

2.2 Teachers as cultural workers

Letters to those who dare teach

Paulo Freire

Translated by

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FOURTH LETTER

On the indispensable qualities of progressive teachers for their better performance

I would like to make it clear that the attributes I am going to speak about, which seem to me to be indispensable to the progressive teacher, are qualities acquired gradually through practice. Furthermore, they are developed through practice in concurrence with a political decision that the educator's role is crucial. Thus the attributes I am going to speak about are not attributes that we can be born with or that can be bestowed upon us by decree or as a gift. In addition, the order in which I list them here is not intended to rank their value. They are all necessary for a progressive educational practice.

I shall start with *humility*, which here by no means carries the connotation of a lack of self-respect, or resignation, or of cowardice. On the contrary, humility requires courage, self-confidence, self-respect, and respect for others.

Humility helps us to understand this obvious truth: No one knows it all; no one is ignorant of everything. We all know something; we are all ignorant of something. Without humility, one can hardly listen with respect to those one judges to be too far below one's own level of competence. But the humility that enables one to listen even to those considered less competent should not be an act of condescension or resemble the behavior of those fulfilling a vow: "I promise the Virgin Mary that, if the problem with my eyes turns out not to be serious, I will listen to the rude and ignorant parents of my students with attention." No. None of that. Listening to all that come to us, regardless of their intellectual level, is a human duty and reveals an identification with democracy and not with elitism.

In fact, I cannot see how one could reconcile adherence to an ideal of democracy and of overcoming prejudice with a proud or arrogant posture in which one feels full of oneself. How can I listen to the other, how can I hold a dialogue, if I can only listen to myself, if I can only see myself, if nothing or no one other than myself can touch me or move me? If while humble, one does undermine oneself or accepts humiliation, one is also always ready to teach and to learn. Humility helps me avoid being entrenched in the circuit of my own truth. One of the fundamental auxiliaries of humility is *common sense*, which serves to remind us that certain attitudes may lead us too close to becoming lost.

The arrogance of "You don't know who you are dealing with . . .," the *conceit* of the know-it-all with an unrestrained desire to make his or her knowledge known and recognized—none of this has anything to do with the *tameness* (which is not apathy) of the humble. Humility does not flourish in people's insecurities but in the insecure security of the more aware, and thus this insecure security is one of the expressions of humility, as is uncertain certainty, unlike certainty,

which is excessively sure of itself. The authoritarians' stance, in contrast, is sectarian. Theirs is the only truth, and it must be imposed on others. It is in their truth that others' salvation resides. Their knowledge "illuminates" the obscurity or the ignorance of others, who then must be subjected to the knowledge and arrogance of the authoritarian.

I will return to my analysis of authoritarianism, whether that of parents or teachers. As one might expect, authoritarianism will at times cause children and students to adopt rebellious positions, defiant of any limit, discipline, or authority. But it will also lead to apathy, excessive obedience, uncritical conformity, lack of resistance against authoritarian discourse, self-abnegation, and fear of freedom.

In saying that authoritarianism may generate various types of reactions, I understand that on a human level things do not happen so *mechanically* and happily. Thus it is possible that certain children will go through the rigors of arbitrariness unscathed, which does not give us the license to gamble on that possibility and fail to make an effort to become less authoritarian. And if we can't make that effort for our dream for democracy, we should make it out of respect for beings in development, our children and our students.

But to the humility with which teachers perform and relate to their students, another quality needs to be added: *lovingness*, without which their work would lose its meaning. And here I mean lovingness not only toward the students but also toward the very process of teaching. I must confess, not meaning to cavil, that I do not believe educators can survive the negativities of their trade without some sort of "armed love," as the poet Tiago de Melo would say. Without it they could not survive all the injustice or the government's contempt, which is expressed in the shameful wages and the arbitrary treatment of teachers, not coddling mothers, who take a stand, who participate in protest activities through their union, who are punished, and who yet remain devoted to their work with students.

It is indeed necessary, however, that this love be an "armed love," the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce. It is this form of love that is indispensable to the progressive educator and that we must all learn.

It so happens, however, that this lovingness I speak about, the dream for which I fight and for whose realization I constantly prepare myself, demands that I invent in myself, in my social experience, another quality: *courage*, to fight and to love.

Courage, as a virtue, is not something I can find outside myself. Because it comprises the conquering of my fears, it implies fear.

First of all, in speaking about fear we must make sure that we are speaking of something very concrete. In other words, fear is not an abstraction. Second, we must make sure that we understand that we are speaking of something very normal. And, when we speak about fear, we are faced with the need to be very clear of our choices, and that requires certain concrete procedures and practices, which are the very experiences that cause fear.

To the extent that I become clearer about my choices and my dreams, which are substantively political and attributively pedagogical, and to the extent that I recognize that though an educator I am also a political agent, I can better understand why I fear and realize how far we still have to go to improve our democracy. I also understand that as we put into practice an education that critically provokes the learner's consciousness, we are necessarily working against myths that deform us. As we confront such myths, we also face the dominant power because those myths are nothing but the expression of this power, of its ideology.

When we are faced with concrete fears, such as that of losing our jobs or of not being promoted, we feel the need to set certain limits to our fear. Before anything else, we begin to recognize that fear is a manifestation of our being alive. I do not need to hide my fears. But I must not allow my fears to immobilize me. If I am secure in my political dream, having tactics that may lessen my risk, I must go on with the fight. Hence the need to be in control of my fear, to *educate* my fear, from which is finally born to my courage.¹ Thus I must neither, on the one hand, deny my

fears nor, on the other, surrender myself to them. Instead, I must control them, for it is in the very exercise of this control that my necessary courage is shared.

That is why though there may be fear without courage, the fear that devastates and paralyzes us, there may never be courage without fear, that which “speaks” of our humanness as we manage to limit, subject, and control it.

Tolerance is another virtue. Without it no serious pedagogical work is possible; without it no authentic democratic experience is viable; without it all progressive educational practice denies itself. Tolerance is not, however, the irresponsible position of those who play the game of make-believe.

Being tolerant does not mean acquiescing to the intolerable; it does not mean covering up disrespect; it does not mean coddling the aggressor or disguising aggression. Tolerance is the virtue that teaches us to live with the different. It teaches us to learn from and respect the different.

On an initial level, tolerance may almost seem to be a favor, as if being tolerant were a courteous, thoughtful way of accepting, of *tolerating*, the not-quite-desired presence of one’s opposite, a civilized way of permitting a coexistence that might seem repugnant. That, however, is hypocrisy, not tolerance. Hypocrisy is a defect; it is degradation. Tolerance is a virtue. Thus if I live tolerance, I should embrace it. I must experience it as something that makes me coherent first with my historical being, inconclusive as that may sound, and second with my democratic political choice. I cannot see how one might be democratic without experiencing tolerance, coexistence with the different, as a fundamental principle.

No one can learn tolerance in a climate of irresponsibility, which does not produce democracy. The act of tolerating requires a climate in which limits may be established, in which there are principles to be respected. That is why tolerance is not coexistence with the intolerable. Under an authoritarian regime, in which authority is abused, or a permissive one, in which freedom is not limited, one can hardly learn tolerance. Tolerance requires respect, discipline, and ethics. The authoritarian, filled with sexual, racial, and class prejudices, can never become tolerant without first overcoming his or her prejudices. That is why a bigot’s *progressive* discourse, which contrasts with his or her practice, is a false discourse. That is also why those who embrace scientism are equally intolerant, because they take science for the *ultimate truth*, outside of which nothing counts, believing that only science can provide certainty. Those immersed in scientism cannot be tolerant, though that fact should not discredit science.

I would also like to add *decisiveness*, *security*, the tension between *patience and impatience*, and *joy of living* to the group of qualities to be nourished in ourselves if we are to be progressive educators.

An educator’s ability to make decisions is absolutely necessary to his or her educational work. It is by demonstrating an ability to make decisions that an educator teaches the difficult virtue of decisiveness. Making decisions is difficult to the extent that it signifies breaking free to choose. No one ever decides anything without making a trade-off, weighing one thing against another, one point against another, one person against another. Thus every choice that follows a particular decision calls for careful evaluation in comparing and opting for one of the possible sides, persons, or positions. It is evaluation, with all of its implications, that helps us to finally make choices.

Decision making is rupture and is not always an easy experience. But it is not possible to exist without rupturing, no matter how hard it may be.

One of the deficiencies that an educator may possess is an inability to make decisions. Such *indecision* is perceived by learners as either moral weakness or professional incompetence. Democratic educators must not nullify themselves in the name of being democratic. On the contrary, although they cannot take sole responsibility for the lives of their students, they must not, in the name of democracy, evade the responsibility of making decisions. At the same time,

they must not be arbitrary in their decisions. Setting an example, as an authority figure, of not taking responsibility for one's duties, of allowing oneself to fall into permissiveness, is even more somber a fate for a teacher than abusing authority.

There are plenty of occasions when a good democracy-oriented pedagogical example is to make the decision in question with the students, after analyzing the problem. Other times, when the decision to be made is within the scope of the educator's expertise, there is no reason not to take action, to be negligent.

Indecision reveals a lack of confidence; but confidence is indispensable for anyone with responsibilities in government, whether of a class, a family, an institution, a company, or the state.

Security, confidence, on the other hand, requires scientific competence, political clarity, and ethical integrity.

One cannot be secure in one's actions without knowing how to support those actions scientifically, without at least some idea of what one does, why, and to what end. The same is true of allegiance: One must know whom or what one is for or against. Nor can one be secure in one's actions without being moved by them, or if one hurts the dignity of others, exposing them to embarrassing situations. Such ethical irresponsibility and cynicism show an inability to live up to the educator's task, which demands critically disciplined performance with which to challenge learners. On the one hand, such discipline reflects the educator's competence, as it is gradually revealed to the learners, discreetly and humbly, without arrogant outbursts; on the other it affects the balance with which the educator exercises authority—secure, lucid, and determined.

None of this, however, can be realized if an educator lacks a taste for permanently seeking justice. No one can prevent a teacher from liking one student more than another, for any number of reasons. That is a teacher's right. What a teacher must not do is disregard the rights of the other students in favoring one student.

There is another fundamental quality that the progressive educator must not lack: He or she must exercise wisdom in experiencing the tension between *patience* and *impatience*. Neither *patience* nor *impatience* alone is what is called for. Patience alone may bring the educator to a position of resignation, of permissiveness, that denies the educator's democratic dream. Unaccompanied patience may lead to immobility, to inactivity. Conversely, impatience alone may lead the educator to blind activism, to action for its own sake, to a practice that does not respect the necessary relationship between tactics and strategy. Isolated patience tends to hinder the attainment of objectives central to the educator's practice, making it soft and ineffectual. Untempered impatience threatens the success of one's practice, which becomes lost in the arrogance of judging oneself the owner of history. Patience alone consumes itself in mere prattle; impatience alone consumes itself in irresponsible activism.

Virtue, then, does not lie in experience either without the other but, rather, in living the permanent tension between the two. The educator must live and work impatiently patiently, never surrendering entirely to either.

Alongside this harmonious, balanced way of being and working there must figure another quality, which I have been calling *verbal parsimony*. Verbal parsimony is implied in the assumption of patience-impatience. Those who live impatient patience will rarely lose control over their words; they will rarely exceed the limits of considered yet energetic discourse. Those who predominantly live patience along stifle their legitimate anger, which then is expressed through weak and resigned discourse. Those, on the other hand, who are all uncontrolled impatience tend toward lack of restraint in discourse. The patient person's discourse is always *well-behaved*, whereas that of the impatient person generally goes beyond what reality itself could withstand.

Both of these kinds of discourse, the overly controlled as well as the undisciplined, contribute to the preservation of the status quo. The first falls short of the demands of the status quo; the second surpasses its limits.

The benevolent classroom discourse and practice of those who are only patient suggest to learners that anything, or almost anything, goes. There is in the air a sense of a nearly infinite patience. Nervous, arrogant, uncontrolled, unrealistic, unrestrained discourse will find itself immersed in inconsequence and irresponsibility.

In no way do these discourses contribute to the learners' education.

There are also those who are excessively restrained in their discourse but who once in a while lose control. From absolute patience, they leap unexpectedly into uncontrollable impatience, creating a climate of insecurity for everyone around them, always with terrible effects.

Countless mothers and fathers behave so. Today their words and their actions are permissive, but they transform tomorrow into the opposite, a universe of authoritarian discourse and orders, which not only leaves their sons and daughters appalled but, above all, makes them insecure. Such immoderate parental behavior limits children's emotional balance, which they need to grow up. Loving is not enough; one must know how to love.

Though I recognize that these reflections on qualities are incomplete, I would also like to briefly discuss *joy of living* as a fundamental virtue for democratic educational practice.

By completely giving myself to life rather than to death—without meaning either to deny death or the mythicize life—I can free myself to surrender to the joy of living, without having to hide the reasons for sadness in life, which prepares me to stimulate and champion joy in the school.

Whether or not we are willing to overcome slips or inconsistencies, by living humility, lovingness, courage, tolerance, competence, decisiveness, patience-impatience, and verbal parsimony, we contribute to creating a happy, joyful school. We forge a school-adventure, a school that marches on, that is not afraid of the risks, and that rejects immobility. It is a school that thinks, that participates, that creates, that speaks, that loves, that guesses, that passionately embraces and says *yes to life*. It is not a school that quiets down and quits.

Indeed the easy way out in dealing with the obstacles posed by governmental contempt and the arbitrariness of antidemocratic authorities is the fatalist resignation in which many of us find ourselves.

"What can I do? Whether they call me *teacher* or coddling mother, I am still underpaid, disregarded, and uncared for. Well, so be it." In reality, this is the most convenient position, but it is also the position of someone who quits the struggle, who quits history. It is the position of those who renounce conflict, the lack of which undermines the dignity of life. There may not be life or human existence without struggle and conflict. Conflict² shares in our conscience. Denying conflict, we ignore even the most mundane aspects of our vital and social experience. Trying to escape conflict, we preserve the status quo.

Thus I can see no alternative for educators to unity within the diversity of their interests in defending their rights. Such rights include the right to freedom in teaching, the right to speak, the right to better conditions for pedagogical work, the right to paid sabbaticals for continuing education, the right to be coherent, the right to criticize the authorities without fear of retaliation (which entails the duty to criticize truthfully), the right to the duty to be serious and coherent and to not have to lie to survive.

We must fight so that these rights are not just recognized but respected and implemented. At times we may need to fight side by side with the unions; at other times we may need to fight against them, if their leadership is sectarian, whether right or left. At other times we also need to fight as a progressive administration against the devilish anger of the obsolete; of the traditionalists, some of whom judge themselves progressive; and of the neoliberals, who see themselves as the culmination of history.

NOTES

- 1 See Paulo Friere and Ira Shor, *Medo e Ousadia, o Cotidiano do Professor* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1987).
- 2 See Moacir Gadotti, Paulo Freire, and Sergio Guimarães, *Pedagogy: Dialogue and Conflict* (Rio de Janeiro: Cortex, 1989).