayer, Smokey, and Vincent Spano played his best friend, Steve.

Steve changes from the novel to the movie. In the book he's just another in Hinton's line of not-as-tough sidekicks to the hero, but in the film he becomes the perspective by which the scenes are set and the audience's proxy by whom they're experienced. In the film he's always walking around with a notepad and pencil, taking notes, and at the end, after the Motorcycle Boy's murder, the last he's seen is scurrying away from the scene, desperately scribbling notes.

The movie Steve is sort of my role model. Or he would be if I could accomplish what I'd most like to. Movie Steve is the epitome of a long line of people I've admired who sit back and watch and take note. If I could do what I'd like, I'd live in a large city—Chicago, say, or St. Louis—and walk down to the coffee shop in the early morning and sit outside and drink lattes and write down everything I see. And then I'd go to the bar at night and drink wine and write down everything I see there. My heroes in this are Samuel Pepys and George Grosz, writers and artists who in the midst of interesting times simply sat and took it all in, and then put it down for people to have later as a relic of what those days were like. Such people are almost never known in their lifetimes unless, like Emile Zola and Charles Dickens or even Tom Wolfe, they then use their notes to write extremely detailed fictional examinations of their society.

That is what I would like to do, but because I am not wealthy or live in a major metropolis, and I have a wife who insists that I make a living, I walk around and make notes and then I teach. As some of you know, that's not a bad way at all to make a living, and in contrast with many of the jobs I've done it's certainly one of the driest and least dirty. I can't complain about it, and maybe I can even be a little proud of it.

Let me tell you about a conversation from earlier this week. One of my students in my Composition I course stopped to talk with me after class. This class is in the middle of presenting a short profile of a person I've given them they're unlikely to know but who I think is important to the composition of world society. His person is Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese politician elected by her countrymen to run its government in 1990 but who has spent most of the intervening years under house arrest by the nation's ruling military junta. He asked me, "Do you ever get just ticked off because you find out there's stuff going on and you just can't do a thing about it? I said, "No, but yes."

Let me explain what I meant. No, I try not to lose my perspective: there are innumerable evils in the world and the number I can personally affect is infinitesimal, so I prefer to concentrate on those. But yes, of course it bothers me. Just as I'm certain it bothers you. Whether you're a teacher or a trash collector, which by the way are the two professions no civilization can comfortably exist without, you can't help but be affected by the evils and misrule that takes up much of the world, and by your own impotence when confronting it. My solution is to look at it in the way I was taught by my Abbot at Dharmapada: your time here is limited so there is only one thing you must do. It may be a little something and it may be a big something, but the commonality everyone shares is

you will never have any idea what it is. But don't worry, you won't die until you've accomplished it.

This is pretty heartening stuff; it suggests that no life, even the child who is given birth and then strangled by her mother, is without purpose. That is an idea worth celebrating. It is also complex. I've meditated on this idea for decades and come to realize that it suggests everyone will do one thing in his or her life that benefits life. That Hitler's big thing might not be what he's known for—destroying mid-20th century Europe and causing the deaths of millions of people—but might rather be the little thing he did sometime before he placed that gun in his mouth. It might be that he patted a certain dog or smiled at a certain child; or it might be even more obscure, that he turned left rather than right at some pivotal point. If this holds true for Hitler, and by extension for Stalin and Pol Pot and any other person you'd care to name, isn't it also so for my own *bete noir*, George W. Bush? Of course it is.

I don't think I need to explain for many of you who Parker Palmer is, but I will anyway, if for no other reason than, as in my Composition I course, he is one of those people who I think is involved in society's make up. He is an education theorist who's brought many of his Quaker beliefs and much of its outlook to teaching practices. He's celebrated, and rightfully so, for championing a form of instruction that places the subject at the center of the teaching experience, rather than the student or the instructor, allowing that subject to determine the method and format of instruction, rather than the other way around.

Poet William Stafford famously wrote that “real teaching is messy,” and that's certainly a given in Palmer's format. There are often false starts and cul de sacs and

blind alleys and places where the teacher needs to step back and reintroduce concepts or occasionally reconstitute his entire format in the Palmer method. But it is unusually rewarding I've found for both teachers and students, sometimes blurring the positions of the two, usually to everyone's benefit. He hasn't made this analogy that I'm aware of, but for me this form of instruction is like pairing two good, evenly-matched boxers in a fight, with all the requisite, exquisite footwork and dodging and weaving that such a card would require. If you've never seen such a bout, it generally ends with one of the fighters winning through an accumulation of points rather than a knock out, and with the other fighter congratulating him on an excellent fight. It's easy to imagine such combatants going out for a beer together afterward.

That might strike you as a little testicular an analogy for describing something nurturing like teaching. Very well. Think of it then like two gymnasts performing on a trampoline. To avoid clashing heads or ending up in a crumpled heap, they need to alter their shared routine to take the moves of the other into account, one bouncing now, the other bouncing now, the point not being to bounce the other off the trampoline but to provide a good workout for each other and, incidentally, a good show for anyone watching. The two work in concert to produce a good work.

I've been rereading Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* this week, particularly a chapter called "Knowing in Community". He says here that "to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced," a slippery term that, five pages later, he establishes as recognizing that "reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it."

Very often it seems my role is that of translator so let me see if I can make this more accessible: teaching effectively, or in my case here, preaching effectively allows for the creation of a community whose members work together to create an effect, a recognition that reality is what we experience. We seek the truth, which he defines as “an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.” We work together for a reason, not simply because we’re thrown together willy-nilly, although that might be why we initially came together, but because we’ve transcended that initial randomness to affect a greater good. Palmer calls this the grace of great things, our coming together to make great things happen.

They’re not necessarily big great things, the eradication of poverty, the shift in a social injustice, the toppling of bad leadership. They may be little great things: getting a cup of coffee for someone physically hampered, smiling at one another, pointing to something needing to be done. Palmer writes, “In a series of critical experiments, physicists have shown that subatomic particles behave ‘as if there were some communication between them,’ even when they are ‘too far apart to communicate in the time available.’ These so-called particles, widely separated in time and space, seem to be connected in ways that make them act less like isolated individuals and more like participants in an interactive and interdependent community.”

“An interactive and interdependent community.” Is there any better description of the goal we have set for ourselves as the members of this church? It’s there at the beginning of our services: “Love is the spirit of this church and service is its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.” Palmer notes, “In religious life, when a community attaches ultimacy to its

ordained leadership or to the mass mind of its members, it will fall into idolatry until it turns to a transcendent center that can judge both parishioners and priests. In political life, when a nation lacks a transcendent center that can call fear-mongering leaders and fear-filled followers to purposes larger than their fears, its civic life will degenerate, sometimes into fascist evil.” In its place, we become greater than the sum of our parts. Some faiths and some groups are based on exclusivity, on achieving for yourself the goal of wealth or influence or salvation or forgiveness or sanctity. Not ours. Unitarian Universalism is a social faith, as our species is a social species. The analogy may not be flattering, but at our best we’re more like a colony of ants than a single cougar. The better image might be of the Buddhist monks who protested en masse in Rangoon last fall, for the first time publically chiding the military junta that rules Myanmar, which is at least nominally Buddhist, for its repressive policies. If you watched video of those protests you recognize that at our best we live, and we die, together.

I’m sure many of you have come up with your own examples of this form in practice, but I’m going to leave you with one of mine. I spent some time trying to decide on a good story to leave you with. I thought about my experiences among the Hare Krishnas in New York and fundamentalist evangelicals here in the Midwest. I thought about the migrant workers I lived with in Louisiana and the Buddhists in Montreal. And all of those are really nifty stories have some relevance to my topic, but I chose this one because the lesson is that without working together, the outcome, while not life-threatening, would have been less pleasant for everyone involved.

This was 1986, my first Rainbow Gathering in Nantehala National Park in western North Carolina. I would eventually come face-to-face with some backwoods

good ol' boys who, rather than butchering my body and using my teeth as a matte comb for their dogs, wound up sharing beers with me and talking about how they wished they could live the kind of life I was; and later still would have a crippling bout of dysentery that was shared with another thousand or so free-livers. But this was before all that.

It was my second, maybe my third day at the Gathering—time tends to run together at these things, an experience only partly due to the substances I was ingesting—and I was hiking back into the site after having hiked down to retrieve something one of my friends who'd traveled there with me had left in her car. I was coming back into the site through the main parking lot where there was Bus Village and Bike Village and the drunks who cluster around the entrance since alcohol isn't allowed into the Gathering, and I passed a pickup truck at the barrier. In its bed was lashed a standup piano, not much different from ours here.

Someone yelled, "hey, brother, can you lend us a hand?" There's an unwritten understanding at the Gathering that, if you're asked for help, and you're not doing anything else, you'll help. This is not, I might add, a bad way to behave in general society. Anyway, the request came from one of the half dozen guys milling around the truck. I said sure and stepped up to help.

By the time we had the upright off the truck, there were about ten of us, including one fellow who was naked except for his shoes. Let me explain a little here about the dress code at the Gathering—there is none. It's not unusual for most everyone to wander the trails naked at one point or another. There's something freeing about dropping trou and letting everything air out, and it genuinely feels good. After about a day, you stop noticing. Still, at least this guy had on sneakers, which was more than I had on my feet.

We ranged along the sides of the piano and hoisted. I can tell you what kind of piano this was. It was heavy. Solid oak or maybe concrete. With ten of us we still needed to shuffle under the weight of it and stop about every dozen feet to flex our hands and shift position. Let me tell you a little about how to get to the Gathering—once you're past the barriers keeping people from driving in and most of the alcohol out, you still need to hike another three, sometimes five miles to achieve main camp, which of course was where the piano was headed. I don't know how far it was from barrier to main camp, but if you told me it was ten miles, I wouldn't dispute it. And I can't say it's the truth, but it certainly seemed as if I spent the entire trip behind the naked guy wearing only shoes.

So we started off. Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle. "Wait a minute!" Rest. Hoist. Grunt. Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle. "Wait a minute!" It went like that for almost the entire hike to main camp, and I will tell you, it may be true that hippie men are more in touch with their feminine side, but it's also nonetheless the case that not one of us was willing to admit we were ready to quit. A number of people passed us on our route and not a one of us asked any to replace us.

Much of the way was dry road but it was straight up. There were deep gouges on either side—it was a ranger's access road—so we were limited to going down the center in a narrow band about six feet across. This doesn't sound very hard, but imagine it while lugging a piano with nine other hippies, none of whom were really looking forward. There was much swearing when we'd veer toward one of the ruts on the side and on occasion we had to stop and back up a couple feet to avoid a gash that had opened out of one of the ruts. And it seemed like no matter how much I tried to concentrate on my bare

toes kicking up pebbles below me, I focused instead on the very white butt directly in front of me.

Then of course there was the mud. A part of the road was skirted by a stream that at one point crossed the road, making a mud bog about twenty feet across. This bog was further softened and widened by thousands of feet tramping through it for a few days, extending and deepening it so that walking through it was like walking through a deep layer of frosting, complete with little flourishes where our feet broke free and left tall whippets. This was the point at which my bare feet probably came into their own, since it's easier to slog through such stuff unencumbered by the worry that your shoe will be sucked into the earth's core forever.

We started out joking and laughing and one or two guys were singing, but all that stopped after about the first half mile. Then it became a long silence, punctuated by occasional cries of "whoa," "just a second here," "to your left," "watch on the right," not to mention many cries of "oh my aching god!" Admittedly, that last one was from me.

I stopped carrying a watch in 1983 so I have no idea how long it took us to carry that piano to main camp but I can vouch that the sun, which was high overhead when I'd left my friend's car back at the road was hovering somewhere on the horizon. We were dirtier, sweatier, smellier and a lot less companionable than when we'd started. But I can also tell you that it felt really, really good to finally drop that sucker into place in its intended point of honor at main circle, and for the rest of my time there I was lulled to sleep each night in my tent about a quarter mile further down the trail by the tinkly plinking of someone noodling on the keyboard, listening to proof that I had accomplished something of benefit to everyone between it and me.