



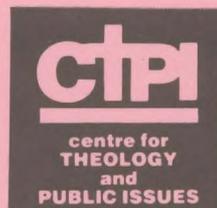
DISCUSSION PAPER 1

THE VIRTUES OF THE PROGRESSIVE EDUCATOR

A lecture by PAULO FREIRE

Edited by Elizabeth Templeton

DISCUSSION PAPERS



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THE VIRTUES OF THE PROGRESSIVE EDUCATOR

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The Virtues of the Progressive Educator

(This lecture, given on the occasion of Paulo Freire's visit to Scotland in May 1988, has been edited to make the English more accessible to a wider readership. The charisma of his actual deliverance, done in a packed church, virtually a spontaneous meditation on the theme is uncatchable in print, but this version is as near to his actual words as colloquial English allows.)

I will say something to you about how I see the role of a certain kind of educator, and afterwards, maybe, we can have a conversation.

But I think that the first qualification I must make is that we cannot really speak about the role of the educator as such, but only about the role of certain kinds of educator. Why do I say that? Why do I not say that I will try to speak about the role of the educator as such? Precisely because for me, there are different educators, defined according to their political and ideological positions. If I speak about the educator's role without making such distinctions, and then go on to describe what seems to me to be the role of an educator whose position is progressive, then a reactionary teacher - who has the right to be here tonight - could say, properly, "But look, this is not my role as I understand it".

In saying that, I begin to reiterate what I spoke about earlier this afternoon (in a small seminar) namely, the impossibility of a neutral education. That is, I don't believe that education is an activity at the service of humanity'. That's a very, very vague definition of it. I must also put the question to those who define education to me in such a way. What do you mean by 'humanity'? Once again we are up against a very vague concept. 'Humanity' is lots of things and it is nothing at the same time.

Education is not vague. Education is always inspired by and inspires politics. It has to do with power - political power, economic power. For that reason I said that what I would try to speak about was the role of the progressive educator, a certain kind of educator, not an 'educator as such'. I think a good reactionary philosopher would speak about the role of the reactionary educator.

I think it is clear now, at least from my point of view, why it is the progressive educator I am interested in discussing. You are not obliged to agree with me - but you are obliged to examine reality; not my speech, but what reality means. So now I think I could say something about how I see this liberating teacher. And when I speak of 'liberating teaching' I am far from believing that the liberating teacher comes to liberate the students. No, no, in the last analysis the liberating teacher needs to be liberated too. (Though we don't have another better expression than liberating).

I want to think now, as if I were in my study in Sao Paulo, thinking with myself, talking to myself, writing, about some qualities or virtues which a progressive educator has the obligation to create through practice. Right now I mentioned 'qualities', 'virtues'.

First of all, I would like to say that I don't believe we are born with virtues. Secondly, I don't believe, either, that we receive virtues as gifts. I cannot give my son and my daughter some virtues on their birthdays. For example, 'I give you now the virtue of courage, of honorability, of believing in something, of respecting others.' Nobody gives virtues or receives them. Rather we create them or not, by acting. We create the virtues, sometimes, precisely because we don't have them, because we missed them at some moments in our lives. We were so far away from having some qualities that suddenly we discover how remote we were from them, and then we begin to create them, missing them. But we don't receive them as a gift or give them through speeches.

I think this is something very obvious, but important enough to need emphasis. Parents make the creation of virtues among their kids possible or impossible much more through their example, their witness, than by their speeches. For example, creating truthfulness is impossible for a father in the following scenario: The father is in the presence of the kid who is beginning to learn how to speak - the kid's not yet speaking very well. He/she is getting used to his/her linguistic competence. The telephone rings, and the father says to the mother, 'If it's for me, say I'm not at home'. He says it without thinking how much this negation of a concrete fact can disturb the kid's mind in formation. Afterwards, the kid says something which is not the truth, and the father punishes him for lying.

Teachers do the same. Teachers many times quote books which they have not read yet. Teachers sometimes quote the title of the books which they found in the bibliography of a book which they have not read. I ask, how is it possible to suggest virtues like this? By speaking? How do we give emphasis to ethical virtues in this way?

Look, my friends, even though I am in a church, I am not a priest. (If priests could get married, maybe I would be!). I have nothing against them, but I'm not a priest. I don't make sermons. I don't want you to think that I came here to make a moral statement. No. I am very concrete. What I want to say is that we either create or don't create our virtues in doing, in trying to overcome our mistakes, our errors. Of course, we also use speech as much as possible, putting speech near the action, diminishing the distance between what we say and what we do.

Now, having made clear my general attitude to 'virtues', I will say something about two or three specific virtues which I consider fundamental for a progressive educator, though not for a reactionary educator. There is, however, just one aspect, one dimension of education where both have to have the same virtue: both the reactionary teacher and the progressive teacher have to fight in order to live the virtue of being competent. They have both to fight to become more and more competent. Both, of course, have to accomplish their task - they have to come on time. (Sometimes I cannot arrive on time, but then I assume ethically the responsibility for being late. It's not acceptable to lie, to say 'I missed the bus'. No, I did not miss the bus, I slept more. My body needed that: it was a biological need).

I think then that the first virtue for the progressive educator - when I say 'the first' I do not mean it is necessarily the most important - is the virtue of loving. But please don't think that when I speak about love I am speaking about something sweet and soft. It's very interesting. I am not afraid to speak about love: I am not concerned by the thought that love has been exhausted and used for objectives which are not so good. No, I just love. Love is not a privilege of youth. Love is an expression of life. It's a way of being alive. Of course, among us, love has beautiful expressions and dimensions, ways of being. But concerning the act of teaching, of education, I cannot understand the very act of being an educator without loving. That does not mean that I don't have the right to hate some students. I have. I am not afraid to say that as well. I understand love exactly in its contradiction with hate. It is because I can hate that I can love. If it were not for hate, I do not know how it would be possible for me to love.

There are some fears I don't have, some conditions of my life which make me able to be not too much afraid of things. How would it be possible for me to teach, to educate, if I felt uncomfortable merely at the thought that I would have to come to the class next day? If I felt a stranger; if sometimes the frightened smile of a student, a student's curiosity expressed often in a timid question, if all these things were not able to touch me, to tell me, "Look, you are alive: these people are alive, asking you questions." If I was not able to feel that I could not be a teacher. I could not be an educator. (Of course, I would be a bureaucratized teacher. That's another thing. I am not speaking about the bureaucracy of education, but about the educators). Then, loving in spite of all is a condition for the progressive educator to continue educating.

Maybe you could ask me: "But, Paulo", how is it possible to love with the students in aggressive attitudes?" In this book, for example,* Professor Ira Shor speaks a lot about the aggressivity. The violence of some students in the States. I understand that. But I still don't think that the progressive educator is a myth. It is not easy. First of all we have to understand that loving is difficult; loving, no matter at what level we love, loving the wife, loving the husband, loving the kid, loving the parents, loving the neighbours. And no easier loving the students. It's not cosy. If it were easy we would not need to spend some moments speaking about it. We would just say. "It's necessary to love." But it's not like that. It is difficult, but not impossible this task of education. Not easy, difficult!

I think another virtue which the progressive educator has to shape is that of consistency. It's another difficult thing - very difficult. But the progressive educator can't say. "Do what I say and not what I do." I remember when my two sons were very very young. I used to smoke a lot. I stopped ten years ago, but I used to smoke sixty cigarettes a day. I remember that I never told them, even one time. "You cannot smoke. I don't allow you to smoke." On the contrary, I said with humility, "Smoking is something very bad from the point of view of your health, but I love to smoke. I don't have enough power, enough strength

*'A pedagogy for liberation'

to fight against the taste of smoking. I am very sorry, but your father is also weak, is fragile. Today I am sure that it would be terribly bad for you if you smoke: tomorrow it is your decision and not mine." I remember that both of them asked me to give them a shot as an experiment. I said "yes", and gave them the cigarette. They found it bad, but not bad enough to stop them smoking today. But I ask, what would have been my authority at that stage for saying, "You don't smoke because I don't permit it" ? That would be precisely the abuse of my authority. My authority always existed, but as authority which never became authoritarian. Never.

So consistency between the values I speak about and the action I accomplish in order to make concrete the values I aim at as a progressive educator is vital. That consistency must be a primary preoccupation for us. How, for instance, can I speak of education and freedom, of the right to ask questions, of challenging the teacher - how can I speak about that, and the moment the student asks me the first difficult question I tell him: "Shut up, I am the teacher !" How is it possible ? Which speech is the student to believe ? The speech in which I pronounce my respect for freedom or the speech in which I deny the right of freedom ? Of course, the students believe in the second speech, because that's the speech which has strength, which cuts, constrains.

Sometimes, my friends, it is not easy to be consistent. In my life, in Brazil, we often say: "I count to ten in order to give the answer", precisely because while I am counting I am 'remaking' myself. Many times I had to count to fifty in order to be consistent. But this is an effort which makes you able to sleep well in the evening. That is, your conscience feels comfortable. This consistency is, however, a hard thing for a progressive educator to create. He or she has to fight for it. And why do we try to get this consistency ? We have to create all the virtues, because all of them are interlocking: one is not separated from the other. They constitute a kind of system of virtues, inter-related.

For example, while we are trying to be consistent, we have also to be humble, and we have to be patient. Both humility and patience are also virtues, indispensable virtues. Suppose, for instance, I am trying to be consistent, and discover I haven't been. I must be humble enough not to punish myself too much, not to fall into guilt, for if I allow myself to fall into guilt-feelings, it may be very difficult afterwards to get out of the guilt, and the more guilty I feel, the less capable I become at being free. Then I need to be humble enough to be the first to tell myself: "No, no, be patient with yourself. Maybe tomorrow you will be more consistent." And why not ? Why do you not say that you are not yet consistent, not that you've failed ? Look now, you're a human being. You know then that trying to generate, to incarnate the virtues is a process - they have to be incarnated, they are not metaphysical categories. We are not born virtuous. We have to give flesh to virtue. And that is why it is possible for us to improve ourselves, to get better.

Do you see ? I am sixty-six years old, and I am starting loving again, beautifully. I loved during forty-two years a fantastic woman who made me, about whom I spoke, I wrote: the mother of my sons, the grandmother of my kids, my grandchildren. She died. I almost died. But I had to be alive. I was not the owner of myself. I could not terminate, declare to leave the world. And if I had to stay here, I would have to stay here loving, and not crying. I would have to stay here creating, recreating, producing and not sleeping. And then I discovered Anita and I love Anita. If it was not for Else, Anita could not exist, but if it was not for Anita, I would not be here, speaking, alive and happy.

You see, this is for me the struggle of life and the beauty of life. The courage of loving. I am not afraid of loving. I never was. I am twenty-five years old, full of hope. I can walk. I don't walk because the doctor is afraid

No, humility has its demands. We have to be humble, not because we need to be agreeable to people, but because humility is the only way we have by which we can grow. It is actually part of the process of my growing up. It is not something on the outside of that process, a device which helps me to grow. It's a demand, and it becomes a virtue at the point where I discover its fantastic value, not just as an indispensable means for some limited end I have in view. But being humble does not mean accepting humiliation in silence. I never accept it: I fight against it. But at the same time at which I discover the need to fight, I also, through humility, understand my uncompletedness better. If I am uncompleted, I have no right not to be humble, for I am unfinished. If I am unfinished, it is because I am involved in a process. If I am in process, I have to appreciate the limitations I have as a being in a process. Because I am not, I am becoming.

And then, necessarily, I have to become patient. Being patient means knowing, being clear that the world cannot be made from Monday to Tuesday. It means that many times we spend hours, days, months in understanding a fact. Being patient means understanding the need to prepare ourselves in the process of doing something so as to get a semi-final product, since we can never have the final product.

Yet being patient demands from us at the same time impatience. So we can never just be patient, as well as never just being impatient. If we are exclusively patient, we often become fatalistic, and have a tendency to transfer the responsibility we should have to other people or to God. If we are just impatient, we tend to distort the real meaning of history. So the only way a progressive educator has is to create the virtue of being impatiently patient.

It is being impatiently patient that I understand how to deal with the curiosity of the students, sometimes to deal with their aggressivity. Often, adolescents read a book they have found in their grandfather's library, whose last printing was 1921. They look at the book, and they think they are the first people to have it. And they come to school, and they ask the teacher questions about the book to see whether he or she is capable or not. And the teacher has to be impatiently patient, to demonstrate to the student that many years ago the teacher also

studied the book, yet without becoming angry with the student, who was necessarily testing, proving the teacher. It's a right students have, to know about the teacher's competence. It's a duty that we should accept such 'proving'.

I have spoken about four virtues, and I have not had a fifth one - the virtue of using the time with respect to others' rights. I have spoken too much, and not had the virtue of respecting your time. Excuse me for my lack of this virtue.

Now I think, if you want it, we can have a conversation.

