

**Teaching to Transgress** A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 14 September, 2008 Chip Roush

FIRST READING As you read these quotations, adapted from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, try to pay attention to your feelings. Some of us may feel inspired; some may feel guilty; some may be angry. Perhaps, many of us will feel all those things, and more. Try to imagine that we are both oppressors and oppressed. Freire's words can teach us in both roles.

"The oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors.

The oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle.

How can the oppressed participate in their liberation? As long as they live in the duality in which "to be" is "to be like," and "to be like" is "to be like the oppressor," this contribution is impossible. Too many become inoculated with the bourgeois appetite for personal success.

Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more--always more--even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing. For them, to be is to have. For them, having more is an inalienable right.

Certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation...they truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation.

A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle.

The oppressed...call themselves ignorant and say the 'professor' is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen. Almost never do they realize that they, too, 'know things' they have learned in their relations with the world.

It is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason. While no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others.

Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction...so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.

Education as the practice of freedom--as opposed to education as the practice of domination--denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world.

Authentic education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming. People know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompleteness.

People are fulfilled only to the extent that they create their world, and create it with their transforming labor... If a person in the world of work is totally dependent, insecure, and permanently threatened--if their work does not belong to them--the person cannot be fulfilled. Work that is not free ceases to be a fulfilling pursuit and becomes an effective means of dehumanization.

Welfare programs as instruments of manipulation ultimately serve the end of conquest. They act as an anesthetic, distracting the oppressed from the true causes of their problems and from the concrete solutions of these problems.

In order for the oppressed to unite they must first cut the umbilical cord of magic and myth which binds them to the world of oppression; the unity which links them to each other must be of a different nature.

Dialogue cannot exist without a profound love for the world and its people. The object of [dialogue] is not to 'dislodge' the oppressed from a mythological reality in order to 'bind' them to another reality. On the contrary, the object of dialogical action is to make it possible for the oppressed, by perceiving their adhesion, to opt to transform an unjust reality."

SECOND READING This is "Teaching a Nephew to Type" by Rebecca McClanahan

Because you lag already  
years behind the computer-and-  
otherwise-literate boys with fathers,  
and your handwriting is a tangle  
the teachers have grown weary  
of unraveling, and because you are as close  
to a son as I can manage, though nothing  
about you is manageable anymore,

I am teaching you to type. The trick  
is to look anywhere but down.  
Your fingers are dumb birds pecking,  
just follow the chart I've made.  
We'll begin in the thick of things,  
the home row to which we'll always  
return. Little finger on a. Then tap  
your way next door to s. Now

you've made as. Don't think, I say.  
Just watch the chart: dad sad fad  
a flash a flask a lad had. Tomorrow  
we'll move on to reach and return  
and the period key, but for now  
just use the comma, it's like catching  
a breath, or you can type a colon,  
double dot, old snake eyes, luck  
in your future, meaning watch this space:  
something is about to follow.

SERMON A long time ago, before I was even a minister, I presented a “lay viewpoint” on Juneteenth. Juneteenth is now an official state holiday in more than half of our United States; it commemorates the freeing of the slaves in Texas. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863; but it had little effect on the daily lives of many slaves—especially in Texas. It wasn’t until June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1865, over two years later, that Union General Gordon Granger and 2000 federal troops arrived in Galveston, to enforce the emancipation. So, I presented my piece, and sat down and enjoyed the rest of the service, and afterwards, during Coffee Hour, a person approached me and identified himself as a history professor, visiting from Galveston, and he corrected a few details from my talk. At the time, I thought: “what are the odds?” How likely is it, that on the day I speak on a topic, that an expert on that field happens to be in attendance?!

Since then, I have learned over and over, and heard from many other UU ministers, that there is virtually \*always\* somebody in the congregation who knows more about the subject—whatever subject—than I do.

We Unitarian Universalists are a well-educated group. A significant portion of us have post-graduate degrees, and even those of us who are not grossly over-educated are intensely curious and tend to value learning and education. We know the feeling that the poet wrote about, teaching her nephew to type: “watch this space: something is about to follow.” Most of us know the keen anticipation of learning something new.

We know that education has been extremely important, throughout the history of the world. We know that the scientific method helped improve agricultural yields, ten thousand years ago; we know that “knowledge is power.” We know how to fill in the blank: “reading is \_\_\_\_\_.” {fundamental}

Of course, non-UUs know these things, too. People other than Unitarian Universalists appreciate the value of education.

When my wife, Becky, was first out of college, she worked in a rehab hospital in Lexington, Kentucky. When her patients learned her name, many of them praised her and her family. Some even shed a tear,

as they told her how one or the other of her grand-fathers had helped their family. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, literacy was not as common as it is, now. Especially in the hills of eastern Kentucky, there were many people who never learned to read very much, if at all. Becky's grandfathers were each one of the few people in their county who could read and write, and who would help others to write their wills, or work with other legal documents or read a letter from a relative, far away.

In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. In the country of the illiterate, the woman who can read or write is queen. And people who can read and write will be able to use that power either to help the people around them, or to cheat and manipulate and keep the people around them in a state of dependence.

According to United Nations figures, 20% of the world's population was illiterate, in 1998. As recently as 2007, it is estimated that 18% of the world is illiterate. In some countries, that rate skyrockets to 80% or more—barely one person in five can read or write, in any language, in some nations. And of course, some of the poorest countries have the lowest literacy rates, so their people are stuck in a vicious cycle.

That is why the work of Paulo Freire is so exciting. Freire did not just teach people to read, he taught them self-confidence, and teamwork, and a form of liberation theology in which oppressed peoples can work together, toward their own freedom.

When Freire started his work in Brazil, it was a legal requirement that one had to be literate, to vote. Now, we can debate whether or not that might be a \*good\* requirement, for elections; but if a country is going to require it, then the country ought to do all it can to teach its citizens to read. Brazil was working on that, and Freire's theories were showing great promise, until a military coup ended his work. Later, he was able to show that his ideas were effective, at Harvard, and with the World Council of Churches, and in African countries like Guinea Bissau and Mozambique.

Freire was not part of the educational reforms in India, but when girls who were part of that education reform grew old enough to raise their own families, then female and child mortality rates declined dramatically.

Education liberates people from poverty and disease and serfdom.

Such liberation is not only necessary in other countries. These conditions occur in our own United States. Author and professor bell hooks writes: "In the apartheid South, black girls from working-class backgrounds had three career choices. We could marry. We could work as maids. We could become school teachers...From grade school on, I was destined to become a teacher..."

Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington [school] were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers and cultural workers—black folks who used our 'minds.' We learned early on that our devotion to learning...was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist...white racist colonization. Though they did not define or articulate these practices in theoretical terms, my teachers were enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance...

Within these segregated schools, black children who were deemed exceptional...were given special care. Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race.

To fulfill that mission, my teachers made sure they 'knew' us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshipped, what our homes were like, and how we were treated in the family...

Attending school then was sheer joy. I loved being a student. School was the place of ecstasy—pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk...

School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the...zeal to transform our mind...Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived [or] behaved...Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was expected of us."

One might reasonably think that the obedience required of hooks and her friends was another regrettable example of a racist system, but I fear it is worse. Too many of our public schools today, perhaps even most, are concerned only with information, with no relation to how the children are supposed to live, and

certainly with no thought to how they might be transformed, and learn how to liberate themselves and others.

This is not the fault of the teachers, nor the administrations, local or state or national. It is part of our culture. With the recent changes, due to the “No Child Left Behind” legislation, too many children spend most of their time learning how to do well on specific tests.

This is the exact opposite of Freire’s ideas.

On the cover of the order of service, Bart Simpson is writing, over and over, “I will not waste chalk...I will not waste chalk...” He is being taught that obedience, not reason, not the ability to think or reflect, is the dominant value in our consumerist culture.

We need liberation. We need “education as the practice of freedom.”

And we don’t just need it in our schools.

When I read the book, “White Collar Sweatshop,” by Jill Andresky Fraser, I became both excited and irate. Fraser details how millions of white-collar, “professional” jobs amount to abuse of the people who work them. With all due concern for the people who really work in sweatshops, who earn a few dollars per day, in conditions that are not merely unhealthy, but dangerous and even toxic, these white collar workers are being robbed of their human dignity as well.

When I worked as a database administrator, I knew that I and my friends were working more hours for less pay, relatively speaking, each year; I knew that I was getting fewer vacation days, and having to take my cellphone and laptop on those “vacations.” The work week lasted at least 50 hours, and that did not include the work we took home to do. Personal health and family obligations suffered because there was always someone waiting to take our job and replace us. Exhaustion, depression and excessive alcohol & tobacco use were common.

I thought that I and my friends were the only ones. When I read Fraser’s book, I learned that it is much more widespread. As Paul Freire wrote, in our first reading, “if their work does not belong to them—the person cannot be fulfilled. Work that is not free ceases to be a fulfilling pursuit and becomes an effective means of dehumanization.”

Freire also wrote that the work of liberative education “cannot exist without a profound love for the world and its people.” When I read “White Collar Sweatshop,” my heart was broken open. I became educated to the dehumanization of millions of United States workers. Now I work for our liberation.

We will not change the soulless consumerist society all in one day. Customers and producers will continue to be faceless, interchangeable cogs for at least a few more months or years. And yet—the movement is picking up steam. More and more people are taking small-but-real steps to restore balance in their lives. More and more of us are working together, exploring what it might mean to work to live, instead of to live to work.

We have to do it, together. Our leaders will not—and \*cannot\*—do it for us. Theorists like Freire and hooks know that it has to come from the people. Liberation is the ultimate grassroots effort.

This does not mean that leaders won’t emerge in the struggle. It does not mean that we should prevent or ignore or undermine the people who are willing and able to lead. It means that we must all take responsibility to make liberation real, here, and now.

bell hooks again: “I had an interesting experience, last semester teaching at City College. I couldn’t come to class one day and I had a substitute come, a person who was much more a traditional thinker, a traditional authoritarian, and the students conformed for the most part...When I returned and I asked, ‘well, what happened in class?’ the students shared their perception that [the substitute] had really humiliated a student, [had] used her power forcibly to silence. ‘Well, what did you all say?’ I asked. They admitted that they had sat there silently. These revelations made me see how deeply ingrained is the student perception that professors can be and should be dictators...The triumph of liberatory pedagogy [is] that we had the space to interrogate [these] actions. They could look at themselves and say, ‘Why didn’t we stand up for what we believe? Why didn’t we maintain the value[s] of our class? Do we see

ourselves acting in complicity with hooks' vision of liberatory practice, or are we committed to this practice ourselves?"

During seminary, I was fortunate enough to take several theology courses with Professor Thandeka. The courses were difficult, both intellectually and emotionally. Not only was learning the material hard, teasing out the subtle arguments that thinkers have made, and many have died for, down through the centuries—it could also be wrenching emotionally. Some of the theologies we studied directly challenged our own internal beliefs, the beliefs and understandings upon which we based our lives. It was not uncommon, perhaps once or twice a term, for one of us to come to tears in the classroom.

Usually, the person crying was an active participant in the discussion. That's why he or she was upset—she was trying to articulate what she did or did not accept in the work we were studying. In that case, it was obvious to everyone in the room what was going on, and, guided by Thandeka, we listened respectfully as he worked his way through his emotional and intellectual process.

There was one time, however, in one of the later classes, where the person crying was not in the middle of the debate, but rather sitting relatively quietly as the tears streamed down her face. Because we were engaged in a debate, we did not notice at first. Then one person did notice, and another, and somebody finally named it: "hey, stop! So-and-so is crying." Well, we did stop. We ceased discussing the material that the syllabus said we were to be discussing, and we engaged with the human feelings present in the room. And we didn't wait for the professor to tell us to do it; we did it on our own. I don't know that I've ever seen Thandeka more proud as her students began to teach each other, and we began to not just talk about liberation, but to actually \*liberate\* ourselves and each other.

Each person reading this is both oppressed and oppressor. Some people have left this congregation, and when I ask them why, they have told me, "I am a theist, and I did not feel welcome in the congregation." Others have left, and told me, "I am a secular humanist, and I did not feel welcome in the congregation." We are all of us \*both\* oppressor and oppressed.

And the only way to liberate ourselves from these roles is to stand up for ourselves and to stand up for each other and to work together to educate our beloved community.

What would it be like if we were all courageous enough and compassionate enough to offer a respectful challenge when somebody said something, with which we disagreed, and then we offered an authentic open ear and listened to what the words meant for them, and how they felt about the issue. What would it be like if that person then asked us, "well, that is how I understand it, but please tell me what your understanding is."?

I am not suggesting that any of us will or should change our beliefs or opinions; *and* I am hopeful that as we have such open discussions they will come to feel less dangerous and we will have more conversations and we will learn to trust in the feelings and experiences of our friends on this shared journey, even if they use words different from our own.

And won't the congregation feel more welcoming, then?

The Buddhists among our congregation have their own sitting group; those who appreciate Celtic Nature-based spirituality meet as the Henge of Seekers; perhaps the Christians and theists and deists and religious humanists and agnostics and secular humanists and atheists might form some groups on their own, some adult religious education experiences to communicate and appreciate their understanding of our complex, evolving universe.

And maybe, just maybe, once we feel firmly grounded in the tradition that speaks most powerfully to us, once we've grown more comfortable in speaking up for ourselves, and in actively listening to others, as we are learning to work together to liberate us from the imposed identities that distract and divide us—\*maybe\* we would then begin to engage other differences, like race, like ethnicity, like political affiliation, like class identity.

Racism starts with ignorance. Religious intolerance flourishes where there is a lack of understanding. Fear is born from the unknown. Education addresses the root cause of all these troubles. Paulo Freire taught 300 people to read and write in 45 days. Then he taught ten thousand, and then whole countries.

We are learning together, and what we learn, we'll teach others. And our evolving universe will take another step in the practice of liberation.

So may we be.