

Sharing Impact For Liberation: Framing The Challenge (Part 1 of 2)

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This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both

— Paulo Freire¹

The sentiment expressed by Freire in this quote would appear to many as problematic today, as it seems to carry within it an expectation that those who are already oppressed, marginalized, stressed, or worse would then find energy on top of it to engage with the whole.

Whether or not Freire himself intended this to be an expectation, I don't see it that way. Any time someone says to me something to the effect of, "Why do I have to be the one to educate white people about privilege?" my only answer is a simple: "You really don't have to do that, ever." Rather than expectation, I hold this invitation as a paradox: to the extent that any of us would take on this invitation as a "have to" we won't experience its benefits; it won't turn out to be liberating. It will only be liberating if, and when, we are stepping into it knowing that we don't have to; that it's not "for" anyone else that we would be doing it; that it's our own liberation at stake; that this invitation gives us a path of agency and dignity rather than an either/or of submitting or rebelling.

In addition, this invitation is not instead of having ample support from others to be with the rage, exhaustion, deep grief, helplessness, and anything else that comes with the daily grind of oppression. This support is vital to maintain the basic sense of being human, a sense of self, and the dignity necessary to be able to accept the invitation. And sadly sufficient support is rarely available in the form I believe most works: a deep understanding of and resonance with the experience, surrounding it with profound tenderness and spaciousness. What is much more available is support in the form of *agreement* with what is being said. Both forms of support provide relief and a sense of not being alone. Yet the former is much more likely than the latter to also offer new strength, integration, and increased capacity. Specifically, the capacity to choose how to respond, to find open-heartedness, and to embrace the very difficult task of accepting the invitation to commit to hold liberation for all.

Given how rare it is to find the conditions necessary for inner transformation, I am surprised and heartened by seeing the number of people who accept the invitation and take on the valiant task of leading us all towards liberation. One such person is [Charisse Minerva Trueheart](#). Charisse is a performer, community organizer, and mindfulness teacher who is also on the board of [iBme](#), an organization I have been working with for three years, supporting their path towards a collaborative, distributed leadership way of functioning.

¹ Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 21.

A few months ago, I offered a session on feedback in iBme's teacher training program, where Charisse is one of the trainers. There, with 15 other people watching and listening, Charisse asked for input on how to give feedback across a difference in culture, race, and power. Given our relationship of deep trust, I ventured to offer Charisse precisely that Freireian invitation, which she accepted in full. Our exchange inspired me so deeply, I asked her if she would be open to it being shared publicly. She agreed. Initially, I believed that the exchange would speak for itself, with only minimal commentary on the transcription of the 10-minute coaching session. As I began to write, I discovered that there was much more to unpack than I had imagined. The commentary has expanded so much that I am breaking this piece down into two. The first, this one, frames the topic. The second is the transcript itself with my commentary, along with a link to the recording.

Intention and Impact Revisited

In 2013 I wrote a piece about [intention and effect](#) where I looked closely at the tendency we all have to defend ourselves whenever someone shares with us the impact of our actions on them. This tendency, prevalent as it is in human interactions, gets magnified and is even more painful when the person whose actions had the impact is in any position of power or privilege in relation to the other. I believe that this phenomenon, which in the case of racial power difference is often referred to as "white fragility," has little to do with whiteness per se, and more to do with what I believe to be true, though unprovable: our human souls find it painful to take in the reality that our needs might have been met at the expense of other people's needs. Tragically for all of us, the presence of any privilege generally means just that: what appears normal and simple to us when we have any privilege is often hiding from us the actual reality of the situation. The vast gaps in access to resources that are central to our existing social order shrink in our own perception, since people usually compare upwards rather than downwards. The oppressive nature of normative behavior on those on the margins of society can't even occur to us without massive self-reflection, even while others are aware of such norms and of their invisibility to us. And most of us find it immensely difficult to grasp the prevalence of many small and big ways that what we say or do is painful to others regardless of our intention. It's a tall order to open our hearts to it. And yet, for any situation in which we have advantage in relation to someone else, the path of liberation is the path of setting aside our deep need to be seen and trusted for our heart's intentions, so that we can really take in and mourn the effect of our actions independently of our intention. I repeat: it's a tall order. And it's what I want for myself in any situation, especially in relation to people whom society deems less deserving, less acceptable, even subtly less human. And it's what I want for any of us when we are in such positions of power or privilege.

Precisely because this kind of response is such a tall order, and because of Freire's deep understanding of our human condition, this also has significant consequences for any of us whenever we find ourselves in a position with less power, less access to resources, more stress, more impact, less resilience. As much as we want, in those instances, to be free of the burden of speaking the impact, or to speak it with the least effort possible, when we do that we create the least favorable conditions for us to be heard. Because to whatever extent we include anything directly or indirectly about the person whose actions had the impact on us, we reduce the chances that the person will be able to hear us. Why? Because hearing us when we include anything beyond the pure impact requires the other person to do the switch that is so, so difficult for all of us to do, especially when we have any privilege. We are effectively asking them to set aside their need to be seen and trusted and instead focus on taking in and mourning the impact of their actions, while simultaneously and silently maintaining their sense of innocence within themselves in relation to their intentions. Most

people don't have that capacity. We can all recognize this lack of capacity as tragic, and that won't change the reality of such lack. We can't change it by wishing it to be different.

And the result is that if we want to be heard, we can make it easier for the other person to hear us, the more we stay focused only on the impact and say nothing about the intentions, character, or social location of the person whose actions resulted in the impact. We also have the clear option of recognizing the agency this approach gives us: the power to support others in hearing us, taking in the impact, and learning from it. This is the very thing we want. This power, the power to choose to speak in ways that will support what we want, is one of the ways that the oppressed can have that strength Freire talks about. Because in my experience, impact well delivered liberates the powerful from their guilt and shame, and invites them, fully, into a human interaction, into relationship, into caring for all needs, and into the capacity to learn. I have far more trust that such interactions would lead to change, rather than defensiveness or dismissal. And I trust change that arises from care for all far more than change in behavior that arises from self-judgment or from fear.

I want this also, because, over the last number of years, the thrust of conversations about such impacts have tended to go in a way that has not been satisfying to me. What Paulo Freire speaks to, in addition to the possibility of individual liberation, is a pathway that can create an outcome that is different from everybody going away, broken-hearted in one form or another from the conversations that happen in so many places, including in particular and especially in social media. In addition to being broken-hearted, sometimes, some people walk away with some kind of bitter righteousness that, "Once again, we showed that we are right and they're wrong." I don't see how these exchanges, with this outcome, can result in actual change happening in the direction of a world that truly works for all, both the currently marginalized and the currently powerful. This is the world I want.

This is all so very painful to me, beyond any words I can say here, because the anguish and the rage, the terminal exhaustion, and the desire to be free from having to do this thankless and intensely difficult work are so understandable to me. This is precisely why I would never expect it; this is why when someone shares an impact with me I will do everything within me to receive it; to tease apart the impact from anything that is attributed to me; and to soothe within, without asking for anything, any activation of my need to be seen – all so that I can really take in the impacts however they are presented, without expecting or demanding anything from the person who is brave enough to share them.

And, still, to those who want full liberation, like I know that Charisse does, I want to issue the full invitation to the exacting, rigorous work of speaking of impact without attributing anything to the person whose actions resulted in the impact. I only issue that invitation when there is full trust, ideally only when asked, and I always want to check if it's wanted. In those contexts of trust, when receiving the invitation simply is beyond capacity, we can mourn together, because bitterness, separation, and moral indignation are the powerless analogs of imposition, and I simply don't believe they can lead to a positive outcome. Mourning, in its softness, counters the deep and harsh grooves set in by patriarchy, the breeding ground of shame, powerlessness, and rage. It gives us energy to find willingness to take on the challenging tasks that liberation entails. The [next post](#) takes on the details of what it takes once we are ready, and not before.