

A Personal Remembrance and Conversation with Paulo Freire, Educator of the Oppressed

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On May 2, 1997, a sweet, soft-spoken Brazilian teacher died of a heart attack. At Paulo Freire's funeral the next morning in Sao Paulo, I was struck by the many ironies and paradoxes of his life. Over three hundred prominent members of Brazil's Left gathered to pay their last respects to a gentle man who was known as a revolutionary. His casket was draped with both the green and yellow national flag and the red and white flag of the militant Workers Party. Members of the military police were his pallbearers because Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, whose conservative actions Freire bitterly protested, directed that he be afforded the honor of a state funeral.

After the Catholic priest finished saying the last rites, people quietly sang a famous Brazilian activist song that Freire loved:

*Come let us go, who hope for the unknown,
Who know what must be done and don't wait for it to happen.*

When the casket was lowered into the ground, I bent down and plucked a rose from the huge piles of wreaths. I dropped the flower on the casket with a feeling of deep gratitude.

One of the television crews asked me to explain my presence there in my orange uniform. I said, "Twenty-five years ago when I was a university student in the U.S., Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was required reading in our course in peace studies. It inspired me greatly to dedicate my life to the cause of changing the world, of creating a true revolution based on love, and of doing service work with the poor. I became a monk of Ananda Marga which organizes different types of charity projects, especially kindergarten schools in poor areas. So in fact Paulo Freire is one of the reasons why I wear this uniform."

Freire began his career by teaching literacy courses to the poor working classes of Brazil's impoverished Northeast. He developed a system of teaching through dialogue, recognizing and respecting the knowledge that poor people already have. He helped them to simultaneously question the reasons for their poverty. This process of "conscientization" gradually became so successful that in 1963 he was invited to head the National Literacy Program of Brazil.

Father of all

To understand the power of Freire's humble style of work, consider a typical opening night of a course with laborers from a sugar cane plantation. As they arrived he engaged them in relaxed conversation until suddenly a disconcerting silence fell. He too remained silent and waited.

Finally one of them said, "Excuse us, sir, for talking. You're the one who should have been talking, sir. You know things, sir. We don't."

"Fine, I know some things that you don't. But why do I know and you don't?"

Suddenly curiosity was kindled. The answer was not long in coming.

"You know because you're a doctor, sir, and we're not."

"Right, I'm a doctor and you're not. But why am I a doctor and you're not?"

"Because you've gone to school, you've read things, studied things, and we haven't."

"And why have I been to school?"

"Because your dad could send you to school. Ours couldn't."

"And why couldn't your parents send you to school?"

"Because they were peasants like us."

"And what is 'being a peasant'?"

"It's not having an education. . . not owning anything. . . working from sunup to sundown. . . having no rights. . . having no hope."

"And why doesn't a peasant have any of this?"

"It's the will of God."

"And who is God?"

"The Father of us all."

"And who is a father here this evening?"

Many raised their hands. Freire pointed to one and asked, "How many children do you have?"

"Three."

"Would you be willing to sacrifice two of them, and make them suffer their whole lives so that one of them could go to school and have a good life living in the capital? Could you love your children that way?"

"No!"

"Well if you, a person of flesh and bones, could not commit an injustice like that, how could God commit it? Could the Father of all really be the cause of these things?"

A different kind of silence fell. Then: "No. God isn't the cause of all this. It's the boss!" (from *Pedagogy of Hope*, Continuum Publishing, New York, 1994)

From such an opening, Freire taught and discussed the words that had the most power for the group of people he was working with. For plantation workers these would include "house", "land", "well", "hunger", "school", "wages", "debt", etc. Simple pictures of people like themselves surrounded by the things of their world, interacting with others, created springboards for highly animated conversations. Education like this had great importance in their lives, and so his techniques were able to achieve functional literacy in the incredibly short span of 30 hours.

Freire's importance

The young soldiers at the funeral were much too young to remember that in 1964 the country's generals had found this "Paulo Friere Literacy Method" so dangerous to their political control of the country that they declared its author to be "an evil, dangerous subversive and an enemy of God." Imprisoned for two months, he was then sent into exile and not allowed to return for 17 long years. Ironically again, it was this very punishment that catapulted his ideas around the world.

He worked for the ministries of education in Chile and Argentina, taught for a year as guest professor at Harvard University in the U.S., then directed the education office of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. In 1971 his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was published first in English, then translated into a dozen other languages and finally republished and distributed worldwide by Penguin Books. His revolutionary approach to education to help oppressed classes recognize their exploitation became a guide to liberation movements around the world. He was awarded honorary doctorate degrees from universities in Great Britain, Belgium, Switzerland, El Salvador, Fiji and the United States.

Dr. Sohail Inayatullah of Pakistan explained the importance of Freire's ideas in his own work. "Paulo Freire has had such a huge influence in the last forty years that almost all progressive education uses his base... to authentically see what the needs of the other are, to experience their world. This is action learning, finding out the worldview of others and working with them at many layers. While I accept where they are, I also challenge their current belief patterns. So it is both an authentic meeting and an effort to move to a new level of understanding - conscientization as he calls it."

One month before his death, I had the honor to meet Paulo Freire in the library of his home in Sao Paulo. His soft white beard and long hair framed his beautiful Portuguese expressions of hospitality. We conversed for almost two hours in a wonderfully gracious atmosphere of mutual respect.

Discourse and practice

Paulo Freire: My fundamental question for practical education is about the relation between the educator and the educated. I give greater importance to the testimony of values. I cannot give a discourse about kindness while I am killing an animal in front of those who are listening to the discourse.

One of the major struggles in every individual is to diminish the difference between what one says and does, between the discourse and the practice.

Ethics really is fighting to decrease the distance. I think that in politicians one will encounter the maximum distance between the two. You listen to the speech of a candidate for mayor, but after being elected his or her actions do not look at all like the discourse. Like the educator and like the people, I think that one of the values that we should search for is exactly this - the value of consistence.

I remember when I started being a father. With my first wife what was important was the exercise to diminish the distance between what we did and what we dreamed. This is a fight, a daily fight, but a beautiful fight, a delicious fight. I remember that sometimes I asked forgiveness of one of my sons or daughters for the contradiction in what I taught. It is important that the child knows that the father is also incomplete, that he can make mistakes. We should be satisfied with the knowledge that we are daily fighting for this consistency.

I always say, I like purity, but I reject Puritanism. I like morality, but I hate moralizing. I think that the daily fight of people is to reach for sincerity.

Fundamentally I am a spiritual person. I don't say that I am religious, but I am a man of faith. I consider faith not necessarily as religion. In me there is always the mixture of the mundane and the transcendental. I cannot achieve complete transcendence and not be a part of the world. It is here in history, remembering history, that I realize my infinite potential to fall. It is by living the possibility of falling that I can fall less.

For example, I used to smoke a lot until 1978. In that year I was living in exile in Switzerland and I was smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. It was absurd from a health point of view. I was destroying myself. When I reflect on this period I see that the two or three times that I thought I should stop smoking, I was fundamentally lacking in willpower. When you do not decide, you will not break through, because in the end, the decision is a rupture in lifestyle. Nobody can decide without breaking with one and staying with the other. The decision is not neutral. No decision can be neutral. And I broke the habit with anger.

I think it is very important to make decisions with the capacity to feel anger. My truth is that anger is in harmony with love, not antagonistic. Some fundamental things that I have done in my life I did because I had anger. And the anger was precisely because of love. A just anger. The young Christ that expelled the moneylenders from the temple did so with anger, a just anger.

Dada Maheshvarananda: For myself I feel a just, revolutionary anger at the heart of the book, *Proutist Economics*, by Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar. He points out how unethical capitalism

is because it does not guarantee the minimum necessities of life while it encourages the super-accumulation of wealth.

Ethics of the market

PF: At this moment in capitalism we should be explicit about what is called neo-liberalism. At its base is the ethics of the market. I would like to say our fundamental ethics should be the ethics of the human being. This is totally opposite in function from the ethics of market interests, which is a malevolent ethics that does not respect the human presence. I think that no politics of technological or scientific development that forgets the interests of human beings has meaning for me. I do not defend the stopping or reversal of science or technology, because I think this is a reactionary posture. However I do think that the development of science and technology should not lose its vision.

Neo-liberalism is totally against this, and its concept of development is completely disinterested in humans. I am today fighting a lot against this, struggling against this. One way is my refusal to participate in any type of collaboration with the government of Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. I did not vote for him, and I will not vote for his re-election. I will always be on this side of the fight against this man, whom I know personally and who is a great intellectual, because his sin is so serious. He was one of the major Marxists of this country who suddenly discovered that his path was on the right. I do not accept this, so I criticize him. I am very friendly with the minister of education, but from the point of view of Brazilian national politics, I have nothing to do with him. It is a pity because at my 75 years of age, when I could make a major contribution to this country, I am refusing to do it. The contribution that I am making instead is to write and criticize all this.

DM: Capitalism uses different terms, different forms. In prior eras, capitalism used political exploitation through imperialism and colonialism, but after the Second World War it transformed all this exploitation into economic exploitation. Currently it also uses many psychological techniques. For example, the tobacco industry spends billions and billions of dollars to convince and create new consumers among the youth. To do this it uses very psychological techniques of propaganda, such as cowboys with horses and other expressions of freedom.

PF: What the American economy fundamentally wants is to deepen and consolidate its command and domination of other economies. They call this democracy and the globalization of the economy. And President Cardoso still says that the Brazilian people are backward and ignorant. How could it enter his mind to sell the national mining company, Vale do Rio Doce? It is the third largest company in the country, and it is honest, serious, technically efficient and competent. The country is losing all its created potential because the principle of neo-liberalism and privatization is what he thinks is correct.

DM: One thing that I am especially interested in is the concept of cultural invasion. You wrote about this idea 25 years ago in your famous book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I worked in Southeast Asia for fourteen years, and there it is very clear that capitalists are imposing American pseudo-culture on local cultures.

But in Brazil it is different, because, for example, the multi-billion dollar television company O Globo discovered techniques to transform propaganda from the United States and remake it in a Brazilian form. This makes it more difficult for Brazilians to realize this type of cultural imposition. I would like to know your opinion about this.

PF: The actual process of domination is a process that is necessarily very cunning. There are quite a number of tricks, because at a certain time the dominator's process is physical - that is, the exploiter takes charge. Colonialism was like this.

But later it became very expensive for the dominators to maintain a colonial structure. So it became better to remove their soldiers from invaded countries and to instead manipulate countries through the economy. Domination through the economy and politics must

necessarily take the form of very refined control or a cultural invasion. At times the invaded do not perceive that they are exploited.

The development of our critical capacity is always very necessary, but also more and more difficult, too.

DM: This is also an essential part of Neohumanism, a philosophy that our organisation teaches - to study and analyze different types of exploitation. "Education for liberation" is the motto of our system of education. Through our study and dialogue with others we can understand different types of exploitation. Individually and together with others we can fight against it.

People's presence

PF: Fundamentally I think that one of the things that is lacking in us in the learning experience, in both teachers and students, is what you are calling the capacity to meditate, as well as the feeling of transcendence. It is an experience of critical reflection about our presence in the world.

What is generally emphasized in Brazilian schools is the transfer of content. Teaching is reduced to techniques of transferring information of minor importance, a mechanics of knowledge of biology, geography, history and mathematics that minimizes one's presence in the world. My growth does not end with physical training, technical training of superficial knowledge of content. Yet this is today one of the characteristics of neo-liberal education, what they call pragmatism in academic practice. For me, no, education is more than this and in my point of view it involves a way of permanent meditation.

Paulo Freire's legacy can be discovered in his two dozen books and thousands of sites on the Internet. It can also be seen in the eyes of excited children and old people who gained the power to read words that shape their lives. He was fond of quoting another famous militant, Che Guevara:

"Let me tell you, at the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the genuine revolutionary is animated by great feelings of love."

As I walked away across the grass of the cemetery, I thought how fitting were the words of P. R. Sarkar in the dedication of his book, *The Liberation of Intellect: Neohumanism*:

"To those who think for all. . .
Who offer others seats of honor and respect. . .
Who venerate others, instead of waiting to be venerated -
To them I dedicate this book with humble esteem and deepest salutations."

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