

Par

"First Words," Paulo Freire's Introduction to *The Pedagogy of Autonomy*

The question of how to train teachers alongside reflections about progressive educational practice in favor of students' autonomy of being is the central theme around which this text revolves. A theme in which the analysis of the knowledge fundamental to that practice is incorporated and to which I hope the critical reader will add things that have escaped me or whose importance I have not perceived.

I should clarify for probable readers the following: to the degree that this theme has been of ever-present concern to me as an educator, some of the aspects discussed here have not been strangers to analyses developed in former books of mine. I do not believe, however, that confronting the same problems from one book to another and in the body of the same book bothers the reader, especially when restating the theme is not simply a repetition of what has already been said. In my personal case, to take up a theme or subject again is principally due to the oral style of my writing. But it also has to do with the relevance that the theme of which I speak and to which I return has in the group of objects to which I direct my curiosity. It has to do as well with the relationship certain matters have with others that start to emerge in the development of my reflection. It is in this sense, for example, that I again approach the question of the unfinished quality of human beings, their insertion in a permanent movement of seeking, that I once again discuss ingenuous curiosity and critical curiosity that becomes epistemological. It is in this sense that I again insist that to *form* is much more than simply to *train* students in the interpretation of skills, and why not say as much for the seeming obstinacy with which I speak of my interest in all that is said about men and women, a subject from which I depart and to which I return with the excitement of someone who enters the fray for the very first time.

Thus the raging tone, legitimate rage, which surrounds my discourse when I refer to the injustices to which the oppressed are subjected in this world. Thus too, my total lack of interest in assuming an air of impartiality, objectivity, assurance when confronting facts and occurrences, regardless of order. I could never be an 'ash-gray' impartial observer. That does not mean that I have ever relinquished a rigorously ethical position, however. People

who observe do so from a certain standpoint, which does not make the observer wrong. The real error is not in having a certain viewpoint, but in making it absolute and ignoring the fact that, even if your viewpoint is correct, it is unlikely that it will always be accompanied by ethical right.

My standpoint is that of the "wretched of the earth," the excluded ones. I do not, however, accept terrorist actions in the name of anyone because they result in the death of the innocent and make human beings afraid. Terrorism negates what I am in the habit of calling the "universal ethic" of human beings. I am with the Arabs in the struggle for their rights but I could not accept the malice of the terrorist act at the Munich Olympics.

I would like, on the other hand, to underline our ethical responsibility, as teachers, in the exercise of our educational tasks. To underline this responsibility as well for those who find themselves preparing to undertake them. This little book is shot through, permeated with a sense of necessary ethicality that has significant connotations for the nature of educational practice as a formative practice. As teachers and students, we simply cannot escape from this ethical rigor. However, it is necessary to be clear that the ethics of which I speak are not the minor, restricted ethics of the market that obediently curtsy to the power of money. On an international level, there is a growing tendency to accept the crucial reflexes of the "new world order" as natural and inevitable. At an international meeting of NGOs, one of the presenters claimed that that he had begun to hear with a certain frequency in First World countries the idea that children of the Third World, ravaged by diseases like acute diarrhea, ought not to be saved since that "would only prolong a life destined to misery and to suffering."* Obviously, I am not speaking of this kind of ethics. Rather, I am speaking of the universal ethics of human beings. Of ethics that condemn the cynicism of the aforementioned discourse, that condemn the exploitation of the human workforce, that condemn accusations based on hearsay, claiming someone said A while knowing it was B, falsifying the truth, deluding the imprudent, berating the weak and defenseless, betraying dreams and utopias, promising something knowing you won't fulfill the promise, giving false testimony, speaking ill of others for the thrill of speaking ill. The ethics of which I

* GARCIA, Regina L., VALLA, Victor V. The excluded speak. *Cadernos Cede*, 38, 1996.

speak are those that are knowingly betrayed and negated in grossly immoral behavior like the hypocritical perversion of *purity* in *Puritanism*. The ethics of which I speak are those that are knowingly affronted by discriminatory manifestations of race, of gender and of class. That is why we must fight to make these ethics inseparable from educational practice whether we work with children and adolescents, or with adults. And the best way to fight for them is to live them in our practice and bear them vivid witness in our relations with our students. In the way we treat the content of what we teach, in the way we cite authors with whose work we disagree or with whose work we agree. We cannot critique an author after reading one or two works. Or, what is worse, on having read a prior critique by someone who only read the jacket blurb of one of her books.

I may not accept the pedagogical conception of this or that author and I ought to make clear to students the reasons I oppose him or her but what I must not do as part of my criticism is to lie, to say untruths about them. The scientific preparation of the teacher must coincide with his or her ethical forthrightness. Any misstep between the former and the latter is harmful. Scientific formation, ethical correctness, respect for others, coherence, the ability to live and learn from those different than ourselves, not to allow our own uneasiness or our antipathy toward others lead us to accuse them of something they did not do -- all of these are obligations to whose fulfillment we must dedicate ourselves humbly and perseveringly.

It is not just interesting but profoundly important that students perceive the differences in factual understanding, the often contrary positions teachers take when analyzing problems and laying out their solutions. However, it is fundamental that they perceive the respect and loyalty with which a teacher analyzes and criticizes other people's positions.

From time to time, throughout this text, I return to this theme. This is because I am absolutely convinced of the ethical nature of educational practice as a specifically human practice. And, on the other hand, because we find ourselves, not just in Brazil but the world over, so much under the ethically dubious sway of market rule that everything we do to defend the universal ethics of human beings seems to me insufficient. We cannot consider ourselves subjects who seek, who decide, who rupture, who opt, as subjects of

history and transformation unless we understand ourselves as ethical subjects. In this sense, the transgression of ethical principles is a possibility but not a virtue. We must not covet it.

It is not possible for an ethical subject to live without being permanently exposed to the transgression of ethics. One of our battles in History, therefore, is exactly this: to do all we can in favor of ethicality without falling prey to hypocritical moralizing, a recognizably sanctimonious pleasure. However, it is equally part of this struggle for ethicality to securely counter those critiques that see in the defense of ethics precisely the expression of that 'moralism' we criticize. To me, the defense of ethics never signifies its distortion or negation.

However, when I speak of the universal ethics of human beings I am speaking of ethics as a mark of human nature, as something absolutely indispensable to human togetherness. In so doing, I am aware of the possible criticisms that, unfaithful to my thinking, will single me out as ingenuous and idealistic. The truth is, I speak of the universal ethics of human beings in the same way that I speak of their ontological vocation to be more or that I speak of human nature as not constituting something socially and historically *a priori* to History. The nature nursed by ontology is socially gestated in History. It is a nature in the process of becoming with some fundamental connotations without which it would not be possible to recognize human presence per se in the world as something singular and original. In other words, more than a being in the world, the human being became a Presence in the world, with the world and with other beings. A Presence that, by recognizing the other presence as a "not-I" recognizes itself as "itself." A Presence that thinks to itself of itself, that knows itself a presence, that intervenes, that transforms, that speaks of what it does but also of what it dreams, that states, compares, evaluates, values, that decides, that breaks. And it is in the domain of decisions, of evaluations, of freedom, of rupture, of options, that the necessity of ethics installs itself and imposes responsibility. Ethics become inevitable and their possible transgression is a lack of valor, never a virtue.

It would be truly incomprehensible if the consciousness of my presence in the world did not also signify the impossibility of my absence in the construction of that presence. As a conscious presence in the world I cannot escape the ethical responsibility of my moving myself in the world. If I am a pure product of genetic, cultural or class determination, I am irresponsible for what I do to move myself in the world and if I lack responsibility I cannot speak of ethics. This does not mean to deny the genetic, cultural, social conditioning to which we are submitted. It means to recognize that we are *conditioned* but not *determined* beings. To recognize that History is a time of possibility and not of *determinism*, that the future, permit me to reiterate, is *problematic* and not inexorable.

I must also emphasize that this is a hopeful book, an optimistic book, but not one ingenuously constructed of false optimism and vain hope. No matter that people, even leftists, for whom the future has lost its problematic quality – the future as data, as a given – will say that it is one more fantasy from an inveterate dreamer.

I do not hate those who think that. I only lament their position as people who have lost their address in History.

Fatalist, immobilizing ideology, which enlivens neoliberal discourse, runs riot in the world. With post-modernist airs, it insists on convincing us that we can do nothing to counter the social reality that, historical and cultural as well, starts to be or to become “almost natural.” Phrases like “that’s the way it is, what can we do?” or “world unemployment is a fatality of the century’s end” accurately express the fatalism of this ideology and its indisputable immobilizing will. From the standpoint of such an ideology, there is but a single recourse for educational practice: to adapt the student to this reality that cannot be changed. All that is needed for this to happen is the technical training indispensable for students’ adaptation, for their survival. The book with which I return to my readers sounds a decisive ‘no’ to this ideology that negates and demeans us as people.

Every text requires one thing: that the reader surrender himself or herself to it in a critical way, with growing curiosity. That is what this text expects of you who have finished reading these "First Words."

Paulo Freire, São Paulo, September 1996

[Translated by Peter Lownds, Los Angeles, June 2005]