



PAULO

The Man from Recife

FREIRE

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Introduction

"To be, one must be becoming" Freire, 1998b, p. 64

The unfolding of Paulo Freire's philosophy, uniqueness, and the lens from which he viewed the world began at a young age in his hometown of Recife, Brazil, ultimately bringing this gentle spirit of man to be internationally recognized for his insightful analysis of human behavior and structural inequalities. Freire's theoretical examination of political, social, economic, and educational inequalities illuminated a light for those living on the margins, facilitating a voice, a language, and a transformative way for a more just society. In the same spirit, passion, and commitment as such individuals as Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu, Rigoberta Menchú, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and numerous others, Paulo Freire is that rare person who emerges every so often in critical points of history when there is a need of a courageous, prophetic voice of conscious. Extraordinarily grounded in the wisdom of humility, yet gifted with a determined strength, deep insight and perceptive intelligence, Freire not only believed in the human spirit, goodness, and the fostering of a more hopeful world, but was also profoundly committed to challenge individuals, political, educational, and religious structures that perpetuated the status quo.

My awareness of injustice took place years ago, as a young boy growing up in Italy, experiencing bewilderment and shock as I watched clips on Italian television and viewed disturbing pictures in the newspaper of violent acts that dehumanized people when I saw vicious dogs chasing down human beings, and power hoses forcing people across a street with bursts of water in Birmingham, Alabama. As a child growing up in the 1960s, and even though so far removed from North America, I thought, "What craziness! What possibly could be going on in the minds of individuals to perpetrate such atrocities? More importantly, what was going through the minds of those who were receiving these violent blows?" It was then that my sense of social justice began to take root, leading me to read all I could about the civil rights movement. Moreover, the direction as to how I would approach my adult life crystallized, summed up under my class picture in my senior high school yearbook by the lyrics of "Right On" by the late Marvin Gaye:

Some of us were born with money to spend; some of us were born for races to win; some of us are aware that it's good for us to care; some of us feel the icy wind of poverty blowing in the air. For those of us who simply like to socialize, for those of us who tend the sick, ah, and heed the people's cries, let me say to you right on.

In that light and driven by a desire to be an instrument of change and service with what Freire calls a “conversion to the people” (Freire, 1990c, p. 47), I became an elementary school teacher.

I taught elementary school for 18 years, spanning across three different states, working in rural, suburban, and urban areas. Particularly as a result of my experience as a public school teacher in the New Orleans area in the mid-1980s, and observing the further disenfranchisement of students by a school system that was so obviously not working for them, it seemed like I was in a continuous search to seek understanding and solutions. It was then that I was prompted to begin my graduate studies and was first introduced to the work of Paulo Freire. I haven't stopped reading Freire since. His perceptiveness and wisdom provided validation, explanation, and terminology to what I was feeling, impacting my awareness and providing a clearer picture of the political nature of schooling, the unchecked non-neutrality of its practice, and a direction that must be pursued to disrupt the status quo. In other words, Paulo Freire provided for me, as Giroux (1985) puts it, a “language of critique with the language of possibility” (p. xii). In short, as I understood it, Freirean thought began to infiltrate my thinking and pedagogical practice.

Not only did a profound consciousness change take root in how I approached my work as an elementary school teacher, but I became more involved with the political process that impacted decisions related to education, particularly sensitive to those that affected the education of the poor and marginalized. Now, as a university professor, a prevailing theme in my scholarly work, and as an overall approach to my teaching, is one that is especially informed by Freire. In my graduate classes, my students are engaged in a dialogical environment where we discuss the complexity of education, the politics of education, and how unchecked and unchallenged policies simply aid in domesticating and further marginalizing scores of students. In addition, we discuss solutions and possible alternative approaches to education that will lead to a more just educational system.

Purpose of Book

The purpose of this book is to celebrate the life and work of Paulo Freire. I depended on three primary sources to gather information, naturally beginning with a reliance on the large quantity of translated original writings, lectures, and interviews that Freire left us. I also, of course, thoughtfully depended on the work of a variety of scholars who knew and worked with him. To be sure, from those two sources alone, a wealth of material is to be had. However, it is worth noting that the limitation of my work was dictated by virtually relying only on English translated material. That is, particularly in light of Freire's "poetry-in-motion" unique Brazilian Portuguese style of writing, it can be challenging to capture the richness of his thought through translated work. In addition to the latter, there still remains a considerable share of Freire's writings and interviews and the scholarly work of numerous Freirean scholars that have yet to be translated in other languages, including English. Finally, I traveled to Brazil to capture a small glimpse of Freire's homeland, traveling to Recife, Jaboatão, São Paulo, and other parts of the country, observing, taking in, and especially talking to people who knew and worked with him.

Taking my cue from Joe Kincheloe, shortly before he passed away, the approach to writing this text was taken from a place where I relied on my pedagogical imagination in framing sometimes complex topics and issues in such a way that is reader friendly and accessible. As Joe additionally suggested, this text is not one where I feign neutrality and is obviously written in my own personal, idiosyncratic way. While this book highlights Freire's youth, his early formation, professional experiences, and critical aspects to his thought, this text also discusses the historical unfolding of liberation theology and critical pedagogy and the significant role that Freire played in each. Moreover, while I touch on some issues relative to the criticisms of Freire's work, it is beyond my purpose to spend much time on those themes, simply leaving those critical discussions for others. In short, this book is a celebratory chronology of Freire's life and work, and while it is primarily written for newcomers to his life and thought, I also have attempted to bring an imaginative approach that would be attractive to those who are already familiar with his work. Because the text is biographical in nature and in places where it seems to aesthetically flow, I use Freire's first name when referring to him. In other places where it seems more appropriate, I use the more traditional academic approach of simply referring to his last name.

It is important to say a brief word here about the sexist language that Freire employed in his early writings (particularly in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Educação como prática da liberdade* (*Education as the Practice of Freedom*), and one that he was furiously called out on by his critics. Freire never shied away from his critics and, in fact, welcomed a dialogical, constructive debate. In the case of his use of sexist language, it was not, however, so much a debate because he fully accepted and saw the correctness of the criticism. And while his thinking during the writing of those early works was inclusive of both men and women when he singularly wrote “man” or “men” to make a point about human beings, his response to his critics was one of gratitude and conceded that the gravity of his error was a result of “the impact of my conditioning by an authoritarian, sexist ideology...” (Freire, 1994a, p. 66). Because of the constructive criticism he received and because he deeply understood that language matters and is a critical aspect of transformation, Freire made it a point to utilize inclusive language in his later writings. To that end, wherever I cite Freire’s earlier writings and there is an appearance of sexist language, I draw from the thinking of the publisher’s note of Robert Mackie’s text, *Literacy and Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire* (1981c), when it states,

It is often argued that the text is sacred and must be quoted as it first appeared. It seems to us an open question. Sometimes the sexist modes of expression are the reason material is quoted, sometimes it is necessary to keep them because of their period flavour. But there seems no reason *on principle* to perpetuate offence just because it was once given: and in Freire’s case where his ideas are genuinely non-sexist, it would be doubly inappropriate to preserve linguistic forms which contradict his thought and intention. (p. vi)

Thus, where a quote may include a masculine noun or pronoun, I include some form of inclusive language in brackets.

Moving from childhood to his early adult years, Chapter 1, “It Began in Recife,” focuses on Freire’s interests, pastimes, and his early education. By capturing a glimpse of his youth, family life, and the various triggering events that powerfully helped shaped Freire’s life direction, one will appreciate how these formative years grounded his later thought, philosophy, and action.

Chapter 2, “The Educator (Before the Exile),” focuses on Freire’s pre-exile years and the early education initiatives that he pursued in

Brazil, where approximately four million children lacked schools and where millions more of the adult population were illiterate (Freire, 1994a). Incorporating an approach that placed authentic value on the learner, fostering the concept of dialogue, and the cultivation of critical awareness proved to be successful in addressing the alarming illiteracy rate of Brazil in the 1960s. However, it was the unfolding of Freire's literacy campaign that landed him in prison and ultimately into exile.

"The Exile Years (1964–1980)," the title of Chapter 3, discusses the nearly 16 years Freire spent in exile dividing his time beginning in Bolivia on to Chile, Massachusetts, and Europe. The chapter particularly highlights the time Freire spent in Chile and the process involved in the writing of his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Because many of his exile years were spent in Europe working with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and using it as a base of operations to travel around the world, the chapter also spends time exploring his work relative to the WCC.

Entitled "Returning Home," Chapter 4 focuses on Freire's post-exile years. Because of a change in the political climate in Brazil, Freire was able to freely return from exile to his beloved homeland in 1980, where he taught at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo and the Universidade de Campinas in São Paulo. He also served as Secretary of Education for the city of São Paulo for a period of time, making significant changes in the school system. The chapter also spends some time discussing Freire's agony with the passing away of his first wife, Elza, and his ecstasy with the marriage to his second wife, Nita. Chapter 4 concludes highlighting some of Freire's pastimes and aspects of his personality.

Chapter 5, "Influences: An Overview," provides a concise picture of the various individuals and philosophies that shaped Freire's perspectives and ultimately his action. Not only did his early life experiences have a powerful impact in shaping his life, but the reading and unfolding understanding of a variety of philosophers, educationalists, contemporaries, and others from diverse backgrounds were influential in his thinking. Particularly for the reader who is slightly informed regarding existentialism, phenomenology, personalism, humanism, liberalism, and Marxism, a summarized explanation of each is presented, serving to provide a greater contextual framework when explaining the thinking that shaped Freire's thought. Whether he drew from his lived experiences as a child, his parents, Eunice

Vasconcelos, his first teacher, his Christian faith, Karl Marx, Emmanuel Mounier, Amílcar Cabral or a number of others, Freire's analysis of the political, social, and educational landscape was influenced by a variety of philosophies, sources, and experiences.

Chapter 6, "Freirean Themes," explores, among others, the concepts of dialogue, conscientização, praxis, and banking/problem-posing education, all of which play a significant part in the dialectical interweaving of theory and practice. Critical to Freirean thought is fostering movement toward a more humanized world. Chapter 7, "Liberation Theology and Paulo Freire," provides a historical unfolding of liberation theology, its tenets, and Freire's influence on its thinking and practice. Whether it was his mother's Catholic influence, his father's spiritualist point of view, the wisdom of particular theologians, philosophers or others, Freire was grounded in a certain spirituality that was liberatory in nature. In fact, Gustavo Gutiérrez (1996), sometimes referred to as the "father of liberation theology," points out that Freire played an integral part of the thinking of liberation theology. "Paulo Freire, Black Theology of Liberation, and Liberation Theology: A Conversation with James H. Cone" is the title of Chapter 8. Freire had great respect for Cone's work, and the feeling was mutual. Based on an intriguing conversation I had with Cone, this chapter discusses his relationship with Freire, the meaning of a black theology of liberation and its relationship with the theology of liberation that emerged from Latin America.

Chapter 9, "An Overview of Critical Pedagogy: A Case in Point of Freirean Inspired Teaching," underscores, as McLaren (2000) argues, that Freire is the "inaugural protagonist" of critical pedagogy. Influenced by the Frankfurt School and critical theory, this chapter provides an overview of critical pedagogy and its link to the reconceptualization of the curriculum. Somewhat autobiographical in nature and with an emphasis on critical pedagogy, the chapter ends with an example on how Freirean inspired teaching has impacted the thinking of my graduate students as articulated through their narratives.

Chapter 10, "The Influence of Freire on Scholars: A Select List," presents selected scholars from various countries that have been influenced by Freire over the years. Through their narratives, the chapter collectively celebrates the life and work of Paulo Freire. Chapter 11 is a revealing interview with Ana Maria (Nita) Araújo Freire, where she discusses a wide array of topics. Nita discusses, among other sub-

jects, her background, her life with Paulo, and why his work is critically important. The final chapter, "The Man from Recife and Why He Matters," emphasizes that as long as injustice and oppression still mark this world, the work and thought of Paulo Freire will continue to be relevant.