

## I. Rethinking the Peer Educator

### A. Knowledge, Connection, The Culture

*ABSTRACT: We, by title and definition, are EDUCATORS. We accept that we serve a purpose because peers are seeking knowledge. This is one way for us to think of high-risk behaviors on our campuses. I call on you to begin to think of high-risk behavior in those terms: of students seeking knowledge—knowledge of alcohol, sex, drugs, etc. This, they hope, will lead them to self-knowledge. Their motives for knowing may hold the key to our understanding the situation.*

*From Parker Palmer: “If curiosity and control are the primary motives for our knowing, we will generate a knowledge that eventually carries us not toward life but death.”*

*He goes on to assert that COMPASSION (love) is the authentic base for the learner and the educator. Behavior change, something in which we are deeply interested, is a profound, unique kind of knowledge. Facts do not change behavior. We have known this for a long time. Carl Jung, in his discussions with Alcoholics Anonymous co-founder Bill Wilson, suggested that alcohol issues (and other high-risk behaviors) are spiritual issues. The many alcoholic patients Jung treated longed for some sort of spiritual connection. The connection, on a lower level, was easier to obtain through alcohol. In college, this is a pseudo vision quest.*

*I assert that this information can help us to develop better, stronger ways of reaching students, by changing our techniques from being head-based to being heart-based.*

### **The Heart of It**

What does it mean to be an educator? Why are we doing what we do? We are here because we care about people. It is in our nature to want to help those who fill our lives with connection. We desire to give of ourselves in order to make their lives better, more complete, more meaningful.

This is what an educator does everyday, or at least strives to do everyday. How can s/he make the lessons touch the students? What allows the information to “stick”? Whether educators are teaching physics, literature or health, it is imperative that they establish some kind of connection with the students.

It is true that knowledge must be “absorbed” into the brain, but if a student is going to make use of the knowledge (especially in our case) in everyday life, there needs to be a multi-level absorption. Facts—something we pride ourselves on knowing—affect only one section of our brains—the rather dry, non-emotive part. Knowledge, I will assert, bridges to some level of both emotion and spirit.

“We have ignored the question of origins because we imagine that knowledge begins as neutral stuff—“the facts.” ... The problem, we believe, is not how our knowledge arises but how we use and apply those neutral facts. We think that knowledge itself is

***Getting to the Heart of It:***  
***Using Playback Theatre to Empower and Create Response-ability***  
**Tad Spencer, presenter**

passionless and purposeless. So our strategy for guiding its course is to surround the facts with ethics, moral mandates meant to control the passions and purposes of those who use the facts. ...But I have come to see that knowledge contains its own morality, that it begins not in a neutrality, but in a place of passion within the human soul. Depending on the nature of that passion, our knowledge will follow certain courses and head toward certain ends. From the point where it originates in the soul, knowledge assumes a certain trajectory and target—and it will not easily be deflected by ethics once it takes off from that source.” (Palmer, 6-7)

“A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community, and our knowing becomes a way of reweaving that community’s bonds.” (8)

“But a knowledge that springs from love will implicate us in the web of life; it will wrap the knower and the known in compassion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transferring joy; it will call us to involvement, mutuality, accountability.” (9)

Parker Palmer suggests that there is a spiritual component to knowledge and to learning. Anyone who has spent time in the classroom could certainly agree with that, **since by “spiritual” we mean connection with the human spirit of people.** That is part of the definition of an educator. An educator helps students “happen well in their own life stories.” In terms of our theatre/life-skill overlap, the educator has a responsibility to help people live outside of “the script.” Most people feel that there is a certain script or set of expectations by which they have to live. For example, some college students may feel that the script to which they have to adhere is one that involves heavy drinking every weekend. Once we give students both permission and the tools to live spontaneously, their decision-making processes will begin to thrive. In order for people to become responsible, they must make decisions and be able to survive their mistakes and their failures. (This is a skill we address specifically in Playback Theatre.) If we continue to educate students on “life skills,” we must teach them *skills*, not just facts. Humans do not change a behavior purely because of facts. If we believe that they do, we are being counterproductive.

Is there also a physiological component to human connection? The brain is composed of three distinct layers—the reptilian brain (just the nub at the top of the spinal column), the limbic brain (middle layer), and the neo-cortex (large outer layer). The reptilian brain is essential to basic body functions—respiration, heart function, etc. One can survive with only this part of the brain in tact. Without the neo-cortex and the limbic brains, however, one cannot properly think, analyze, or even connect with other people. The limbic brain has been identified as the center of connection among mammals. Human thought is a unique blend of reasoning from the neo-cortex and of emotion/connection from the

***Getting to the Heart of It:***  
***Using Playback Theatre to Empower and Create Response-ability***  
**Tad Spencer, presenter**

limbic brain. If we only teach facts, we are only touching a minimal amount of our peers' full human capacity to learn.

Often we are led astray from our more meaningful efforts by the traps of the culture. So much of the world today is based on numbers and some form of economics—the language we use, our priorities, our values. Stop for a moment and notice all the ways that numbers influence our lives. At its most dangerous, we can begin to think of our relationships in terms of economics. Sometimes, marriages end when one person feels s/he isn't getting the benefits promised and therefore goes looking for “a better deal.” I call this “eCONomy mind,” because it is easy to be “conned by eCONomy mind.” It seems that quantity has supplanted quality as the overarching goal.

In terms of health education, eCONomy mind often rears its head in the form of grants. A number of us have gotten stuck in the traps that grants present. Although they are essential to our financial survival as a group and as a health education system, they are also dangerously tied to pure numbers and the concept of eCONomy mind. *For the good of students on our campuses, we must not let the philosophy behind grants control the way we do things.*

Historically, our bond to grant monies was forged because while most people believed health education to be important, very few funding sources from our traditional organization budgets were present. So, grants were created to ameliorate the fiscal woes. The problem with this was that various organizations and causes had to compete for the funds. This led health groups to emphasize all the negative things about their cause, i.e. emphasizing (perhaps exaggerating) how widespread the problem was, increasing the likelihood of receiving funding. For those of you familiar with social norming, you will notice that this goes against everything social norms tries to accomplish. In social norms, we try to emphasize the *positive* things that are happening. To a degree, we've all been brainwashed by our grant applications. We start to be conditioned to think that our problems on campus are worse than they really are.

I am not implying that we should abolish grants. Quite the opposite. We definitely need all the financial support we can get. I DO believe, though, that we can develop new, creative, more precise ways to utilize the money in our efforts. We have the ability to strategize and to address profound issues on a very human level. We also need to be mindful of the message behind our umbilical tie to these grants.

Another eCONomy mind problem is the temptation to gain satisfaction by distributing large numbers of materials. In this culture, bigger is better; large numbers mean that we are doing more, right? I declare: NO. While it might look impressive to say we distributed 1,000 cups or keychains or whatever, we have to turn around and ask ourselves, “is that really making a difference?” It is very easy to get caught up in handing out physical, tangible things. That makes us feel good; we are clearing out our office; lots of people are carrying our cups or lanyards. But doesn't that only satisfy the

***Getting to the Heart of It:***  
***Using Playback Theatre to Empower and Create Response-ability***  
**Tad Spencer, presenter**

grant committees/higher ups/eCONomy mind standards? It will be an amazing day when people change behavior because of a cup.

Keeping the words of Parker Palmer entrenched in our minds (and hearts), it is time to search for a new way of thinking about health education.

**B. Deeper Longings of High-Risk Behavior**

For years, Alcoholics Anonymous has recognized the importance of having a “higher power,” something larger than all of us, present in combating dangerous behavior. While it is true that AA deals with a very specific population of high-risk drinkers (addicts), we can adopt some of their philosophies to help us address our populations. By looking at the deeper longings of all drinkers, we see that there is a common thread. This thread is spirit. I’m not suggesting we evangelize or try to pack students into some sort of dogma, but simply incorporating the human spirit into our work will put us on the road to great success and much more meaningful work.

The Latin for “alcohol” is “spiritus.” That is an uncanny coincidence: the same word for alcohol (a poison) as for the highest religious experience. This sets up the framework for our discussion: people are seeking spirit, but the easier route is spirits.

From Carl Jung on an alcoholic patient:

“His craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness; expressed in medieval language: the union with God.”

“the evil principle prevailing in this world leads the unrecognized spiritual need into perdition if it is not counteracted either by real religious insight or by the protective wall of human community.”

It is not to say that everyone who drinks (or smokes or has sex) drifts into addiction. But there is something inherent in all those that “fills a void.” Addiction (and addictive behavior) is a truly *human* phenomenon, implying that there is something unique in our brain that keeps us wanting to *know*. When we realize the gap between our minimal knowledge and the greater “Universe knowledge,” it can make us quite anxious. (As anxiety rises, spontaneity goes down. More on this in the Playback section.) The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard described anxiety as “the possibility of possibility.” If you stop and meditate on that deceptively simple statement, much of what addiction/high-risk behavior is begins to emerge. The novelist and infamous heroin addict William S. Burroughs once wrote, “one does not intend to become a drug addict, one just drifts into addiction for lack of any other motivation.” Somehow, it feels as though the addiction will fill a meaningless vacuum in our lives. Meaning, again, is a spiritual/philosophic issue.

***Getting to the Heart of It:***  
***Using Playback Theatre to Empower and Create Response-ability***  
**Tad Spencer, presenter**

As for the “average everyday” high-risk drinker, there may be behaviors and/or atmospheres around drinking that make it appealing on a “gap-filling” level. The desire covers a multitude of things; let’s break down alcohol use on college campuses. Students give us many reasons for their drinking:

- **Connection**—bonding with friends at a bar or at a party while wearing an “alcohol shield” to protect the real self from being hurt or shamed. Students also just wish to meet other people, a longing for connection with their peers.
- **Routine/Ritual**—“My friends always go out and party on ‘x’ night.” Going out to the bar after a long week, a game, etc. is pretty much a cliché. It happens all the time for a reason: it is a small ritual that brings people comfort. At our school, a neighborhood bar has “2 for Tuesdays.” While the discounted drinks are popular, it is more the pure ritual that students love. They know that every single Tuesday, there will be a party at the bar. This is especially important to a culture that does not honor many rituals or rites of passage. We dress our kids up in a cap and gown, walk them across a high school stage, send them off to college, and expect that to be sufficient. Students are obviously (whether it be conscious or subconscious) hungry for more. Alcohol (or other high-risk behavior) becomes a pseudo vision quest that leads not toward enlightenment but toward dangerous situations. Students especially need closure on certain phases of their lives, otherwise everything stays “alive” and charged with emotional energy, shooting their anxiety levels through the roof. A second, very curious ritual also appears on college campuses: alcohol bottle collecting. Some students keep all the bottles of liquor they have drunk as a sort of evidence of “battle scars.” This is equivalent to an ancient warrior collecting items from opposing armies or a fighter pilot placing decals on his jet, marking his “kills.” What this says is, “See all the battles I have fought against my life’s anxiety.” That is a form of human ritual.
- **Celebration**—“Because I just want to party” is a popular cry from many students. Certainly, on the surface it is “just partying,” but there is a deeper longing there. It is celebration. We all want to celebrate our lives and the lives of others. Too little of that occurs. Drinking with friends becomes the mode for celebrating anything in life.
- **Self-esteem**—Like I pointed out earlier, some people simply feel empty and need to fill that emptiness with something—ideally, some sort of meaning, but realistically, some sort of physical thing (a substance).
- **Anxiety relief**—Mentioned above, this reason for drinking starts on the surface (“I get tongue-tied when I talk to women, so I drink to ease that problem”) and runs deep down the roots to the core (again, the “possibility of possibility.”)

ALL of these are spiritual issues/spiritual longings. Using the words of Parker Palmer, we make the connection that students want to explore knowledge of these issues. Seeking knowledge is a spiritual pursuit—to understand the world/universe around us, to understand our place in it all.

***Getting to the Heart of It:***  
***Using Playback Theatre to Empower and Create Response-ability***  
**Tad Spencer, presenter**

So, if we agree that education has a spiritual base, and if the true longing of people who practice self-destructive behaviors is a spiritual one, why should we teach only facts to these people in hopes of getting results. We risk being the butt of an old joke: "A man goes to the doctor and says, 'It hurts when I hit myself in the head with this hammer.' The doctor replies, 'Then stop hitting yourself in the head with the hammer.'"

I ask you to remove the "diagnosis" and the "demonizing" from these health issues and see them as possibilities for knowledge that students pursue. *That* leads to a much richer understanding for us; that leads us to true connection, true education.

## **II. The Playback Method**

### **A. History, Contexts of Use, The Theory Behind It**

Playback Theatre is an improvisational theater method practiced in over 15 countries and 50 cities throughout the world. Though each community in which Playback is offered is unique, its purpose is the same: to heal whatever needs to be healed and celebrate whatever needs to be celebrated in the participants.

Playback is just what it says it is: Real life stories told by volunteer "Tellers" in the audience are "played back" by specially trained actors on the spot, improvising, using no more than swatches of cloth to become everything from the nuclear power plant next door to your grandmother in Florida.

Playback has been used in a variety of healing and educational contexts, from preserving Maori wisdom traditions at the only Maori university in New Zealand, to bringing together for the first time Auschwitz survivors and Nazi descendants to hear each others stories in Germany. In a major hospital in Texas, trauma survivors do Playback for each other under the guidance of a psychologist and trained PBT practitioner. When the hospital faced major budget cuts, the Playback program was the one that was kept -- it worked. There's also a teenage PB company in New York used in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program with great results. At one residential treatment center for high-risk foster children, therapists themselves do Playback every week for the children. The therapists claim it not only helps the children, it also helps them.

After 25 years since the first Playback Theatre performance, interdisciplinary research into why and how the Playback method heals and educates all those who participate in it, actors, tellers, and audience, as effectively and profoundly as it does is just now beginning in earnest in Germany, Australia, and the United States among a group of scholar-practitioners. A conference was held in 1997 to discuss research modalities and debate conceptual frameworks for serious inquiry into the salutary effects of this remarkable method.

The answer might lie in our brains. According to Daniel Goleman (*Emotional Intelligence*), translating our experiences, especially our difficult or traumatic ones, into

***Getting to the Heart of It:***  
***Using Playback Theatre to Empower and Create Response-ability***  
**Tad Spencer, presenter**

stories, giving emotions a beginning, middle, and an end, breaks the vicious cycle of needing to repeat the experience, over and over again, as in post traumatic stress disorder. Furthermore, the brain responds to our efforts to shape emotional chaos into a coherent pattern by actually growing more of the types of neurons we need in the part of the brain where we need them (the cerebrum) every time we do it. Pertinent to Playback, the more the parasympathetic nervous system is involved in the making of these stories from life -- i.e., the more our bodies are involved in acting them -- the more responsive the brain growth, and the greater the potential for healing swiftly from emotional trauma every time it happens. That's another way of saying that the more stories we act, the more stories we live. And as we learn in Playback, we are all actors in each other's stories.

Playback can easily be used in ways specific to what our goals are as peer educators. It is not uncommon to base the Playback stories around some sort of issue, perhaps alcohol abuse. The students can tell us exactly what the real issues are on campus instead of us assuming what the issues are on campus. This way, students who come to our program are much more absorbed in the topic because these are stories that they tell about their own lives. These are not scripted scenarios; these are real stories, real feelings. And we bring closure to those stories so that everyone feels like his/her story and self are valuable.

**B. The Forms**

- **Conducted Story**—This is possibly the most common or most traditional form of Playback Theatre. Volunteer “tellers” recount a life story that is then played back to the teller by a set of actors. The exact dialogue is not important, rather the goal is to capture the emotional essence of the story. The stories may seem insignificant (i.e. someone stubbed his toe on the chair in the living room and flew into a rage), but the emotion is quite strong and present in the person at that moment. S/he needs to tell that story—to let the emotion manifest itself in some narrative form. In the example, the “real” situation (that may never, and rarely does, come out) is that the person was mad at the *idea* of the chair because his/her father would always get drunk in the chair. His toe stubbing released the anger toward his father's alcoholism. Seeing this story replayed lets the teller know that it was okay for him to feel such emotion. We do not place judgment on the tellers. Their reality simply comes to life, and very often, a light bulb clicks on. The truly gorgeous thing about this form is that *everyone* has a story.

- **Moving Sculpture**—This exercise is a little abstract, but very powerful when it is done properly. It essentially works to make emotions into something visual—something a little more concrete. A group of actors, usually four or five, are available in the front of the room. A “conductor” asks the audience for some strong emotion that someone is feeling at the moment. (i.e. during orientation, some freshmen may be feeling nervous about meeting people and about getting all the classes they need.) That emotion is then turned into a moving sculpture. One at a time, using only sound and repetitive motion, the actors come together to form a sculpture of what that emotion “looks like.” Very often, it appears as a machine—linked, solid, and powerful. The secret of this exercise is that it works like a favorite song—people exclaim, “Yes! That's how I feel!”

***Getting to the Heart of It:***  
***Using Playback Theatre to Empower and Create Response-ability***  
**Tad Spencer, presenter**

- **Sound and Movement “Check-ins”**—This is an exercise that groups can do anytime as a warm-up or icebreaker. Instead of the traditional, “my name is Tad, I’m a sophomore, studying English,” this form gets people up and moving as well as expressing how they are feeling currently. Everyone stands in a circle and allows one person to start out. The person introduces himself/herself and comes up with a sound and a movement that expresses how s/he is feeling. The person does it, and then everyone else in the group “plays it back to that person” by repeating his/her sound and movement exactly as it was done. This continues until everyone has gone. Again, this allows people to identify with others on a much deeper basis than just “I’m a sophomore, too.”

- **Pairs**—This form is similar to moving sculpture, as it relies on a group of actors and emotions from the audience. In this, however, actors pair up to present sets of conflicting emotions. (i.e. someone in the audience might be feeling very excited about college and living far from home but also guilty about being away from his/her family.) Each actor picks one of the emotions to portray. They move and speak and act as one, but with conflicting emotions. The actors bring the emotion to a point of climax and then freeze. Usually, we have two or three pairs that give their different interpretations of the emotions. (This exercise was demonstrated during the presentation.)

- **Comedy Games**—Most everyone has seen some form of comedy improv. While this is not part of the traditional Playback Method, we often use these games to teach spontaneity skills. The games have a very distinct purpose behind them—whether it be teaching focus, teamwork or acceptance of given situations. They are fun for everyone, and they become a safe environment for taking risks. Why not start a meeting off with an improv game? In some Native American cultures, it is customary to make sure everyone laughs before a meeting begins. Laughter, they say, opens up the soul so that one can be fully present. A list of games and descriptions is available upon request.

### **C. How Do We Use It? The Practical Side**

1. Psychodramatist J.L. Moreno once pointed out the direct correlation between anxiety and spontaneity. Basically, as your anxiety rises, your spontaneity goes down and vice versa. This is a very anxious culture—everything fast and impersonal. Recalling Kierkegaard, we think of anxiety as the possibility of possibility (the possibility of us achieving our highest possible self.) We could also say that the journey of self-knowledge makes us anxious. Since students are immersed in that, and in the culture, it is safe to say that they experience some level of anxiety (possibly leading to self-destructive behaviors.) Many people have not had the training or been given permission to explore what it means to be spontaneous. Part of our job as Playback actors is to teach people how to “show up” in their reality and become more spontaneous. When people feel that they have to live by a “script,” their anxiety goes up, and their spontaneity goes down. With a bit of retooling and training, students can learn to constructively and creatively deal with the daily craziness of life.

2. Risk taking is a phrase that perhaps needs clarification since we so often speak of “high risk behaviors.” (Maybe we need a linguist to come in and clear things up.) Risk



***Getting to the Heart of It:***  
***Using Playback Theatre to Empower and Create Response-ability***  
**Tad Spencer, presenter**

taking is essentially allowing people to feel comfortable enough to do things they might be afraid of or anxious about. It allows them to pursue that highest possible self. Playback helps build courage to do that. Because our scenes are based purely on human emotion and story (what is in the room at the time), people can relate to them very quickly and very easily.

Closely tied to this is the skill of “failure survival.” Thanks to the empowering nature of Playback we teach skills to help people survive when their risks fall short or appear in reality as a bad decision. In short, this is growth.

3. Living and working with metaphor or story is a vital skill to avoid burnout and constant grinding against the gears of reality. This also helps us to keep students from feeling like they are being diagnosed or shamed. Nothing puts the wall up faster. The use of story and metaphor allows us to find out what is really happening in students’ lives without hiding behind any code or script that stifles people. Think of it as a way of “softening the blows.” It’s a way to talk about “the story”/ the issue without turning it into a personal attack. That, in itself, helps the person feel valued as well as the fact that their story is the basis of a dramatic presentation. *Show up* in your reality.

4. Especially for those of you involved in social norming or any other data driven process, a helpful secondary analysis tool (other than cold, hard data) is a sampling of stories—samples of what is happening in peoples’ lives. We call this “warm data.” There has to be another side to the numbers in our campaigns—a complement to eCONomy mind. Try something revolutionary: ask a student how s/he *feels* about the campaign. You may have to prod a bit, as it will catch him/her off guard. More than anything, *be creative!*

5. As Playback evolved and grew, the practitioners realized that there was a strong service element to this theatre form. (Please see *Acts of Service* by Jonathan Fox.) As you start to use playback in your community, you will begin to see its powerful, life-affirming qualities. This can be taken into various places where people need to have their stories heard. Perhaps it is a corporation where peoples’ voices have been silenced by a crushing micro-management style. It may be a hospital where doctors are too busy prescribing treatments to listen. Maybe it is on your own college campus or even in your family. Playback actors quickly realize the gifts they possess; they realize that these gifts need to be shared with the greater world. Playback actors tell stories not in a way that will boost their egos and bring them critical acclaim; they tell stories because stories need to be told. And people are grateful for it.

***Getting to the Heart of It:***  
***Using Playback Theatre to Empower and Create Response-ability***  
**Tad Spencer, presenter**

**In Conclusion**

The popular cliché in health education is “the body is a temple.” That is to imply there is something sacred in the human body. There is. Can we afford to ignore it? It seems remarkable that very few of us want to enter someone else’s temple (carrying the metaphor to its furthest reaches.)

Let me put it in these terms: I studied abroad in London five years ago. I will never forget the first time I walked into St. Paul’s Cathedral, taking in all the gold, marble, and jewels. I had been told facts about the cathedral—how it burned in 1666, how it was rebuilt, how many millions of British pounds it took to keep it in proper shape. None of that affected me. But when I heard the organ play, filling up all the open space in that cavernous architectural wonder, I “got it.”

A friend of mine says that he would wander around the streets of London, performing extraordinary acts of introspection among the unsuspecting English. He would walk and ask himself, “why? ... why?” He looked at St. Paul’s, and it boomed, “BECAUSE.” That was sufficient for him.

The heart is our method of saying “because!” We can sit and wonder why students are drinking heavily or having unprotected sex, but that never seems to get us anywhere except lost in the dense city streets of logical explanations. We never have the benefit of hearing the story. Perhaps if we open up the doors to the temples, hear the organ music play, hear the story, we will “get it.”