

Adapted from “Solidarity, The Five Conversions” ctd. (Richard Rohr)

Continuing our conversions to greater solidarity with the marginalized.

The Third Conversion is when we idealize some of the virtues of the poor that we ourselves do not have. When the lens is cleared by our initial awakening to injustice, it is much easier to focus on people’s admirable qualities, especially those that might be lacking in our own group. We see, for example, plenty of people who are happy, generous and grateful with the little they have while we who are entitled can be grumpy whenever the littlest things go wrong! It can be so humbling.

Staying at this conversion stage still places an unfair burden on those who are marginalized. Projecting only good qualities onto them tends to ease the burden of solidarity work from us. If it is unjust to dehumanize others, it is equally unjust to “superhumanize” them, applauding their ability to “do it all” instead of making sure they don’t have to.

The Fourth Conversion is a deepening recognition of the impact of systemic oppression. This tends to come about as a result of disillusionment and disappointment with the poor, especially when one sees how they have been socialized to a worldview of failure and scarcity. This is internalized oppression. As Paulo Freire puts it, “so often do [the oppressed] hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything . that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness.” From the very beginning, the systems we operate in either support us or tear us down.

Those who come from a social location that has put them in systems and relationships where options are limited are often humiliated and looked down upon at every stage of life. Under those conditions, it is much harder to keep putting their best foot forward. The work of solidarity is to close the distance these systems have put between us by joining and accepting others as fully human—in our struggles and gifts alike. This work requires a commitment to *relational accompaniment*. What is needed, according to Freire, is for us to “stop making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures, and risk an act of love.”

The Fifth Conversion to solidarity is a choice to walk with the poor and oppressed, to be taught by them, and to love them as equals, each of us bearing the Divine Indwelling Spirit within. Paulo Freire’s teaching on solidarity is fully aligned with the ministry of Jesus: “Conversion to [solidarity with] the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were.”

Freire employed a method of dialogue that created solidarity and transformed systems of injustice. The dialogue enables the “helper” to let go any personal agenda and allows the needs of the “helped” to be fully told. Eventually a movement towards liberation is born. Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence. Living out the Gospel

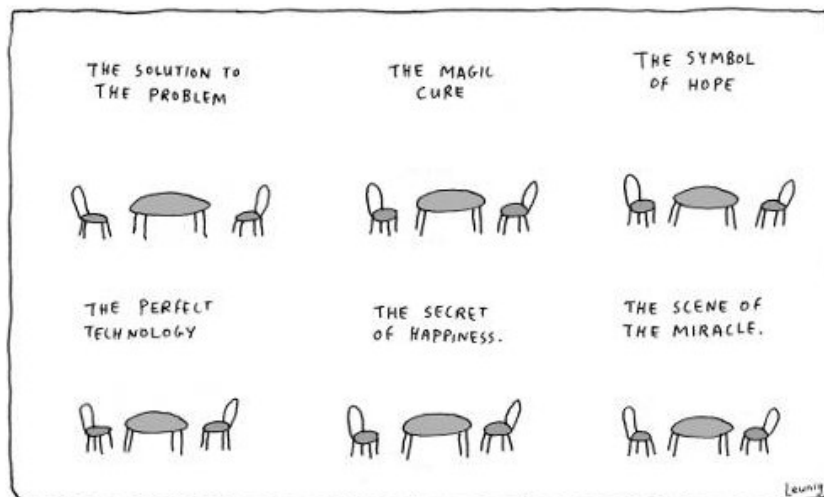
is always a process of what Freire calls *humanization*, a movement toward greater freedom, dignity, inclusivity, and possibility. We are one, and through solidarity we more clearly identify and name the systems that separate us. We find in ourselves and in the other the true “image of God” in which we are created and connected.

The dialogue that leads to solidarity is a way that oppressors and oppressed begin to recognize each other as *subjects* in their full humanity, as both learn and teach in this active encounter of faith and love. Here is Freire, in his own words:

Dialogue cannot exist without humility. How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others—mere “its” in whom I cannot recognize other “I”s?

How can I dialogue if I consider myself . . . the owner of truth and knowledge . . . ?

How can I dialogue if I am closed to—and even offended by—the contributions of others? Self-sufficiency is incompatible with dialogue.



At the point of encounter [in dialogue] there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know. We are all on this journey together and we are all in need of liberation (which might be a better word than salvation). God’s intention is solidarity with, and universal responsibility for, the whole. As Paul taught, “If one part is hurt, all parts share in the pain. If one part is honoured, all the parts share in the joy” (1 Corinthians 12:26). Think of Christianity as a giant act of solidarity with the marginalized, and all of creation.

In order to be truthful,
 We must do more than speak the truth.
 We must also hear the truth.
 We must also receive the truth.
 We must also act upon the truth.
 We must also search for the truth
 The difficult truth within and around us.
 We must devote our selves to truth.
 Otherwise we are dishonest
 And our lives are mistaken.
 God grant us the strength and courage
 To be truthful. Amen. (Michael Leunig)



Images courtesy of Michael Leunig

Elaine