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PAULO FREIRE:
TEACHER AND PHILOSOPHER OF LIBERATION

The work of Brazilian educator, philosopher, and political activist, Paulo Freire, has put the poor and the oppressed on the stage of history.

It has done so by making their stories heard and creating the conditions in Latin America and other countries for a political pedagogy that enables such stories to be read as counter-narratives against the imperial or magisterial stories of the rich, the powerful, and the privileged.

First world readers of Freire cannot help but be confronted with the complicity of the first world in creating the oppression of third world peoples. Like the voice of Rigoberta Menchu, recent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Freire's voice is a testimonial to the strength, dignity, and intelligence of the oppressed. It is a voice sounded from the margins of hope, and has, over the decades, had a profound--if not astonishing--influence on the work of liberation theologians, social theorists, educators, social workers, and literacy workers.

Freire's liberatory pedagogy, beginning with his goal of empowering oppressed Brazilian peasants, has, over the years, assumed a legendary and epoch-making status. Few educators have strode so knowingly and with such determination along the crossroads of language and culture.

~~Freire's internationally celebrated work with the poor began in the late 1940s and continued unabated until 1964, when he was arrested in Brazil as a result of a literacy program he designed and implemented in 1962. He was imprisoned by the military government for seventy days, and exiled for his work in the national literacy campaign, of which he had served as director. Freire's 16 years of exile were tumultuous and productive times: a five-year stay in Chile as a UNESCO consultant with the Chilean Agrarian Reform Corporation,~~

specifically the Reform Training and Research Institute; an appointment in 1969 to Harvard University's Center for Studies in Development and Social Change; a move to Geneva, Switzerland in 1970 as consultant to the Office of Education of the World Council of Churches, where he developed literacy programs for Tanzania and Guinea-Bissau that focused on the re-Africanization of their countries; the development of literacy programs in some postrevolutionary former Portuguese colonies such as Angola and Mozambique; assisting the government of Peru and Nicaragua with their literacy campaigns; the establishment of the Institute of Cultural Action in Geneva in 1971; a brief return to Chile after Salvador Allende was assassinated in 1973, provoking General Pinochet to declare Freire a subversive; and his eventual return to Brazil in 1980 to teach at the Pontificia Universidade Catolica de Sao Paulo and the Universidade de Catolica de Sao Paulo and the Universidade de Campinas in Sao Paulo. These events were accompanied by numerous works, most notably *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Cultural Action for Freedom* and *Pedagogy in Process: Letters to Guinea-Bissau*. In more recent years, Freire has worked briefly as Secretary of Education of Sao Paulo, continuing his radical agenda of literacy reform for the people of that city.

Based on a recognition of the cultural underpinnings of folk traditions and the importance of the collective construction of knowledge, Freire's literacy programs for disempowered peasants are now employed in countries all over the world. By linking the categories of history, politics, economics, and class to the concepts of culture and power, Freire has managed to develop both a language of critique and a language of hope that work conjointly and dialectically and which have proven successful in helping generations of disenfranchised peoples to liberate themselves.

As an academic cultural worker, Freire's life and work have helped me to unlearn my privilege as a white, Anglo male, and to "decolonize" my own perspectives as an educator teaching in the industrialized west. I first began reading Freire after five years of teaching in one of Toronto's inner-city schools. In trying to analyze my inner-city teaching experiences once I had left the classroom to pursue graduate studies, Freire's work helped me both to recognize and name my own complicity in the oppression that I was trying to help my students resist. In other words, Freire's writings helped me to unlearn the influences of my liberal heritage that positions so many white teachers as "missionaries" among the disenfranchised. Freire's work has further helped me recognize how the system of education is situated within a discourse and legacy of imperialism, patriarchy, and Eurocentrism. This lesson is a difficult one, especially for many white, male educators. It is also a difficult lesson for teachers and prospective teachers who come from the ranks of the privileged. Working with predominately white, affluent undergraduate women for the last seven years at Miami University of Ohio has convinced me that radical educators have an obligation to work with the non-poor as well as the poor. This is also a challenge of Freirean pedagogy. To convince North American students of privilege that oppression exists to any dangerous extent in our society is a challenge that must be met. When I first started teaching at Miami University, I was shocked at the lack of concern for the powerless in our society. Part of this was related to the fact that students of privilege have been denied the theoretical tools to analyze the ways in which society structures and institutionalizes injustice and inequality. What students need to learn above all is that they shouldn't presume to speak for others. Rather, they should learn to dialogue with others in the interests of working collaboratively with students and community members in a project of social transformation. What

Iris Marion Young refers to as "the five faces of oppression"--exploitation, marginalization, violence, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness are deeply ingrained in our social order and our schools. With a liberating pedagogy such as Freire's, educators and cultural workers in the United States and elsewhere have an opportunity to engage in a global struggle for transforming existing relations of power and privilege in the interest of greater social justice and human freedom.

Freire's pedagogy is designed to offer a reasonable and practical context for rebuilding democracy and for living and struggling for a qualitatively better life for the oppressed, for the non-oppressed, and for generations to follow. His pedagogy poses the postmodern challenge of finding new ways of facing up to our own frailty and infinitude as global citizens while at the time searching for the strength of will and loyalty to hope that will enable us to continue dreaming of utopia.

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