



Doing the Work Before the Work

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As I reflect on how far the field of positive youth development and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has come, I feel very grateful. I also feel we still have a lot to learn in terms of what Parker Palmer calls “the work before the work” – the personal work we need to pursue ourselves before we can successfully do the work of the world.

Since September 11, 2001, when I was asked by the New York City Schools and several foundations to help the schools in and around Ground Zero heal and recover from the tragedy, I have had a deeper appreciation for how important it is to nurture ourselves first before we can be there for those for whom we sincerely care. We need to cultivate our own social, emotional, and resiliency skills before we can expect them to be developed in the lives of the young people we serve.

Those of us in the youth development field know what the research tells us about what young people need to thrive. However, we also know that what ultimately has the most impact in our classrooms and youth serving agencies is the quality of interaction between the adult who is teaching or guiding and the young person who is benefiting (or not) from that relationship.

Lately I have had a renewed sense that we cannot stop the process of developing our own self-awareness and self-management skills. It is more important to assist other adults and young people we serve in becoming skillful in these very things as soon as possible. We have to first build our own reservoir of inner resilience – the place in us that gives our work meaning and purpose and helps us “get up after the night of grief and despair weary and bruised to the bone and do what needs to be done for the children” as Oriah Mountain Dreamer says so eloquently in the poem *The Invitation*.

We need to be part of a living community of learning with our peers in which we are engaged in order to transform ourselves in the ways we want to offer our young people. Youth serving agencies and schools are about educating and caring for young people and the adults involved all at the same time.

Every time we help a group of adults get in touch with the source of contemplative reflection, it becomes easier to align one's inner guidance with an outer reality. Personal insights can become a source of social change in our agencies and schools. The kind of reflection and self-awareness work I am talking about can create a community of adult learners who are able to take the time to be introspective but never lose the sense that they are connected to each other. This kind of community has, as Parker Palmer calls it, "unconditional regard for one another". Then there is the possibility of mutual inspiration. The kind of change I am hoping for comes from the inside out – and that is "the work before the work".

When we have prepared ourselves first – then we can also be ready to help our young people live healthy, engaged lives as active citizens in a democracy which honors diversity and builds skills they will need to tackle the tough questions of life with deeper meaning and purpose. The world that our young people will inherit is as much unpredictable as it is predictable. Young people require the skills that will hold up not only in the work place but with the tests of life they will inevitably face.

I believe that the degree to which we as adults fine-tune our own instruments, is the measure we are left with for transforming institutions collectively. Supporting personal transformation can make the institutions that serve our young people places that we can all come to and work hard to improve. I am hopeful that we have a good chance of this kind of change even though at times it will be hard and may take longer than we originally thought.

We are not alone in this vision and we need to keep up each other's faith that it can be done. One of the ways I do "the work before the work" in my own life journey is by attending the *Black Hills Seminars* each year. It is where for the past 15 years I have engaged in personal transformational work in the company of like-hearted people. I hope to rekindle that connection with some of you very soon.

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