

## **First Letter - Primeira Carta - Prima Lettera: An Imaginary Letter Exchange Between Paulo Freire and Lorenzo Milani**

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Educators Paulo Freire (Brazil, 1921-1997) and Don Lorenzo Milani (Italy, 1923-1967) never met in person. Though contemporaries and both Catholics (Milani was a priest) with shared beliefs about a radical approach to education and schooling, social justice, and inclusive pedagogy, they never had a chance to work together. However, their ideas and their fight for fair schooling systems are still thriving.

In my journey as an educator and researcher, I have been comparing and contrasting their scholarship in order to augment current and future critical literacies, multiliteracies, and multiculturalism research. I do it by re-contextualizing their work, reviewing the research literature about them alongside the research literature by them, and talking to teachers and professors in Brazil and Italy interested in including their philosophy in their education practices.

All this brought me to an irreverent idea: imagining an encounter between them through a fictionalized exchange of letters. The art of letter writing is a genre that helped me to present this critical review, one that is born from my analytical, interpretive, and representational practices.

In this paper, I present my own letter to both educators and two fictional first letters representing an imaginary encounter between them. While my own letter was written only in English without translation, their letters were initially written in Portuguese (Freire) and Italian (Milani) and then translated into English. The translation

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work added one more layer of analysis because it involved imagining their letter-writing technique, and also finding a suitable expression of their thoughts in three languages.

I have been influenced by ideas from a field called performance ethnography, in which the letters are a way of recreating and re-writing the biographic past and making the past a part of the present recognizing the representation of politics-educational collaboration. According to Norman Denzin (2003), this means producing texts that are grounded in different styles, rhythms, idioms, languages and personal identities from different cultures and places (p. 123).

It is also a project that brings a different role of the biography that can help scholars, students, and readers to think about the process of becoming agents for a more inclusive interpretive community (Moreira, 2013, p. 2). My attempt is to revitalize Freire's and Milani's words and pedagogical philosophy filtered through my own experiences living in between cultures and someone who learns and teaches with the awareness that no social practice is politically neutral.

The critical performance pedagogy presented in this paper is fortified through the relevance of a literature review. Giroux (2012) has already proposed this type of work to connect to a wider notion of cultural politics intended for further racial, economic and politic democracy. Thus, the combination of primary and secondary sources emerges as an interdisciplinary project in which practical and performative views of pedagogy, politics and cultural studies are united through literature review and letter writing and analysis.

### **First letters as brief biographies**

In order to contextualize and understand a little about Freire and Milani's lives and contemporary historical happenings, I present their letters as an introduction to each other but also a form of brief biographies.

I start with my own letter to both educators in which I recount how I met each of them. The next letters between concern their lives—their different backgrounds growing up and their similar “calling” to dedicate their lives to education, as well the processes of becoming teachers who see consciousness raising as the key to lift many people out of oppression and free them from manipulation.

Promoting a fictional encounter of both educators after they are long gone seems to me a both inspiring and challenging manner of developing my research, but also somewhat audacious. Other people have published their similarities and contrasts, but

only by indirect speech, without giving them a direct voice. The letter exchange, that never happened, though, was a new one and here I am presenting it. The genre has also a historical and religious significance particularly talking about Freire and Milani. Both were Christian inspired (Mayo, 2007). Writing letters, articles, communicating their literacy, promoting literacy were the main ways that both had to prove that the exile could not silence them. This formula somehow resembles Saint Paul epistolary practices in which writing letters had a missionary purpose.

### **Sources for the letters:**

My main source of information for writing Milani's first letter was his biography presented in the website "Fondazione Don Lorenzo Milani", whose president is Michele Gesualdi, one of Milani's students and his protégée, who, like his brother Francesco, was adopted by the priest. I also consulted Milani's biographies in the books written by Fallaci (1974) and Lancisi (2007).

In order to write Freire's letter, I used mostly Gadotti's (1994) and Kyrilo's (2011) books, besides my notes from a presentation of Ira Shor in November 2012, at the Marks Meadow School of Amherst, MA, which is a building today is part of College of Education at University of Massachusetts Amherst. The title of Shor's talk was "Occupy/Freire: Democracy-in-Progress, Democracy Attacked, 1964 and 2011." I also used the São Paulo Teachers' Union magazine online, which is called *Revista Giz*, and Freire's own stories in his book *Letters to Cristina* (2000). Mayo (2007) and Streck (2008) were also important sources for bringing both Freire's and Milani's biographies together in their studies.

### **My letter to Freire and Milani:**

Dear Paulo Freire and Don Milani,

With some faith still left in my heart, against all rational thought, I still hold out hope that this letter somehow arrives to both of you. I also hope it is seen by others, who like me want to keep alive your philosophies and raise consciousness and transformative learning around the world.

Neither of you know me but I have learned about, researched, and spoken about you every day for the past decade and I feel your thoughts and ideas are so similar that they can easily be assimilated into a single pedagogy.

I was immediately saddened when I learned that you have never met, but this feeling was transformed into an optimistic sense of raising consciousness through education, a purpose that both of you have transferred to many educators. I have visited many places and spoken with many others about your philosophies. I have observed your thoughts and absorbed, reflected, interpreted and presented some of these thoughts and actions in this thesis. I want to share it with as many others as possible, not only as an educator, but as a citizen of world.

Both of you have fought the same battle to make education accessible to more people and how to use critical literacy through questioning and looking beyond what is written. Both of you realize the importance of words, using them carefully and recommending your students to do the same, even treating words like characters rather than objects.

Living in exile was a perfect example to illustrate the importance of making excellent use of words. Exile did not silence you, it made you both stronger. Professor Freire's ideas quickly expanded around the globe, while Don Milani's ideas spread throughout Italy and are still expanding today. Your philosophies are needed now as much as ever because we are still hoping for better days for humanity through thoughtful schooling. This ongoing struggle is the same in many schools and in countries in the world, and fortunately your ideas include important reminders to never give up. Combined, they can be even more effective as we can see when tracing your legacies around the world connecting people.

Fortunately, I was able to bring together two of your students – Ira Shor and Edoardo Martinelli - for meetings and exchanging of ideas. Neither of you have heard about social media or the internet, but through this modern communication method, I can see that both of these students are still in touch with each other. They are brothers in pedagogy, fighting together, as Martinelli said in 2018, in an open social media post.

Interestingly, I was introduced to both of you at different times of my life. I met Professor Freire first during high school in 1988. My teachers from my Escola Normal, the secondary school that prepared students to be elementary teachers, would often bring your ideas and books to class. The military dictatorship had finished just three years earlier and we were freely studying you and soon after, in 1989, Brazilians would finally have the right to vote again after 20 years. At the young age of 16, I could even vote at that time. Because of Freire's books and from this period in high school, I learned that I should never profess that "I don't talk about politics" because politics is part of life, and part of every choice that I make.

My meeting with you, Don Milani, happened also in connection with Professor Freire. I was presenting Freire's ideas to some friends in Italy and they mentioned that I may as well be talking about Lorenzo Milani. The most beautiful moments, though, were when I met personally your former students, Mileno, Nevio and Edoardo along with one of your collaborators, Nanni Banchi, the ex-carpenter of your school, and now president of one of the research associations that bearing your name. They explained to me that you

were known by your students as “il Priore” because you were a priest, and a good one, but also a priest who responded to the call of teaching.

Both of you teach to fight not with arms but with words because you knew that “in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America, in the South of Italy, in the mountains, in the fields, and even in the big cities, millions of young people are waiting to be considered equal” (School of Barbiana, 1994, p. 80). More than 50 years went by since this passage was written in Letter to a Teacher and we are still waiting for all people to be given equal consideration, but we also know that only education will help people to thrive, create and critique.

In summary, I hope that this connection between your ideas and my project helps find some answers and inspirations to carry them forward to others. I finish this letter by asking both of you: how can your theories and practices about language, critical literacy, and multimodal pedagogies help us to help the world today? How can we adapt your pedagogies to difficult current times and issues?

Yours truly and still with some faith,

Simone Maria Gugliotta

### **Imagining Milani’s letter to Freire (see Italian version in the Appendix section):**

Dear Professor Freire,

This letter, if everything goes well, will be the first of many others. It is in Italian with a Brazilian Portuguese intonation, borrowed from our colleague and spokesperson in this project, Simone Maria Gugliotta. She is a person interested in critical pedagogies and, because of it, curious about our lives, work, and legacy.

Education was not my first vocational choice, but at the same time, it was. I will explain myself better to you: since I was little, I understood that I wanted to be near to Christianity, even growing up in a non-religious family environment. I converted to Catholicism practically when I was 20 years old. But at the age of 10, I was baptized. In this way my family would avoid being persecuted by the fascists.

Well, done with initial considerations, I will introduce myself: I am Don Milani, born Lorenzo Carlo Domenico Milani Comparetti, in Florence, 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1923. I prefer to tell you right away that I left life in this earth on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1967, at the age of 44, due to Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a type of cancer. I want you to know straightway because, I knew, throughout our researcher-spokesperson, that the 1960s were also very difficult years for you having had to move to Chile due to the military coup in Brazil, the so-called Years of Lead.

I was born in a cultured and bourgeois family. My father’s name was Albano Milani, and my mother’s, Alice Weiss. She had Jewish origins. As you can imagine, my

family could also have been exiled or even eliminated due to fascist intolerance, influenced by the Nazism, towards Jewish population in the 1940s. In order to protect my two siblings and me from the fascist rage, my parents got married in a Catholic church and baptized all three of us in the same religion (Lancisi, 2013, chapter 1). Until 1930, we lived in Florence where we were among the first families to own an automobile and we could live from family proceeds but, in that year, after the 1929 crisis, the great depression, my father had to start working and found a job as manager in a company in Milan. We moved there and in 1941 and I gained my high school diploma in classic studies. I refused to go to college for my parents' chagrin and I applied for a painting school at the Academia of Brera. In 1943, we moved back to Florence after a bomb attack on Milan. In Florence I gave continuity to my painting studies with Hans J. Staude. The religious aspects from the paintings at this time of my life sparked my vocation (School of Barbiana, 1994).

Regarding religions, we did not grow up with any of them. It was up to me, at 20 years old, the decision of convert to Catholicism. This conversion guided me to the dedication to education. I tried to dedicate my life to painting after the school years, but it was the interest in sacred painting that inspired me to know more about the gospel. A year later I had my first encounter with my spiritual father, Don Raffaele Bensi, I joined the Seminar Maggiore of Florence and became a priest in 1947.

My first mission as a priest was at San Donato di Calenzano, near Florence, where I stayed until 1954. There I developed the catechism lessons through a historical outlook: one would learn about the Jewish population, about Jesus life and about the history of the Christian formation instead of the dogmatic formulas from the Church. I have also founded an evening popular school for the young workers and peasantry from the parish. My project for the evening school was organized after being recognized by the school council. The courses were held during the week and on Fridays we would have conferences on diverse themes. Some friends and master Betti would help me.

The youngsters were obsessed with the disciplines such as technical design, arithmetic, stenography, and geometry, all helpful for applying for work in the railway system. I used to focus on language learning because the word is the magic key that opens any door, because only language can make as equal. Equal is someone who knows how to express her or himself and understand when the other expresses him/herself. Rich or poor, this does not matter. The important issue is to speak (School of Barbiana, 1994).

I used to teach the language, but also the celestial nebulae, sheet music, people's geography, geometric perspective in the drawings. No argument was a taboo, not even sexual education, when I explained the chromosome and the genetic transmission to the young students, between 12 and 13 years old. The achievements of the popular school arrived despite and thanks to many quarrels. I used to go around the town by bicycle to take the students to school. I always believed that the "poverty of the poor people cannot be measured by the bread, the house, the heat, but by the level of culture

and the social function.” It was in the San Donato parish where I started to write my first book *Esperienze Pastorali* (Pastoral Experiences), published in 1958, but we can talk about it in a future letter (Fallaci, 1974).

The 1950s were hard years in Italy due to political confrontations and social drama in the country. My political rationale to vote for the Democratic Christian Party, while giving preference to unionists and laic representatives was too uncomfortable for the Tuscan Curia. Thus, on September 12, 1954, after Don Daniele Pugi, the priest and protector whom I worked with, passed away, I was sent in exile, like you, Professor Freire. My exile was inside Italy, in Barbiana, a small isolated location in Tuscany. They thought they would make me quiet but instead they gave me the possibility to spread my work even more in the field of education as a form of awareness or *conscientização*, a word that you like to use. However, I will relate this story later in a future letter.

I hope to have soon the pleasure of receiving your letter.

Warm greetings, yours

Lorenzo Milani

**Imagining a Freire’s letter to Milani**  
**(see Portuguese version in the Appendix section):**

Dear Don Milani,

It was with immense joy that I received your letter. It arrives through our curious researcher who is taking up the role of interpreter of our lives. I will start presenting myself talking about my family that, in contrast with yours, did not have many economic and cultural resources. I was born Paulo Régis Neves Freire, in September 19, 1921, in the city of Recife, State of Pernambuco, in the Northeast of Brazil. My farewell from this life happened in May 2, 1997, due to a heart attack.

The same exercise that we are practicing here, throughout our research, through letters, is a similar exercise of memories and reconstruction of life stories; it was already possible many times in my life. It happened throughout interviews and books, in particular, a book called *Letters to Cristina*, in which I wrote letters to satisfy my niece’s curiosity telling about my life journey until becoming the educator that I was in life, in books, and in memories. That was her initial question: how I became the educator that I was.

My first readings of the world happened in the backyard of our first house, where under the shadows of fruit trees and in playing with my pets. In this way, my mother taught me to read and write writing in the dirt with little wooden sticks, then breaking the words in syllables, and finally reading the written words on the ground. I was the youngest of a family of four children.

Life was not so bad at the first years of my life. My mother was a housewife and seamstress. My father was a police officer, who became captain during his tenure. However, due to arterial sclerosis, he had to retire early and, at the same time, provide our bread and butter; he worked sometimes as a carpenter doing woodwork that he would rarely sell. He also tried to resell goods that he would bring from the interior of the State of Pernambuco, but he wasn't successful. Nevertheless, these difficulties allowed my father to be very close to us. We would have long conversations about important themes related to Brazilian politics and history.

My father, as your parents, was not a religious man, but he believed in God. My mother instead was very Catholic, and, for that reason, I grew up in the religion that influenced my life's perspective, my pedagogical theories and my activism. My first experience with formal education was at six years old in a private school with my teacher Eunice. She used to tell me to write the words that I knew and then write sentences. She showed me that my main goal was not to memorize grammar concepts but develop my oral and written skills (Kyrilo, 2011). She was important in my life and because of her that I liked school.

Meanwhile, the financial situation at home kept getting worse. The 1920 crash also affected us drastically. The Brazilian economy depended on coffee export and, with the stock market crash, the price of the product dropped very much, changing the life of many Brazilians. Food was getting less available in our house and my bad nutrition was affecting my school accomplishments. I was hungry. Who can memorize and learn when they are hungry? One of my uncles helped us financially for a while, but when he could not anymore, he suggested that we move out of Recife, the capital city of the State of Pernambuco.

Thus, at 10 years old, I went to live with my family in Jaboatão dos Guararapes, about 16 kilometers from Recife. It was a kind of magic decision for my family to see if out of the capital city and away from the coast, life could be better. Yet, it was not. The lack of money and the debts were still here. When I was about 18 or 19 years old, I was still a high school student and I was helping at home. My two brothers were working regularly, doing many sacrifices. My sister was in the last year of primary school teacher training and, for me, the only way that I could help was teaching (Revista Giz Sindicato dos Professores de São Paulo, 1991). In this way, life took me to my education journey.

The other reason that took me to education was an issue of intellectual interest since it was very early that I noticed that I liked to study grammar and I jumped with joy for myself. I bought books by good Brazilian and Portuguese grammarians that I could buy in secondhand bookstores. These texts helped me to become capable to give lessons even before of having a teaching certificate. While giving lessons to students as poor as me, in Jaboatão, I was becoming a teacher. I used to say that nobody is born a teacher because I had lived that experience.



When I was 13 years old, in 1934, my father died and the financial crisis in my family came to be even worse. I remember my mother was ashamed because she could not pay the bills. The grocer would shout even before she entered the grocery store that he would not sell anything to her until she paid her debt. She would turn back to the street after saying a shy “I am sorry” or “thank you very much”. I would see this scene it without saying word, but these experiences stayed with me. I had great respect for my mother because I knew her pain and did whatever I could to help her throughout her whole life. I know you had also a strong connection with your mother and that you died in her home. I died after my mom. I did not see her for many years because I was in exile. She passed away before I could return to Brazil.

It took me longer than the other students to finish my middle school and high school studies. My mother was able to get a scholarship for me in a private school in Recife because in Jaboatão we had only elementary schools. The president of the Osvaldo Cruz School, an ex-seminarian, gave me the award. At 22 years old, I started my university studies at the College of Law, in Recife.

During my college years, I married Elza Maia Costa Oliveira, who was an elementary teacher. We had five children. I tried to work as a lawyer, but it did not last long: I gave up after my first client, who was a dentist starting his career. I did not charge him for my work. I realized that law was not for me and started to teach at the same high school where studied. Some years later, I accepted the invitation to direct the cultural and educational department of the Social Service of the Industries of Pernambuco (SESI). There, I had my first direct contact with adult literacy that, for me and as well for you, related to workers’ everyday lives. Knowing their own reality, workers can make decisions in a critical way and can participate in the country’s social and political life. In 1964, this work was nationally recognized and, the president at the time, João Goulart, invited me to coordinate the National Literacy Program. However, we had barely started, when the military coup d’état happened. The method that I was using threatened the national order. At this point, dear Father, I became, according to the military, an enemy of God and country. My exile started at this point and it lasted 16 years. I lived in Bolivia, Chile, United States and Switzerland. In 1980, after the Amnesty Law, I could finally go back to Brazil (Kyrilo, 2011).

Once, during a conversation with my friend Frei Betto (Gadotti, 1996), who is a priest like you, I told him that, for me, the exile was profoundly pedagogic. Being away from Brazil, allowed me to understand it better. As it happened for you during your time in Barbiana, Father, they were not able to silence me. During this period, I wrote one of my most known books called *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1969, which is 11 years after your well-known book, my dear priest. I know that you avoided direct involvement with political parties, but I did not and I joined the Labor Party in Brazil. During Luiza Erundina’s administration as a mayor of São Paulo, I accepted the charge of education city clerk, from 1989 to 1991.

Well, I will pause for now, but I want to continue the beauty of this letter exchange. I finish my first answer with a question about the books *Pastoral Experiences* and *Letter to a Teacher*. Please, tell me about your first book and how was the experience of coordinating the collective writing of this book. I hope to continue this dialogue with you, Father, talking about the art of teaching, about critical pedagogy and about the pedagogic radicalism of our lives in our future correspondences.

With your blessings,

Paulo Freire

## Conclusion

The similarities between Freire's and Milani's works and beliefs and the contemporaneity of their ideas are a powerful tool for helping oppressed populations in any country... developed, undeveloped, rich or poor. These educators theorized above all how important it is to learn to read and write critically, and to have a better use of language in order to follow the fast changes in our knowledge-based society. The knowledge that they were concerned about was not only related to the practice of learning, but also teaching the construction of a curriculum that respects and honors the background and particular stories of each group of students.

Freire and Milani had interesting lives that showed how the most adverse situations can become opportunities. They did it in the school environments where they worked, and they followed it in their own lives. I am talking here about the fact that they knew how to take advantage of the attempt to silence them, and did their work in exile, a great way of contributing to education. However, bell hooks (1994) remembers to avoid the voyeuristic points of view through which students and teachers tend to see Freire, and that could also be applied to Milani. The focus should be on the ideas they speak about and the oppressed groups they talk about. hooks may be right to a certain point, but with this work I tried to show that without knowing about their experiences and life trajectories their principles and teachings would be much less meaningful. Understanding their social role and identities also can bring people closer or push them away from their thoughts on critical literacy.

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## **Appendix: Letters in Italian and Portuguese** **First Letter Exchange: Introductions**

Egregio Professore Freire,

Non sapevo in quale lingua scrivere questa lettera che, se tutto andrà bene, sarà la prima di una serie di tante altre. Alla fine, mi sono deciso per l'italiano con la cadenza brasiliana, prestata dalla collega e portavoce di questo progetto, Simone Gugliotta, una persona che si interessa della pedagogia critica e perciò curiosa della nostra vita, lavoro e eredità culturali. Chissà quante volte dovrà tradurre questo pezzo, ma eccoci qua a cominciare questa giornata. Anche per me come per Lei, l'educazione non è stata la mia prima vocazione, anche se in qualche modo allo stesso tempo lo è stata.

Mi spiego: sin da piccolo ho capito di voler avvicinarmi al cristianesimo, anche se sono cresciuto in un ambiente familiare non religioso e sono nato da una madre d'origine ebrea. Mi sono convertito al cattolicesimo a 20 anni, ma a 10 sono stato battezzato per evitare che la famiglia fosse perseguitata del fascismo agli ebrei. La vocazione mi ha portato alla passione per l'insegnamento.

Beh, fatte queste prime considerazioni, mi presento: sono Don Milani, nato Lorenzo Carlo Domenico Milani Comparetti, a Firenze, il 27 maggio del 1923. Le dico subito che ho lasciato la vita terrena il 26 giugno del 1967 a 44 anni a causa di una leucemia o linfoma di Hodgkin. Le dico subito questo perché ho saputo, tramite la nostra curiosa ricercatrice, che gli anni 60 sono stati anche molto difficili per Lei che viveva in esilio in Cile, dovuto al colpo militare in Brasile, i cosiddetti anni di piombo.

Sono nato in una famiglia colta e borghese. Mio padre si chiamava Albano Milani e mia madre Alice Weiss. Lei era d'origine ebrea. Come vede, anche la mia famiglia potrebbe essere stata esiliata o addirittura eliminata a causa dell'intolleranza che il fascismo, influenzato dal nazismo, manifestava contro gli ebrei durante gli anni 40. Per proteggerci dall'ira fascista i miei si sono sposati in una chiesa cattolica e hanno battezzato me e miei fratelli. Fino al 1930, abbiamo vissuto a Firenze, dove eravamo una delle prime famiglie a possedere un'automobile e potevamo vivere di reddito, ma l'anno dopo la crisi del 1929 – *the great depression* -, mio padre dovette cominciare a

lavorare e trovò un lavoro come dirigente di un'azienda a Milano. Lì, nel 1941 ottenni la maturità classica, ma rifiutai di andare all'università con gran dispiacere dei miei genitori, mi iscrissi invece all'Accademia di Brera per studiare pittura. Tornati a Firenze, nel 1943 dopo i bombardamenti su Milano, proseguì gli studi di pittura con Hans J. Staude.

Intanto, non credevamo secondo nessuna religione. Sono stato io che, a 20 anni, ho deciso di convertirmi al cattolicesimo. Questa conversione mi ha portato a dedicarmi quasi integralmente all'educazione. Provai a dedicarmi alla pittura dopo gli anni di studio e l'interesse per l'arte sacra mi portò a voler conoscere ancora di più il vangelo. E dopo un anno accadde l'incontro con il mio padre spirituale, Don Raffaello Bensi. Entrai nel Seminario Maggiore di Firenze e diventai prete nel 1947.

La mia prima missione come prete cappellano fu a San Donato di Calenzano, vicino a Firenze, dove rimasi fino al 1954. A San Donato improntai le lezioni di catechismo sul piano storico: si imparava la storia del popolo ebraico, la vita di Gesù e la storia della formazione del Cristianesimo anziché le formulette dogmatiche della chiesa. Fondai anche una scuola popolare serale per i giovani operai e contadini della parrocchia. Il mio progetto di scuola serale è stato organizzato con il riconoscimento istituzionale del provveditorato. Le lezioni si tenevano durante la settimana e i venerdì si tenevano conferenze su temi diversi. Alcuni amici e il maestro Betti mi davano una mano. I ragazzi erano fissati con le materie che ritenevano utili per prendere il diploma come il disegno tecnico, l'aritmetica, la stenografia e la geometria per fare i concorsi indetti dalle ferrovie. Io puntavo sull'insegnamento della lingua perché la parola è la chiave fatata che apre ogni porta, "perché è solo la lingua che rende eguali. Eguale è chi sa esprimersi e intende l'espressione altrui, ricco o povero non importa. Basta che parli." (Lettera a una Professoressa, 1994).

Insegnavo la lingua, ma anche le nebulose celesti, lo spartito musicale, la geografia dei popoli, la prospettiva geometrica nel disegno. Nessun argomento era tabù, nemmeno l'educazione sessuale, dove spiegavo i cromosomi e la trasmissione genetica per gli studenti dai 12 ai 13 anni. Il successo della scuola popolare è stato ottenuto a forza di molte liti. Andavo in bicicletta in giro per il paese per portare gli studenti a scuola. Io credevo e ci credo ancora che "la povertà dei poveri non si misura a pane, a casa, a

caldo ma sul grado di cultura e sulla funzione sociale”. Fu a San Donato che cominciai a scrivere il mio primo libro “Esperienze Pastorali”, pubblicato nel 1958, ma parleremo di questo in una lettera futura. A questo punto glielo volevo soltanto accennare.

Gli anni Cinquanta furono anni duri qui in Italia per conflitti politici e i drammi sociali del paese. I miei ragionamenti politici di votare il Partito Democristiano, ma dare preferenze ai sindacalisti e ai laici furono troppo scomodi per la Curia in Toscana e il 12 settembre del 1954, con la morte di Don Daniele Pugi, il prete con cui lavoravo a San Donato, anch’io, come Lei, sono stato mandato in esilio, ma un esilio interno, a Barbiana, piccola località isolata in Toscana. Pensavano di così mettermi a tacere, ma mi diedero la possibilità di fare un lavoro ancora più capillare e importante nel campo dell’educazione come forma di presa di coscienza o “conscientização”, parola che so Le piace tanto usare. Ma questa storia la racconterò, mio caro Freire, in una prossima lettera.

Spero di aver presto il piacere di ricevere una Sua lettera.

Un saluto affettuoso, suo  
Lorenzo Milani

Caro Dom Milani,

Foi com grande alegria que recebi sua carta através da nossa curiosa pesquisadora que assume aqui também o papel de intérprete e digitadora. Começo a apresentar-me falando de minha família, que ao contrário da sua, não havia tantos recursos econômicos e culturais. Nasci Paulo Régis Neves Freire, em 19 de setembro de 1921, na cidade de Recife, no estado de Pernambuco, no Nordeste brasileiro e minha despedida desta vida aconteceu em 2 de maio de 1997, devido a um infarto.

Este mesmo exercício que começo a praticar, através da nossa pesquisadora, em cartas com o senhor padre, este exercício de lembranças e reconstrução de histórias da minha vida já me foi possível em outras situações. Um exemplo é o livro *Cartas a Cristina*, em que através de cartas, para satisfazer a curiosidade de minha sobrinha,

conto como foi minha trajetória até tornar-me o educador que fui em vida, que sou em livros e sou em memória.

Minhas primeiras leituras do mundo aconteceram no quintal de nossa primeira casa, à sombra de árvores de frutas e em meio a brincadeiras com nossos animais domésticos. Assim, fui alfabetizado por minha mãe escrevendo na terra com pequenos gravetos, depois “quebrando” as palavras em sílabas e enfim lendo o que estava escrito. Eu fui o caçula de uma família de quatro filhos. A vida não era tão ruim naquele tempo. Minha mãe era dona de casa e costurava e meu pai era um oficial de polícia, chegando mesmo ao posto de capitão. No entanto, por causa de uma arteriosclerose, ele teve que se aposentar cedo e para complementar o nosso ganho-pão, ele trabalhava às vezes como carpinteiro fazendo trabalhos com madeira que raramente eram vendidos. Ele também tentou começar um trabalho de revenda de mercadorias compradas no interior do estado em viagens de trem, mas esta nova empreitada também não trouxe resultados financeiros positivos. Todavia, essas dificuldades permitiram que meu pai nos fosse muito próximo e conversasse muito conosco sobre importantes temas ligados à realidade política e histórica do Brasil.

Meu pai, como os seus pais, também não era um homem religioso, mas acreditava em Deus. Minha mãe sim era muito católica e por causa disso cresci nesta religião o que impactou minha perspectiva de vida, minhas teorias pedagógicas e meu ativismo. Minha primeira experiência com educação formal foi aos seis anos em uma escola particular, com a professora Eunice. Ela me dizia para escrever as palavras que sabia e depois formar frases. Sua preocupação principal não era me fazer decorar a gramática, mas desenvolver a minha habilidade oral e escrita (Freire, 1999). Ela marcou muito a minha vida e fez com que eu gostasse muito da escola.

A situação financeira em minha casa continuava muito crítica e a crise de 1929 também nos afetou drasticamente. A economia brasileira dependia basicamente da exportação de café e com o *crash* da bolsa, o preço deste produto caiu muito transformando a vida de muitos brasileiros. A comida estava se tornando escassa em nossa casa e minha mal-nutrição afetava meu rendimento escolar. Eu tinha fome e quem tem fome não consegue memorizar e aprender. Um tio meu nos ajudou financeiramente por um período de tempo, mas quando ele não pôde mais, sugeri que nos mudássemos de Recife.

Assim, aos 10 anos de idade, fui morar com minha família em Jaboatão dos Guararapes, há mais ou menos 16 quilômetros da capital de Pernambuco. Foi uma



espécie de decisão mágica da família para ver se fora da capital e um pouco mais distante da costa, a vida seria melhor. Mas não foi. A falta de dinheiro e o endividamento continuaram lá. Quando eu tinha meus 18 ou 19 anos era estudante e precisava ajudar em casa. Meus dois irmãos estavam trabalhando normalmente, muito sacrificados; minha irmã estava no último ano da Escola Normal, para ser professora primária, e a para mim, a única maneira de poder ajudar era ensinando (Revista Giz Sindicato dos Professores de São Paulo, 1991). Assim a vida em levou naturalmente por este caminho.

O outro motivo que me levou à educação foi uma questão de gosto intelectual já que muito cedo descobri que gostava de estudar gramática e dei saltos por mim mesmo. Eu li todos os bons gramáticos brasileiros e portugueses que consegui comprar em sebos que são livrarias que vendem livros usados. Isso me ajudou a ser competente para dar aula antes mesmo de começar a lecionar. Dando aula a jovens de classe média, tão pobres quanto eu em Jaboatão, fui me tornando professor. Eu costumava dizer que ninguém nasce professor, porque tive a experiência viva disso.

Aos 13 anos de idade, meu pai faleceu e a crise financeira em família se agravava. Lembro-me da vergonha que minha mãe sentia por não poder pagar as contas. O dono da venda gritava antes dela entrar no estabelecimento que não venderia mais nada para ela enquanto não pagasse a dívida. Ela voltava-se para rua depois de dizer timidamente “desculpe” ou “muito obrigada”. Eu prenunciava aquilo e não dizia nada, mas isso me marcou muito. Eu sempre a respeitei muito, porque conhecia sua dor e fiz o que pude para ajudá-la durante toda vida. Sei que o senhor também tinha uma forte ligação com sua mãe e faleceu em sua casa. Eu faleci após minha mãe, mas não a vi por muitos anos até a morte dela, porque estava no exílio e não podia voltar ao Brasil.

Eu levei mais tempo que os outros meninos para terminar o ginásio e a escola secundária. Foi minha mãe que conseguiu uma bolsa de estudos em uma escola privada do Recife, porque em Jaboatão só havia até a escola primária. O diretor do Colégio Osvaldo Cruz concedeu-nos a bolsa de estudos. Depois, com 22 anos, quando muitos já haviam terminado os estudos universitários, eu entrei para a Faculdade de Direito do Recife. Durante os anos de faculdade, casei-me com a professora primária Elza Maia Costa Oliveira com quem tive cinco filhos. Tentei trabalhar como advogado, mas não fui adiante: desisti já no primeiro cliente, um dentista em início de

carreira a quem não cobrei pelo serviço. Descobri que a advocacia não era para mim e comecei a lecionar no Colégio Osvaldo Cruz, o mesmo onde estudei.

Pouco tempo depois, aos 26 anos, comecei a dirigir o departamento de educação e cultura do Serviço Social da Indústria de Pernambuco, o SESI. Depois sai do Sesi e fui trabalhar no Movimento de Cultura Popular chamado MCP, no Serviço de Extensão Cultural e no projeto de alfabetização de adultos em Angicos, no Rio Grande do Norte (Freire, 2000). E foi assim que entrei em contato com a alfabetização de adultos que para mim, assim como para o senhor, deveria estar diretamente relacionada ao cotidiano do trabalhador que conhecendo sua realidade pode tomar decisões de forma crítica e participar da vida social e política de sua sociedade.

Em 1964, este trabalho já era conhecido nacionalmente, e o presidente João Goulart me convidou para coordenar o Programa Nacional de Alfabetização. No entanto, apenas havíamos começado, veio o golpe militar e o método que usava para alfabetizar foi considerado uma ameaça à ordem. Aí, caro padre, fui considerado um inimigo de Deus e da pátria, e começa assim meu exílio que durou 16 anos: Bolívia, Chile, Estados Unidos, Suíça. Em 1980, depois da Lei da Anistia, pude finalmente retornar ao Brasil.

Uma vez em conversa com meu amigo Frei Beto (Gadotti, 1996, p.79) disse que para mim o exílio foi profundamente pedagógico. Tomando distância do Brasil, pude compreendê-lo melhor. Assim, como aconteceu durante o seu exílio, Padre, eles não conseguiram me calar. Durante este período escrevi um dos meus livros mais conhecidos que se chama *Pedagogia do Oprimido* e foi lançado em 1969, 11 anos após a sua obra mais conhecida, meu caro sacerdote. Eu sei que o senhor evitava envolvimento direto com partidos políticos, mas eu afiliei-me ao Partido dos Trabalhadores e durante o governo da prefeita Luiza Erundina, em São Paulo, exerci o cargo de secretário municipal da Educação de 1989 a 1991.

Bom, por agora faço uma pausa e quero continuar com a boniteza dessa troca de cartas. Termina a minha primeira resposta, esperando começar com o senhor um diálogo sobre a pedagogia crítica e sobre a radicalidade pedagógica de nossas vidas em nossas próximas correspondências. Por favor, conte-me sobre o seu primeiro livro e como foi a experiência de coordenar a escrita coletiva do segundo livro. Antes tarde do que nunca!

Com sua benção,

Paulo Freire