REVIEW ESSAY

Liberation, Oppression, and Education: Extending Freirean Ideas

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Introduction

More than a decade has now passed since Paulo Freire's death in 1997. International interest in Freire's work appears to be stronger than ever, with new conference papers and journal articles published on Freirean themes every year. Around a dozen books on Freire have appeared in the English language alone over the past ten years, and others are currently in production. This ongoing engagement with Freirean ideas has been given added impetus by the fact that new books by Freire himself continue to be released. Most of the posthumously published texts appeared in the period immediately following Freire's death (e.g., Freire, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c), but other writings that had previously enjoyed only limited circulation are still being assembled into book form. One of the most recent examples is *Pedagogy of Indignation*, published by Paradigm in 2004.

Pedagogy of Indignation (Freire, 2004) includes a series of letters and short essays by Freire, most written in the last years of his life. These are preceded by a Foreword (by Donaldo Macedo), a prologue (by Ana Maria Araújo Freire), and a letter (by Balduino Andreola). Freire addresses an eclectic range of topics in the essays and letters – social change, literacy, technology, adult education, hope, and utopia, among other subjects – and in so doing he revisits, reworks and extends key themes in his philosophy of education. Here, as in previous publications, Freire's approach in tackling any subject involves reflection on deeper theoretical questions: What does it mean to be a human being? How do we come to know? How ought we to structure society? What are some of the impediments to the pursuit of human ideals? These underlying ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political questions are really the heart of the book.

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While there is not a great deal here that is new for readers well versed in Freire's work, the combination of themes is distinctive and some of the answers Freire gives to longstanding questions differ in subtle ways from those provided in earlier published writings. There is, for instance, greater attention paid to the importance of *willing* in human life. Freire's critique of technicist modes of thought also finds fresh attention in these pages. The relationship between reason and emotion is explored here, as it was in other later works, and Freire's concern with ecological issues is also evident.

At the same time, the primary concerns that motivated Freire's earlier work continue to figure prominently. *Pedagogy of Indignation* is, as the title suggests, an *angry* book. In the last years of his life, Freire was deeply distressed by what he saw around him, both in his native Brazil and in the wider world. *Pedagogy of Indignation* is full of references to what Freire sees as dehumanising structures, practices, and attitudes. It is clear from this book, as it was from the other posthumously published works, that Freire never lost his passionate commitment to social justice. He expressed this in different ways over the years: through his writing, his adult literacy programmes, his university teaching, and his work as Secretary of Education in the São Paulo Municipal Bureau of Education, among other ways. Freire's concern was always to work toward the creation of a more just social world. Underlying this commitment is his theory of oppression and liberation, one of the most heavily debated areas of Freire's work.

This paper reflects on some of the questions raised by *Pedagogy of Indignation*, paying particular attention to the relationship between oppression, liberation, and education in Freire's work. The first section addresses claims of "universalism" in Freirean philosophy and assesses the extent to which Freire's account of liberation depends upon the existence of oppression. It is argued that interwoven with Freire's emphasis on oppression, there exists a shadow, virtue-based theory of liberation. This is particularly evident in later Freirean publications. This idea is developed further in the second part of the paper, where Freire's contribution to what Balduino Andreola calls a "pedagogy of great convergences" is considered.

Oppression, Liberation and Education

Over the past two decades, Freire has often been criticised for the universalist nature of his theory of oppression and liberation. Freire's references to "the oppressed" and "the oppressors" in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972a), it has been suggested, gloss over the multilayered, often conflicting forms of oppression experienced by people of

different ethnicities, genders, and classes. Freire is seen to pay insufficient attention to questions of difference and to the specificities of particular forms of oppression. It needs to be acknowledged, for example, that a peasant man may be oppressed by his landlord but also act in an oppressive way toward his wife or children (cf. Weiler, 1991). These criticisms suggest the need for a more complex theory of liberation: one that will take into account the tensions between different oppressor/oppressed discourses and identities and avoid what some see as the disempowering effects of universalist prescriptions (cf. Ellsworth, 1989).

Freire has responded at some length to these criticisms (Freire, 1996, 1997a; Freire & Macedo, 1993). In *Mentoring the Mentor*, for example, Freire claims that questions relating to layered and multiple identities had always preoccupied him (Freire, 1997a, p. 311). He draws attention to ambiguities and contradictions he often encountered in his political and pedagogical work between different levels of oppression. He provides the example of a woman who was illiterate, suffering, as her husband and eldest son did, from an oppressive social system. She had to face an additional struggle, however, against the oppressive machista attitudes of her husband and son who tried to prevent her from becoming literate. Freire also encountered many teachers, who "while being oppressed by the political system in which they operated, were in turn oppressors of their students" (p. 311).

Freire urges readers to recognise that his work is not confined to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He notes that it would be unacceptable for him to attempt to provide "teacher-proof" answers to educational problems in contexts other than those with which he is familiar. In *Mentoring the Mentor* he refuses, as he has always done, to provide universal pedagogical recipes. In answer to the charge that his work does not address the specificities of race and gender in the United States context, Freire admits that he could not possibly do this without knowing that context. What he does provide, however, is "a general framework that calls for a deep respect for the Other along the lines of race and gender" (1979a, p. 309).

Freire argues that while he was always sensitive to examples of racial oppression, his primary focus in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was class oppression. It was, Freire says, precisely because of his growing awareness of the specificities of different forms of oppression (along the lines of language, gender, and ethnicity, among others) that he defended the thesis of "unity in diversity." Freire's concern in his later years was that while groups on the political Right were able to forge a pragmatic unity despite tensions and differences (e.g., between economic liberalism and moral

conservatism), intellectuals and activists on the Left had spent much of their time fighting each other, with often bitter theoretical wars over questions of class, gender, ethnicity, and politics (cf. Freire, 1997b). Freire maintains that what is needed is a collective struggle against all forms of oppression. In *Letters to Cristina,* he writes:

> Our struggle as women, men, blacks, workers, Brazilians, North Americans, French, or Bolivians, is influenced by our gender, race, class, culture, and history, conditionings that mark us. Our struggle, nevertheless, departs from these conditionings and converges in the direction of being more, in the direction of universal objectives. Or else, for me at least, the fight would make no sense. (Freire, 1996, pp. 164-165)

There is, as has been discussed elsewhere (Roberts, 2003a), a complex relationship between universals and particulars in Freire's work. Freire's support for a position of unity in diversity (Freire, 1994, 1996, 1997a), in which differences would become a source of strength rather than fragmentation and divisiveness, has not satisfied all of his critics. By holding on, in *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Freire, 1998b) and *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004, p. 92), to the idea of a universal human ethic, Freire retained what some see as an unhelpful and naïve modernist optimism. Yet what binds Freire and many of his critics is the idea that liberation is tied, both theoretically and practically, to the notion of oppression. Liberation is conceived as a process of struggle against oppression – however that might be defined.

This is, in part, a recognition of the contexts in which Freire's ideas emerged. Freire's work as an adult educator was primarily in Latin American and African countries, from his original literacy programmes in Brazil, to his efforts in Chile, Guinea Bissau, and other countries (see Freire, 1972b, 1976, 1978). In Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, the disparities between different social groups were substantial, and Freire was, as an educator, confronted with extreme poverty among both the urban and rural groups with whom he worked. These extremes were still evident in Brazil near the end of the century, and in *Pedagogy of Indignation* and other later works Freire writes passionately about the destructive impact of neoliberalism in perpetuating such inequities. For Freire, oppression had become a dominant theme of the 20th century and he was supportive, though not blindly so, of many liberation movements that emerged across different parts of the globe in response to this.

But when we pause to ask, hypothetically, what might become of liberation were oppression to be removed, Freirean theory provides only

some of the answers. Would liberation be necessary, or indeed have any meaning as a concept, in a world without oppression? In some respects, the question is of limited value, for we have to live in and work with the world as it is now, not as it might be in an abstract, imaginary, ideal reality. The world we have now is, as Freire and others have demonstrated, clearly one characterised by widespread oppression. While there was a utopian element in Freire's thought from the beginning (and this persisted throughout his writing career), he always insisted that what he wanted to continue embracing was a *possible* dream.

Freire did not argue explicitly that oppression of one kind or another would always be with us, but neither did he suggest that a "solution" to problems of mass starvation, gross exploitation, the child sex slavery industry, and the like could be found quickly and easily. He spoke passionately about the need to address these problems, and to replace the ethics of the market with an attitude more respectful of the consequences of economic and social policies for human lives and the environment. This message comes through very strongly in *Pedagogy of Indignation*. Freire was aware, however, that there were deep structural impediments to rapid change. He remained convinced that capitalism was an "evil" – that is, *necessarily* oppressive – system (see Freire, 1996, 1998b, 2004), and that any attempt to overcome problems such as exploitation and hunger while retaining the capitalist mode of production would ultimately be doomed to failure.

Thus, to talk of liberation in a world without oppression would be to engage in a process of speculative theorising, ignoring the fact that we are shaped by social structures, policies, and systems. We are, Freire reminded us, beings of history and culture, influenced in ways we often cannot recognise by the traditions, practices, and beliefs of our past. We are, importantly, never fully *determined* by dominant structures, ideas and practices, past or present. But if we are to bring about change we must do so in this world, with all of its complexities and problems. Liberation thus becomes a matter both of recognising limits and of understanding possibilities *given* those limits.

It is perhaps more productive to consider whether the Freirean notion of liberation is *merely* the process of struggling against oppression. We might accept, with Freire, that the world as it is currently structured is oppressive, in multiple ways, with different consequences for different oppressed groups. It might also be acknowledged that any robust theory of liberation must at the very least take into account the reality of oppression – in its myriad different forms. This does not compel us to make the

struggle against oppression *the* defining feature of such a theory. In Freire's case, clearly this struggle is a key theme, but it is arguably not the *only* element in his theory of liberation.

From his earliest writings, Freire has emphasised the importance of human virtues such as love, hope, trust, faith, and critical thinking (see Freire, 1972a). In later works, including *Pedagogy of Indignation*, these virtues occupy a more prominent place in Freire's discussion of education, ethics, and politics. Freire identifies a set of what might be called epistemological virtues – scholarly or intellectual dispositions – of value in the educational process. These include an investigative and probing frame of mind, curiosity, humility, openness, reflectiveness, a willingness to question and to be questioned, a dialogical and collegial spirit of inquiry, and a desire to know (Freire, 1985, 1996, 1997b, 1998a; Freire & Faundez, 1989). These intellectual dispositions complement (and overlap with) a wider set of educational virtues. Freire's later books are replete with examples of the qualities teachers should bring to bear in their work with students. Freire speaks in this context of tolerance, honesty, clarity, knowledge of one's subject, thoroughness, commitment, and a willingness to listen and learn from other participants in an educational setting (Freire, 1994, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; Freire & Shor, 1987; Horton & Freire, 1990). In his later publications, Freire stressed the importance of structure, direction, and rigour in liberating education (Roberts, 2000). He also emphasised the importance of emotion as well as reason in education and human development (Roberts, in press). Love – of one's fellow human beings, of the process of study, and of the students with whom one works – became a key motif in his later books (see further, Fraser, 1997; Darder, 2002).

From these works, it is possible to construct a view of a certain ideal – a mode of being in and with the world, and with others – that might be said to underpin Freire's ethic and educational theory. There is what could be called a shadow theory of liberation underlying his work, and particularly his later writings: a virtue-based account of human striving suggestive of criteria to which the struggle against oppression (in all of its forms) must conform if it is to be characterised as liberating. The struggle against oppression remains the dominant feature of Freire's ideal but it does not *in itself* define that ideal.

There can, then, be struggles against oppression that are profoundly at odds with the Freirean notion of liberation: they may be anti-dialogical, unreflective, lacking in love and care for others, closed to criticism and questioning, and so on. Similarly, it becomes possible to conceive of

individuals and groups striving to realise the ideal – embrace and practice the virtues articulated by Freire – without self-consciously engaging in a struggle against oppression. This would not mean, however, that such people may not *be* so engaged. For, from a Freirean perspective, being dialogical, open-minded, tolerant, and so on can be seen as a form of indirect resistance against oppression.

Freire never published a book specifically devoted to this subject, nor did he refer explicitly to other bodies of work (e.g., virtue ethics, the ethics of care, and work on the philosophy of emotion) that might have been helpful in developing his ideas. Instead, as is true of many key Freirean themes, his philosophy of liberation must be drawn from a holistic, contextualised and critical reading of his work (Mayo, 1999; Roberts, 2000). Such a reading suggests a richer, more complex and multi-layered theory of liberation than some commentators have conveyed in their discussions of Freirean ideas.

Nevertheless, some significant gaps remain. In particular, Freire has little to say about the spiritual dimension of liberation and the role of practices such as meditation in the pursuit of this. In the next section I develop this theme further, with reference to the idea of a "pedagogy of great convergences."

Freire and a "'Pedagogy of Great Convergences"

A Pedagogy of Indignation includes a letter from Balduino Andreola to Freire. In his letter, Andreola (2004, p. xliii) aligns Freire with other intellectuals, activists, and spiritual leaders who advanced a "pedagogy of great convergences." The people he names as examples are as follows:

> Gandhi, Pope John XXIII, Martin Luther King Jr., Simone Weil, Lebret, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Teresa of Calcutta, Don Helder, Mounier, Teilhard de Chardin, Nelson Mandela, Roger Garaudy, the Dalai Lama, Teovedjre, Betinho, Paramahansa Yogananda, Michel Duclerq, Fritjof Capra, Pierre Weil, Leonardo Boff, Paul Ricoeur, and others. (pp.xliii-xliv)

This appears to be a rather eclectic mix, but what unites these thinkers and leaders, Andreola says, is their commitment to a "more human, fraternal, and solidarity-based vision for the world" (2004, p. xliii). Andreola sees in Freire's later written work a shift "from the West toward the East and the South" (p. xliii). He suggests that while Freire embraces the "the rigor of science and philosophy," he is "much closer to the thinking and the vision for the world of the great Eastern masters, as well to the cosmic, mystical, and welcoming spirit of the African peoples" (p. xliii).

As has been noted elsewhere (Roberts, 2005), care needs to be taken in the way Andreola's comments are interpreted. Freire had little to say *directly* about Eastern thought and spiritual traditions; nor did he discuss, overtly or in any detail, mysticism or meditation, in either the West or the East. It is also important to stress that there is, of course, no single, homogeneous mode of thinking, being, or acting within either Western or Eastern traditions. Any attempt to reduce the myriad, heterogeneous ways of thinking in the West to "*the* Western mindset" (Bowers, 1983) is deeply problematic (Roberts, 2000, 2003b). The same is true of the multiplicity of different Eastern traditions.

Andreola is right, in my view, to see something deeper in Freire's work that binds him with many Eastern thinkers. At first glance, however, the connections are not obvious. The key is to recognise points of theoretical kinship while also acknowledging some tensions and being willing to extend ideas worthy of further development in Freire's work. Toward that end, I wish to round out this discussion with a few thoughts on possibilities for ongoing reflection and research.

First, we might want to ask what it is that would make this a *pedagogy* of great convergences. Not all of the people named by Andreola are, in the usual sense of the term, educationists. This does not mean their work is not *educational*. There is much that might be gained by asking what and how we learn from these "great masters of humanity" as Andreola calls them (2004, p. xliii). Do they teach us by their actions, their words, or in some other way? It is also helpful to consider how learning from the examples provided by such lives might differ from one context to another. What might we gain from Gandhi now, in a country of the so-called First World, that is distinctive when compared with an encounter in earlier times and in other places? Where do ideas converge and where do they break apart?

The danger of "heroizing" such leaders needs to be kept in mind. This has, as Boler (1999) notes, been a problem in some readings of Freire's work. The influence of the activists and thinkers identified by Andreola mustn't blind us to their faults and weaknesses. The rigour in Freire's work to which Andreola refers must be applied to Freire himself and to all of the others named. This is, in part, what makes this a pedagogical convergence: the very process of engaging the ideas, and of reflecting critically on the actions, of people of influence is a learning exercise. One of the first ways in which this can be done is to problematize the notion of greatness itself. What does it mean to be a great thinker or a great leader? What politics are at work in the elevation of some people to this status, while others – often toiling away quietly but nonetheless making a profound difference in

peoples' lives – achieve very little public recognition for their efforts? How can the voices of those who have been invisiblized be made more prominent?

Feminist and indigenous scholars have taken a lead in this area in a variety of fields within the humanities and social sciences over the past 30 or 40 years, and work of this kind continues to be necessary and important in the 21st century. New forms of suppression under the guise of a "war against terror" have been developed, inhibiting freedom of speech and action. Universities, supposedly the protectors of academic freedom and critical thought, have not been immune from these forms of suppression. Taking the idea of a pedagogy of great convergences seriously means, among other things, respecting the value of constructive critique. The people named by Andreola have all, in different ways, made their mark on the world by being prepared to question received wisdom, prevailing attitudes, and existing social structures. Subjecting their own work to careful critique pays homage to that work and continues the "great conversation" to which they have contributed.

One of the hallmarks of the work undertaken by many of the people named in Andreola's list is the close relationship between their words and their deeds. Freire refers to this in *Pedagogy of Indignation* and other later works as a form of coherence – an ethical consistency between theory and practice, often easy to espouse but much harder to enact. Freire's conviction in this area was put to the test during the period in which he served as Secretary of Education in the municipality of São Paulo (1989-1991). He faced enormous challenges in this role, with run-down schools, overwhelming poverty, and a pervasive attitude of fatalism and hopelessness among some of the people with whom he was working. That he was able to effect worthwhile changes in the administration of schooling in this vastly populated area was testament to his commitment and abilities as an educator (see O'Cadiz, Wong, & Torres, 1998), but his tenure in the role was limited and at the time at which he left there much work still to be done.

One of the ongoing tasks in building a pedagogy of great convergences will be to recognise ways in which the past converges with the present and the imagined future. Our work as human beings, Freire often reminded us, is never finished. There is never a time at which we can declare ourselves, or the process of education and social change, complete. Further reflection and action will always be necessary. Holding on to a "possible dream" remains more vital than ever in times of desperation and despair. The era of neoliberal reform is, for Freire, a period in human history of exactly this

kind. Freire reserves his most vigorous criticism in *Pedagogy of Indignation* for the politics of neoliberal global capitalism, and some of the changes he observed in the last years of his life have now become an entrenched feature of economic and social policy in many parts of the world.

This, I think, is where Andreola's list has particular contemporary significance. There is a certain orientation to ethical, political, and pedagogical questions that distinguishes Freire and a diverse range of other thinkers, East and West, from some of the ideas that have become dominant across the globe over the past few decades. The neoliberal focus on self-interest, consumption, choice, competition, and the commodification of knowledge and education stands opposed the ideas and practices of all of the thinkers, spiritual leaders, and social activists named by Andreola. The emphasis on love, dialogue, tolerance, honesty, curiosity, open-mindedness, rigour, and political commitment in Freire's work is shared by others on Andreola's list. Acknowledging, respecting, and attempting to understand different traditions and cultures, while not necessarily accepting all beliefs or practices within them, is another point in common. These are the great convergences in the work of the people identified by Andreola.

What of the spiritual connections to which Andreola refers? (For the purposes of this discussion, the term "spirituality" will be used as inclusive of "religion." It is accepted, however, that this way of employing the two terms is by no means unproblematic.) Freire has, on occasion (e.g., Freire, 1985, 1997b), commented on his religious beliefs and his relationship with the Christian Gospels. He has confessed to feeling a certain discomfort in doing so (see Freire, 1997b), but certain features of his orientation to Christianity have become clear over the years. Freire interpreted the Gospels as a call to social action. He did not ignore the notion of personal salvation altogether, but he was adamant from his earliest work as an educator in Brazil that this should be coupled with – indeed, *forged through* – the process of struggling against oppression. He spoke of love in a manner that was consistent with Christ's call to love one's neighbour as oneself. This, for Freire, implied not merely treating others as one would like to be treated oneself but acknowledging that one's neighbour *is* oneself. We are, Freire argued, always social beings, and our actions, attitudes, and beliefs are, in this sense, not merely our own but also those of others. It is, from a Freirean point of view, impossible for a human being to act, think or *be* alone (see further, Roberts, 2000). This interpretation of the Christian gospels placed Freire at odds with the conservative wing of the Catholic

Church in his native Brazil (see Mackie, 1980), but he was later to find kindred spirits among those who became known as liberation theologists.

Beyond these fairly sparse references to Christ, the Gospels, and the Catholic Church, Freire has little to say about matters of spirituality. This does not mean he has nothing to offer in this area. While a fragmented reading of Freire's work (e.g., Robinson, 2004) may suggest irreconcilable differences, there are arguably important connections that might be made between some traditions of meditative practice and elements of Freire's epistemology, ethic, and educational theory. For example, productive links might be made between certain forms of concentrative meditation and the process of "epistemological encircling" described by Freire in *Pedagogy of Indignation* (Freire, 2004, p. 84) and other later publications. Other quite unexpected connections can sometimes be made, as Fraser (1997) demonstrates in drawing a comparison between Freire and Taoism on the themes of love and history. Fraser shows, for instance, that there is considerable agreement between Freire and the *Tao Te Ching* on the nature of leadership and that this has significant implications for education. The comparisons can cross barriers often erected between different genres of written work. Freire's emphasis on dialogue, uncertainty, the process of struggle, and transformation, for example, is also evident in the work of novelists such as Dostoevsky and Hesse, both of whom thought deeply about philosophical and spiritual questions (see Roberts, 2005, 2007).

Freire's occasional explicit references to spirituality in his later writings pose some intriguing questions about where his thought would have taken him had he been granted another ten years of life. For instance, in *Pedagogy of Indignation* he proclaims:

> The philosophies that will help us the most will be those that, without ignoring materiality or minimizing its weight, will not timidly shy away from historical analysis and from comprehending the role that spirituality, not necessarily in a religious sense, [but] feelings, dreams, and utopias play in the changing of reality. (2004, p. 76)

These comments beg further questions. Freire does not elaborate on precisely why and how feelings, dreams, and utopias might be considered part of the spiritual domain. Nor does he say a great deal about others who have thought about spirituality in this way. The relationship between the material and the spiritual could also benefit from further exploration.

There are, then, limits to what we can gain from Freire alone. If the possibilities in Freire's work for a fruitful exploration of questions of spirituality and meditation are to be realised, Freire's ideas need to be put

into critical conversation with those from other writers and traditions. The thinkers named by Andreola provide a helpful starting point in pursuing this agenda further, to which can be added many others. A pedagogy of convergences is also a pedagogy of *conversations* – across cultures, spiritual traditions, disciplinary boundaries, and time – and continuing those conversations, by expanding the list of thinkers and activists considered, is an important task for the future.

Concluding Comments

In the last decade of his life, Freire was a prolific writer, averaging more than a book a year during this period. This productivity had its weaknesses as well as strengths. It is true that these later works extended and deepened key points from Freire's earlier writings. But some of the ideas advanced in *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004) and Freire's other later texts also required sharpening and more careful philosophical development. Freire's writing can sometimes have a somewhat rambling character and readers must work hard to place all the pieces of his theoretical jigsaw together. As has been noted earlier, a holistic reading of his work is necessary if this process is to work well. Freire's reliance in *Pedagogy of Indignation* on anecdotal evidence in elaborating on some theoretical points weakens his argument in places, and the language employed in developing some of his ideas poses problems. His continuing use of phrases such as "the masses" and "the people" in *Pedagogy of Indignation* warrants interrogation. Freire seemed to have a great deal to say in the last years of his life, and in his effort to say as much as possible while facing a hectic schedule of other commitments, the quality of his writing sometimes suffered.

Despite these stylistic shortcomings, *Pedagogy of Indignation* provides a worthwhile addition to the now extensive corpus of Freirean writings. Its strengths lie in the passion with which Freire expresses his opposition to neoliberalism, in the originality of some of the ideas, in the possibilities for further inquiry opened up by statements on ecological and spiritual matters, and in the clear sense of political commitment still evident more than 30 years after the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972a). *Pedagogy of Indignation*, as its title suggests, conveys real anger at the violence done to the human body, soul, and spirit by oppressive structures, policies, and practices. To this extent, it continues in the tradition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and the struggle against oppression remains one of the key features of Freire's theory of liberation. At the same time, the virtues to which Freire so often referred in his later work – love

and hope foremost among them – find further expression here and constitute the other side of a Freirean approach to liberation, so often ignored.

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