



PAULO FREIRE'S SPEECH PROFFERED AS LAUREATE OF THE 1986 UNESCO PRIZE FOR PEACE EDUCATION

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My dear Paulo,

Saludos!

The issue of peace as an epochal theme continues to come up for the usual reasons — humankind's troubles with domination and oppression. At the global level, present threats arise most crucially from the two nations strongly armed since WWII, the U.S. and Russia. They have been technologically and militarily capable of destroying the entire planet at a moment's beat with stockpiles of nuclear weapons. A recent underhanded substitute, economic sanctions are the West's weapons-du-jour, no less lethal. The old enemies keep instigating each other. And there are newcomers to nuclear weapons: France, Israel, North Korea, India, Pakistan, and China, each with cases for adopting them. Intelligence and nuclear-armed Israel, a vassal state, is posed to keep in check oil rich and geopolitically vital nations framed as adversaries, Islamic and others.

In other words, dear Paulo, enmity scenarios have not yet been removed worldwide. Each strangles the conditions and paths to social, political, economic, and the biosphere sustainability. The very concept of sustainability, describing a central tenet of the United Nations today, presumes global communication and cooperation, that is, peaceful, fundamentally dialogical, processes that aim at understanding and solving common challenges to survival.

Back in 1986, you delivered a speech as the laureate of UNESCO'S Peace Education Prize. The speech shows your commitment to education, social justice, and peace. You started by apologizing for your use of a

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mix of Portuguese and Spanish languages and was concerned that your accent could make the work of interpreters difficult during the presentation. Brazilians do tend to use “portuñol” (*português + español*) when attempting to communicate in Spanish and resorting to some Portuguese expressions. You referred to “learning to distort” the Spanish language in Chile, a country you loved and where you lived in exile after escaping from the 20-year-long Brazilian military dictatorship.

At UNESCO, your speech (1998) mixed informal and spontaneous talk – a central characteristic of Brazil’s Northeast culture, a mode you preferred – and reading from a text prepared for the occasion. You started by talking, revealing the contradictory emotions you felt now, and conveying how difficult it was to deliver a conventional speech. You felt joyful. At the same time, you felt embarrassed.

To solve this dilemma, you expressed your appreciation and gratitude “...to stress the importance of the contributions, many of them anonymous, which have been made to my practical and theoretical work...” (p. 25). You said, “I am accepting it primarily as a tribute paid to what I have succeeded in accomplishing *in conjunction, as an educator, with other men and women*” (p. 27, my emphasis).

In your discomfort, modesty, and humility, you unmasked the falsehood of individualism. “Your” work had never been yours alone; it resulted from social collective processes. You acknowledged the many thinkers whose concepts had been impressed on your education theory and practice. You acknowledged the many students over the years who were your teachers. Effusively, you also acknowledged Elza – as your wife and a grandmother – for her capacity as a teacher and student who had made possible for you to receive the award.

You identified as an educator whose work must be understood within its historical, social, cultural, and political circumstances. Never overestimating or underestimating your contribution to progressive education theory and practice, you have been critical of your own research, and have insisted on learning as you taught. While never drawing a distinction between teaching and learning, you did not minimize the act of teaching, holding a “responsible attitude” towards it,

... which means that the teacher must have the necessary competence from the point of view of knowledge and methods, as well as a clear political perception of those at the receiving end of his teaching, and of what that teaching is setting out to achieve. I can only conceive of teaching as a complex whole (p. 26).

From your students around the globe – peasants and workers from all ethnic backgrounds, including indigenous people, from rural and urban areas in Latin America, the Caribbean, North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia – you received many gifts:

Their doubts, their fears, their uncertainties, but also their convictions which I have always shared, have helped me to see things better, to understand more clearly what I thought I already knew only too well. What I have done is to exercise my curiosity regarding their conviction and uncertainties, their doubts and fears, their fragmentary knowledge of the world, whenever--as has consistently happened throughout my life – I have reflected on what I am doing in order to learn to think clearly and to work better (p. 27).

Acknowledging the power of their contribution to your life as a scholar, you moved to talk about peace:

From the nameless, unfortunate, and exploited people of the world I have learnt, above all, that peace is fundamental, indispensable, but that it must be fought for. Peace is something which is created, built up, transcending reality, the perverse facts of social life. Peace is created and developed in the never-ending construction of social justice (p. 27, my emphasis.).

This statement stopped me in my tracks, Paulo, as I took in your words, not necessarily because the ideas were unfamiliar but due to the force of its realization. Yes, peace is fundamental, essential, and ultimate. Yes, peace is indispensable, required, and imperative. Peace is not a given, however – it is socially constructed in the overcoming of oppressive realities. Reiterating what you said: “Peace is created and developed in the never-ending construction of social justice.” This intimates, as one of the popular chants shouted by demonstrators in the U.S.: No justice, no peace! No justice, no peace! No justice, no peace!

Peace education that does not bring injustice to light, or examine the conditions that oppress its victims, does not deserve its name, you warned. Only a “rigorous, responsible, essentially democratic” progressive form of education that encourages students to learn, challenge and critically assess oppressive conditions to act to overcome them represents true peace education (p. 27).

Paulo, I want to tell you a little about the work we try to do in teacher education at my university in the United States, dedicated to anti-oppression, social justice education. We ask our students to discuss related concepts and find appropriate interventions. For example, to realize how the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, complicit with militarism, creates inequality, poverty amidst plenty, and impact global climate and environmental crisis - not to speak of their own pocketbooks, as many graduate with life-long debts. (Under neoliberal ideology, which you despised because of its (un)ethics, higher education is marketized, and considered primarily a private, not a public good.)

We ask our students to examine the patriarchal roots of history and culture in the Americas, and the conditions of women’s, men’s and sexual minorities’ lives as informed by historically constructed rules of gender and sexuality.

We further discuss white, Western-supremacy, and their racism and cognitive subjugation of otherized peoples in the Americas, particularly our Indigenous populations and enslaved Africans. We ask future teachers to disregard privileging able-body and mind future students, and learn to teach with respect to those with diverse (dis)abilities, who bring an important dimension of human experience to inclusive classrooms.

Most important, we look at the intersections (Crenshaw, 1994) of these oppressions due to economic, sex/gender/sexuality, “race,”² and ability conditions that enact often unspoken and unacknowledged hierarchies of domination and subordination. These interlocked oppressions that constitute the system bell hooks (1997)

² I always use “race” in quotation marks to underscore the socially constructed nature of the concept. There is only one “race”, *homo sapiens*, humans.

named *white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* (and we should add, *ableist* and *heterosexist* to this name) are reflected on national characters and their continued politics of aggression leading to war and generalized destruction. We demand of teachers – and all educators – to consider developing attitudes of radical tenderness (D’Emilia *et al.*, n.d.) toward self and Other, and a biased support of social justice, nationally and globally.

Social justice – peace – work is not easy, as you well realized when affirming in your speech that “a less naive view of the world does not necessarily result in a commitment to the struggle to transform the world” (p. 27). As teacher educators, we try, and do not give up. After all, no justice, no peace!

Paulo, UNESCO recognized you as a world peace educator. In your view, the prize should not have the “effect of fossilizing, paralyzing or mummifying” the recipient and it should be regarded as “a warning and an encouragement” (p. 28). You admonished: “Being a laureate does not entitle you to rest on your laurels; as I see it, it is an incentive to be worthy of the tribute” (p. 28).

Worthy, you continued to work with others for justice and peace until you left us, announced, nine years later. We keep your memory close as we work, ultimately, to construct peace as we unite and liberate the maze of oppressive relations slowly but surely.

References

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