

Introduction: In the Spirit of Freire

This is not a book on how to grow a beard or develop wrinkles as marks of sagacity in the practice of teaching. Instead, the essays collected here attempt something much more difficult, and probably impossible. They seek to address the pedagogical implications of a two-sided problem. On the one side is the apparent hollowing-out, and maybe impeding collapse, of the liberal democratic tradition in the West since the days of neoconservative ideological hardening in America in the 1980s and the ascendance of neoliberal economic theory. On the other side is the problem of dealing with the social and cultural fallout from these developments, with neoliberal and neoconservative policies now fully entrenched, yet somehow exhausted and certainly delegitimized by the global financial crisis of 2008. There is a need to reimagine new, wiser, human possibilities given the deep damage suffered at local domestic levels, both at home and abroad. If education and teaching basically concern the stories we tell the young about life, what are the stories that need to be told today? Most of the essays in this book are an attempt to respond to that question, and in doing so they insist on holding in tension a full-face addressing of the contemporary politico-economic environment in which the stories are embedded, alongside an examination of global wisdom traditions as having something important to say about what it means to live well in a complicated, conflicted world.

A rejuvenated critical pedagogy in the spirit of Paulo Freire may be more relevant today than ever. Primarily, this is because the

triumph of propaganda in the military-corporate state has reduced the intellectual left to almost complete silence, a silence signifying either agreement with surface media messages or, worse, fear, producing compliance. There are good reasons for fear in the age of surveillance coupled with the public smearing of anyone who dares to question the dominant interpretation of things. Actually, my personal hope is that, indeed, fear is the cause, since in the long run fear can be overcome by truth, an insight dear to Freire. The starting point for truth seeking and truth telling in our current context is learning to see and acknowledge how one's own experience, for good or ill, is implicated in, and constructed by, macronarratives lying hidden beyond the purview of immediate consciousness. To say this is not to invoke conspiracy theory; it is simply to acknowledge that unless we participate in a certain kind of awakening to our surroundings and day-to-day routines and investigate our auspices, we live in what Freire called the *natural attitude*, which requires a rising to consciousness, or *conscientização*, the condition of both our freedom and our dignity as human beings. A caveat: Anyone inspired by Freire needs to remember that he spent much of his career in exile and was imprisoned twice for his social and political views. He also failed at his own final doctoral exam for much the same reason, at a time when his native Brazil was controlled by powerfully conservative forces. (For an excellent overview of Freire's life and influences, see Gerhardt 1993.)

There is another reason that Freire is relevant, at least certainly to me as I have tried to follow various trails in the search for truth regarding what is going on in the world and to articulate a distinctly pedagogical response to the resulting revelations based on wisdom teachings. This has to do with Freire's eclecticism. Far from being a dogged methodologist, a pedantic pedagogue, Freire was always experimenting, always observing, always revising his understanding and sense of what needed to be done. This was a feature of his relentless curiosity about human nature, a curiosity

brought to maturity through his own intellectual journeying. Phenomenology, existentialism, Catholic communitarianism, Christian personalism, humanist Marxism, Hegelianism – all these were deeply formative to Freire's hermeneutic imagination and his care for human beings suffering in their 'situation', as he liked to call it. Of course, one can discern here a certain lack, with all of these influences being locked into a particular kind of imaginal space; namely, the tropes and traditions of Western philosophy. So it is, then, in the name of eclecticism that I dare extend Freirean compassion to include sources beyond the usual philosophical traditions of Europe as part of a new hermeneutic of human well-being, one that attempts to draw readers and practitioners into a more global conversation of what might be required as we face an uncertain future together.

What can the East, for example, contribute, existentially, politically, materially, to a new global conversation about human futures? I can see two possibilities: (a) a more expanded ontology of human suffering than one finds in Western philosophy, even in Freire; and (b) a more thorough investigation of Mind and its role in human suffering and human healing at both the personal and politico-cultural levels. Eventually, as in my own experience, a journey into Eastern thought can inspire an appreciation of wisdom in human life, which, in turn, ironically, can inspire a return to one's own Western tradition with new sensibilities and a capacity for discerning ancient wisdom sources that have been lost or occluded by the hyper-rationality of the Enlightenment, the rise of science and the technocratic corporate state. I believe the deep commonalities inhering in these various Wisdom traditions, from vastly different civilizations, hold great promise for a new global conversation regarding life together. Let me provide one example, as follows.

In Plato's final Socratic dialogue, the *Phaedo*, which leads to Socrates' taking the deadly hemlock as punishment for corrupting the youth of Athens and refusing the authority of local gods, Socrates declares, "Those who rightly love wisdom are practicing

dying, and death to them is the least terrible thing in the world' (Warmington and Rouse 1956, 470 [hereafter WR]). In this scenario, it is good to remember that, at his impending death, Socrates was in a good mood, happy even while his surrounding supportive interlocutors were thoroughly miserable at the thought of losing their beloved friend and mentor. From a Socratic point of view, practising dying as the right way to live and love wisdom is not a morbid activity. Rather, the practice of dying is the practice of a particular kind of refinement, an overcoming of obsession with the physical body, which is the typical plight of non-reflective being; and here, the physical doesn't just mean my literal body, but the entire material realm of nature (Gk. *physis*). Often in popular philosophy, the Platonic world is characterized as anti-body, privileging instead the soul (Gk. *psyche*, L. *anima*), with the body as that which is trapped in temporality and decay, while the soul is eternal. Indeed, in his own taxonomy of the professions, Plato placed philosophers at the top, because they were concerned with the eternal spirit of life, while at the bottom were physicians, preoccupied only with the bodily world. So also was the merchant class not highly praised in classical Greece. It is not the place here to engage the intricate debates in the Western tradition over body and soul and their interrelationship except to note Socrates' basic point: We need to be careful about the body and its demands, because they can get in the way of something very fundamental; namely, the human desire to engage and become one with the eternal spirit of life; indeed, its deeper truth. Socrates puts it graphically:

[Through obsession with the body] we shall never attain sufficiently what we desire, that is, the truth. For the body provides thousands of busy distractions because of its necessary food; besides, if diseases fall upon us, they hinder us from the pursuit of the real ... and truly make us ... unable to think one little bit about anything at any time. (WR 469)

Then, a point that is highly relevant to themes in this book:

Indeed, wars and factions and battles all come from the body and its desires, and from nothing else. For the desire of getting wealth causes all wars, and we are compelled to desire wealth by the body, being slaves to its culture ... [I]n fact, if we are to know anything purely, we are to examine the real things by the soul alone. (WR 469)

So, 'if you see a person fretting because he is about to die, he was not really a wisdom-lover (philosopher), but a body-lover (philosoma). And no doubt the same person is a money-lover and honours-lover, one or both' (WR 471).

One can witness here a clear indictment of the monotonous materialism that neoliberal philosophy has inflicted upon much of the world, to say nothing of the pretensions of neoconservatism. More important though is the hopeful insight it offers – that, indeed, there is a real world, a world deeper and truer than any consumerist phantasm, or fantasy of world domination, as in the theory of 'Full-Spectrum Dominance' of the neoconservative agenda (see Engdahl 2009). The wisdom lover, through the practice of thinking, of mindfulness, of reasoning (Gk. *logos*), is able to pierce such illusions to reveal that which we cannot live without, which is nothing less than the spirit of life itself, the life prevenient to but also immanent in any particular life, and which will and does go on beyond the death of individuals, cultures, lobbies, states, and nations. The invitation of wisdom is to enter into this Life beyond life through, paradoxically, the practice of dying. The particularities of my body are secondary to the fact of its very existence, of its liveliness, such that if I fall in love with the former, with a contrived sense of who I think I am, and forget the latter, in the name of living I shall actually be dying; whereas if I give up any pretensions about myself, practising a form of dying, of letting go, paradoxically, I enter the living

stream of all things, the source of true joy. In dying, Socrates was happy because he had discovered this secret, a secret shared by all the great sages of the Axial Age, as the philosopher Karl Jaspers named the historical period of two-and-a-half millennia ago, when wisdom seemed to break forth throughout the world (see Jaspers 1966, 1974). The Taoists emphasized that balance in life is important, accepting death as part of living, and that the Tao, or Way of Heaven, is the same as the Tao of Earth; the Buddha taught the importance of not clinging to life in the name of desire, as the paradoxical secret of living well; the Confucians translated all of this into forms of political and educational theory with leaders educated to understand how learning (studying the Way) must never reduce to a form of vulgar accumulation to serve predetermined ends, but rather be an induction into ethical being, grounded in genuine humility, a relinquishing of self-interest. The biblical figure of Job declared in his bodily misery, 'Though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God' (Job 19:26), a reminder that the transcendent is in the immanent, the spirit is in the flesh. Later in the Christian tradition, Jesus taught the importance of losing oneself to find oneself, and the medieval mystical philosophers taught the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of opposites – that this and not this, both life and death, participate in an organic unity that can never be disentangled.

The love of wisdom, as Socrates taught, relies on the gift of thinking, which in the Greek sense is dialogical, a concept much misunderstood today even in the dialogical pedagogy favoured by critical pedagogues. Too often it means a logic of question and answer, with the questioner leading the way to an answer that he/she has predetermined to be the correct one. Instead, the Greek roots, *dia*, meaning 'through', and *logos*, meaning not just logic, but reasoning, thinking, considering, searching, 'wording', and so on, all point to how dialogue really means thinking through together so that together we might discover the answer to

the conundrum in front of us both. In a sense, any conundrum facing us lies in a kind of open space that is indeterminate until together we consider it through dialogue and come to a conclusion on which we can all agree. This process is very similar to that found in North American Indigenous circles: When an important decision is to be made, elders gather, not so much to argue as to sit together, speak quietly as so inspired, and wait until a full consideration of the problem has unfolded in their mutual presence and a decision can be made. Dialogue in this sense is foundational to the effective practice of democracy, but it has suffered profound degradation in recent years by reducing speaking together to blatant forms of confrontation, competition, and embattlement rather than honest mutual consideration of problems held in common.

What makes the times of contemporary Western civilization so precipitous is nothing less than the death of thinking in this ancient sense, a sense still so relevant and necessary to the practice of democratic life. The block to thinking has been established, for example, by attempts to conform educational institutions to the rule of money, whereby schools and universities are coerced into a predetermined law of economic determinism. Furthermore, as many of the essays in this book try to clarify, the assumptions regarding Market Logic and economic well-being currently at work not only are time bound in their construction, but also refuse any reconsideration or refinement of their basic auspices, even though those auspices are increasingly exposed as inadequate, indeed inappropriate, to today's geopolitical requirements. This is how the death of thinking operates: by a refusal to consider anything outside of its own logistical paradigm. When thinking cannot begin with an open future, it actually ceases to be thinking, surviving only as a form of calculative rationality to serve predetermined ends. The social and cultural implications of this condition are dire, because if the future is not open, why should I go on? It should come as no surprise that mental illness,

especially depression, is now the leading medical condition in North America (see Whitaker 2010).

The difficulty of addressing these issues is tied to their insinuation in a further logic, the logic of empire, with all of the ancillary emotional links to patriotism, nationalism and fundamentalisms of one kind or another. All of these latter features, which are necessary for the sustenance of empire, require a massive machinery of public persuasion, through heavily controlled public media and curriculum narratives that underwrite the military corporate state. The power of this machinery lies not so much in its overtness, which is not difficult to read in the pronouncements of advertising and vapidly ideological politics; rather, the power resides in its subtleties of inversion. The following point made by Michael Budde about advertising is worth quoting at length as an analogue for political suasion as well:

Marketing/advertising power does not operate in a (simple) 'hyperdermic' fashion, implanting ideas and desires into the minds of countless passive individuals. Nor does it assume that people are stupid, easily duped, or incapable of choice. Its dynamic is more closely akin to a seduction than assault. It involves actor A knowing things about B that B doesn't realize A knows. It is like playing poker against someone who has already seen your hand, unbeknownst to you ... In such a context, the actor under surveillance chooses, she is acting freely, but she does so in a context constructed to advance the priority of others. So long as asymmetry in information persists, and so long as the player under surveillance is unaware of the degree of contextual manipulation and structuring, the one-sided interaction can continue indefinitely. (Erlendson 2003, 42)

Believing that one is choosing freely what in fact has already been chosen for one? Interested readers can explore further this dynamic through the work of Edward Bernays, the nephew of

Sigmund Freud, who drew on Freud's theories of instinctual drives and the unconscious to formulate the theories of propaganda and marketing behind many of the operations of daily life in the world today (see Bernays 1928/2005, 1923/1951), including the fictional conventions of 9/11 (see Griffin 2011, McMurtry 2013), the so-called Color Revolutions in Eastern Europe (see Engdahl 2011), and, more lately, the Arab Spring phenomenon and spreading disruptions in North Africa (see multiple links at www.globalresearch.ca).

Actually, the problems that Western democracy faces might be even deeper than this. The architects of neoliberal polity drew most heavily on the work of Fredrick Hayek (1944/2007), who in turn drew on the work of Joseph Schumpeter (2008). Philosophically, there is an ironic linkage going back to Friedrich Nietzsche (see Nietzsche 2000) in the nineteenth century. Their basic point is that democracy, traditionally based on dialogue and education in the humanities as core curriculum, along with common participation in political decision making (basically the Deweyan ideal), is a crock of nonsense. Realistically, you can't run a country that way. Dialogue has its severe limitations, as anyone who has spent fruitless hours of discussion in committee meetings can attest. When it comes to issues of great political and economic importance, what is required is a small cadre of elites who, through long exercise of power and influence and their superior intelligence, best know what is to be done. Democracy is a nice sop for the masses; having a sense of participation in the big picture is comforting. But when it comes to the heavy lifting in policy and action, leave it to the Big Men, gifted and creative as they are, so proven by their success, particularly in wealth accumulation. Let schools and universities have their humanities departments – it's a good way to pacify intellectuals who love nothing better than to chatter endlessly about this and that over cafes of wine. What we really need today are persons of iron will, exceptional brain and awe-inspiring courage who can stay the course of bringing

progress to the world while keeping the hordes at bay (all qualities self-defined, of course).

There is much towards which one can be sympathetic in the forgoing scenario, but a key aspect is lacking; namely, a consideration of ethics, or what Plato called the *virtues*, and here we are returned to the questions of mind and mindfulness so essential to the practice of wisdom. In this context it is helpful to distinguish two Greek terms for intellectual activity. The discursive action of the *logos* we have so far considered. The formal term for this is *dianoia*, or reason, which depends on 'formulating abstract concepts and then arguing on this basis to a conclusion reached through deductive reasoning' (Palmer, Sherrard and Ware 1990, 360 [PSW]). There is a higher form of activity, however, based on the highest human faculty, simply called 'the intellect' (Gk. *nous*). The Greek concept of intellect shares much with the Asian concept of mind, in particular appreciation for the unity of mind and body, especially in the heart. For Greek sages the intellect 'constitutes the innermost aspect of the heart' and is variously referred to as 'the organ of contemplation' and 'the eye of the heart' (see PSW, 360). Chinese does not have two words for mind and heart, but only *hsin*; literally, heart-mind. Through this highest human faculty, the intellect or heart-mind, a person is capable of knowing the truth of life and the inner essences or principles of created things, what Plato and Buddhist philosophy call the *Real*. This can be achieved by 'direct apprehension or spiritual perception', but it requires one key quality, purification. Purification from what? What is it that corrupts the intellect or heart/mind and its operation more than anything else? Distraction. 'Distraction is the cause of the intellect's obscuration', said Peter of Damaskos in the eleventh century (PSW, 182). What are the causes of distraction? For Plato, as we saw, it was the endless call to satisfy bodily desires, which can come in many forms, such as the desire for certainty, the desire for wealth, the desire for power, not just the usual

suspects of lust, gluttony and so on. Aristotle called it the desire for 'bad infinity' (Gk. *pleonexia*), a total investment in or commitment to something of finite value. For Taoists it can be an excessive desire for one thing over another, which creates an imbalance in personal and cultural energies. For the Buddha it is the condition of constant craving that can never be satisfied. The operation and vitality of the intellect requires great discipline, a kind of perpetual vigilance against all those warring factions that would enslave attention to nonessentials and prevent one from seeing the world as it actually is, personally, politically, pedagogically.

The point here is that under the rhetorical sirens of freedom and democracy, neoliberal and neoconservative polity and practice survive on the basis of the infinite distractibility of persons, either through repetitive narratives of civilizational superiority supported by faked heroic deeds of antiterrorism (see Aaronson 2013) or through the more direct seductions of consumer culture with its promises of a fulfilment that can in truth never be realized. By these very means a consequence is achieved that serves the ruling order: nothing less than the corruption of the intellect/heart-mind and the incapacity of persons to see their actual condition. To lose one's mind is a terrifying prospect precisely because, without mind and mindfulness, we cannot be human.

Such, then, is the commitment of this book: in a stumbling way to issue a call for a return to sanity, both personal and collective, and for courage to turn away from enslaving distraction to see our 'situation' in the Freirean sense for what it is, that a renewed freedom might be gained and human dignity prevail through a healed body, a body politic, a cultural body; revived, ironically, through a recovery of spirit, of the eternal within the body of the real. To know the real is a mark of wisdom, but the journey to it is long and difficult. Paulo Freire once said that the key thing in any pedagogical endeavour is 'to grasp the aspiration of people' and there are signs everywhere that hope is rising for true reform along

the lines noted here. For example, a Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (www.contemplativemind.org) has been established, as well as a Wisdom University (www.wisdomuniversity.org). My one worry about all this good work is that it seems to hold so little engagement with the temporal powers of the present, and that unless there is vigilance over and challenge of the prevailing epistemologies of power, wisdom tries to exist as a severed psychotic space without specific address in the real world. A good education today must not just be for the body or for the soul, but for the soul-in-the-body, which means an education of both body and soul together. Hence all of the essays in this book try to maintain a critical view of education as always political, with the political as the site of dreaming for a world of lesser suffering and greater hope.

A few words about the content of each of the chapters: Chapter 1, 'Wisdom Responses to Globalization: The Pedagogic Context', gives an account of a graduate seminar I have developed and offered for the past five years at the University of Alberta. In the seminar we hold in tension the political and the ontological by examining the publicly unspoken underside of contemporary neoliberal economic theory along with an exploration of the wider parameters of the term *Wisdom*. Chapter 2, 'Can Wisdom Trump the Market as a Basis for Education?' looks at the historical evolution of Market Logic, from the first stock exchange in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1460 to the collapse of global markets in 2008. This is followed by some brief examples from various Wisdom traditions that address questions the market cannot answer with respect to the requirements of mindful pedagogy. Chapter 3 'Meditation on an Answer from Ku Shan', involves consideration of Ku Shan's response to the question 'What is the basic object of investigation?' His reply: 'How has one gotten into such a state?' Ku Shan was a fourth-century CE neo-Taoist scholar. Chapter 4, 'The Deep Politics of War and the Curriculum of Disillusion', draws on Indigenous knowledge traditions for

examples of how best to understand the phenomenon of disillusionment that often arises when one begins to see one's situation for what it is. Chapter 5, 'From Leo Strauss to Collapse Theory: Considering the Neoconservative Attack on Modernity and the Work of Education', examines the philosophical work of Leo Strauss. Strauss is important for his strong influence over the neoconservative movement in the United States that has led to the current state of almost perpetual war in the Middle East. The pedagogical implications of Strauss's views receive special emphasis. Chapter 6, 'Engaging Peter McLaren and the New Marxism in Education', provides a kind of interlocution between McLaren and myself. McLaren remains one of the most important voices today for a neo-Marxist approach to education, and we ignore Marx at our peril. Chapter 7, 'Hermeneutic Inquiry', might seem odd for inclusion in this collection. However, hermeneutics remains important for clarifying the multiple meanings and operations of tradition in human life, especially in the context of pedagogical interpretation. Historically, hermeneutics has always served as an interpretive buffer between philosophical idealism and revolutionary politics and contains its own form of wisdom. Chapter 8, 'Spiritual Cardiology and the Heart of Wisdom', engages an emerging form of educational research – namely, Life Writing. I try to bring wisdom insights to an appreciation of this movement. Chapter 9, 'The Prophetic Voice in Curriculum', opens a discussion that might have been dear to the heart of Paulo Freire: the role of the prophetic in educational and cultural analysis. The influence of Dwayne Huebner in the field of curriculum studies is taken as exemplary.

Finally, this introduction would not be complete without some words of appreciation. Very special heart-felt thanks go to Shirley Steinberg and Ana Maria Araujo Freire for their invitation to contribute to this book series *Critical Pedagogy Today*. I praise their courage and stamina in keeping the fire of critical praxis alive. A deep thank you also to my copy editor, Linda Pasmore. Her eye

TEACHING AS THE PRACTICE OF WISDOM

for detail is so much better than mine. Last but not first, my partner Julia, who has taught me more about life than she will ever know: I am profoundly grateful.

Grace and peace to all readers.

CHAPTER 1

Wisdom Responses to Globalization: The Pedagogic Context

To seek enlightenment by separating from this world is as absurd as to search for a rabbit's horn.

Hui Neng
Founder of Ch'an [Zen] Buddhism,
Seventh century C.E.

We are drowning in propaganda ... It's threatening our lives, cutting off our air.

Mark Crispin Miller
Professor of Media, Culture and
Communication, NYU (2011)

Distraction is the cause of the intellect's obscuration.

Peter of Damaskos
Eleventh-century Greek Orthodox theologian

The wise are mightier than the strong ... (and) the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Proverbs 24:5 and 12:18

Wisdom is proven right by all her children.

Jesus of Nazareth