

Core Beliefs Essay

Aaron Schmidt

University of Alaska Southeast

Bosh! Stephen said rudely. A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery.

James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young*

Man

We teach who we are.

Parker Palmer, "The Heart of a Teacher"

Core Beliefs Essay

My core beliefs as a teacher stem from my core beliefs as a person. I articulate my purpose in life in terms of a spiritual knight errant: I am on a quest to know and be myself, and to love and encourage others to know and be themselves.

It takes great courage to be oneself. Courage; the word itself refers to the heart, and implies a heart strength that sets the psyche.¹ As much as I know from experience that school can be psychologically discouraging, I also know that school can be a place that encourages and empowers people. I am here to affirm my students for who they are, and at the same time to challenge them to grow in a way that is true and authentic for them. Along the way, I want to model love in such a way as to help facilitate connection.

I am in love with the world around me. I see connections everywhere, including in places that some academics would call unacademic. What I now see as my penchant for divergent

¹ Wikipedia has this to say about the idea of psyche: "The basic meaning of the Greek word ψυχή (*psūkhē*) was 'life' in the sense of 'breath,' formed from the verb ψύχω (*psukhō*, 'to blow'). Derived meanings included 'spirit,' 'soul,' 'ghost,' and ultimately 'self' in the sense of 'conscious personality' or 'psyche.'" *Psychology* is rooted in *psyche*. I am a scholar and a teacher not only of mind but also of life, of breath, of consciousness, of spirit, of soul.

thinking I once saw as a distraction, which I feared held me back from fulfilling my academic potential. I have come to realize that the fullness of my life lends fullness to my scholarship and teaching. All that is gold does not glitter. Not all those who wander are lost (Tolkien, 1993). I want to read and study and learn and teach, both to raise my consciousness & connections and to be around other learners. I also want to ride my bike and make music and play games and do nothing and love my family & my friends. For me, all these things are connected. Every thing expresses and participates in the whole, which is infinite. All parts of my life influence who I am as a teacher.

I believe that students learn from each other. Countless things have shaped me as a learner and a teacher, but lately I find myself recalling my fellow students, so many of whom have inspired me in key ways. As an undergraduate at Seattle Pacific University, I had some friends who helped me see how the ancient, sacred, fraught process of learning can inform and inspire the other parts of life: art, music, faith, personal style. I'm not describing it quite right;

they turned me on. Their scholarship was on another level, they were getting at the heart of the matter and not just prattling or posturing, and they were so *cool*.²³



² Cool is easy to dismiss as vanity, but I think the idea also describes relevance and the interplay between connection and not-connection. Specifically, it is about the appeal of divergence. Often, it is a celebration of the eccentric. What is normal, easy, and inauthentic does not stay cool for long. True cool endures, transcends and transforms the quotidian. Cool takes courage. Be the cool you want to see in the world.

³ *Opening of the Jockey Club, Paris, ca. 1923*. Photo courtesy of Donald Gallup.

Once, in a daylong session at Dr. Blumberg's house, Noah burst into tears while reading Derrida out loud, and PJ finished reading for him. There in her living room, Dr. Blumberg conducted an orchestra of the soul. The people and the ideas came together in harmony with the music of the spheres. What I was seeing was a real discourse community, and even as I wanted to be a part of it I realized I *was* part of it. The guilty, isolated boy that I was suffered a sea-change into something rich and strange. Though it would take another decade or so for me to really believe and reconcile it, with a little help from my friends my consciousness had opened to a life of the mind that was transformative in such a way as to make me feel more fully human.

I believe in empowering students to connect with content which, like Soylent Green, is people; content is comprised of the ideas people have about things, and is never quite the things themselves. Further, I believe that teaching is about facilitating a connection between the perspective of each particular student with the particular perspective presented by authors and discourse communities. This involves an affirmation of both the discursive content and the student. Every discourse is a world. Every student is a world. This stuff is worth knowing. You are a worthy knower. You carry with you being and experience and knowledge that are part of the Ultimate Reality. Every thing to be experienced and known is also part of that Ultimate Reality. तत् त्वम् असि. Thou art that. At the same time, you and every thing to be experienced and known are also not a bit tamed, are untranslatable. Love makes the leap.

Love stands at the crux of how I perceive myself and my connection with the cosmos. To borrow Ezra Pound's words, *Amo ergo sum* (Pound, 2003). As Pound knew all too well, power can get in the way of that love. I believe this is especially true when schools would rather see students controlled than free. "The true purpose of schools is to nurture young people in their

learning. Society, however, uses schools, as it does all other institutions, to maintain itself - and, in particular, to maintain the current socioeconomic system.” Just look at grades. Look at all the charts that tie learning to earning. Look at the way students so often feel tired and afraid. “I believe that schools can become both nurturing communities and forces for the liberation of human intelligence” (“The Goal: Caring Communities of Learners”). Indeed. I want to teach in a way that is loving, nurturing, and liberating to the psyches of myself, of my colleagues, and of each of my students. How cool would *that* be?

References

- Gallup, D. *Opening of the jockey club, paris, ca. 1923*. Retrieved from https://mrskhistory.wikispaces.com/*The+Lost+Generation+of+the+1920s
- Joyce, James. *A portrait of the artist as a young man*. (1964). New York, NY: Viking Press.
- Palmer, P. *The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. (1998). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Pound, E. *The pisan cantos*. (2003). New York, NY: New Directions.
- Psyche. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia online*. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psyche_\(psychology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psyche_(psychology))
- “The Goal: Caring Communities of Learners.” Author and date unknown. Lisa’s class.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The fellowship of the ring: being the first part of the lord of the rings*. (1993). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.