

Thematic Article

# Truth in the light of Parker J. Palmer's metaphorical understanding of education as a spiritual journey

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Recommended citation:

Szymańska, M. (2026). Truth in the light of Parker J. Palmer's metaphorical understanding of education as a spiritual journey. *Central European Journal of Educational Research*, 8(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.37441/cejcr/2026/8/1/17083>

## Abstract

The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of truth as one of the most essential attributes of spirituality, determining the qualitative function of educational subjects, and education, in general. Appropriate understanding and practice of the truth, in conjunction with other values/virtues such as obedience to truth, love, faith, prayer, courage, humility, etc., foster building a friendship between teachers and students, based on a dialogue about the truth. According to Parker J. Palmer's research, these values/virtues constitute the foundation for exploring the metaphor of education as a spiritual journey, enabling schools to overcome obstacles on the path to building a civilization of Love and Peace. The hermeneutic analysis of the contents leads to the conclusion that educational systems need to be reformed to address the authentic good of humanity. This will require a focus on building school autonomy based on the values/virtues that make for the spiritual approach to education and upbringing.

*Keywords:* education; virtues; spirituality; truth; obedience to truth

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## Introduction

Today many challenges have arisen that education must face at all levels. Social, cultural, political, and economic changes direct the operation of schools undermining the stability of even the proven systems. This interacts with a lack of security. Thus, the guarantee of effective, quality education often fails, which is reflected in the events we see taking place worldwide. Such a situation demands deep reflection grounded in seeking the truth and courageous openness to the results of query conducted, for example, within, at least, three cycles of educational action research. This can be seen by the fact that dynamic changes affect school's function, transforming it temporarily into a laboratory. This metaphor may result in mixed feelings, arousing concern and anxiety about shaping a qualitative perspective on education. After all, paradigms in education should not take the form of a "melting pot", for that would lead to educational and pedagogical crises, the likes of which we see around us. Thus, not surprisingly, the question arises: how can we manage these school crises on the moral, social, cultural, and spiritual levels looking at the future of the next generations? It's difficult to find a single, specific reply to this problem. The answers are assumed to lie in the axiological and ethical background, where values constitute the rock of educational systems on which a house is built. Such a house would not be destroyed by storms and strong winds. What is more, such a house can be a subject to a constructive innovation fostering the progress of integral human development as a whole. Therefore, for an educational system to work properly, values/virtues are needed, most importantly, spiritual ones. Their implementation in educational content support the teacher and student formation (Szymanska, 2017), justifying Palmer's (1993) metaphorical view of education as a spiritual journey. Before discussing the main aspects of this metaphor, it seems necessary to outline some information on Palmer's achievements. He was assigned to a group of 25 people whose work changed the world. He published a number of books, particularly: *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:*

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*Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old* (2018), and *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward Undivided Life* (2009)<sup>2</sup>. His focus centering mainly on educational subjects which are ground in objectivistic-behavior theories, leaving little to no place for spirituality. The author sees many dangers to education and the future of next generations coming from such approaches, since the personalistic, ontological dimension of humanity cannot be ignored. In this light, he exposes the hidden core of a person, that is, the spirituality enabling the teachers and their students to make education an instrument for seeking the truth in love, courage, faith, obedience, and other virtues. These and other merits that are found in the educational process through deep reflection he sought to unearth. Nowadays, in times of chaos caused by extreme relativistic concepts of cultural, social and political tendencies, his concept is crucial. For, while the current mainstream would seek to promote “the melting pot” of values, having naught to do with creating the autonomous space for teaching and learning truth, his attempts to foster that very thing which is logical and spiritual at the same time. His is the challenge set before educators.

Along these lines we have set out the following research questions:

- 1) How does Parker J. Palmer understand the metaphor mentioned?
- 2) What factors determine the practical implementation of this metaphor in the educational sphere?
- 3) What conclusions can be drawn from the presented theoretical analysis?

Answering these questions will be possible using the hermeneutic method and content analysis (Szymańska, 2025, pp.21-22; Vieira, de Queiroz, 2017) to explore and grasp the ever-updated, education-oriented issues raised in light of Palmer's concept. This is indeed the goal. Once achieved, practical implications can be unearthed and put in place.

#### **Parker J. Palmer's metaphorical vision on education perceived as a spiritual journey**

Presenting Palmer's metaphorical vision on education as a spiritual journey requires, at least, an outline of the definitions of chosen spirituality appropriate for the discussed issue. It is worth mentioning the thought of Edward H. Taylor, who, in making the review of the literature on this subject refers to such authors as: Michael Miovic (2004), Dorte T. Viftrup, Niels C. Hvidt, and Niels Buus (2013), indicate that spirituality can be defined thus: “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). Also, it is worth eliciting the concept of spirituality by Doris Reisinger who aligns its social and personal dimensions and exposes the fact that they infuse each other. She claims also that spirituality belongs to the natural ability to be learnt from others, so it can be shared with the person's social environment. The author explains: “Therefore, it can never be entirely private, but at the same time it is always unique and intimately personal. Spirituality understood in this way is closely connected to religion, culture, art, and even social dynamics” (Reisinger, 2025, p.127). Thus, on one hand, spirituality creates the inner space of feelings and mentality; on the other hand, it is formed by many factors, including the Transcendental one. The development of the spiritual sphere of personality has an impact on a person's integral development encompassing the biological, psychological, social and cultural structures of personality (Kunowski, 2000) and social community in which the person lives and acts. According to the research, it has a significant influence on forming the identity in its construct named the autonomous creative identity (Szymańska, 2025), comprising the spiritual identity often tied up with the religious one (Nicoară, Nicoară & Popescu, 2024). This reflection on spirituality corresponds with Reisinger's view: “spirituality is the art of shaping a system of meanings that fits a person's individual fate and character and makes them thrive without alienating them from their historical, cultural, and social context. Spirituality is furthermore a system of meanings that add up to a coherent whole, and that can be adapted and developed so that it can deal with even the most unexpected changes in life. Finally, spirituality is a system of meaning that is resilient and allows a person to thrive and to give meaning to even the most shattering of life experiences (2025, p.128)”. Such understanding of spirituality also is related to Palmer's metaphorical concept of education as a spiritual journey. Therein, the teachers and pupils are the main participants cooperating and collaborating within the community called school, where space is created for building bonds based on love, truth, obedience, humility, openness, and transcendence. In this way, they allow others to know their selves as they are known (Palmer, 1993). Chris Kiesling's and others' perception of spirituality are also ground for this idea; they speak of it as constructing spiritual identity perceived “as a persistent sense of self that addresses

<sup>2</sup> The information is taken from his biography accessible at <https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/parker-palmer>.

ultimate questions about the nature, purpose, and meaning of life, resulting in behaviors that are consonant with the individual's core values" (Chris Kiesling's, 2006, p. 1269). It follows, education should stimulate its subjects to discover and disclose the meaning of spirituality. It can then be shared with others while still providing the space for personal exploration and discovery. Palmer puts it like this: "If we want to recover the spirituality of education to overcome the arrogance of the mind that would be God, we would do well to seek clues in the desert experience" (Palmer, 1993, p. 41). He recommends teaching from the heart, using stories and anecdotes that have within them hidden the valuable contents necessary for stimulating reflective growth. This growth can make a person open to silent speculation and attentive listening. In this way, truth and obedience will grow and mature. "Learning the truth requires that we enter into personal relationship with what the words reveal. To know the truth we must follow it with our lives. In this kind of education, the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the subject is one of obedience. The word 'obedience' does not mean slavish, uncritical adherence; it comes from the Latin *audire*, which means 'to listen'. Obedience requires the discerning ear. The ear that listens for the reality of the situation, a listening that allows the hearer to respond to that reality, whatever it may be" (Palmer, 1993, p. 43). He combines obedience with the faith, prayers, and truth grounded in a "rigorous and demanding love" (1993, p. 46) which are to perform a great role in the art of teaching and learning that fosters spiritual development, provided that both pupils are willing to look for the knowledge that transforms. In light of this, it can be assumed that spirituality is intertwined with educational processes, "a conscious process with a consciously set goal" (Reisinger, 2025, p. 128). Reisinger continues to explain: "therefore, spirituality is better understood not as a need, but as an art. Hence I would like to define spirituality as the art of creating meaning in life" (Reisinger, 2025, p. 128). This coincides with Palmer's "education as a spiritual journey" exceeding the three dimensions of teaching and learning: openness, boundaries and hospitality. Openness, Palmer writes, is "creating a learning space means resisting our own tendency to clutter up own consciousness and our classroom. If we can affirm the search for truth as a continually uncertain journey, we may find the courage to keep the space open rather than packing it with pretense. Second, we must remember that we not only seek truth but that truth seeks us as well" (1993, p.71, 72). He points out that "the openness of a space is created by the firmness of its boundaries. A learning space cannot go on forever; if it did, it would be not a structure for learning but invitation to confusion and chaos" (1993, p. 72). Therefore, the teacher is bound to define carefully and wisely the boundaries, which understood and used properly, can help students overcome their difficulties through hard work. They can face true problems and find solutions to them, though the pain be great and the cost high. So that their toils be meaningful and effective, we must address the third dimension of the metaphor - hospitality. The author claims "hospitality means receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas with openness and care. It means creating an ethos in which the community of truth form, the pain of truth's transformations be born" (Palmer, 1993, p.74). The characteristics of the learning space described above reveal an inherent connection between its key dimensions. The dramatic space, defined by the interplay of silence and speech, is closely linked to the development of the cognitive space, while both are shaped by and reflected in the emotional (feeling) space — all united by a shared commitment to truth. Practicing these aspects of learning and teaching, space can be seen as a challenge that carries a reward, if the teacher builds a friendship with the students. It is necessary to add that "The true test of a friendship is its ability to sustain conflicts, its capacity to incorporate tension as a creative part of relationship; indeed it is in tension and conflict that the transformations of friendship often occur" (Palmer, 1993, p. 104). Such a kind of friendship takes place in a light, sweet atmosphere. Moreover, by overcoming obstacles and barriers, enduring pain, teachers can find strength, as long as they cling to their passion (Chen et al., 2021) for the vocation and their love for their students. Building a formative, spiritual approach to self and by valuing spiritual merits can help both pupil and teacher fulfill their educational mission. Among these virtues, Palmer mentions humility, faith, truth, curiosity, love, openness, and obedience. These inform the teacher's approach, requiring silence, meditation, especially silent meditation, solitude, and grace through prayers (1993; 2018). He also draws attention to the transformative knowledge the students gain while learning the school subjects. According to him: "The teacher, who knows the subject well, must introduce it to students in the way one would introduce a friend. The students must know why the teacher values the subject, how the subject has transformed the teacher's life" (1993, p. 104).

To sum it up, Palmer's metaphor of an educational journey highlights the meaning of building the inward educational space in teachers and students through the mature friendship determined by virtues/values (Hitlin, 2003). These are formed in their hearts and minds while they are in the process of knowing themselves as they ought to be known by others. Active participation in this journey requires an obedient approach to truth and courage (Palmer, 2007). Friendship seen from this perspective is rooted in the well-developed spirituality "that

carries a person through all kinds of challenges of life and helps them to deal with these situations, in a way that they do no harm to either themselves or others, is a true art that few have mastered, but from which all would benefit" (Reisinger, 2025, p. 128).

### **Truth - the prior value determining the metaphor of education as a spiritual journey**

The metaphor of education as a spiritual journey points inward, toward the inner dimensions of teaching and learning, and calls for an understanding of the truth and courage that underlie the authentic, wise attitude of the teacher. This attitude should be built on the truth. In this context, recalling Stanisław Kowalczyk's view on virtue/values is crucial. Referring to cognitive-intellectual values, he notes that truth is not a theoretical-speculative value, but an existential-personal one. He underlines that the logos of truth, recognized in the world, thanks to human mental faculties, requires an ethos, which defines and drives human action. He also stresses that one of the primary criteria of human value is their fidelity to and humility regarding the truth, combined with an awareness of their own limitations. Betrayal of the truth is always the psychological destruction of the human personality (Kowalczyk, 2006, p. 176). That is why, it is necessary for teachers to create a space for truth in which students can experience practicing it personally and in community. One of the means of conveying the truth is the dialogue taking place in a relationship between "knowers of self and those who are known by self, who are understood as independent but accountable selves. The dialogue saves personal truth from subjectivism, for genuine dialogue is possible only as I acknowledge an integrity in the other that cannot be reduced to my perceptions and needs" (Palmer, 1993, p. 55–56). The truth in the friendly relationship between teachers and pupils/students is shaped mainly by those who know, who make an attempt to possess the truthful knowledge which does not infuse the world subjectively "as premodern knowing did" (Palmer, 1993, p. 32). This knowledge is not used for manipulating others or to meet personal or communal needs, as it takes place in the modern or postmodern, and educational realms. Truthful knowledge is primarily built by bonds of love, not logic. Although, it is afflicted by logics as well. Teachers and students treat the classroom as an integral community, a place where these ties hold them responsible for behaving according to knowledge shaped by morals. This adherence to axiological epistemology provides for a wider creative space, where teachers can share their power accountably with students. Nevertheless, it is sad to say that many students, on one hand, expect teachers to act creatively and make the space for them while, on the other hand, do not want to take true responsibility for own learning. Considering this, Palmer's perspective on such a situation seems to be very actual nowadays. He writes: "when a teacher tries to share the power, to give students more responsibility for their own education, students get skittish or cynical. They complain that the teacher is not earning his or her pay, and they subvert the experiment by noncooperation. Many students prefer to have their learning boxed and tied, and when they are invited into a more creative role they flee in fear" (Palmer, 1993, p. 39). To overcome difficulties connected to student engagement in the process of learning, the educational institution could provide possibilities for pupils to develop their inner character where love and obedience to truth hold their rightful place. This could lead to community building where friendship between members is shaped wisely according to the ethical rules grounded in personalism. Palmer sees the Christian approach of prayer as very effective as it "brings us to the edge of a great mystery, where we become inarticulate, where our knowledge fails" (1993, p. 125), we learn humility and to be open to multiple interpretations of knowledge, but it can also be seen as relativism, promoting chaotic subjectivity and thus impeding the process of seeking truth. To avoid dangers connected with choosing the right path to grab hold of truth, teachers could develop students' natural mental and moral curiosity with the use of Sokrates' methods of inquiry and others (Dorgu, 2015), for example, enabling them to discern what is good or bad, shallow or deep, authentic or illusionary, false beauty, love, and truth etc. One must adjust appropriately his or her chosen knowledge strategies in order to better apply what is known to be true, to reinforce it. It is thanks to truth that we better understand Man's existence and purpose (Duma, 2016, p. 868), by adding a new qualitative layer to and support for building a new, quality identity. It can thus be perceived as one of the most important factors determining the shape of a teacher's vocation and the mission they are bound to fulfill. Palmer calls them a "true professor", saying, "the true professor is not one who controls 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 brings us into community with each other and the world" (1993, p. 113). The true professors/teachers create a learning space for truth and obedience to truth. They create the space for building a community of the Spirit, enabling bonds of friendship formed in and through prayer done in solitude and silence, and meditation rooted in love for God, for others, for the world, and for self.

### Conclusion and implications

The hermeneutical content analysis presented above points out significant values/virtues, namely truth, obedience to truth, love, and humility in education, as viewed through Parker J. Palmer's education as a spiritual journey. In his thought, spirituality is key to qualitative education and the formation of educational subjects. As far as the meaning of spirituality in education is concerned, he focuses on educational approach reform from a personal view of the truth according to the Christian faith. Palmer's observations can be transferred to a universal framework of school curriculum and may inspire educators to undertake not only practical action, but also seek out spiritual factors that better the quality of education and upbringing. Such an approach requires courage and the faith in the power of Transcendence in overcoming boundaries, including political ones. Regarding the true good of humanity, such activities seem worthwhile, we are surrounded in our day and age with hostility, insecurity, and extreme relativism. This has little in common with the truth and obedience to the truth, generally and not dogmatically. Therefore, the "spirit-seeking heart" and the "knowledge-seeking mind" (Palmer, 1993, p. 24) should induce teachers' and other educators' constant reflection on the quality of their vocational identity as affecting their students' holistic, integral development. Remembering that education goes beyond the tangible and material, they need to ask questions about the mission they are to fulfil.

**Acknowledgments:** We thank Johnathan Dabney for the English language editing.

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