

A Teacher's Reflection Book

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Exercises, Stories, Invitations

Jean Koh Peters

Mark Weisberg

Foreword by

Gerry Hess

Co-Director, Institute for
Law Teaching and Learning

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For Susan, and in memory of Donald L. Finkel
For Jim, Liz, and Chris
For our students

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Foreword

Why do we teach? Who are our students? What can we do to help our students persevere, survive, excel? How can we continue to develop our professional and personal selves? Where will we find the time and space to address these, and many other questions, relevant to our personal and professional growth? These issues matter to thoughtful teachers at every level—elementary school physical education teachers (like my brother), high school special education teachers (like my son), social work professors (like my spouse), and law school profs (like me).

Jean Koh Peters and Mark Weisberg offer us a wonderful resource—*A Teacher's Reflection Book*—to facilitate our journey of discovery and renewal. Mark and Jean are teachers' teachers. Not because they are model teachers, colleagues, parents, or partners. Like most of us, Jean and Mark have struggled to become effective teachers and to integrate their professional and personal lives. They are teachers' teachers because they have thought deeply about how to facilitate teachers' development through reflection. They have meticulously planned and then led wildly successful reflection retreats for teachers. And now they have written this book to bring the power and magic of reflection to anyone willing to spend a bit of time reading, thinking, and writing about their teaching.

In their retreats and in this book, Mark and Jean guide teachers through the reflection process. They offer a wide variety of exercises and opportunities for us to delve more deeply into our teaching and our students' learning. Jean and Mark do not talk at us, instead they provide space and support for our reflection.

While reviewing a draft of *A Teacher's Reflection Book*, I had two experiences that illustrate the power of Mark's and Jean's work. As

I reviewed the first half of the book, I was harried and overwhelmed with end-of-the-semester teaching, exam preparation, and grading. Reading this book was another item on an already too long To Do list. But as I began making my way through the book, I stopped often to engage in the reflection exercises Jean and Mark offered. The review became a joy rather than a chore.

While reviewing the second half of *A Teacher's Reflection Book*, I was stuck for fourteen hours in the San Francisco airport. Inspired by Mark and Jean, I spent a couple of hours engaged in a mini retreat, which they call an individual reflection event. My mini retreat helped me make the transition from semester break to a new semester. By the time I got on my long-delayed flight, I was filled with energy and ideas for my upcoming semester of teaching and scholarship. What a gift.

I hope that *A Teacher's Reflection Book* helps you embark on a valuable journey of reflection. I am confident that you are in good hands.

Gerry Hess
Professor, and Director of the
Institute for Law School Teaching
Gonzaga University School of Law

Preface

The ‘secrets’ of good teaching are the same as the secrets of good living: seeing oneself without blinking, offering hospitality to the alien other, speaking truth to power, being present and being real.

—Parker Palmer, *Foreword to Mary Rose O’Reilly, Radical Presence*¹

Welcome to *A Teacher’s Reflection Book*. Its story began eleven years ago in a beautiful room with a stone fireplace, oriental carpets, and huge windows with a view of the Cascade Mountains.² Gathered there were 30 law teachers from across North America who’d come to spend three days reflecting on their teaching. Some were disillusioned and had come wondering whether teaching really was their vocation. Others, while excited about their teaching, had found their academic lives so full that they welcomed an opportunity to slow their pace and enter a quiet space to reflect on what they’d been doing. Still others had come simply to rest: to walk, to swim, to read, to decompress.

Jean Koh Peters was in this last group. Exhausted from a year of teaching and difficult clinical work representing children and people seeking asylum in the United States, she had arrived a day early, with forty pounds of novels, gardening, and craft books she had been wanting to read, as well as her guitar and flute, firmly resolved not to become involved in the retreat, defended against any kind of group experience. She wanted time to herself to recover from the year.

Jean never did pick up any of those books; they went back to Connecticut unread. Instead, after talking and enjoying a wonderful meal that first day with retreat facilitator Mark Weisberg,

and walking with several participants the next day before the retreat began, she found herself drawn to the opening session, even accepting Mark's invitation to greet the entering participants with music from her flute. As the first session began, she felt herself invited into a safe, welcoming, open space, and from that moment she was fully engaged and left the retreat feeling reinvigorated and more grounded in her vocation. For almost all participants the evaluations told a similar story.

How did that happen? The participants certainly were crucial. Everyone seemed to want to spend several days connected to, or reconnecting with, their authentic selves, and most embraced the opportunity to engage with and be supported by like-minded peers. And the setting, along with the structure of the retreat, seemed to give them permission to do just that. Exercises, stories, readings, large and small group discussions, along with considerable free time for thinking, walking, writing, and talking, each in its own way conducive to reflecting.

Whatever the reasons, Gerry Hess, Director of the Institute for Law School Teaching, decided the Institute should sponsor a second retreat, and this time invited both Jean and Mark to facilitate. Mark was delighted at the prospect of working with Jean. When invited by Gerry to facilitate the initial retreat, he had been intrigued by the challenge of designing an event foregrounding reflection. As part of his planning process, he found himself returning to his favorite books about teaching and learning, parts of which found their way into the retreat materials. During the retreat, he was excited to see readings that had touched him helping to open a space for others. While fully engaged in the retreat, his role as sole facilitator left him less time than he would have liked for his own reflections. He expected that sharing the role with Jean would change that. It did, and much more. Gerry's invitation began a collaboration that has been a vital part of our working and our personal lives for the past eleven years.

Although when we agreed to work together, the retreat was three years away, we began planning almost immediately, communicating through e-mail and more significantly, in weekly, hour-long telephone conversations. We retained most of the ele-

ments of the first retreat, adding a structured opportunity for participants to work on an “Individual Reflection Event,” designed to meet their most pressing needs for reflection and feedback.³ We also added an arts space and sang rounds. This retreat was equally well-received, and it was clear that the additions contributed to its success.

For the most recent retreat, in July 2005,⁴ we expanded its audience, opening it to all university teachers. We were apprehensive about whether people from diverse disciplines—the list included Business, Law, Exercise and Sports Science, French, Asian Studies, Education, Drama, English, and Psychology—would be able to work meaningfully across those disciplines and support each other, but we needn’t have worried.

Through it all we wondered why the insights that emerged from this experience, and the experience itself, had to be reserved for three days in a wonderful setting with perfect weather, delicious food, and comfortable accommodations. Why couldn’t we try to make them available to a larger audience? When Gerry suggested we should do just that, we decided to give it a go. This book is the result.

At first we were daunted by the idea of trying to recreate in black and white what had felt so linked to a specific time and place. We came to realize, however, that our goal was not to recreate the retreats, but to serve the same purpose the retreats served: to help dedicated teachers who were committed to reflection, but who simply couldn’t figure out how to work it into their daily lives, to find that time and structure that reflection. Our goal at our retreats has been to help teachers begin to craft a daily life of reflection that could be continued in the hurly-burly of work back home. The mini-retreat we’ve called the Individual Reflection Event (see Chapter 2) was designed, both to allow participants to have that mini-retreat while attending the retreat, but also, by learning that they could design one and by participating in others their colleagues had designed, to encourage them to create similar mini-retreats for themselves, which they could work into their daily lives at home.

We have designed this book so that you can use its materials as part of those reflection events, those mini-retreats, either on your

own, with a friend or colleague, or with a group of colleagues over time. Just as our retreat participants went home with huge, heavy three-ring binders filled with some of our favorite writings about teaching and learning and our favorite exercises for prompting reflection, we hope that you'll find this book a companion, inviting you to reflection, supporting you through the difficult times that sometimes can accompany our teaching.

Some writers refer to retreats as time in "sacred space."⁵ Using that definition, it's easy to understand why busy teachers want time to retreat; in normal academic life, reflection feels impossible. What is sacred about faculty meetings, PowerPoint presentations, exam booklets, and grading? Yet, when we have been able to gather with other teachers to talk about teaching, inevitably we have found that our teaching contains a meaning and heart so important to us that the chance to reflect on it seriously feels not a burden, but a joy. We also discovered that many of our participants already had found a variety of ways to reflect on their teaching but hadn't identified them or figured out how to regularize them. And we learned that no matter how many ways they might have to reflect on their teaching, people welcome more.

We hope you might find this book useful in those precious moments of reflecting on the teaching work we are privileged to do. As our section on the individual reflection event suggests, we believe that the four essential elements of retreating—preparing an intention to explore, entering into a contained time or space, listening mindfully, and reemerging transformed into ordinary time and space—can become part of even the most harried professional teaching life. We hope this book will be a companion for you as you move in and out of your work life and your reflection time and will help provide a link between the two, so that reflection becomes a necessary and regular part of your already rich lives.

And you needn't reflect alone. One of our greatest pleasures in facilitating these retreats has been to meet other teachers who share our desire to reflect. The company of good colleagues is a joy unrivaled, and we encourage you to explore whether you might use this book in conversation with other like-minded teachers. But because so many of our readings are by teachers, for teachers, even

if you are working on your own, using these materials will help you to enter many conversations with fine teachers of all stripes.

Consequently, as we've done in our retreats, we invite you to join us and enter what we hope will be a safe, supportive space in which you can find your unique path for reflecting on your teaching, alone, and possibly with others.

To help you on that path, we've included a variety of prompts for reflecting. Throughout the book you'll find exercises that, following Don Finkel, author of the provocative *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*,* we hope you'll feel encouraged to try rather than just read. Some of the exercises you can do either alone or with a group. We also ask questions and occasionally offer our responses to them. We include stories, our own and those of others. And in each section we include a set of what we hope will be provocative readings, not an exhaustive survey of a topic, but a selection of favorites.

Some of the exercises and readings will appeal to you more than others. We don't expect you to respond to each. Rather, we've tried to provide enough variety that each of you will be able to craft your own reflective journey through the book. We intend the book to be exploratory, not hortatory. And while it has a structure and we do have our perspectives, we haven't constructed the book as an argument. Rather, to echo Mary Rose O'Reilly:

[Our] method is more circling than linear. This book is not a how-to manual, still less an argument developed from premise to conclusion. It is a collection of exercises, stories, tropes, and images that nudge up against each other and try to reproduce the "analysis" as an experience,

* "It's almost impossible to get people to put their book down and perform some task while they are reading. Nevertheless, I shall attempt the impossible. I would like you to stop reading this book long enough to take this simple test ...

Find a piece of paper. Put from your mind what you have read in this book so far. Answer the following question in writing ..."

Donald L. Finkel, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000).

an experience [we] hope [you] will share the living-of. Instead of constructing an argument in theoretical terms, [we're] trying to “make it happen” ...⁶

You can approach the book from several perspectives. You can use it to explore personal dimensions in your life, or you can use it to explore professional dimensions. As the opening quote from Parker Palmer suggests, for us these are intimately linked, and we invite you to explore whether that's true for you. However you approach it, remember that a retreat is meant for an audience of one. So as you proceed, we encourage you to trust your own process and to use whatever methods work for you.

How the Book Is Organized

The book contains six chapters, each divided into sections. Chapter 1 begins, unsurprisingly, at the beginning, with *Saying Hello*. Teachers say many hellos, and they aren't always easy. As teachers, we want to make our first encounters meaningful, to be both inviting and engaging, possibly even provocative. In this section, we say hello to you and explore what is significant about saying hello and how we might do it. We offer you a variety of exercises and introduce you to several thoughtful teachers reflecting on their teaching. Perhaps as you engage their voices, you'll want to begin to add your own.

If you were to describe your ideal teacher, what qualities would she have? What relationship would she establish with you?

In Chapter 2 we focus explicitly on reflection: what it is and how to practice it meaningfully. We invite you to think about the teacher you are or try to be. Exploring the value of reflecting, we identify critical elements in any reflective process, offer a model for using that process, which allows you personalize it by helping you locate what we call “processes you can trust.”

An extremely useful method for employing these processes can be an *individual reflection event*, an opportunity to listen to yourself, and possibly to others, on an issue or concern important to you. At the past two retreats, we invited each person to identify

that issue for themselves and provided a structure that would ensure them the time for deep reflection on their issue and for others to support them in whatever ways they wished. We've tried to do that again here, providing several examples of successful individual reflection events.

When we reflect, we create a space where we can listen to ourselves, and in a supportive group, to others, including our students. Listening not only is essential for reflection; much of our lives consists of listening and being listened to. We've devoted Chapter 3 to exploring how we listen and what that might mean for us and for our interlocutors.

It's impossible to reflect meaningfully on our teaching without thinking about our students: who they are, and what and how they learn, in our classrooms and out. That's our focus in Chapter 4. Our initial mirror is fear. Underlying this chapter is our assumption that in our learning and our search for ourselves, as teacher, writer, or student, we're often paralyzed by fear: the fear of being discovered for the frauds we "know" we are, the fear of failure, or of success, and the fear of being known or of not being known. In this chapter we want to create a space that will help people move past their fears and find their authentic selves.

In Chapter 4, expecting that our classrooms reveal our core values and process, we begin there and ask: What is it we're doing in our classrooms, and why? To explore that question, we take you to visit several classrooms, each a different nightmare, and ask you to pause to look at the dispositions⁷ of those classrooms and to reflect on your experiences there. Which do you fear most?

What are the dispositions we want present in our own classrooms, and how can we help establish and sustain them? As an entry point, we also include several stories describing classroom practices that, if they do not eliminate, at least have reduced the paralyzing fear that teachers and students can feel.

Since we think you'll benefit from visiting several classrooms and institutions, in this Chapter, rather than creating a single narrative, we focus on several individual stories.

To reflect on our teaching, we also need to reflect on our students: who are they authentically? We ask this question, be-

cause we know that what and how a student learns are inextricably intertwined with who she is. As Parker Palmer puts it, "... there is a deep yearning among students and teachers today—a yearning for embodied meaning—that will be fulfilled only as education embraces the fact that what is inward and invisible is at least as important as what is outward and empirical."^{*8} Yet in the current educational environment, we wonder if students (and teachers) are encouraged to bring what they know and what they care about to their work. That leads us to ask what it would mean for a student (or teacher) to be who they are in this environment? What would our teaching look like if we were to meet all the individual needs of our students?

This section also includes the voices of several students, writing about themselves and about their learning. What they write reveals personal dimensions that their teachers and fellow students may not know, several of which are startling. What would a classroom more open to those dimensions look like?

We want our students to learn discerning judgment, yet the judgmental atmosphere that can penetrate our classrooms may mean that students will be overly cautious in exercising their judgment and learning from their mistakes. Because we think it central to both learning and teaching, we return to the theme of teaching non-judgmentally and offer several strategies for doing that.

Chapter 5 invites us to reflect on teaching as a vocation: what it means to be a professional, and what it might mean to have a vocation as a teacher. As with students, our operating assumption is that in the various fora in which a teacher teaches, her teaching is inextricably intertwined with who she is. To help you begin your exploration, we include a professor's story illustrating how challenging it can be to assert and sustain an identity and a voice in a (professional) world that seems consistently threatened by identi-

* Compare Mary Rose O'Reilley:

Most work of consciousness happens in an underground storehouse
that mind can only fertilize like a good gardener.

Mary Rose O'Reilley, *The Peaceable Classroom* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1993), 38.

ties that differ from a perceived norm. At the center of the chapter is an essay we have written on vocation. We draw on several sources and offer four exercises for exploring your vocation: writing your obituary or eulogy, finding a governing metaphor, composing a job description, and visiting with your future self. We examine the relationship between vocation and spirituality and include an extended meditation on how we can nurture our vocation, drawing on “processes we can trust,” both external and internal. To illustrate those processes, we feature several stories. Finally, we look at two particular elements of a teacher’s vocation, writing and classroom teaching, and also offer our perspective on nurturing vocation in our students.

As we began with *Saying Hello*, we end in Chapter 6 with *Saying Goodbye*. We think saying goodbye is an important dimension of our work as teachers. As with hellos, a teacher says many goodbyes, and they rarely are easy. In this chapter you’ll find several meditations on saying goodbye.

With these goodbyes, we intend to signal both a form of closure to the retreat inside the book and to invite a form of re-entry into the world.

In an Appendix to the book we include a collection of selected *Resources for Reflecting*. We hope that along with the book, you’ll find those resources helpful to you in reflecting on your life as a teacher or in facilitating reflection workshops you might decide to offer your colleagues. We wish you hours of abundant reflection and would be delighted to learn of your experiences using the book or resources and delighted to learn of others you’ve found helpful.

J.K.P. and M.W.

Notes

1. Parker J. Palmer, Foreword to *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, by Mary Rose O'Reilley (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1998), ix.

2. The Retreat was held at the *Sleeping Lady Resort* in Leavenworth, Washington, accessed January 24, 2011, <http://www.sleepinglady.com>, and was sponsored by the Institute for Law Teaching and Learning, housed at Gonzaga Law School in Spokane, Washington, accessed January 24, 2011, http://www.law.gonzaga.edu/Centers-Programs/inst_law_teaching-learning.asp.

3. We describe this event more fully in Chapter 2.

4. This Retreat was held in the Canadian Rockies at the Banff Centre in Banff, Alberta, and was organized by Tim Pychyl of the Institute for the Advancement of Teaching in Higher Education, with generous financial support from the publishing company, McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

5. Jennifer Louden, *The Woman's Retreat Book* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), 28.

6. Mary Rose O'Reilley, *The Peaceable Classroom* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1993), xvii.

7. We borrow the term from Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill's discussion in "The Dispositions of Democratic Discussion." *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 8–18.

8. Parker J. Palmer, Foreword to *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, by Mary Rose O'Reilley (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1998), x.

Gratitudes

In our long journey to this book, we've been blessed with many encouraging and supportive people. First, without Gerry Hess, we never would have begun writing. As head of the Institute for Law School Teaching, Gerry conceived the idea for the first Reflecting on Our Teaching retreat, invited Mark to facilitate it, and encouraged Jean to attend. He conceived the second, this time with both Mark and Jean facilitating. And having helped organize and having participated in both, he suggested we write this book. Not only that, during the past 11 years, he's been consistently helpful, reading drafts, offering suggestions, regularly reflecting with us about our teaching, and fortunately, even connecting us with Carolina Academic Press.

With generous financial assistance from McGraw-Hill Ryerson Canada, Tim Pychl was instrumental in conceiving and organizing our third retreat and has been an enthusiastic supporter throughout. Along with Tim, other colleagues and friends have read and commented wisely on ideas from or drafts of some or all chapters. For that we're grateful to Madelon Baranoski, Kim Brooks, Sue Bryant, Alice Dueker, Liz Karns, Christopher Knapper, Linda Ross Meyer, Susan Olding, and Robert Post.

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We're grateful to Stephen L. Carter for permission to include a passage from his novel, *The Emperor of Ocean Park*, and to the President and Fellows of Harvard College for permission to include a chapter from Patricia Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor*.

Thanks also to Steve Ellmann and the participants in Clinical Theory Workshop for inviting us to present "Experiments in Listening," and for their helpful comments following the presentation, as well as the Law Faculties at Roger Williams University College of Law and CUNY Law School, who gave very helpful feedback when Jean presented ideas from Chapter 3.

We want to acknowledge the work of three people whose secretarial work and was invaluable, and who performed it with patience and grace: Deborah Tropiano at Yale, and Sharron Sluiter and Natalie Moniz-Henne at Queen's.

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Mark also would like to specially acknowledge three people: Don Finkel, without whose years of friendship, curiosity, conversation, insight, and approach to teaching and to life, he would not have been able to grow as a teacher and a person; his wife Susan Olding, for her gifts of love, constant support, encouragement, and patience, and for her model of what means to be a writer and a parent; and finally, to Jean, for a wonderful 11 years of listening, talking, commiserating, laughing ...

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