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## The Teacher Spiritual Development in the Reference to the Metaphorical Understanding of “Education as a Spiritual Journey” by Parker J. Palmer

(pp. 29–44)

Suggested citation: Szymańska, M. (2024). The Teacher Spiritual Development in the Reference to the Metaphorical Understanding of “Education as a Spiritual Journey” by Parker J. Palmer. *Multidisciplinary Journal of School Education* 13(1(25), 29–44. <https://doi.org/10.35765/mjse.2024.1325.02>

### Abstract

**Objective of the article:** The aim of the article is to elicit and show the correlation between a spiritual teacher’s development and education seen as a spiritual journey in a pedagogical, personalistic perspective. The research question is as follows: How does the relationship between the teacher’s spiritual development and Palmer’s perception of education in spiritual perception look?

**Research method:** To answer the research question, the method of hermeneutic content analysis seems to be appropriate, as it provides a deeper meaning of education rooted in spirituality for the teacher seen as a unity achieved in the integrative process of formation.

**A short description of the context of the presented issue:** The contents of the article are rooted in the personalistic perspective and cover the reference to spirituality, to some extent corresponding with human spiritual development and teacher spiritual development, tightly connected with Parker J. Palmer’s concept of education perceived in the spiritual dimension.

**Research findings:** The article elicits the meaning of spirituality in the quality of teacher development and the need to provide a space for spirituality in education, in the care of future generations. The research emphasizes that students achieving a spiritual identity on a transpersonal level can become fruitful for contemporary civilization, and further research in this light demands engagement of the broader scientific community, working in the personalistic paradigm.

**Conclusions and recommendations:** Education lacking the space for spirituality determined by higher values does not foster the building of the wholeness of a person and can cause many problems with forming one's identity, the core of which is a spiritual identity on the autonomous, transpersonal level. The conclusion is that the more "technical/pragmatic" approaches to education are propagated, the more problems in the functioning of future generations can appear. That is why the core curriculum in education needs changing, which should be followed by changes in teacher higher education and training.

**Keywords:** spirituality, spiritual development, spiritual identity, teacher spiritual development, education

## Introduction

Dealing with the issue of a teacher's spiritual development in light of Parker J. Palmer's concept of education seen as a spiritual journey (1993) imposes the need to focus briefly on fundamental aspects that seem to be combined with a teacher's spiritual development, such as human spiritual development, which corresponds to the integrative model of spiritual development by Ken Wilber (1980). This model matches Eric Erikson's phases of identity development (1980), which fosters a better understanding of spiritual identity, also in the personalistic perspective of human integral development (Kunowski, 2000). All these aspects elicit the meaning of values in the process of teacher education, which should guarantee a space for spirituality to permeate the processes of learning and teaching. Ignoring

this aspect can reduce education to the technical organization of schools, where “technical” paradigms appear insufficient, particularly when considering the psychological state of those being educated, who look for something deeper than the technological style of cultural functioning.

The discussion in the article of all these aspects from various perspectives, such as theology, philosophy, the social sciences, etc. has to be limited because of the formal requirements for text submissions. The issue of spirituality is broad. The reviews of the literature on spirituality made by, for example, Michael Miovic (2004), Dorte T. Viftrup, Niels C. Hvidt, and Niels Buus (2013), or Edward H. Taylor (2023) indicate that spirituality can be defined differently:

Spirituality appears to be a transcendental internal experience and belief system that varies from person to person [...]. Many definitions are all-inclusive, while others, especially those from religious organizations, have more restrictive parameters. However, whether inclusive or exclusive, these definitions are equally abstract. The lack of specificity invites individuals to self-define spirituality. (Taylor, 2023, p. 1008)

In the article, teachers’ spiritual development in reference to education seen as a metaphorical journey is presented in the Christian perspective, which aligns spirituality with a religious lifestyle, as stressed by Stephan Kunowski (2000) and Parker J. Palmer (1993), and which requires courage from teachers working nowadays (Palmer, 2007). Here, it is worth mentioning that Palmer is a well-known educator all over the world. In 2011 he was one of 25 people changing the world. He has written many articles and books whose content elucidates the vocation and avocation of teacher. It is worth recalling some of them here: *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (1999), *The Courage to Teach: Exploring an Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (2007), *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (1993), *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old* (2018), and *a Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward Undivided Life* (2009).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A biography of Parker J. Palmer is accessible at <https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/parker-palmer>.

The article uses hermeneutic content analysis (Vieira & de Queiroz, 2017). It can be mentioned here that

the Hermeneutic Content Analysis (HCA) goes beyond the description of Qualitative Content Analysis. The HCA also involves description, but considers understanding and reflection of material. The main responsibility of HCA consists of understanding of sense of analysed material. The Hermeneutic makes possible to understand the sense and the deepest sense of a text. (Vieira, de Queiroz, 2017, p. 14)

Choosing this method seems to be justified, since presenting the strong relationship between a teacher's spiritual development and education perceived in a spiritual dimension requires deeper knowledge and metaknowledge connected with spiritual identity and an integrative model of spirituality, as depicted below.

### **The spiritual development of a teacher in the personalistic pedagogical perspective**

Spiritual development can be seen from two perspectives. One is connected with religion and faith (e.g. Szymańska, 2017; Fowler, 1981; Kunowski, 2000; Palmer, 1993, 2007; Marek, 2017), while the other can be combined with the idea of human development free from religion (Russo-Netzer, 2017). This variation comes from the view on religion and spirituality. Thus, the first seems to be deeply rooted in theocentric personalism while the second is rooted in anthropocentrism, which can be acknowledged in the research conducted all around the world and recalled by Pninnit Russo-Netzer (2017). According to the research in such countries as the United States of America, Pakistan, or Indonesia, most of those who believe in God combine spirituality with religion; in such countries as Sweden or France, most of those who engage with spirituality locate themselves outside of the framework of religion, which is probably determined by the wider historical, cultural, and social context (Russo-Netzer, 2017).

Here, it is a must to claim that the appearance of postmodernism broadened the possibility of perceiving spirituality as an important factor that influences the style of human living, particularly in the physical and psychological fields (Russo-Netzer, 2017). In this context, it is worth recalling the research conducted by Chris Kiesling and Gwendolyn Sorell (2009) on the relationship between the spirituality and identity formation, where the sense of spiritual identity coexists with human development (Kiesling et al., 2006); this corresponds with Erikson's theory on identity development within a life span (Erikson, 1980) and spirituality. Analyzing Erikson's holistic idea of the development of a spiritual adult, Kiesling and Sorell underscore the following:

(1) actuality and mutuality: the release of defensiveness naturally acquired in attaining autonomy that frees one to participate and share effectively; (2) leeway: the freedom to be oneself and to grant such freedom to others; (3) adaptation: the move from passive acceptance of unacceptable life conditions to ego strength whereby one gains the power to fit the environment to one's needs and the needs of others (Gandhi overcoming prejudice is his exemplar); (4) insight: truth gained via contemplation of seeing into oneself and into a situation that obliges toward ethical action (Erikson regarded confessional prayer as the precursor to psychoanalysis); and (5) virtue and centrality: the spiritual and ethical center that with optimum resolution of life stages allows the self to be bound together around transcendent values of hope, purpose, fidelity, love, wisdom, and so on. (Kiesling & Sorell, 2009, pp. 253–254)

Taking into consideration the concepts outlined above can help in reflecting upon spiritual identity and human spiritual development, which are tightly connected with a teacher's spiritual development and the target of this article. Kiesling et al. (2006) define "*spiritual identity* as a persistent sense of self that addresses ultimate questions about the nature, purpose, and meaning of life, resulting in behaviors that are consonant with the individual's core values" (p. 1269). They add that

a sense of spiritual identity focuses on individual construction of a relationship to the sacred and ultimate meaning [...]. Our definition posits that a sense of spiritual identity emerges as the symbolic religious and spiritual content of a culture is appropriated by individuals in the context of their own life. In other words, the content of one's sense of spiritual self is individual, whereas the structure is inherently social and thus inevitably local and historically specific [...]. a sense of spiritual identity is a role-related aspect of an individual's overall sense of ego identity. (p. 1270)

Achieving the mature sense of spiritual identity demands hard work on one's own multi-dimensional process of development influenced by individual, cultural, environmental, and contextual factors (Russo-Netzer, 2017) within one's whole lifespan, which could be considered deeply by teachers, who sometimes ignore this aspect while performing their roles and constraining their commitment in the educative process. They tend to reduce the meaning of spirituality and spiritual development in their practice, which results from complicated circumstances including the education system and its assumptions. In reply to this problem, Wilber's integrative model of spiritual human development (1980) appears justified. This model covers three stages: the pre-personal one, which reflects subconscious functioning and can be instinctual or conditioned by fundamental biological needs; the personal stage, where the mental processes is conscious, oriented mainly toward ego, and a coherent self-identity development appears to be achieved; and the transpersonal stage, at which the awareness goes beyond consciousness of ego, resulting in a new approach of self-consciousness to self-transcendence and the spiritual sphere (Russo-Netzer, 2017). The integrative model of spiritual human development by Wilber corresponds with the pedagogical concept of integrative layer human development by Kunowski (2000). Kunowski's concept shows the tight relationship between the development of layers – biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual (religious) – and their reciprocal influence on each other in the way one achieves maturity, which is conditioned by individual developmental potential and approach to challenges,

widely understood environmental circumstances, and upbringing powers: *bios, logos, agos*, and fate, which are formatted by functions such as *sanare, edocere, educere, educare*, and *initiare* (Kunowski, 2000). In this context, special attention should be paid to spiritual development, which seems to be influenced by many factors, including biological, psychological, social, cultural, and religious, as reflected in Kunowski's concept.

Based on this concept, spiritual development requires caring for the quality of the following elements of spirituality:

- reason, which enables the person to know the truth and incorporate it into their life and which is connected with developing the "ability to value and assess all the experiences in relation to the Self and others treated as good, true, and noble ones, where love helps man come closer to ideal: Good, Beauty, Truth, and Sanctity" (Szymańska, 2017)
- freedom, which is accompanied by a sense of responsibility for oneself and for other people (to some extent)
- transformative creativity, which helps the person find new solutions, gain new perspectives, construct new valuable things and ideas and share them with individuals and the community, experience a new quality of relation to self, others, God, and the world
- reflective openness to metaphysical depth, which fosters an understanding of life situations, particularly complicated ones, and helps overcome the barriers of sensual experience on the way to Transcendence, find the meaning of life in the light of Absolute and God, and pursue achieving unity with Him.

Considering all the above, it can be claimed that spirituality somehow characterizes the spiritual identity and corresponds with the third phase of Wilber's integrative model of spiritual development: the transpersonal one. This phase has a lot in common with the moral development on the postconventional level and matches the similar stage of identity development (Witkowski, 1988), as it requires not only that

higher values be respected and incorporated into life, but it becomes effective when the mechanism of the introception of values works well (Kunowski, 2003).

The analysis of chosen aspects connected with spirituality, identity, and spiritual development of a human being implies the need to refer to a teacher's spiritual development, which can be associated with the teacher's spiritual identity fostering the realization of their prestigious vocation. The teacher, truly seeking ways that enable them to achieve their personal and professional goals, specially rooted in personalism, is bound to reflect on the stages of spiritual development in relation to other spheres infused with spirituality that provide a deeper sense of vocation that has an impact on others. The questions concerning the reflective skills (Szymańska, 2020) need to be posed within the pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal dimensions of spirituality, which can help in forming one's spiritual identity revealed in moral/social and cultural areas of life. According to the attributes of spirituality, the teacher constructs new lenses for perceiving the formative functions of reason, freedom, reflectivity, transformability, and creativity, which are determined by values such as dignity, truth, educative love (Szymańska, 2016), responsibility, faith, hope, and beauty. A new perception of self, others, the world, and God pushes the teacher to explore the meaning of Transcendence, in both the theoretical and practical dimensions of education. It shapes the openness, commitment, and participation that lead to maturity revealed in the personalistic paradigm infusing the teacher's activities.

### ***Education as a Spiritual Journey by Parker J. Palmer in reference to teachers' spiritual development***

To consider the reference of a teacher's spiritual development to Palmer's metaphor of education as a spiritual journey, this metaphor must briefly be presented. Thus, Palmer (1993), in book entitled *To know as we are known: Education as a spiritual journey*, writes:

My vocation (to use the poet's term) is the spiritual life, the quest for God, which relies on the eye of the heart. My avocation is education, the quest for knowledge, which relies on the eye of the mind. (Palmer, 1993, p. xxiii)

These both wings: heart and mind need to coincided in the search of "wholesight" perception of reality, what takes place in constructing a holistic way of getting knowledge that "must be translated into practical ways to teach and learn." (Palmer, 1993, p. xxv)

Therefore, the "spirit-seeking heart" and the "knowledge-seeking mind" (Palmer, 1993, p. xxiv) can embrace the whole reality in shaping the integral, holistic approach to self and life, as well as to education, which should induce the teacher's constant reflection on the quality of their work influencing the student's holistic, integral development. Education goes beyond the real, material aspects, as revealed in the author's confession:

I mean a slow, subtle, nearly unconscious process of formation, something like the way a moving stream shapes the rocks over the long passage of time. The disciplines of textual study, observation and analysis, and community life are the channels through which that stream flows. (Palmer, 1993, p. 20)

This stream can be understood as transcendence, which cannot be separated from self and the world by education, as "such an education either turns out people who force their own distortions on the world, or it produces people who have succumbed to the world's distortion of themselves" (Palmer, 1993, p. 12). A threat for future generations can arise when "the technical/pragmatic" tendencies overwhelm the personalistic, integral, holistic approach to upbringing and education, when an axiological perception of the world can be reduced to the relativistic point of view of self, others, the world, and God. It occurs when building the spiritual identity on a personal or transpersonal becomes vague. Such an approach encourages us to lock ourselves in our own closed logic, reducing the meaning of love to soft, sentimental feelings or virtue and distorting

the view of freedom and truth conditioned by our own image and desires, which leads to nowhere, to the destruction of self and the world. In this light, immaturely released curiosity and control in the educational process of gaining knowledge and skills gradually excludes transcendence on behalf of "tough scientific" knowledge taught and learned in a paradigm of objectivism, having not much in common with the transformative one (Palmer, 1993, pp. 13–40). The author understands that "to learn is to face transformation. To learn the truth is to enter into relationships requiring us to respond as well as initiate, to give as well as take" (p. 40). Palmer adds,

we find it after to seek facts that keep us in power rather than truths that require us to submit. Objectivist education is a strategy for avoiding our conversion. If we keep "reality," we can avoid, for a while, the truth that lays the claim of community on our individual and collective lives. (Palmer, 1993, p. 40)

Being aware of difficulties and challenges that education faces now and may struggle with in the future, Palmer sees the solution in teachers' spiritual formation (1993, pp. 107–125), where the integrative model of spiritual development can be applied, particularly at the postconventional stage or in a transpersonal phase. This phase elicits the autonomy of the teacher in the personalistic perspective, especially the Christian one. Spiritual development here requires from teachers an attitude of openness to grace, accompanying them in the process of transmitting the information coming from outside to the innermost world, then transforming the knowledge that opens new gates into the teacher's larger capacity to better know themselves, others, the world, and God. This results in a higher capacity to help others be better known. To make it true and real, the education goals should also comprise the spiritual ones. Such an approach requires the teacher's spiritual formation and is determined by values or virtues, among which the pursuit to know and live in truth dominates. In this context, it is not surprising that Palmer (1983) claims:

The true professor is not one who controls the facts and theories and techniques. The true professor is one who affirms a transcendent center of truth, a center that lies beyond our contriving, that enters history through the lives of those who profess it and bring us into community. (p. 113)

The author draws attention to some aspects that indicate the connectedness of education seen as a spiritual journey with the teacher formation that takes place basically in the spiritual domain, which demands effort from the person and the community to overcome many steps of the spiritual ladder:

- affirmation of virtues such as dignity, love, true, faith, hope, care, commitment, curiosity, openness, and hospitality in personal and communal life. Teachers are supposed to create and arrange the space for these virtues, even if learning or teaching them can be painful, especially while bringing something new (e.g. ideas) and valuable into this space. Their struggles can appear to be difficult, but worth making an effort. In this light, the teachers are bound to be obedient to truth, although such an attitude can bring some discomfort to themselves and others, which requires the courage to face difficulties. The courage in defending the truth gains a new shape thanks to love emanating from God, who assists the teachers and enables them to cooperate fruitfully with His grace, which translates into achieving higher quality knowledge.
- affirmation of transcendence in personal and communal life, which requires being immersed in prayerful communication with God, mastering the skills of meditation and contemplation, and practicing the discipline of silence and properly understood solitude that deepens the knowledge of self and one's identity and in fact helps "to understand the liabilities and limits for our knowledge of the world" (Palmer, 1993, p. 123). Furthermore, Palmer writes, "as we face ourselves in solitude, we are slowly freed from

the stranglehold of our dependencies and darkness and from the destructiveness of our objectifying world" (Palmer, 1993, p. 123).

- making space for feelings.
- building a deeper relationship with oneself and others (particularly the community), the world, and God, which can take place through learning, including personal and communal experiences. The lenses that enable perception of new, richer perspectives must be changed to better understand wholeness seen as unity of heart and mind. Such a relationship demands from its educational subjects to be curious, reflective, and open to new challenges facing the affirmation and implementation of high virtues mentioned above.

To summarize, the teacher's spiritual development taking place in the wholeness of the person, whose heart and reason are integrated while going through its phases until reaching the transpersonal one, seems to be related with the educational journey that can either make the school community stay on the pre-personal level or can provide many opportunities for them to achieve the transpersonal level within formation. Such a journey is assumed to reflect on Paul Avallone's statement (1989) that

education must deal with the entire man. The harmonious development of all of man's faculties is the purpose of the educative process. Education, therefore, must deal not only with the physical, emotional, intellectual and moral aspects of man's life. The spiritual must also be taken into account, for man is a being endowed with spiritual qualities. (p. 53)

This thesis demands that the theory be transmitted into practice, creating a model that can be deployed in the education system, which is to be reformed in respect of personal and communal educational goals eliciting the need to build a spiritual, autonomous identity on a post-conventional level.

## Conclusion, results, and recommendations

Having considered both the integrative model of spiritual development, the concept of spirituality in the integral development, and Palmer's vision of education hidden in the metaphor of a spiritual journey, it appears necessary to refer to a teacher's spiritual development, which should be regarded as a challenge for building a civilization of love and truth, starting with educating the younger generations. Such education has to face many obstacles that have fused contemporary lifestyles, shaped by eclectically mixed cultural trends and determined by the uncritical use of new technologies. It seems helpful to avoid many traps for upbringing, teaching, and learning, creating a space for formative education – in which spiritual development takes the central place. A spiritual journey in education has a lot in common with a teacher's spiritual development, as they both appear to be long-lasting, dynamic, integrative, transformative, reflective, creative, reasonable, transcendent, and individual/communal and to embrace two wings – heart and reason – in building the perspective of wholeness seen in the personal and communal dimension.

The aspects discussed above can bear some results. First of all, education has to provide a spiritual space for both teachers and students, which often requires that the hierarchy of goals be rearranged toward building a truly personalized model of education. This model has to go beyond the technical strategies used mainly for learning, seen in the "tough," materialistic horizons of effects on the ladder of success. Building an enriched spiritual identity requires conscience commitment in implementing the hierarchy of values in the school community, which can be reflected in the change of attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and motivations. This change reveals the need for formation and fostering the creation of a new, enriched identity (Cencini, 2005; Palmer, 1993) in the process of education going beyond the limits of tangible results, which demands openness and readiness for transformation. To realize formative, spiritual goals, it is necessary to change not only the curriculum, but also the system, to enable educators to engage in experimental projects and conduct

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research lasting some years with those who feel responsible for achieving goals within wholeness, in Palmer's understanding. In this context, it is necessary to claim that the teachers are supposed to be ready and eager for formation enlightened by the grace given them by God, who helps them master their faith permeated with love. Such a project could be made with the use of action research, in some circles documented thoroughly at the local, national, and international levels, and its results could be disseminated widely for the benefit of further generations, who are endangered by various wars, also metaphorically.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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