

## CHAPTER 6

### A MAN WHO HUMBLY LIVED IN AUTHENTICITY

*To be authentic it must be liberating. One of its basic preoccupations must be the greater penetration of the 'prise de conscience' which operates in human beings when they act and when they work.*

(Freire, 1994, p. 148)

*Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly.*

(Freire, 1990, p. 47)

*People who met Freire or heard him speak often identified the quality of humility as one of his distinguishing character traits.*

(Roberts, 2000, p. 16)

Conscientização (conscientization) (see Chapter 7) is not a process that is static, nor formulaic; rather it is a process that assumes an understanding of our unfinishedness and the critical place of the dialectical interweaving of reflection and action (praxis), implying that this understanding is a “requirement” in becoming more authentically human “if we are to deepen our awareness of our world, of facts, of events, of the demands of human consciousness to develop our capacity for epistemological curiosity” (Freire, 1998, p. 55). In that light, therefore, when we consider the concept of authenticity and its relationship to becoming more authentically (or fully) human, it not only intersects with Freire’s conception—that as unfinished beings—to fully live is to be in a continuous process of reinventing oneself, but also suggests that one (as subject) is true, honest, and genuine to oneself, and—therefore—to others.

The question then becomes what do we mean by the term “authenticity” and, further, how is it associated with the virtue of humility? Moreover, as Peter Roberts’ epigraph indicates, Freire was a man of humility, clearly as evidenced to those who knew him. How was it then that such a well-known, accomplished academic able to rest his foundational character in the virtue of humility, particularly within the world of the academy where it is not uncommon to observe academic types who remain high on their own self-importance? To that end, this chapter aims to explore those two fundamental questions in light of Freire’s spirituality.

## THE PRAXIS TOWARD LIVING AUTHENTICALLY

To authentically live suggests that the conscious self acts true according to one's self-understanding and ethical "code" that s/he has freely constructed in order to provide meaning and purpose in life. Indeed, if one is not true or ethical to his/her created meaning and purpose, then life is naturally lived inauthentically, ultimately leading to anxiety, despair, and meaningless living (Heidegger, 1996).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the autonomous nature of the concept of authenticity is liberating in the sense that one acts out of commitment and choice as opposed to a sense of duty. In other words, instead of filtering one's interpretation and meaning of the world through institutional or other external constructs, a person of authenticity explores meaning through existential experiences (Maslow, 1968; Heidegger, 1996), not only revealing a transparency of his/her humanity, but also paving a path to becoming a subject of his/her history (Collins, 1977).

However, because oppression is a vehicle to domesticate, the consequence for the oppressed is the thwarting of the ability to become subjects of history naturally impacting the capability to be authentically human. Stated another way, to live authentically is to possess the opportunity to authentically live, implying that instead of history "given" and "received," history is grasped and made, which begins with a critical examination of reality. In other words, as Collins (1977) puts it, "Men [and women] exist authentically when they can name the world, giving meaning to history and culture, they can only name it when they know it authentically" (pp. 65–66).

As highlighted in Chapter 3, dehumanizing infrastructures subvert choice and freedom for the oppressed and oppressor, and both are in need of liberation in order to be more authentically human. For the former, a ridding of themselves of being "hosts" of the oppressor, which is maintained by their unawareness of the conditions that have propelled them to "fatalistically 'accept' their exploitation," all of which gives them an "unauthentic view of the world and of themselves" (Freire, 1990, p. 51).

And for the latter, "Any situation in which some men [and women] prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence...to alienate men [and women] from their own decision-making is to change them into objects...No one can be authentically human while he [or she] prevents others from being so" (Freire, 1990, p. 73). Movement toward authentic living, therefore, demands a profound rebirth, a conversion to the people, a critical viewing of reality (see Chapter 2), which richly takes place through dialogue (see Chapter 5) (Freire, 1990), all of which "...is joined by meaningful praxis" (hooks, 1994, p. 47).

The word *praxis* comes from the Greek, meaning to act or do, and the "doing" was associated with political activity. Thus, one who is engaged in political matters is a person of action, marked by the term praxis; and one who lives a life of contemplation (theory) is immersed in the things metaphysical and eternal truths, which stands taller than praxis, yet both are critical aspects of being human. Indeed, the theory–practice tension finds its roots in Greek philosophy (Gutiérrez, 1990).<sup>2</sup>

Immanuel Kant—who placed great importance on the practical and experience yet saw its connection to theory—had an influence on the dialectical thinking of Hegel and others, ultimately leading to Marx, who saw the notion of praxis as central to societal transformation. While Hegel (2010) argued that reality could be understood through a dialectical triadic system of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, culminating in the metaphysics of the Absolute Idea or Spirit, Marx, albeit holding onto Hegel’s concept of alienation and a dialectical perspective of history, rejected his idealism and instead asserted a philosophical perspective that was materialistic, particularly manifested in the “dialectic between economic conditions and human action, or what has been called ‘the materialist conception of history’” (Ozmon & Craver, 1990, p. 313).

Thus, drawing on Hegel’s transformation of consciousness and the transformation of nature as asserted by Marx, Freire developed his own concept of praxis which is illuminated in his conception of conscientization (Schubeck, 1993). Moreover, borrowing from Gramsci’s notion of Marxism as a “philosophy of praxis” and history as one of becoming, and pulling from Kosik’s belief that finding our authentic selves occurs through an examination of our daily existential realities, Freire (1985) and Freire and Faundez (1989) argue that humans are incomplete and their move toward becoming and shaping history unfolds through praxis. In other words, through the process of conscientization, the notion of praxis can be characterized as the dialectical interweaving of reflection and action, ultimately playing a significant role in human liberation and societal transformation.<sup>3</sup>

The engagement of praxis obviously implies an ongoing dialectical process, which significantly aids in diminishing “the distance between what we say and what we do” (Freire, 1993, p. 22). Moreover, the dichotomizing of practice and theory contradicts the notion of praxis; that is, theory devoid of practice amounts to simple verbalism; and practice devoid of theory results in blind activism (Freire, 1985). As Freire (1985) puts it, “That is why there is no authentic praxis outside the dialectical unity, action–reflection, practice–theory. In the same way, there is no *theoretical context* if it is not in a dialectical unity with the *concrete context*” (p. 156).

#### WITH RESPECT TO THE EDUCATOR

For the educator in particular, therefore, fostering a dialogical environment that is filtered through the dialectical interweaving of reflection and action is one that cultivates what Freire (1990) characterizes as a problem-posing approach to the teaching and learning process. In this approach, the driving assumptions are that people are viewed as conscious beings who are unfinished, but yet are in the process of becoming; liberation occurs through cognitive acts as opposed to the transfer of information; the vertical structure of teacher–of–the–students and students–of–the–teacher as in banking education is not visible,<sup>4</sup> but rather a horizontal relationship that materializes through a teacher–student with students–teachers; that is, a joint responsibility between student and teacher exists and a non–dichotomizing

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interaction is evident, implying both are actively engaged as co-investigators in the pedagogical process (Freire, 1990).

Particularly in light of Freire's concept of cultural circles<sup>5</sup> as the frame of practice, a problem-posing approach unfolds in a dialogical setting that explores and problematizes existential realities. In other words, the process is one where students are presented with problems relative to themselves and their relationship with the world, leading them to be challenged yet prompted to respond to that challenge within a context of other interrelated problems.

Because of the concreteness of the problems posed as opposed to the exploration of theoretical questions, the resulting outcome is one of critical comprehension and less alienation, leading to new challenges, new understandings, and commitment to the process. In short, problem-posing education is one where human beings "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation" (italicized is author's) (Freire, 1990, pp. 70–71).

And while love is what laces a dialogical environment in which a problem-posing approach to education is propelled, it is humility which must ground the educator in order to come to that greater sense of fostering an authentic faith in humankind (Freire, 1971). As Rohr (2013) puts it, "...love works only inside humility" (p. 166).

### HUMILITY

In the higher and admirable sense of the word, humility describes one as modest, unassuming, and unpretentious. From a spiritual perspective, the characteristic of humility genuinely places ego to the side, allowing one to authentically yield and to be open to God (or the transcendent), others, and to grow in wisdom. In other words, as Nouwen (1983) asserts, "It [humility] means staying close to the ground (*humus*), to people, to everyday life, to what is happening with all its down-to-earthness. It is the virtue that opens our eyes for the presence of God on the earth..." (p. 162).

Thus, humility necessitates a letting go of preconceived notions of what is, who we are, and perhaps even who God is. Mother Teresa (1996) suggests that the reality of truth cannot be spoken without simultaneously considering the value and necessity of humility. In that light, Freire (2005) makes the point, "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...Humility helps me avoid being entrenched in the circuit of my own truth" (p. 72). Hence, in the act of teaching, one is also in the primal position to learn from students, implying a profound respect for them and taking the time to listen to them.

While humility, as described above, is demonstrated through modest behavior, keeping one close to the ground, and guides the certainty-uncertainty tension of our

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truth, it does not imply a resignation, cowardice, or disrespect for oneself; in fact, “humility requires courage, self-confidence, self-respect, and respect for others” (Freire, 2005, p. 72). Stated another way, humility can be characterized as the ability to admit limitations and weaknesses, leading to a clearer understanding of oneself; the ability to thoughtfully discern biases and prejudices, leading to tolerance, acceptance, understanding, and empathy; the ability to recognize and determine that one’s lens of the world may quite possibly be too narrow and limiting, leading to a more holistic perspective; the ability to admit that one may not be as informed as he/she ought, leading to a pursuit of knowledge and information; the ability to discern a healthy ego as opposed to being egotistical; the ability to get in touch with and constructively address what Carl Jung calls our shadow—that is, those areas in our lives that, in large part, are associated with negativity, insecurity, and discomfort; and the ability to accept individual strength, insight, knowledge, wisdom, and intelligence as gifts that are to be nurtured, refined, and ultimately used as a service to others.

In short, the virtue of humility, which informs our incompleteness, is a critical component of a progressive teacher, one who embraces the process of becoming, while at the same time realizing that no one is above or superior to anyone else (Horton & Freire, 1990; Freire, 1995; Freire, 1998). In the end, humility, combined with love, powerfully aids one to embrace the virtue of tolerance, which “teaches us to learn from and respect the different” (Freire, 2005, p. 76).

#### AN INCREDIBLE PRESENCE

Ana Maria (Nita) Araújo Freire (2011) describes Freire’s spirituality as one that was authentic, making clear he was a man who carried “an incredible presence about him,” further stating that “...it was important to him to maintain a consistency between his private and public life,” which was not only grounded in his aim to live a life of “...consistency, humbleness, tolerance, generosity, and compassion,” but also in his ability to authentically listen (p. 276).<sup>6</sup> In other words, Freire was one who lived what he wrote, with a deep love for people, especially a love for “...the ‘pueblanos’, the working class of Brazil and the world” (p. 277).

As Nouwen earlier reminds us, to live in humility is to stay close to the ground, to the real, to people, something that Paulo Freire intimately understood, which is the reason why Cone (2011) can easily say that Freire’s life “embodied” humility.<sup>7</sup> And Cone further points out that “Humility will always keep you knowing that it is not just about you” (p. 206). And therein lies the salient point.

To live in humility is to realize its power, its presence. And to realize its power and presence is to live authentically. And to realize the dynamic of authenticity is to realize the dialectical interweaving of reflection and practice. And to realize this entire process is to realize that to engage in the world is to engage with the other, and that life is not *just* about you. This is something that Freire deeply understood in his spirit, in his being.

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Indeed, Paulo Freire was that rare academic who filtered his life in the act of becoming by living what he wrote. For more than some that walk the halls of the academy, many get caught up in “their” research; “their” work; “their” expertise; “their” status, etc. And what often gets lost in that process is that ultimately their work is not about them, especially for those of us in education, social work, or any other social justice work. It is always about the other, as Freire so understood.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Heidegger, who emphasized the notion of what is characterized as existential phenomenology, focused on the concept of “acting in history” and “being in the world” or in Heideggerian terms *Dasein* (existence), the way one interacts and subjectively negotiates life’s experiences (Kluback & Wilde, 1958).
- <sup>2</sup> According to Pythagoras, metaphysical contemplation is characterized as *theoria* (theory), and the philosopher who lived the “theoretical” life was close to the gods, and thus living happily. Influenced by the thinking of Pythagoras, Aristotle’s conception of *theoria* implied that contemplation was an endeavor reserved for philosophers who engaged in the divine activity of contemplating things universal and timeless (Schubeck, 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> Collins (1977) explains it the following way:

Liberation comes about through conscientization when men [and women] “take possession” of reality by demythologizing it and acting upon it. As praxis it is an unfinished process because discovering a new reality by critical transitivity does not exhaust conscientization. The new reality must become the object of a new reflection since what is authentic in one historical epoch will not necessarily be authentic in another...The more men [and women] are conscientized the more they exist. Freire compares the entire process of conscientization to a “painful birth” or an “Easter experience” in which human consciousness of the oppressor and the oppressed dies in order to be reborn. (p. 65)
- <sup>4</sup> A banking education is driven by the following assumptions: first, it views people as those who are manageable and adaptable; second, the teacher sees reality as compartmentalized and one that is static and predictable; third, students learn through memorization as per what knowledge is dictated by the teacher; and fourth, a dichotomy exists between a person and the world. That is, one is *in* the world as spectator as opposed to *with* the world as re-creator (Freire, 1990). To that end, banking education is driven by the thinking that students, from a Lockean *tabula rasa* (blank slate) perspective, are empty receptacles, or what Freire (1970) refers to as “empty pots” in need of filling by the teacher, who is the possessor of knowledge. In other words, this kind of educational approach is regulated and one of depositing whereby “the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire, 1990, p. 58). This kind of educational approach thwarts creativity, reinforces a fatalistic outlook, and functions through a monologue or anti-dialogical stance. And because the cultural–socio–historical setting is not contextualized, the existential reality of the learner is not a consideration simply because “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 1990, p. 58). In the final analysis, a banking education is one that Freire (1990) describes as necrophilic (see Chapter 3, endnote 13), an approach that is extraordinarily controlling, all in an effort to obviate thinking, maintain the status quo, and serve the interest of the oppressor.
- <sup>5</sup> It was through the adult education programs that were conducted by Freire that the notion of cultural circles and cultural centers had its beginnings, forming at such venues as soccer clubs, neighborhood associations, churches, and philanthropic organizations. Frame-worked in an approach that utilized pictures or slides to introduce topics, while at the same time encouraging dialogue with the participants, various themes such as nationalism, democracy, development, and illiteracy were discussed in these circles. The success of that process prompted Freire and his associates to think about how the notion



- of cultural circles could be used to actually teach adult learners how to read (Freire, 1996). That is, because of the obvious interest of the participants in the adult education programs, Freire theorized that a major aspect for adult literacy learners to learn how to read must begin with the process of them reading their concrete *world*, which naturally would lead to a greater critical consciousness of their reality, ultimately facilitating an energy and enthusiasm to learning to read the *word* (Brown, 1978).
- <sup>6</sup> It is worth pointing out that the term compassion, which is intricately linked to the qualities of empathy and care, comes from the Latin *compati*, meaning to be conscious and aware of another's difficulty and distress while simultaneously seeking out possible solutions and alternatives to alleviate anxiety and troubles. Therefore, as it relates to the concept of care, Mayeroff (1971) makes the point that the idea of caring is not an abstract concept, or a momentary event, but rather a way of relating to with another. In other words, the process of caring aids in facilitating growth, relationship, and especially illuminates itself in realizing another's potential, possibilities, particularly when facing obstacles and times of difficulty.
- <sup>7</sup> There was a mutual respect between Paulo Freire and James Cone, who is known as the "father" of a black theology of liberation. Freire wrote the Foreword to Cone's 1986 edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, which also appears in Chapter 11 of Freire's text *The Politics of Education*. Speaking of Cone, Freire (1985) writes "James Cone is a committed man, 'saturated' in this real world, which he analyzes with the authority of one who has experienced it" (p. 148).

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