



What I Learned Along the Way: Memory, Education, and the Struggle for the Future

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Turning 83 has made me think less about age than about memory, about the people who shaped me, the worlds that have disappeared, and the obligation to carry something of them into the future. Many of the intellectuals who profoundly influenced my thinking are now gone. Their absence has made me increasingly aware that an intellectual life is never simply one's own. We inherit languages, questions, acts of courage, friendships, arguments, and examples from others. What matters is what we do with that inheritance, those increasingly powerful landmarks of a life's journey.

I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island, where childhood was brief and the future was never guaranteed. Living in poverty meant my family ran out of food each week, usually one day before my father got paid. Only then could he go to the market. As a kid, I delivered newspapers for most of the year and shoveled snow during the winter. Childhood evaporated in the race to survive.

The extra money I earned sometimes helped keep the family afloat.

At the age of 8, I became a shoeshine boy and staked out a route through Black



and white nightclubs in Providence. On Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights, I started my route at seven o'clock and got home around midnight. I loved going into the Celebrity Club and other bars, watching the adults dance, drink, and steal furtive glances at each other. Most of all, I loved the music. Billie Holiday, Fats Domino, Dinah Washington, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, and Little Richard played in the background against the sounds of glasses clinking and people talking, as if their only chance to come alive was compressed into the time they spent in the club.

Whenever I finished my route, I had to navigate a dangerous set of streets to get back home. I learned how to talk, negotiate, and defend myself along that route. I was too skinny to be a tough guy; I had to learn a street code that was funny but smart, fast but not insulting. That's when my body and head started working together. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was learning that the intellect could be as powerful a weapon as the body itself. Against the lessons of militant masculinity that surrounded me, I slowly began to forge a different understanding of the relationship between the body and the mind.

Like so many young people then and now, time was a burden, a constant fight for survival. Whatever choices we had were limited by the economic constraints, inequalities, and fears that shaped both our sense of ourselves and our relationship to others. I learned early that class marked where you could go, how you were seen, and what others imagined you were capable of becoming. One ray of light appeared even before I started school. Occasionally, my mother scraped together a few quarters to buy a book from an encyclopedia series sold by traveling salespeople who stopped at our door every month. I was hooked.

But I learned things in those streets that school never taught me. I learned about friendship, solidarity, humor, survival, and the dignity people could extend to one another even when they had very little.

When someone lost a job, neighbors brought food. People watched out for one another. Poverty was real, but so was the conviction that nobody should simply be abandoned. Much later, I understood that these experiences had given me an early, largely unarticulated education in the meaning of the social.



Author (1953)

Basketball was another education. Lacking the security of a middle-class childhood, my friends and I seemed suspended in a society that neither accorded us a voice nor guaranteed economic independence. Identity didn't come easy in my neighborhood. It was painfully clear that our identities were being shaped through daily battles over masculinity, violence, respect, and the need to find an anchor in a culture in which life was fast and often short-lived. I grew up amid the motion and force of mostly white working-class male bodies, bodies asserting their physical strength as one of the few resources over which we had some control.

Dreams for the youth of my Smith Hill neighborhood were contained within a limited number of sites, many of which occupied an outlaw status in the adult world: the inner-city basketball court in a housing project, which promised both danger and fierce competition; the streets where adults and youth collided and the police and parole officers harassed us endlessly; and the New York System hole-in-the-wall restaurant, where we gathered after a night of hanging out, drinking, and dancing.

For many of us, the Benefit Street basketball court, especially in the Black neighborhood, was one of the few public spaces in which the kind of cultural capital we recognized and took seriously could be exchanged for respect. If you weren't good enough, you didn't play; if you were good, you performed with a kind of humility governed by a code that said you didn't lose easily. Nobody was simply handed recognition. The basketball court became for me a rite of passage and a powerful source of possibility. We played day and night, wherever we could find a space.

Basketball was taken seriously because it was a neighborhood sport, a terrain where respect had to be earned. It offered us a mode of resistance, if not a respite, from drug dealing, everyday violence, and the general misery that surrounded us. It offered another kind of hope, one that seemed to fly in the face of school credentials, high status, or the security of a boring job. It was also a sphere where we learned something about



Author and Opponent (1961)

friendship, solidarity, and respect for one another.

Moving through Black clubs as a shoeshine boy and later playing basketball across racial boundaries exposed me to music, language, friendships, and experiences that contradicted the racism embedded in the white working-class culture in which I had been raised. I did not yet possess a theoretical vocabulary for understanding racism or white privilege. That came later. But experience had already begun to unsettle what I had been taught.

This has remained one of the central lessons of my life: education often begins before we have a language for what we are learning. Critical consciousness emerges when experience acquires a vocabulary capable of making power visible.

The 1960s gave me some of that vocabulary. The civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the larger culture of resistance taught me that private troubles could not be separated from public issues. Later, C. Wright Mills helped give theoretical clarity to something I had experienced throughout my youth: individual suffering cannot be understood apart from the structures of power that produce it.

Teaching high school during the Vietnam War deepened that lesson. My students wanted to talk about a world on fire outside the classroom. They taught me that education could not retreat into abstraction while history was exploding around us. The classroom had to become a place where knowledge addressed the conditions shaping people's lives, where knowledge was not divorced from agency or the possibility of a future different from the present.

Those experiences eventually found their way into books such as *Theory and Resistance in Education* (1983), *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life* (1988), and

Teachers as Intellectuals (1988). They grew out of my conviction that education is never politically innocent and that teachers are more than technicians delivering approved knowledge. Schools can reproduce the existing order, but they can also become places where students learn to question it, acquire a language of possibility, and understand themselves as citizens capable of acting upon the world.

One experience in the early 1970s changed my life. I went to Brown University to hear Stanley Aronowitz give a talk. I had heard academics speak before, and too often I came away feeling that their language was designed to keep people like me outside the conversation, too abstract, jargon-filled, and imbued with an elitism I felt but could not fully articulate. Stanley was entirely different. He spoke without notes. He was passionate, funny, theoretically sophisticated, politically uncompromising, and completely accessible. Most important, he sounded like where he came from. He had not erased his working-class identity in order to become an intellectual.

I remember thinking: this is what a real working-class public intellectual looks and sounds like.



Author with Stanley Aronowitz (1982)

That moment stayed with me. Stanley showed me that becoming an intellectual did not mean learning to imitate the manners, language, and pretensions of an allegedly elite academic class. You did not have to give up the experiences that formed you in order to think theoretically. You could bring the street, working-class culture, music, anger, humor, and a sense of injustice into conversation with theory. You could be rigorous without becoming obscure. You could speak to people rather than over them.

For someone with my background, this was enormously liberating. Stanley gave me permission, though I doubt he knew it at the time, to imagine another kind of intellectual life. I began to understand that intellectual work was not simply a career. It was a vocation, and it carried responsibilities. Ideas mattered because they could help people understand the forces shaping their lives, recognize that those forces were neither natural nor inevitable, and perhaps acquire the courage to change them.

My subsequent encounters with Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, Carol Becker, bell hooks, Stuart Hall, Zygmunt Bauman, Roger Simon, Peter McLaren, and many others strengthened that conviction. They differed enormously, but each taught me something about the relationship among ideas, politics, education, and responsibility. They also taught me that nobody thinks alone. Intellectual life is made through conversations, disagreements, friendships, political struggles, and encounters that sometimes change the direction of a life.

As my work developed, I also became increasingly convinced that pedagogy could not be confined to schools. *Border Crossings and Disturbing Pleasures* (1992) marked that widening of my concerns. I wanted to understand how identities, desires, values, and political sensibilities were being shaped across popular culture and everyday life, in film, music, media, and other cultural

sites that often taught more powerfully than formal institutions. *Stealing Innocence* (2000) extended that concern to the ways corporate culture increasingly treated children and young people as markets, consumers, and objects of commercial power.

Universities have repeatedly tested these convictions. Being denied tenure at Boston University in the early 1980s despite unanimous support through the formal tenure process taught me that universities are not innocent institutions standing above politics and power. I was given an opportunity to remain if I stopped publishing for two years and allowed the then-president of the university, John Silber, to be my tutor. I refused. That experience reinforced a lesson that has stayed with me: there are moments when the price of institutional security is silence, and silence can become another name for complicity.

After Boston University, I no longer believed that the university was inherently a public good, though I continued to believe it was worth fighting for because of its crucial role in shaping young people, knowledge, and public life. This was especially true because at that time I met my best friend Donald Macedo and my comrade Paulo Freire. Both were fighters and their brilliance and courage enabled me to believe that critique alone is not enough. Critique without possibility eventually becomes another form of resignation.

I was fortunate in the years that followed to work in universities where I found remarkable intellectual communities and a sense of solidarity. At Miami University of Ohio, I found an extraordinary intellectual community among colleagues such as Paul Smith, David Shumway, Michael Ryan, Joe Kincheloe, Peter McLaren, and others, people who created a culture of argument, friendship, and intellectual exchange.



Pablo Freire and
Donald Macedo (1983)



Peter McLaren (1991)

At Penn State, where I held an endowed chair, the administration was less important to my experience, but colleagues such as Jackie Edmundson, Patrick Shannon, Sophia McClennen and others were intellectually on fire. There was a genuine sense that ideas mattered and that intellectual work was sustained through dialogue, disagreement, and solidarity. When I moved to McMaster in 2004, I was hired by a remarkable president, Peter George, and a dean, Nasrin Rahimieh, who understood the importance of supporting work that reached beyond the university and into public life.

But universities change. Administrators come and go, colleagues leave, and forms of support that once seemed secure can disappear. I learned over the years that the university is not automatically a public good. It has to be fought for. What has kept me going are the students, colleagues, friendships, and intellectual communities that remind me of what a university can be. Institutions can disappoint us, but that is no reason to surrender them. If anything, it makes the struggle to defend education as a democratic public good all the more important.

Over time, that struggle forced me to confront forces extending well beyond the university. *The Terror of Neoliberalism* was an attempt to name the emerging connection between market fundamentalism, the destruction of the social state, and new forms of authoritarian power. *The University in Chains* brought that analysis back into higher education, examining what happens when universities become increasingly subordinated to corporate, military, and market interests. The question running through both books was one that had been with me since Providence: what happens to democracy when public life is stripped of the institutions, values, and forms of solidarity that make it possible?

This is why young people have remained at the center of my work. Teaching, at its best, is not about producing replicas of the teacher. I do not want students to think as I do. I want them to discover that they possess a voice, that ideas have consequences, that power can be questioned, and that the world they inherit is neither natural nor inevitable. Education should provide the conditions in which students can become critical citizens and moral witnesses capable of imagining something beyond the world as it presently exists.

At 83, I feel this more intensely than ever.

I have lost many of the intellectual giants with whom I shared arguments, friendships, political commitments, and hopes. At the same time, I have found the love of my life and have been reminded that intellectual and political commitments are inseparable from our capacity to love, share, learn, and struggle with others. We do not become fully human alone.

If I have acquired any wisdom over these years, it is that one must never stop learning, never surrender one's capacity for outrage, and never allow institutions to convince us that justice is an impractical dream. Hope is not optimism. It is a condition of agency. It is the conviction that history remains unfinished and that what human beings have made can also be unmade and transformed.

That question became more urgent as authoritarianism moved from the margins toward the center of political life. *The Violence of Organized Forgetting* (2014) examined how historical amnesia makes cruelty easier to normalize, while American Nightmare confronted the growing challenge of fascist politics in the United States. *Pedagogy of Resistance* (2022) returned to a conviction that has animated my work from the beginning: domination is sustained not only through institutions and force but also through forms of education that manufacture ignorance, depoliticize people, and narrow the horizons of the possible.

Memory is crucial to that struggle. I no longer think of memory simply as a record of what happened. Memory is a form of responsibility. It enables us to recover the people, struggles, solidarities, and unfinished possibilities that the present would prefer us to forget. Bearing witness to the past matters precisely because it places demands upon the future.

That is also the concern at the heart of my more recent books, *Burden of*

Conscience (2025), *Assassins of Memory* (2026), and *Disappearing Futures* (2027). The struggle over memory is never simply a struggle over the past. It is a struggle over what a society is permitted to remember, whose suffering counts, which histories are erased, and whether the unfinished promises of democracy can still speak to the present.

That may be the most important lesson I have learned.

At this stage of my life, I have little interest in withdrawal or, as Bob Dylan put

it, simply following the parade. I want to continue writing, teaching, learning from young people, and participating in struggles that reach beyond my own lifetime.

Institutions may fail us. Political circumstances may become increasingly cruel. Friends and teachers eventually leave us. But the obligation to resist injustice, enlarge the possibilities of democracy, and keep alive the capacity to imagine otherwise does not disappear.

If our work does not reach into the future, what is the point?



Author with Paulo Freire (1982)

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