In Memory of Paulo Freire

A Bit of My Life with Paulo Freire

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Translated by Alex Oliveira

Writing about Paulo under the impact of his loss is very difficult. It is difficult and painful because it implies remembering happy and sad moments lived almost every minute—we were rarely apart—for the past ten years of our lives. It is difficult and painful because now I will speak about our personal relationship, unlike the many other times when I spoke or wrote about his understanding of education or how with his theory, extracted from his practice, upon sensitive and accurate observation, and from the love he always nourished for the excluded, he revolutionized the world while dealing with even the most obvious aspects of daily life; he was the true educator of the oppressed.

I wish to speak as his widow, as a woman who has lost and cries for the man who loved and was loved by her so much. I wish, thus, to speak about the passion, about the complicity and the difficulties of a life so intensely shared.

We met when I was four and he was sixteen, and I remember him perfectly well when he was still very much a child, thin, angular, and energetic—earning for this reason the nickname of "Mr. Kilowatt"—walking around the hallways of the Oswaldo Cruz School in Recife, owned by my parents, Genove and Aluñço Pessoa de Arajo, who strongly influenced him in his development as a humanist. I remember him when suffering from tuberculosis, at the age of 19, and myself, how I cried upon learning that, since back in those days the disease spared no one who contracted it. He returned to the Oswaldo Cruz School, finished high school, and was accepted into the traditional Recife School of Law. He abandoned law and became a Portuguese teacher at the same Oswaldo Cruz School, where he was also my teacher; I was 11 and in the first year of high school.

He was the one who signed a document of responsibility with the local branch of the Pernambucan traffic authority so that I, still under 18 (the driving age), could obtain my provisional driver's license. It was also Paulo, along with two other friends, who met me at the Guararapes Airport in Recife, one night in November of 1962, and took me to my parents' home, where lay the body of my brother, Paulo de Tarso, killed by a lost bullet in a restaurant in Fortaleza,
when he was being honored by his military fellows. Ironically, he had just returned from the liberation war in the Belgian Congo.

Our lives ran in parallel, touching each other from time to time ever since my childhood and his adolescence. The military coup of 1964 took Paulo to Bolivia, Chile, the United States, and finally to Switzerland.

There, in Geneva, we met in July, 1977, for a lunch; I was with Raul, and he was with Elza, our partners then.

I went to the airport in Campinas, São Paulo, with Raul and my oldest son, Ricardo, to welcome him when the 1979 political amnesty brought him back to "relearn Brazil."

In 1985, I had become a widow and needed to return to my graduate studies at PUC-SP; I chose him as my academic advisor. Paulo was also widowed a few months after that. Saddened, he stopped working. I thought of giving up the demanding academic life; he insisted that I go on writing, for this way, he would be forced to return to his teaching. So we entered a pact and lived up to it. In reality, it was a pact, even if we didn’t clearly know it, of return to life.

One morning, in June, 1987, he interrupted my reading of a segment in my dissertation and said, looking at me with his strong gaze, "Nita, you look so beautiful!" I was startled. We were silent for a few minutes. What does that mean? I asked myself. I continued to read; then, suddenly, a new statement from him on what he judged to be the truth—my beautifulness—a word he loved to use for the people and things that aesthetically touched him.

With his second statement, I understood that with the strength of his gaze, more than the words softly spoken, he was opening a path to get to me, "changing the nature of our relationship," as he liked so much to say later.

We could no longer read or hear the material; our hearts beating strong, desire invading us, we unveiled something very beautiful and important: we could love once again, and we were. Our pact of work of a few days earlier was now one which implied what it had come to be: a pact for a shared life.

He went out to get his hair and beard cut, for he was leaving for Cuba that night. He came back quickly, as he had promised, and asked me if the barber had done a good job. He took another step towards intimacy. He poured some Cachaca into a chalice, turned and offered it to me, I refused. He spoke a third time, softly and tenderly, of how beautiful he thought I was, "as beautiful as in adolescence." I smiled largely, in the happiness of my yes to him, for in the meantime I had mentally relived my whole life. I had had time to be sure that I wanted him as a life partner. He embraced me delicately. We had lunch together at then his house on Valença Street.

I waited. A few days later he called me and asked me to wake him up early the following morning, for he was attending a meeting at the University of Brasilia. I set all the alarm clocks in my house to go off at 5:45 am. I called him. He was already sitting, ready for the trip, for he had not been able to sleep well just thinking about us. He told me then, no longer timidly, about his desire to have me as a woman and partner.
In our first days together, it was difficult to overcome the “ghosts” of people, dead and alive, who reminded us of the past. We spoke, dialogued, and discussed that. Thus, the validity of our desire, the legitimacy of our loving each other without guilt, without continuism, and without intending to replace our deceased partners became clear. We loved each other unabashedly.

From that point on, life gradually became light and easier. Flowers became more colorful, and people became kinder; food tasted better, and students studied harder. Even labels on packages seemed prettier. It was life that resurfaced within us with enough strength to revive what the deaths of our first partners had partially killed in each of us. We buried, because that is necessary, the presences and alliances of our previous relationships, but that did not in any way represent any lack of love or affection for them, nor did it mean we forgot our previous partners. On the contrary, we had to leave them in peace so that life could become plentiful in us.

One day, however, having returned from a trip, Paulo did not call. We met by chance at PUC. I was upset, and he kept trying to be nice to me. He also said he needed to talk seriously with me. He invited me for lunch at his house the next day. Then, he told me that he understood he did not have the right to ask that I marry him since, in addition to the twelve-year age difference between us, he felt his health was fragile. He believed, at the time, that he would live “another couple of years.” I responded that I was not about to renounce having him as my partner and literally added, “If you, Paulo, were a man marked to die in two years, I would spend those two years with you.” He smiled softly, putting both of us at ease. That was exactly what he had wanted to hear. He kissed me, put his arm around my shoulders, and we went to have lunch. That day we decided to get married. We were married in a catholic religious ceremony, in Recife, on March 27, 1988, and on August 19 of the same year, we reaffirmed our commitment before the legal authorities.

So, at his request, I stopped teaching at PUC-SP and at Moema College. It was difficult to abdicate, but his request made sense. He used to say, “How can you leave me alone at night, three or four times a week, just waiting for you? What will I do in such solitude? I know you also teach during the day. Will I be traveling, responding to requests from all over the world, alone? I didn’t get married to be alone!”

Such demands of a public man’s life, Paulo’s life, were incompatible with my university faculty position, which kept me daily busy. I chose to be by his side. I chose to be with him, caring for him, but without abandoning intellectual life. I earned my Master’s degree, adapted my work for a book, earned more academic credit, and defended my doctoral thesis in education; I wrote and spoke at conferences in Brazil and abroad, and I contextualized three of Paulo’s books by writing notes to them.

We accepted and overcame, to the extent possible, all these difficulties because in each of us there was adolescent passion, adult love, and a desire for engagement in serious work nourished by the contradiction of our differences and by the intensity with which we lived all these things each day.
We understood that love, passion, does not exist by itself, it is not something metaphysical, but rather something concrete which can only gain permanence if lived and felt each day, at each step, at each decision. In small things, small actions, in the simplest gestures.

Before being a critical thinker, sharp and serious, Paulo was a real person. All who have lived with him know that. He liked me to call him "bicho" and "my Paulo" as well. He was jealous and ever thirsty for my attention and my tender care.

He was a soccer fan and fanatically rooted for Corinthians (Sap Poulo) and Sport (Recife), both "teams of the masses." He experienced high emotion and tension during the games of the Brazilian national team. He loved the "African smoothness" and rhythm, that is, the body movements of our players. He enjoyed watching the Brazilian volleyball teams and took a liking to formula-one races until the day that curve in Tambolero, Imola, took away our greatest idol.

He liked classical and Brazilian music. He never believed that soccer and carnaval were not agents for unawareness among our people, but rather legitimate forms of expression of the Brazilian people’s creativity. He used to say to his friends who, since the time of exile had insisted on that thesis, that "a revolution which denies, kills, or inhibits the cultural expression of its people is not a revolution of the people, with the people, or even for the people."

He used to enjoy riding in cars, and since for his regret he never drove one, he used to call me whenever he was tired of working so we could go for a ride along tree-lined streets, filled with flowers and birds, and he always, always, had his hand somehow touching my body.

Touch, bodily contact between us, at home or in public, was one of the ways we found to make the tenderness and passion of our love eternal. We used to hold hands while watching TV, at the movies, on airplanes, or while talking, by ourselves or with friends.

This was how he had wished to die. He told me, tenderly and deeply, as he had ten years before, just before going into the ICU, "Nitinha, I love you; I love you. I want to die here with your hand holding and caressing mine."

I smiled; I did not believe such a thing would happen so soon. It was his desire to continue to live; he loved life so much! It was his clasped-hand desire, source of life and tenderness, to go on living.

The building of a plentiful and happy day-to-day involved his leaving love notes on my desk, his whistling from his office so we would look at each other, or even so I would go looking for him around the house, and his always asking me on weekends or holidays, "What would you like for us to do today?" or "Have you though about what we should do this weekend?"

He never—really never—responded with irritation or became upset when, for any reason, I interrupted his work. It could have been for a phone call, or to ask about some doubt I had about my writing, or even to talk about some minor household problem. This past April, on the tenth, he got ready to attend the
launching of his book “Pedagogy of Autonomy”—he was happy because, “finally one of my books will be sold at a truly popular price”—then, he went downstairs to his office to “work just a little bit.” When I was ready, having on the dress and the perfume he had given me for our ninth anniversary, during our recent trip to New York, I called him on the intercom. He replied, “I need to put down on paper this idea I have in my head, wait a minute.” I retorted, “just come to look at your wife on the stairs.” He walked over calmly and happy and said what he knew I wanted to hear, “You look beautiful.” We understood that it is through this game of love that love, tenderness, and happiness become solidified.

Paulo used to regret that so many intellectuals have lost themselves in their marriages and in their lives as a whole without dichotomies because they did not stop their work to live moments such as that one with their wives, or because they thought it unscientific to gaze at the moon, or to go grocery shopping, or to help their wives choose their clothes, humorizing them in this feminine pleasure. Paulo did that with me during these almost ten years of shared life.

We learned a great deal from one another; we educated each other either by discussing educational theories and practices or by simply sharing the simple things in life. He learned from me that going to New York on business did not mean a prohibition from going to the ballet or attending a Broadway show. Going to Spain to conduct seminars did not imply denying himself the right to go to a “Casa de Tablados.” He began to understand going to the antique fairs in São Paulo as an opportunity for entertainment and to sharpen his aesthetic sense. I learned a world of things from him, but above all, I learned not to dichotomize reason and emotion. “Do not hide your emotions when you write, say what you feel; a scientist is not, never was, neutral.”

We did experience unpleasant moments, anger, and lack of understanding with each other, but we never allowed ourselves to be held hostages to those things, nor did we consider them as a fatality of shared life. The moments of conflict that we lived, which needed to be lived, were never understood as barriers capable of inexorably separating us. On the contrary, we thought of them as opportunities for us to grow closer to each other by overcoming previously irreconcilable points of view. We accomplished that many times.

He was proud of having learned to make the bed on weekends and to prepare the dishes for the washer. He understood that thinking in philosophical-scientific depth was not incompatible with simple everyday tasks. Even though he engaged in few of those tasks, he perceived them as an opportunity to become more of a man, more of a person, more human.

- Having open-heartedly accepted my new relationship with Paulo, my four children received back from him the comforting acknowledgment of that acceptance. Thus, between Paulo and Ricardo, Eduardo, Roberto, and Heliana, the complicity of a true friendship was established. However, as Paulo used to emphasize, he never intended to take their father’s place, but rather legitimize it. André, “my best friend in New York,” and Marina, who used to give him “messages sent by little ocean waves,” are emotionally his grandchildren.
He understood from a young age that "being a person" was the ideal to be pursued by each of us humans, by improving on our virtues, educating ourselves on the basis of principles. This way, he gradually forged himself in his control over emotions, by deepening his ability to think, and by improving on qualities he understood could make him more of a person: generosity, humility, coherence, indignation, tenderness, tolerance, prudence and gentleness (about which he always said, "mistaken are those who think I am weak or tame"), solidarity, courteousness, politeness, impatient patience, loveability, cooperation, respect, appreciation, understanding, and acceptance of the other, a belief in freedom, in affection, and in giving of oneself, almost without limits, to others. He never spoke about forgiving, persecuting, or seeking revenge, or resenting. I never heard him speak about those things.

He used to say that legitimate anger, as well as love and indignation, was necessary for social mobilization and transformation, and for personal improvement.

As for hatred, he only spoke about hating five days before he died, “I quit smoking in 1978, after having avidly smoked for almost 40 years. Now that I know the harm it caused me, I really hate smoking; it is killing me.” It is true; smoking three packs of cigarettes a day continuously for so many years had left him with emphysema, with the arteries of one kidney obstructed (working at 3% of normal capacity), and his entire circulatory system calcified. A circulatory deficiency in his brain in August, 1995 was certainly the warning, not understood by us, that there was a huge difference between Paulo’s dynamic and young mind and his body, which weakened each day.

Paulo died in the morning of May 2, 1997, before the cold he disliked so much got to São Paulo, not leaving behind any recommendations, not leaving messages, without enthroning intellectual successors, rather he previously democratized his knowledge, spread it throughout the world, so that each of us could appropriate and make just and adequate use of it. His coronaries did not resist that one thing, certainly the only thing he ever hated in his life. He died in his sleep by a massive heart attack.

Hours earlier, a dialogue between us, still alive in me, went, “Nitinha, don’t let me die! I want to live so much!” I replied by asking, “You want to live for me, don’t you?” Three times I asked, and three times he answered with his sweet, calm, and gentle smile, “Also.” I caressed him a lot, kissed him and left him almost asleep at the ICU. It was dawn on May 2.

The whole world was included in that “also” of his. It went beyond love for his own life and for his closest people, and built into it was the desire to conclude tens of projects he had planned out in his mind for the following years. “I have projects for at least another five years, right Nita?”

His agenda for 1997 was all planned: receiving honorary degree from the Universities of Havana, of Algarve, of Malaga, of Oldenburg (which I will receive in memoriam July 7), of Santa Fé (Argentina), and of Chapman (California), which I will also accept in his memory, when a bronze bust will also be placed on the grounds of the campus, next to Martin Luther King’s. Thus, his thirty five titles would become forty-one.
His agenda also included: finishing another book (he wrote 29 pages), writing three others, one with the PUC-SP team about the teaching-learning act, another with a team from the University of Iowa, about knowledge theory, and the third one with a leader within PT³, his political party, about the deterministic fatalism of neoliberalism, teaching a course for one semester (September 1997 to January 1998) about knowledges which qualify the progressive educator at Harvard University, signing a contract to supervise the television production of videos on elementary education teacher development, based on his theoretical principles, scheduled to be aired by the most famous Brazilian TV network, and another video where his voice would be used as the theorist analyzing his practice throughout the world.

This is how Paulo Freire died: lucid, courageous, loving, good-humored, inventive, certain that he still had a great deal of himself to give those he loved, certain that his mission among us was not finished, that there was lots to do, many and much to fight for. There was this world full of pain which made him suffer so much, but also full of hope, upon which he still wanted to intervene, as the true humanist that he was. Paulo departed full of faith in God, humble, tender, and tame. In this world, he left a gap that hundreds or thousands of us will have to gradually fill through political-pedagogical-educational work. In me, much pain and “saudade” of the times shared with the intensity that only love, passion, and tenderness can account for. Serene, Paulo left, full of faith in God and certain that men and women will still build a better world, more just, more beautiful, happier. The smiling expression on his face, resigned and happy, told us he had met the Lord.

São Paulo, Brazil

Notes

1 Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, a Jesuit University
2 A Brazilian liquor distilled from sugarcane.
3 The Brazilian Labor Party, “Workers’ Party.”

Remembering Paulo Freire

ANN BERTHOFF

The first time I met Paulo Freire, we’d all gone out for supper at a Portuguese restaurant in East Cambridge—all of us from UMass-Boston where Paulo had been lecturing. I remember Judy Goleman, Neal Bruss, Donaldo Macedo, but there were others. Paulo amused us with a tale of going with an anthropologist into the Brazilian hinterlands where he’d been welcomed according to custom. That custom was to rub an evil-smelling concoction into his beard. “Culturally,” he said, leaning back in his chair, his arms spread out on the backs of the chairs