

# The Legacy of Hope: Remembering Freire

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Early this spring, I had been re-reading Freire for guidance and inspiration particularly in regard to his concrete demonstration of the dialectical unity of practice and theory. Then, with a significant felt sense of loss, I learned by e-mail that Paulo Freire had died on May 2 at age 75. Since then, many of my friends and colleagues have expressed their sadness on hearing of Freire's death. Some have already spoken and written how Paulo's work touched their lives and why this work remains a treasure for those seeking to renew the practice of progressive education. It is to this commemorative discourse that I wish to contribute.

Over a decade ago, I had the privilege of attending a small dinner party at which Freire was present. He talked of his plans to write his memoirs, a book structured as a set of reflections and reminiscences on his life and work. These were to take the form of letters to his niece Cristina. Late into the night, he shared his thoughts regarding the content of the first few of these letters. These were mainly charming stories of his youth that spoke clearly of the physical suffering and loss of dignity that accompany poverty as well as the preciousness and joy inherent in life. This memoir was published in English in 1996 as *Letters to Cristina*. Reading this book now after Freire's death, I found much more than a memoir. In these reflections, I was engaged anew by Freire's passion and wisdom and reminded once again of why we still need to study his writing today. These brief reflections on the legacy of Freire were inspired by this engagement.

Freire demanded of himself and urged on others a rigorous "epistemological curiosity." This was a curiosity rooted in the absolute refusal of dichotomies between doing and thinking, action and reflection, acquiring skills and knowing the reason behind the technique, and between politics and education, information and education. This refusal, he felt, prevented the bureaucratization of thought the consequence of which was an unfortunate and dangerous arteriosclerotic ideology subject to the pathology of the "hardening of the categories." It was on this basis that Freire centered the discipline of critical reflection—a reflection whose point of reference was practice, which took as its object of concern the thematized problems of practice. Freire knew the temptation of abstractions, the dangers of pronouncements becoming meaningless when divorced from realities of human endeavour.

This emphasis on the centrality of practice to thought did not make Freire's writing any less theoretical or abstract. I remember hearing him at a conference respond to a young student who had been surprised by the language of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He had found it too difficult and theoretical and wanted to know why Freire had not written the book so that it could be read more widely with ease. In his response, Freire showed little sympathy for this position. Rather, he stressed the importance of the difficult and important work of study and tenacity needed to master the comprehension of unfamiliar concepts that might contribute to a more in-depth knowledge of the structure and requirements of practice.

In this world where a popularism is defined through communicative form—the short, easy-to-read statement—many would not consider Freire's writing populist. Yet, in his life and work, whatever abstractions he developed were always grounded in his political and educational commitments. The lessons of his writing were never formulaic. They were lessons of hope borne of the possibility that the future was an open horizon. They were lessons of method, expositions of a praxeological way of working in the service of the dreams and aspirations which drive collective action.

Freire's educational and political commitments were rooted in his deep humanism. For Freire, the basic project of a progressive education was to enhance the possibility of human dignity. He was a progressive educator because he was offended by the perversity of an unjust reality that denied the ontological vocation of all human beings—to be more. He was also a progressive educator because he believed the future could and would be constructed by us, men and women who struggled to transform an evil present. These deep beliefs were the basis of his struggle against the violence of class-based injustice. They were also the root of his unrelenting commitment to anti-racist and anti-sexist politics. He insisted that we not give those who discriminate any rest—a rest “which only enables them to attempt to solve their problems through the sleazy game of false explanations.” He never shrunk from this obligation and always helped inspire others to have the courage to fulfil theirs.

Dialogue for Freire never meant an abnegation of the responsibility to speak for justice and democracy; it never meant a flattening of social conflict. For Freire, tolerance was not a favour, but rather a duty of all of us in our dealings with others. But this responsibility did not obligate one to repetitive and unproductive conversations, nor to compromises which cover over the truth of social violence. Dialogue obliges respect for thinking that contradicts our own as well as the subject who thinks it. Freire taught that the tolerant are all the more authentic when they defend their position convinced of their correctness. The picture he drew of a tolerant person is not of someone who has to apologize every time there is disagreement. The tolerant know that genuine disagreement is based on respect for those with whom they disagree. Freire saw tolerance not just as a responsibility but also a means to grow and develop knowledge. He recognized that citizenship is a social invention that demands a knowledge born of the struggle for, and the reflection on, citizenship itself. Furthermore, he recognized that this struggle places on its subject a profound ethical demand—the duty not to lie.

Freire insisted on an education that would demand this responsibility of its subjects. It was the basis of his conception of education for democracy, an education that would enhance the ethical rigor with which one could address deviations from the path toward a just society. The direction he saw for this path was tied thoroughly to how he thought about liberation and its relation to history. Freire was consistent in maintaining a dialectic, non-mechanistic conception of history, one in which the future took on a problematic and undetermined character. He was always insistent that the future is not what it needs to be, but whatever we make of it in the present. He urged us to teach within an understanding that there is not only one future, but multiple hypotheses for the future. In this view, education would include the intertwined experience of decision, rupture, ethics, aesthetics, and critical knowledge. It would be a hope-

ful experience, not a despairing one in which the future is a given fact and passed on as a burden.

Paulo Freire leaves us with a legacy which at this moment seems to stand over and against the proliferating technocratic definitions of public education. It is a legacy bequeathed to us in the belief that education may still support the development of a civil society within which people may speak, protest, and fight against the distortion of our human orientation. It is a legacy borne of the joyful and hopeful recognition that we may yet have the courage and means to reinvent ourselves.