

**On Broken Hearts, Courage, And A Life Of Activism (v. 3.0)**  
by chris cavanagh

*and to imagine what it is like,  
dying of heartbreak,  
a subtle, yet extravagant death*  
Lisel Mueller, *Heartland*

**[Stop Eating Sugar]**

Two loves kept me going through characteristically alienating teen years: my dog (long a beloved memory) and reading, which remains with me still. I inhaled the corpus of 20<sup>th</sup> Century science fiction and fantasy including comic books and I lost myself in literature. It was this love of literature that taught me something about both magic and praxis.

You see, I used to believe that if I could believe intensely enough, perfectly enough, then the worlds of fantasy, sci-fi and Victorian steam-punk I was losing myself in could become real. I remember with visceral feeling how deeply I believed that the Green Lantern was real, that Wonder Woman's invisible island was out there somewhere and that I could find it if I believed. Jules Verne's **Journey to the Centre of the World** was a documentary to me, not fiction. This was magical thinking and, while it did not alter the material world in which I lived, it did irrevocably alter the landscapes of my imagination. And I have learned that any change we wish to bring into the world, to effect on the world must first be imagined – it is, in the first instance, an act of thought. While I'm not asking you to "believe" in magic (I'll leave that to The Lovin' Spoonful), I do think magic has something to teach us about how the imagination works.

As for praxis – this I *am* proposing belief in. Praxis (in the work of Freire, Marx, bell hooks and numerous other theorists of liberation) names two relationships that are central to the practice of popular and emancipatory pedagogies: the inseparability (albeit in dialectical tension) of theory and practice or, in different words, action and reflection; and the relationship of action to changing the world for the better. But I want to *PUSH* the notion of praxis to include, at its radical roots, a few more things. I'll start with **love**.

But first, a return briefly to my love of literature: this love, at 20, lead me to two books that would change my life by showing me the road i wanted to walk and *would* walk for the next two decades (and, likely, for a few more): ***Open Veins of Latin America*** by Eduardo Galeano and ***Pedagogy of the Oppressed*** by Paulo Freire.

As I moved from teens to twenties I became increasingly aware of a rage and despair that had been growing in me for some time. I place its earliest (dimly) conscious beginnings around the age of 12 when i learned of the Holocaust followed quickly by learning of slavery, the slaughter of Native Americans, the Raj and much more. At age 20, I witnessed the destitute poverty of the populace of Haiti. It was Galeano's measured anger and stark descriptions of centuries of genocidal conquest that gave shape to the world of violence and suffering that hovered beyond my vision.

In Haiti with Canada World Youth, i was introduced to a reality i had long suspected and would only begin to name while there: the wealth of the few required the poverty of the many. My heart ached – i would say that it “broke” except that it had broken long before and i had, for some time, learned to live with heartbreak as a permanent condition. Freire’s words showed me what to do with this feeling: learn and teach, teach and learn – I learned about popular education as a way to change the world. Just how to do this is still something i’m working on.

It was Freire’s use of the word “love” that touched my heart and instantly persuaded me that the education he was writing about was what i wanted to do. Again and again Freire wrote that the educator interested in resisting oppression had to practice love as well as humility, faith, hope and critical thinking. As difficult as the latter four things were it was “love” that was the most mysterious to me in the context of education and activism for social justice. I knew there was a truth in that word and i knew i wanted to track that truth down. Freire’s words spoke to my broken heart and now, after over twenty years of doing popular education, i believe that a broken heart (or, at least, the ability to allow one’s heart to be broken) is a necessary quality of the activist fighting for social justice. I say “necessary” not to scare off all those who might feel intimidated by such an assertion but as a challenge to engage in a dialogue about what creates lasting change - the kind of change that Marx, Emma Goldman, Gramsci, Audre Lorde wrote about.

And here I want to make explicit a debt I owe to those who have taught me the most about love and freedom. For that world was taken away from me in some very characteristic ways, not the least of which is the way I was clothed and trained in the tropes and habits of patriarchal, racist privilege, to name only two of the many forms of oppression that structure our world. What I have learned of love comes directly from two sources in my life: first, the poor community into which I was born and, secondly, the women, women of colour, lesbians, gay men, and all those people who resist the hegemonic world order and dare to make claims on this reality that we share so unequally. I have “traveled”, as Maria Lugones describes it, into many worlds and I have always sought to travel with love, to resist the arrogance that I am blithely encouraged to wear as a right. I am not claiming that I am an expert at this traveling, nor am I even saying I’m good at it. I think I’m better at it than I used to be, but it is not for me to judge my accomplishments in this.

I often wonder about why people resist learning the truth about the violence and disparity that characterize our world, especially when, from my (admittedly limited) point of view, truth leads to better decisions, better relationships, a deeper engagement with the world. I have long sensed that the most significant resistance comes from peoples’ hearts. Two things explained this to me – a story and a passage from Ecclesiastes.

### **[THE 36 JUST MEN]**

How i love this tale – how the boy’s casual act is the catalyst for such great change, and how the very balance of creation is said to rest on compassion and generosity.

As for Ecclesiastes, Chapter 1, Verse 18 says, **“In much wisdom is much grief and s/he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.”**

When i am facilitating groups, doing public education about the history and reality of injustice i like to remember this old Jewish tale and this biblical passage. I see the truth in them – and more than that, i feel it with my heart. Popular education has taught me to respect what people know and part of this respect is assuming (perhaps having faith, hope and humility a la Freire) that people know that to open themselves to the truths of this world is to open themselves to pain and suffering that they fear they cannot survive the knowing of. And who am i to force knowledge onto them. Should they open themselves to what i have seen, to what i have taught myself, to what i have been taught and should their hearts break (a safe bet), will i be there as an ally, a friend, a support - to help them live with the new knowledge, to assure them that a broken heart will not kill them?

Contemporary urban life makes it difficult to promise to be there for people – and perhaps this makes me shy to push people into sorrowful truths. But i do what i can responsibly to persuade. To live as Theodore Roethke implies when he writes: “Those willing to be vulnerable / move among mysteries.” A broken heart might let in more suffering (and that means more truth, by my reckoning) but it also lets in more of a lot of other things: delight, for one. And, of course, love.

Proposing that love be included in the root definition of praxis requires a critical attitude towards common sense notions of love. Few would dispute that love is, in the first instance, identified as virtually synonymous with romance. This is so obvious I need say no more about it. But not so obvious, though in plain site, is the way in which love is identified above all as a “feeling.” And what trouble that gets us into. How many marriages and friendships have floundered on this essentialism? How often have people concluded that the absence of the “feeling” means that love is also absent? Why do we privilege the “feeling” aspect of love above all else? Why do we treat love as a singular essential to which we then add a variety of other qualities and dispositions (e.g. fidelity, patience, care, etc.)? Suffragist, writer and analyst Florida Scott-Maxwell sums this dilemma up nicely:

*I wonder why love is so often equated with joy when it is everything else as well. Devastation, balm, obsession, granting and receiving excessive value, and losing it again. It is recognition, often of what you are not but might be. It sears and it heals. It is beyond pity and above law. It can seem like truth.*

Love, as with so many other notions and dispositions, is also about power and subjectivity – as Foucault writes. I’m neither sure nor clear about this, but I know that in the work of Foucault and other theorists that I love (Cixous, Derrida, Spivak, et al) are some powerful theoretical notions that can expose the ways in which love has been constructed over time, and the ways in which humans have been constructed as subjects who can “love” in very particular, governed and regulated ways such that we articulate nicely or, perhaps more simply put, OBEY, the hegemonic routines that dominate our lives. A praxis that includes a critical notion of love is one which can engage this complex approach to the history of subjectivity and one which, I believe, has emancipatory potential.

People ask me again and again about facilitation and how i do what i do. I can share many tricks: planning, anticipating, paying attention to the set-up of the room, establishing guidelines for participation, modeling good behaviour, practicing a generous sense of humour, being balanced and rested, looking in people's eyes a lot, paying attention to body language – and all these things are true. They are tricks that can be learned – it is like learning a language – learning to decode the non-linguistic communication that we practice every day – sound and gesture and mood. But i know that the one and only reason i am any good at what i do is that when i am facilitating or leading or chairing (or whatever mode i might be asked to be in) i am loving the group that i am with. Loving the whole and the parts. i know with my whole body that this is so. And it is a hard knowledge to bear. I go into almost every group situation with my heart open. And it is this open heart that i use to sense what is really going on – below or above (or even besides) language: people's fatigue and enthusiasm, hopes and fears, disappointments and frustrations, expectations and dreams. And, also all the power games that we are so adept at playing. I can sense those who are open and eager for new things and i can sense those who are waiting to ambush and play those games of power that they are used to and comfortable with – even when, ironically, those same games are clearly against their self-interest (at least, “clear” to my biased eyes).

My best piece of advice to anyone wanting to learn how to facilitate or otherwise lead meetings is to learn to love the people you are with. If that is too difficult then at least learn to love what they *could* be. Love the way that the world *could* work if we were all moving with the energies of kindness, generosity, imagination, humour, compassion. And aim for the *could*. It is worth the effort. It is about acting as if the world we want is already here. And in that acting we are actually living, if only momentarily, *in* that possible world. That is the trick of magic – imagination that changes the material world. We have the possibility of making the new world one meeting at a time. (Having sat in the rocking chairs at Highlander Education Centre in Tennessee i believe what Myles Horton said about changing the world 35 people at a time – that's how many can sit in a circle of rocking chairs in the main meeting room there – may you one day have the opportunity to do so.) i believe each meeting could be lived according to the ways of *another possible world*, as they say in Porto Alegre, Brazil. We could acknowledge that we want our meetings to be ruled by kindness and compassion, by cooperation (as well as that type of competition that makes us stronger – it's far and away not all about group hugs and nicey-nicey feel-good mutual admiration). Not the competition – which I'll call combat - that seeks to reduce the opponent in stature but rather the competition of contest (a form of play) which seeks to meet the opponent with mutual respect and an expectation that conflict will and can be engaged lovingly. It is what Freire says about radicalization:

***Radicalization involves increased commitment to the position one has chosen. It is predominantly critical, loving, humble and communicative, and therefore a positive stance. The person who has made a radical option does not deny another person's right to choose, nor does she try to impose her own choice. She can discuss their respective positions. She is convinced she is right, but respects another person's prerogative to judge himself correct. She tries to convince and convert, not to crush her opponent. The radical does, however, have the duty,***

*imposed by love itself, to react against the violence of those who try and silence her - of those who, in the name of freedom, kill her freedom and their own. To be radical does not imply self-flagellation. Radicals cannot passively accept a situation in which the excessive power of a few leads to the dehumanization of all.*

How often i have been frustrated by someone who thinks yielding ground is a way of being democratic; how irritating it can be when you want a good argument and your opponent insists on facilitating you. I often prefer a self-assured combative conservative (arrogant even) over an equivocating liberal who insists on pointless (and untrue) platitudes like “seeing things from both sides”. There’s a time for facilitation and there’s a time for taking a stand. It should always be about respect and even love. Taking a stand, the radicalization that Freire talks of, requires courage – which is another form of love (let’s remember that courage comes from the French and has the word “heart” – coeur – in it; courage means “with heart”). Where there is no courage love dies.

And all this requires loving oneself as well. We owe it to each other to care for ourselves as well as caring for each other. I learned this the hard way, as so many of us do, by burning out a few times. Living according to that old joke about hitting your head against a brick wall because it feels so good when it stops. I was in Brandon, Manitoba in 1986 when i came across these words by Thomas Merton:

*There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by nonviolent methods most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes one's work for peace. It destroys one's inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of one's work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes works fruitful.*

This too is about love. A person who loves themselves will be radical as Freire describes and that person will not do violence to themselves nor to others. That is courage. That is the challenge.

All that I have said thus far is thinking towards a radical revisioning of PRAXIS. And I want to add a few more provisional thoughts (mind you, most of what I’ve said is pretty provisional) about praxis as a form of popular education or, perhaps, popular education as praxis:

To reiterate (sort of): if praxis is about emancipation then it has to include in its definition more than it characteristic meanings of action and reflection dialectically bound and action to change the world. It needs to include love – that is my appeal. But more than appeal is my demand that it include critical self-reflexivity with a disposition of humility, faith and hope, as Freire writes. All these dispositions are key. But let me address humility and faith

a bit. Foucault's analysis of subjectivity shows persuasively that human subjects are intricately bound to/within a long history (an archaeology and/or a genealogy) of power relationships that govern not only our behaviour but also our individual and consensual conceptions of ourselves and "worlds." A pessimistic interpretation of Foucault's work would suggest that we can never escape these power/knowledge regimes which inevitably and inexorably appropriate our resistance in the interests of maintaining these very power/knowledge regimes – that the best we can hope for in changing things for the better is almost undetectable incremental change that only expert historians after the fact can identify and articulate. I choose a more optimistic interpretation. I think we can escape the governing/regulating power/knowledge regimes. But, here's the "rub", as the melancholy Dane might say, we cannot know with any certainty that we have escaped. For the tools to verify that certainty are the products of the very power/knowledge regimes that we fancy we are escaping. The tools are tainted and could well betray their apparent purpose, acting as yet another strategy of governance/regulation. So how do we go on? We need humility and faith. Faith that, despite irreducible uncertainty, we are making a difference, effecting change, making things better, etc. And humility because we might be making mistakes. Faith without humility will almost certainly lead to dogmatism and tyranny as well as disenchantment and despair. We will make mistakes. And some of those mistakes will cost lives and loves. But if we can forge a praxis imbued with these qualities then I think, despite failing to achieve our political, social and economic change, we will yet be succeeding ontologically, as Freire might put it, in becoming more human – as long as, by my reckoning, "more human" means more connected to each other, as well as the grass and trees and animals, sky and water and stars, and more.

Imagine a praxis that is mindful of what the Avatamsaka Sutra (a more-than-2000 years old Chinese Buddhist text) describes as the Jewel Net of Indra:

**Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net that has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each "eye" of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.** (*Francis H. Cook, Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977, p. 2.)

Imagine if we see ourselves, each human, as one of those jewels. Imagine further that every living, breathing creature and every stone and pebble and molecule in creation is one of those jewels. What word could describe such a disposition? I like the Buddhist notion of mindfulness. I also like "love".

A love that we can practice with ourselves and with each other. A challenging thing. The words of one of my favourite poets, Nikki Giovanni, come to mind:

**There is always something to do.  
There are hungry people to feed, naked  
people to clothe, sick people to comfort and  
make well. And while I don't expect you to save  
the world, I do not think it's asking too much  
for you to love those with whom you sleep, share  
the happiness of those whom you call friend,  
engage those amongst you who are  
visionary and remove from your life  
those who offer you depression, despair  
and disrespect.**

I have been lucky in this life – to be blessed with much love – from Acadia to Montreal to Nicaragua to Toronto. I have been loved by many friends. And over the almost five decades of my life I have watched love grow steadily – in breadth and depth – in my family and clan. I have met Paulo Freire and I swear that when I shook his hand and chatted briefly I felt that he knew me – it felt like love and I believe it was. I have loved the Nicaraguan Revolution and my heart stills breaks for that loss.

But I think broken hearts are, perhaps paradoxically, stronger hearts. And that's good. Yes, very good.

**[Dance]**