

(2018) "A Northeastern Brazilian Storm: Memories of Paulo Freire" CONCEPT vol 9 no 3 Winter 2018 pp 26-30

## **A Northeastern Brazilian: Memories of Paulo Freire**

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Fifty Years since the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*? That time period corresponds nearly perfectly with the length of time that I have been working in the field of adult education. In August of 1970, I took up a job as a research fellow in the Institute of Adult Education at the University of Dar es Salaam. I had finished my course work in education and African Studies at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) and was fortunate enough to be offered a job by Nicholas Kuhanga, the Deputy Director of the Institute who was touring the USA at the time. 1970 had been named "Adult Education Year" by the Government of Tanzania. The then President, Julius K Nyerere, a deep believer in the power of the education of adults as a foundation for social and political transformation, called for the creation of a national infrastructure of district adult education officers and preparation for an adult literacy campaign.

I threw myself into learning all I could about the history of adult education in Tanzania and into whatever theoretical work that I could find on the field. The library in our Institute had quite a bit of material written in the USA, some from the UK and some from Sweden. Almost nothing on Tanzania itself and nothing at all from other parts of the global South. Nyerere had written some on adult education, more on his vision of education for self-reliance, but I found myself in a theoretical vacuum trying to make intellectual sense of the expectations that were in the air. I still remember, Dr. Marjorie Mbillinyi, a young lecturer in the College of Education telling me one day in 1970 about an incredible book that she had just heard of, a book written by a Brazilian intellectual about literacy work in Brazil. I can't remember how I got my first copy of *Pedagogy*, but the thoughts, words, dreams that poured out of those pages were simply electrifying. Here was someone working in a similar context as ourselves. His vision was a revolutionary one, the same as that of our President Nyerere. His intellectual foundations were a combination of Marxism and humanistic psychology. He created a discourse, a set of words and concepts which fit our world so well. 'Banking education', 'conscientization', 'problem-based education', 'thematic investigation', 'codifications' were only some of the tools that excited us. His believe in the knowledge of people to transform their own lives through dialogue and collective action was very similar to those of Nyerere. I was privileged though a book review of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in our national adult education journal to introduce Freire to the Tanzanian adult education community.

The Ministry of Education was launching an adult literacy campaign in the early 1970s. Freire was invited to come for a month to Tanzania for a visit that Institute of Adult Education was to host, to see if some of his thinking might be of use in the official campaign. I was assigned the duty of coordinating his visit, in May or June of 1972 as I recall. I was in my late 20s, Paulo was 50. My first sight of him was in the Senate chambers of the University of Dar es Salaam at a reception for him. He was dressed in a nice brown suit and tie. I was actually a bit taken a back seeing him dressed like this. Suits and ties were uncommon in Tanzania and had been abandoned

as colonial symbols replaced by the Nyerere suit, a collarless suit without shirts and ties. But the political subtleties of dress in socialist Tanzania were little known anywhere else and he told me that he wore a suit out of respect for the University and all those working there.

We organized so many visits and talks. We organized a public talk in the assembly hall of the Institute of Adult Education in downtown Tanzania. The hall held about 800 people. Freire was an intellectual, not a politician, nor a footballer, nor a musician. By the evening of the event, the hall was packed. And as close to the front as possible were members of the Independence movements of Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, all of whom had training bases in Tanzania and benefited from the political support of the Nyerere government. And Freire, whose English at that time was not at all polished, drew energy from the room and spoke for hours on the common struggles facing oppressed peoples in Brazil, Latin America and Africa. I remember still the faces of three women from the ANC in South Africa sitting in the front row, dressed in stunning dresses and complex wrapped head scarves. Their eyes were glued to Paulo. They asked him questions and he spoke with them as though no one else was in the room. It was a private conversation between four people who were able to connect at a deep emotional level in spite of never having met before.

Upon leaving Tanzania, I began working with the International Council for Adult Education, first as a Research Officer, then eventually as Secretary-General. From that platform, we created the International Participatory Research Network, a network that drew on the ideas of Nyerere, Freire, Fals Borda and others in the global South to challenge the dominant social science research methods of the day. Freire was still living in exile at the time, in Geneva, working as Education Secretary for the World Council of Churches. Our network kept in close contact with Paulo as he was travelling around the world. His support of our work was important to gaining visibility. When he was finally able to return to Brazil, I had the great pleasure of visiting him at his home in Sao Paulo as he was beginning to work as the Education Secretary for the Worker's Party government in the state of Sao Paulo. We asked him to consider becoming the Honorary President of the International Council for Adult Education. He accepted. I was privileged to work with Paulo in many places over the years, in preparation for the 1985 World Assembly of Adult Education in Buenos Aires, at the Global Summit for the Environment in 1992, at his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday conference in New York City and other gatherings. Writing now in 2018, I can say that his ideas, his warmth and his love remain powerfully in my life. These past 50 years have been so much better having known this beautiful man. Let me close with this poem that I wrote on the first anniversary of his passing.

Surf On Paulino

I mean picture this

600 street-wise American and Canadian activists

Assembled in the conference hall of the New School of Social  
Research in New York City

Where in 1932 the first North American meeting of the Workers  
Education Association was held

A birthday conference for Paulo Freire, the most influential

Educational thinker of the 20th century  
Academics jammed in next to homeless organizers who are  
Jammed in next to Lady Garment Workers who are  
Jammed in next to the Puerto Rican Independence underground who are  
Jammed in next to kindergarten teachers who are  
Jammed in next to high school students who are  
Waiting to hear from Paulo Freire

And Paulo, 70 years old, who has come to town to help us all  
Celebrate ourselves through him, stands up behind a table on the  
Stage

"I'd like to tell you",  
Paulo says in his quiet gentle voice,  
"About the best gift that I have had for my birthday.  
I received it from a young boy in Recife, in Northeast Brazil where  
I was born.  
He gave me the gift of a picture which he had drawn himself  
A picture of the crashing Atlantic coastal waves  
And in the picture was a man riding on what I think is called a  
Surf board.  
And on top of the board, riding the waves, was an old man with a  
white beard and glasses.  
That old man was me. It was a picture of me.  
And my young friend had written words beneath this picture in his  
own handwriting.  
He told me 'Surf On Paulino'  
Surf on little Paulo  
And", Paulo said with a smile that reached out to the entire hall,  
"I intend to do just that".

For Paulo was a transcendent rider of the waves  
Waves of respect for the oppressed people of this planet  
Waves of intellectual curiosity; lover of words  
Waves of exile and loneliness in Chile, Geneva and Africa  
Waves of love for his children, his dear Elsa who died before him  
Waves of love for the final love of his life, his widow Nita.  
And waves of love for his friends in such places as Guinea-Bissau,  
Cuba, India, Fiji, France and, yes, for us in Canada.

For if he was a teacher  
For if he was an activist  
For if he was a writer  
For if he was a teller of stories  
He was above all a person in the great and ancient tradition of

Brazilian mystics  
More than a teacher  
More than an activist  
More than a writer  
More than the teller of stories

He carried with him a warm breeze of historic possibility  
He carried with him the memories of many struggles  
He carried with him vulnerability and need  
He carried with him opportunities for friendship  
He carried with him the new eyes of the young  
He carried with him revolutionary agency  
He carried with him his hand for ours  
He carried with him the electric atmosphere of a Northeastern  
Brazilian Storm

Paulo often apologized for his ways of speaking languages other  
Than his beloved Portuguese  
And yet he held audiences at hushed attention when he spoke in  
English, French or Spanish in every corner of the world  
He found ways through his distinct ways of speaking English and  
French and other languages to draw us in to his speech  
To draw us into himself  
So much did he seem to need us, his audience, that we hung on his  
Every word and we helped him to reach out to ourselves

So that in the end  
we were his text  
We were his words  
He was our text  
He was our words

Paulino  
Surf on