

## We Can Also Learn in the Shade of the Mangoes

Son of Joaquim Temistocles Freire, an army sergeant from Rio Grande do Norte and of Edeltrudes Neves Freire, a housewife and seamstress from Pernambuco (Brazil), Paulo Reglus Neves Freire was born on September 19th, 1921 in Recife, in the district of Casa Amarela, at number 724 on the road to Encanamento. His father was responsible for his name. It should have been Re-gu-lus, but a mistake was made at the Registry Office. In his teens he began to be called just Paulo Freire.

His mother was ten years younger than his father. A spiritualist, she had completed high school and spoke French well. Both parents were strongly marked by the patriarchal and macho culture of the Northeast of Brazil at the beginning of the century. Paulo was the youngest of four children, of whom two died without his having known them. The first stages of his education were somewhat strict. "My father," he said later, "always lived at the midpoint between the opposite poles of freedom and authority. He was an army officer, but not an authoritarian. This was very different to my mother's way of being. She was very quiet and soft, much more so than he. He was also very affectionate, but he was less tender than my mother."<sup>1</sup>

Paulo learned to read with his parents, in the shade of the trees in the yard of the house in which he was born. This experience came through his own words, words from his infancy and childhood, not from the experience of his parents. This fact would influence his work, years later. His chalk was the twigs of the mango tree in whose shade he learned to read, and his blackboard was the ground. This formation and information was all given informally, before school. It was a living, free, unpretentious preschool.

His first school actually was a small private school belonging to a teacher who died in 1978. He went there already knowing his alphabet, writing well and copying. He studied there for little over a year but would never forget something which was called "making sentences." It was an exercise which he liked a lot: the teacher asked him to write two or three words and then asked him to say something with those words. She had a very definite oral intuition of the necessity of the child to exercise his expressivity. If he made a mistake when he wrote, he would be corrected during and after. There were no abstractions.

At this school, Paulo Freire was introduced to verbs. But, instead of memorizing the present indicative tense of the verb *to have*, he lived the verb *to have* in the indicative present as he lived it in the past tense. After all, verbs are learned like this, and not in the way that many people teach them, through mechanical memorization. The "I am" in itself, in the pure recitation of the verb tense, has no meaning at all.

### A Teenager Who Considered Himself Ugly

Paulo Freire had a happy childhood, but at a very early age, like the majority of Brazilians from the

Northeast, he knew the meaning of hunger and misery. He was eight when the effects of the world economic crisis of 1929 were felt in the Northeast of Brazil. In 1931 the crisis made the Freire family move to Jaboatão, twelve miles from Recife, where survival seemed less difficult. Paulo was thirteen when his father died. These problems meant that his studies had to be put off. He only entered the *ginásio* (high school), now the fifth series of the first grade, when he was sixteen. All his classmates were eleven or twelve.

Paulo Freire recounts that almost all his classmates were well-dressed, well-fed, and came from homes which had a certain culture. "I was tall, lanky, wore pants which were too short and risked being made fun of because of their length. They were shorter than the length of my legs."<sup>2</sup> He admits that he had the feeling that he was an ugly teenager. He rejected his own body, which was too bony. He was afraid of asking questions in class because, as he was older than his classmates, he felt obliged to ask questions that were more intelligent and pertinent than the rest of the class.

But living in Jaboatão, playing knockabout games of soccer, he also had contact with children and teenagers from poor rural families and the children of workers who lived in the hills or near the canals. "My experience with them," says Paulo Freire, "helped me to get used to a different way of thinking and expressing myself. This was the grammar of the people, the language of the people, and as an educator of the people I devote myself today to the rigorous understanding of this language."<sup>3</sup>

Paulo Freire always had great difficulty in assimilating any kind of formal education. But he began to teach at a very early age, when he was still a high school student. He remembers that he had written, three years earlier, the word *rato* (mouse) with two r's.

His mother brought him up in the Catholic religion, and this would also be an important influence both on his pedagogical theories and on his practice—he was a militant in the Catholic Action movement.<sup>4</sup> Freire never denied his Christian upbringing; in fact, he has always considered Christianity progressive. But he would criticize what he called the church of the oppressors, opposing it to the prophetic church, the church of the oppressed: “The prophetic church is the church of hope, hope which only exists in the future, a future which only the oppressed classes have, as the future of the dominant classes is a pure repetition of their present state of being the oppressors.”<sup>5</sup>

He frequently wrote to his mother, who died in 1978, when he was still in exile.

He was over twenty when he obtained a place in the Faculty of Law of Recife. Then he met Elza Maia Costa de Oliveira, a primary school teacher who taught children how to read and write. She was five years older than he. They got married in 1944 when Freire was twenty-three and was working as a secondary schoolteacher. It was Elza who stimulated him to systematically devote himself to his studies, and she even helped him to elaborate the method which has made him so well-known.

Paulo Freire always refers to Elza with considerable affection: “My meeting her was one of the most creative meetings in my life,” he once said. They had five children: Maria Madalena, Maria Cristina, Maria de Fátima, Joaquim, and Lutgardes. The three daughters followed the footsteps of their father and became educators. Paulo Freire continues: “Elza was marvelous and continues to be. She is a permanent presence and stimulation in my life. For example, when I was in prison in 1964, Elza visited me and brought me pans full of food for all my cellmates. She

never told me, 'Look, if you had thought a little more . . . if you had avoided certain things, you wouldn't be here.' Never. Her solidarity was total and still is.'<sup>6</sup>

Paulo Freire lost Elza on October 24, 1986 after forty years of "being sweethearts."<sup>7</sup>

### Teaching as a Passion

I wanted very much to study, but I couldn't as our economic condition didn't allow me to. I tried to read or pay attention in the classroom, but I didn't understand anything because of my hunger. I wasn't dumb. It wasn't lack of interest. My social condition didn't allow me to have an education. Experience showed me once again the relationship between social class and knowledge. So, because of my problems, my older brother began to work and to help us, and I began to eat more. At that time, I was in the second or third year of high school, and I always had problems. When I began to eat better, I began understanding better what I was reading. It was just at this time that I began to study grammar as I loved language problems. I studied the philosophy of language on my own and got myself ready to understand structuralism and language when I was eighteen or nineteen. Then I began teaching Portuguese grammar with love for language and philosophy and with the intuition that I should understand the expectations of the pupils and make them participate in the dialogue. At a certain moment, between the ages of fifteen and twenty-three, I discovered that teaching was my passion.'<sup>8</sup>

In 1946, living again in Recife, Paulo Freire began to work at SESI (Social Service of Industry), where he stayed eight years.

FIGURE 2

Paulo Freire in Recife, in the early fifties as director of the Education Department of SESI (Social Service of Industry).



SESI is an employers' institution whose objectives are to assist. It was set up, according to Paulo Freire "not to criticize the consciousness of the working class, but to confuse reality and to put obstacles in the way of the fact that the working class could achieve its own identity."<sup>9</sup> But it was here that the reality became clear. It was here that Paulo Freire learned to talk with the working class and to understand their way of learning about the world through their language. And it was here that he became an educator, learning through his practice something that would always remain with him: *always think about the practice.*

Paulo Freire became educational director of SESI and coordinated the work of the teachers with the children, as well as working with their families. In these contacts

between school and families, he learned that discussions of abstract concepts, for example the ethical code of the child in Piaget,<sup>10</sup> would not be able to sensitivize a concrete father, who hits a real child in a concrete situation. What would help was a discussion of the difficulties of someone who had too little to live on.

At SESI Paulo Freire was in charge of studying the relationships between pupils, teachers, and parents. And it was here that he discovered the roots of his anti-elitist and anti-idealistic pedagogy. He noticed the "idealistic" elements in the orientation given to working-class families, and the resulting mistakes, made him follow new directions. Paulo Freire attributed their problems to the difference between middle-class language and the popular language of the workers. Thus, a study of the language of the people was the starting point for the development of his work on popular education and his pedagogy.

Important experiences in his life at this time were his participation in the MCP (*Movement for Popular Culture*) of Recife<sup>11</sup> and the studies on popular and erudite language which he made as a teacher of Portuguese.

He read important Brazilian authors such as José Lins do Rego, Graciliano Ramos, Jorge Amado, Gilberto Freyre:

I read them a lot. And they also remade me as a young teacher of grammar due to the aesthetic creativity of their language. Today I remember how I changed my teaching of syntax when I was about twenty. The important thing was, at that time, not just to deny the rules. When I was young, I learned that beauty and creativity couldn't be slaves of grammatical correctness. This taught me that creativity needed freedom. So, as a young teacher, I

changed my teaching and gave greater value to creativity. This was also a basis for me to understand later that creativity in teaching is linked to creativity in politics. Authoritarian teaching, or an authoritarian political regime, doesn't allow the freedom necessary for creativity. Creativity is necessary in order to learn.<sup>12</sup>

Motivated by Elza, Paulo Freire devoted himself entirely to educational work and abandoned his work as a lawyer soon after his first case. Paulo Freire himself tells the story: "I had to collect my fee. After talking to my client, a young shy, frightened dentist, I decided not to charge him. He was happy because I was this kind of lawyer, and I was happy when I stopped being one."<sup>13</sup>

Paulo Freire was one of the founders of the Cultural Extension Service of the University of Recife and was its first director. From this experience he made his first studies of a new method of teaching adult literacy, which he demonstrated in 1958 at the Regional Preparatory Seminar in Pernambuco under the title "Adult Education and Marginal Populations: the Problem of the Mocambos (slums in the Northeast of Brazil)."

In 1959 Paulo Freire wrote "Present-day Education in Brazil," which was the thesis with which he competed for the chair of History and Philosophy of Education in the School of Fine Arts of Recife. This thesis gave him his Ph.D.

In this thesis, the seeds of his theory and educational practice can be found: "Paulo Freire criticizes Brazilian school education and proposes a radical revision starting from the study of the needs of the educational process in particular historical circumstances. . . . The style, though not forceful, does not hide Paulo Freire's acceptance of a



decisive point of view: all considerations of Brazilian school education cannot develop in the emptiness of abstract propositions.”<sup>14</sup>

Paulo Freire’s work at this time was clearly marked by nationalism and developmentalism. This was due to influence from authors connected to ISEB,<sup>15</sup> (Higher Institute for Brazilian Studies), who included Roland Corbisier, Álvaro Vieira Pinto, and Alberto Guerreiro Ramos.

Although Paulo Freire realizes that he made a number of errors and ingenuous proposals in this thesis, he was on the right track. As he would say later,<sup>16</sup> he defended “the exercise of democracy and talked about the importance of groups of ordinary people discussing their own street, their trade union, their children’s school, the basic facilities of their district and even their own production. I don’t regret saying in 1959 and I continue saying today, even with much more conviction, that the concrete elements of democracy must be lived without any fear in Brazil. And what must finish is this mania you find on the left of talking about democracy and being a social democrat.”<sup>17</sup>

The following year, when he gave a lecture entitled “Primary Schooling for Brazil,” he defended the idea that the problem of the primary school is not just that there are too few schools for the number of pupils but that the problem is equally their lack of “insertion” in the social context. Without this, schools give no hope and are “inadequate in relation to the great increase in democratization, closely connected to development, which is an integral part of the country.” In a note he adds: “Even today I can’t understand why no one has thought of offering the children of the Northeast of Brazil selections of ‘popular ballads’ in their reading books. These have both an aesthetic and a cultural value.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the inadequacy of primary school, Paulo Freire draws attention to its *lack of organicity* in carrying out its specific functions:

We can say that the type of school that we urgently need is a school in which you really study and work. When, together with other educators, we criticize the intellectualism of our school, we are not trying to defend a position for the school in which subjects and the discipline are diluted. In our history we have probably never had such a great necessity of teaching and of learning as today. Learning to read, write and tell. Studying history and geography. Understanding the situation and situations of the country. The intellectualism we are fighting against is just this hollow, empty, loud verbosity which has no relation to the surroundings in which we are born, we grow up in, and from which even today to a great extent, we are nurtured.<sup>19</sup>

At this time, Paulo Freire was making a proposal which only recently has been put into action: the setting up of parents' and pupils' associations and school councils with educational goals. These would associate the formation of a critical consciousness with popular organization.

### The Act of Studying

Studying is, really, a difficult task. It demands a critical and systematic position. It demands an intellectual discipline which can only be gained in practice.

This is exactly what 'banking education'<sup>20</sup> fails to stimulate. On the contrary, its basis lies in killing

curiosity, creativity, and any investigative spirit in the pupils. Its “discipline” is that of ingenuity before the text, in contrast to the critical element which should be necessary.

This ingenuous procedure to which the pupil is subjected may, in addition to other factors, be responsible for the way in which students whose reading becomes purely mechanical free themselves from the text and imagine themselves elsewhere. What they are asked to do is not to understand the content but to memorize it. If the student manages to do this, he will have answered the challenge.

In a more critical vision, things happen differently. The student of a text should feel challenged by the whole text and his or her objective should be to get hold of its deep meaning.

This fundamental, critical posture, an indispensable part of the act of studying, requires that whoever devotes themselves to it, takes on the role of the subject of the act.

This means that a serious study is impossible if the student of a text approaches it as if he were magnetized by the magical words of the author, behaving passively, “domestically,” trying to do no more than memorize the statements of the author, letting himself be “occupied” by what the author states, being transformed into a container to be filled by the content of the text.

Seriously studying a text is to study the way in which the writer studied in order to write it. It means taking note of the *historicosociological conditioning of knowledge*. It means looking for relationships

between the content under scrutiny and other connected areas of knowledge. Studying is a form of demanding, of recreating, of rewriting—a task for the subject and not for the object. Therefore, from this point of view, it is not possible for the student to get away from the text, to renounce a critical attitude toward it. . . .

It's no good jumping a page of a book if you haven't understood it. You must insist on unraveling it. Understanding of a text is not something that is given as a gift. It demands patient work from the reader who is puzzled.

Study can't be calculated from the number of pages read in a night or by the quantity of books read in the course of a semester.

Study is not an act of consuming ideas, but rather one of creating them and recreating them.<sup>21</sup>

### The Act of Knowing

If we look at the cycle of discovery, we can see two moments, not more than two, that are dialectically related. The first moment of the cycle is the moment of production, production of a piece of knowledge, of something new. The other moment is when the piece of knowledge which has been produced is discovered or made known. One moment is the production of a piece of knowledge, and the second is when you discover something that already exists. What we generally do is that we dichotomize these two moments, isolating them from each other. As a consequence, we reduce the act of *discovering* existing knowledge to a mere *transference* of existing

knowledge. And the teacher becomes the specialist in transferring knowledge. In this case, he loses some of the necessary and indispensable qualities which are required in the production of knowledge, as in the discovery of existing knowledge. Some of these qualities, for example, are action, critical reflection, curiosity, a demanding questioning, worry, uncertainty—all these virtues are indispensable for the subject who will understand! . . .

Another essential factor is that, when we separate the *production* of knowledge from the *discovery* of already existing knowledge, schools become easily transformed into shops for the sale of knowledge, which is part of capitalist ideology.<sup>22</sup>