

# The Gospel of Paulo Friere

By Rick Collins

**'West also says that "tenderness is what love looks like in private", and in that quiet moment in Brazil, I noticed the power in the tenderness in Dennis Friere-inspired approach. A tenderness that stands in relationship with love and justice.'**

In a small brick home, in a favela in the hills surrounding São Luís in Northern Brazil, I listened to Dennis Labayen (the then Field Director of Outreach International) talking to one of the home's occupants. The air has the feeling of cool relief that recent rain brings in the tropics - even as I sit with the knowledge that enough rain could also cause the earth in this hilly village to move, spelling disaster for these homes and the families that live in them.

Dennis asks our host about what she thinks about when things are quiet. Their discussion is one where trust is established quickly. She shares of her practical anxieties for her children, and through their discussion, she begins to see both possibilities, and her own potential to transform the situations that drive her deepest anxieties.

The parts of Brazil we visited were home to Paolo Friere. As a young Catholic man, he had been instilled with an importance of service to the poor. As an educator, he would develop a way of teaching that engages critical reflection in order to dismantle the 'culture of silence' that keeps people feeling powerless. It is a message that says that charity and philanthropy is not the pathway to justice - we must transform our social relationships.

When I read his classic work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I can't help but see theological language everywhere.

Friere's vision is one in which the liberation of the oppressed is achieved through an almost eschatological (even if eminently practical) transformation of relations through the power of dialogue and reflection. This is not the kind of

reconciliation that Saul Alinsky describes as "when one side gets the power and the other side gets reconciled to it", but one in which true justice is achieved through the recognition of the worth of persons. Friere's vision is Isaiah's vision of the lion lying with the lamb, and being led by the child.

I can't help but to think of Jesus (a poor man among an oppressed and occupied people) announcing his own mission to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed when Friere says, "This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well."

I think of the sacrament of baptism, and the 'cost of discipleship' when I read, "Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman emerges a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superceded by the humanisation of all people...no longer oppressor or oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom."

The idea of 'the Word', as the creative force in Genesis and the Gospel of John comes to mind when I read, "Within the word, we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed - even in part - the other immediately suffers...Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world."

Friere's language is almost Christological when he says, "Authentic revolution attempts to transform the reality which begets this dehumanising state of affairs. Those whose interests are served by that reality cannot carry out this transformation, it must be carried

out by the tyrannized, with their leaders....the leaders must incarnate [this truth] through communion with the people.”

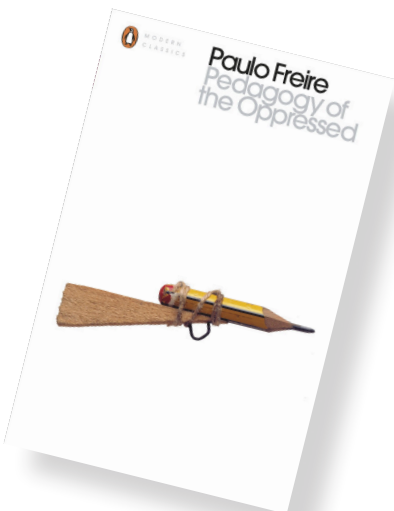
Friere’s work is humanistic and practical, but to say it lacks a mystical dimension would be selling it short. I could say it’s short on prayer and contemplation, but at the core of his methodology is deep reflection and mindfulness about the realities we find ourselves in.

I could say it lacks the yearning for the annihilation of distinctions between self and the Divine that I find so appealing in the works of the mystics. But could we not see the annihilation of the parts of our psyches that keep us divided from our human family as the social fulfilment of such a yearning?

Friere’s work helped to keep me sane as I went through my own experience of poverty and transience in the merciless US economy. It kept my eye on the hope of Isaiah’s vision. It reminded me that the Good News is indeed, practical and material good news for the poor and liberation for the oppressed. Today it reminds me to not become complacent with the degree of stability and security I have been afforded, but others have not. It also reminds me to have hope.

Friere’s work is also one that is deeply instilled with the kind of profound love for people that demands an end to injustice, while being filled with mercy and grace. To use the words of the philosopher Cornell West, “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

West also says that “tenderness is what love looks like in private”, and in that quiet moment in Brazil, I noticed the power in the tenderness in Dennis’ Friere-inspired approach. A tenderness that stands in relationship with love and justice. A tenderness that recognised the worth of that person. A tenderness that recognised the power in each of us to become catalysts for change, and to move our communities, societies and world closer to transformation.



## For Everyone Born, a Place at the Table (CCS 285)

BY SHIRLEY ERENA MURRAY

For everyone born, a place at the table,  
for everyone born, clean water and bread,  
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing  
for everyone born, a star overhead,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

For woman and man, a place at the table,  
revising the roles, deciding the share,  
with wisdom and grace, dividing the power,  
for woman and man, a system that’s fair,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

For young and for old, a place at the table,  
a voice to be heard, a part in the song,  
the hands of a child in hands that are wrinkled,  
for young and for old, the right to belong,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

For queer and for straight, a place at the table,  
for trans and for gay, a welcoming space,  
a rainbow of race and gender and colour,  
for queer and for straight, the chalice of grace,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

For everyone born, a place at the table,  
to live without fear, and simply to be,  
to work, to speak out, to witness and worship,  
for everyone born, the right to be free,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

