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**Review of *Letters to Christina: Reflections on my Life and Work*.
Paulo Freire. Reviewed by Arline Prigoff, California State
University, Sacramento.**

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reaching four million reports of abuse by the Millennium. If the trend of the past 20 years continue, child abuse will need to be reframed as well. In fact, the evidence on family preservation suggests that child welfare was reframed some time ago. If we reframe poverty, should we reframe child welfare too?

David Stoesz believes that the end of social work is near. Perhaps he's right, but the conventional wisdom of *Social Work in the 21st Century* is that opportunities for social work practice will continue to grow in gerontology, health care, and the work place. However, the essential tension in our future is a reflection of a pluralistic profession in a complex society, a value-based profession in a market-place society. Are we here to fight for social justice, or make a living? Is adaptation a virtue, or a sin? Do we know any thing, or not? *Social Work in the 21st Century* is unsettling, and a brilliant portrait of a profession on the ropes. But we have much to be proud of, and this book is highly recommended as a sampling of our best.

Daniel Harkness
Boise State University

Paolo Freire, *Letters to Christina: Reflections on my Life and Work*.
London: Routledge, 1996. \$ 16.95 paperback.

For both those readers who have known and revered the unique contributions of Paolo Freire to an international literature on personal, community and political empowerment, and for those to whom this text is the first encounter with that brilliant educator, this book is a gift and a legacy. Paulo Friere died at the end of April, 1997. In this work published a year before his death, Freire responded to a request from his niece Christina: "I would like," she said, "for you to write me letters about your life, your childhood, and, little by little, about the trajectory that led you to become the educator you are now."¹ Freire's reflections, in response to Christina, reveal the depth of consciousness that can be achieved through the methods of self critical questioning to promote self awareness and world transformation which Freire developed, practiced and then taught:

The more I return to my distant childhood, the more I realize that there is always something there worth knowing . . . For me to return

to my distant childhood is a necessary act of curiosity. In doing so, in stepping back from it, I become more objective while looking for the reasons I involved myself and those reasons' relationship to the social reality in which I participated. It is in this sense that the continuity between the child of yesterday and the man of today is clarified. The man of today reflects in order to understand how the child of yesterday lived and what his relationships were within the family structure, in the schools and on the streets . . . My lived experiences as a child and as a man took place socially within the history of a dependent society in whose terrible dramatic nature I participated early on. I should highlight that it was this terrible nature of society that fostered my increasing radicality.²

Freire early rejected the structure of "class-based society, which is necessarily a violent society,"³ in his view. He recalls, "even in my very early years I had begun to think that the world needed to be changed; that something wrong with the world could not and should not continue."⁴ It was clear to Freire that it was not conflicts within his immediate family, but the impact of poverty and hunger in a class-based society that were the aspects of the world which needed to be corrected:

I never doubted my parents' affection for me or their love for each other and my brothers and sisters. The security of the love in our family helped us to confront the real problem that afflicted us during the greater part of my childhood: the problem of hunger. It was a real and concrete hunger that had no specific date of departure . . .⁵

The implications of these early experiences for his perspectives as an educator are evident:

Some years later, as the director for the Department of Education of a private school in Recife, it became easier for me to understand how difficult it was for sons and daughters of poor families to achieve satisfactory educational results. They were vulnerable to a greater and more systematic hunger than I had experienced . . . I did not need to consult scientific studies to determine the relationship between a lack of nutrition and learning difficulties. I had a first hand, existential experience of this relationship. I could see myself in the children's stunted frames, their big and sometimes sad eyes, their elongated arms. . .⁶

Paolo Freire, who cited Franz Fanon and Albert Memmi on this point in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, understood that subjugated persons are at risk to internalize the attitudes and responses of their oppressors, and thereby to betray their own class interests and self respect: "Deep down, the oppressed internalizes the oppressor, who then begins to live within him or her. This is the ambiguity of the oppressed, who grows the oppressor within him or her."⁷

Freire was a liberator, through his methods of education in poor and oppressed communities:

I do not think that such conditions create in students a nature that is incompatible with the ability to learn in school. What has been happening, however, is that the elitist, authoritarian schools do not take into account, in their curricular organization and their treatment of program content, the knowledge that is generated by social classes that are subjugated and exploited. I am convinced that educational difficulties would diminish if the schools took into consideration the culture of the oppressed, their language, their efficient way of doing math, their knowledge of the world.⁸

Through learning to observe his surroundings, to analyze events in his natural world and to communicate with siblings and friends, as a child, Freire learned to overcome personal fears, and to become a truth teller in regard to inequality and injustice. His educational methods promoted forthright, critical analysis of educational methods and institutional practices. In Brazil he tested his concepts in practice, with stunning success. Following a military coup d'état in Brazil in 1964, Freire was forced to flee from Brazil to exile, first in Chile, and later in Geneva, Switzerland. Freire understood that telling the truth about reality, no matter how grotesque, is the path to human liberation: "I am convinced that men and women who lived through the tragic experience of losing their freedom . . . should constantly tell the youth of today, many of whom were not yet born, that these things are true. That all these things, and much, much more, happened."⁹

Freire was the founder of conscientización as a method of social transformation. His innovative, participatory methods of education have been adopted by grassroots communities in

El Salvador and throughout Latin America, and repressed by military regimes in Brazil, Chile and Argentina. This final work, written a year before his death, reveals Freire's educational and political vision.

Arline Prigoff
California State University, Sacramento

Notes

1. p. 11.
2. pp. 13–14.
3. p. 14.
4. p. 11.
5. p. 15.
6. p. 16.
7. p. 161.
8. p. 16.
9. p. 7.