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What Is Critical Hope?

> *Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can become tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope.*[1]
>
> —PAULO FREIRE

Critical hope is a type of hope that grapples with its own political, emotional, relational, and experiential dimensions in order to enact change. We live in an era where leaders of all kinds are being called to cultivate hope and yet attend to the many injustices and conflicts that render hope a complex—and sometimes even tone-deaf—position. Critical hope does not accept simple solutions, and it pushes back against the toxic positivity that sometimes accompanies feel-good narratives of hope. Nonetheless, critical hope holds a place of reverence for notions such as love, freedom, and community. Embedded within critical hope is a critique of itself and a questioning of the value of hope in differing contexts. To engage with critical hope is to uphold multiple conflicting truths simultaneously. I can think of nobody who has better captured the essence of this idea than philosopher Darren Webb, who described critical hope this way:

> *To persevere with humble serenity while being driven by a rage that renders serenity impossible; to wait with patience and yet impatiently refuse to wait; to denounce the ambitions of the irresponsible adventurer while proclaiming education to be adventure full of risk; to keep oneself focused on a scientific study of concrete reality while acknowledging that a scientific knowledge of reality is not enough; to restrain oneself to the discourse of the real-Possible and yet declare that the role of the educator is to make possible the* impossible *by dreaming it.*[2]

In any historic moment when there is a palpable sense of despair, anger, or injustice, to be merely hopeful is to be, at best, naive and, at worst, ignorant

of global and systemic issues that cause suffering. Enter *critical* hope: a dance, a negotiation, a heated entanglement between a critical awareness of the problem (or many problems) at hand and the spark of spirit that—sometimes in contradiction to our own experiences and sensibilities—insists on hope. Critical hope is not naive hope that things will get better; it is an abiding wisdom that change cannot be created without a foundational starting point of hope. Critical hope implies an ever-evolving relationship to hope, dependent on context, experience, and identity. To practice critical hope is to steadfastly persist through this changing relationship, and to—with hospitality and curiosity—hold space for emotions like anger and grief.

Origins

In this book, I share with you my own conception of critical hope. However, the notion of critical hope can be traced to Brazilian educator, scholar, and activist Paulo Freire. Freire believed that the goal of education was to transform society and build more equitable systems of governance, education, and social relations. His writings, and indeed his professional life, were endeavors that embraced the politics of education, culture, and equality (or lack thereof). Paulo Freire's career involved abundant traveling and several relocations. As a result of a military coup in Brazil in 1964, he went into exile in Bolivia and eventually moved on to Chile, where he worked for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and wrote the book that would make him famous: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

What made *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* so internationally recognized was arguably the love and humility he conveyed toward those who he identified as "oppressed"—those living in poverty and those marginalized for reasons of race, class, and the like. Rather than romanticizing or fetishizing the oppressed, however, he upheld their lived experiences as valid forms of knowledge and expertise. The common sense that is built through adversity and work and living in the world (informal modes of education), he believed, is just as valid and valuable as the "expertise" derived through books, formal education, and degrees. He saw education as an act of liberation—a way for all people, regardless of socioeconomic status, to develop a critical consciousness in which they could identify broken or inequitable systems and

work to transform them. He called upon those who occupied positions of privilege to struggle in solidarity with the oppressed and to use their own resources to help the cause.

Because of Freire's origins in education, and because of my own origins in education, this book has an undeniable orientation in the world of teaching and learning. But I will speak repeatedly throughout this book of leaders and change makers because I believe that whether you are a parent, a CEO, a healthcare worker, an entrepreneur, an entertainer, or a service worker, you have spheres in your life in which you are a leader and a change maker. You have spheres wherein people listen to you, and you carry influence, and where people will notice whether you model the ethics and values that you espouse, and where you teach others—either formally or informally—through your own actions. This is what it is to be an educator too. Leaders and change makers are all around us, and they are, at their core, educators and facilitators of learning.[*] Because of the ubiquity of learning in society at large, leaders and change makers everywhere are in a position to be arbiters of critical hope.

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[*] I make this point cautiously and with a nod to fellow educators and teachers who have spent a lifetime honing their craft. This is not to diminish the expertise of the truly seasoned educator but to highlight the ubiquitous role of education and learning in society at large.

Before I take creative and intellectual liberties with the notion of critical hope in the coming chapters of this book, I will offer here a simplified overview of how Freire viewed critical hope. He believed critical hope was

- an act of witnessing (often, witnessing injustices, oppression, tragedy);
- the practice of moral imagination that encourages leaders to envision a society with greater dignity, freedom, and justice;
- a celebration of human agency and capacity to enact change;
- the freedom to participate both individually and collectively in shaping the institutions that affect our lives;
- something anchored in practice and historical concreteness—that is, real, material, and lived realities that stem from history;

- a form of imaginative reinvention;
- a concept related intimately to the idea of the unfinished human being (humans as incomplete and always learning);
- an exercise about asking better questions rather than providing answers;
- a practice characterized by *politicity*, the quality of being political;
- an act stubbornly and persistently oriented in love, as is education broadly.

Other thinkers and writers have since taken up critical hope as well, adding to its robustness as an idea in both theory and practice. American educator Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade described the role of critical hope as a salve to the common narrative that urban youths' experiences of adversity are somehow deficits or drawbacks.[3] Critical hope, he claimed, frames the overcoming of those social stressors as something that deserves to be celebrated. Educational philosophers Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg asserted that an alignment with critical hope is an explicit affiliation with the quest for democracy, egalitarianism, and the end of human suffering.[4] Joe Kincheloe also urged a kind of critical hope that is developed through learning from people in different historical, cultural, racial, political, and socioeconomic locations. But beyond that, he called for leaders and educators to *ask questions*—of ourselves and of the act of learning through hope.[5] Plenty of others in the academic realm have extended critical hope in their own areas of expertise and lived experiences to the degree that would be difficult to summarize here.[*] Before we move on to some of the principles of critical hope, let's first explore the meaning of "critical."

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[*] See Vivienne Bozalek, Brenda Leibowitz, Ronelle Carolissen, and Megan Boler, eds., *Discerning Critical Hope in Educational Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

What Makes It Critical?

The word *critical* can mean a lot of things. A critical moment is a moment of high importance—a juncture point at which an outcome can be significantly affected. When an individual is described as too critical, they might have a

temperament that is inclined to point out the negative aspects in a person or a situation. When a patient is in critical condition, they are very sick and likely to die. When an actor's work is critically acclaimed, they have been judged by the critics to be worthy of praise. Schools aim to educate students in critical thinking so that they can judiciously evaluate the world around them. A critical mass can be understood as the number that is required to tip scales in a given direction and lead to a chain reaction of change. Critical theory (depending on who you talk to) involves the examination of the world through a lens that highlights power relations, impacts of capitalism, misogyny, homophobia, racism, and other forms of discrimination. Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education that draws on critical theory and explores teaching and learning as a potential process of liberation from oppression.

In the realm of critical hope, there are three facets of the word *critical* that hold utmost importance. The first two are somewhat self-explanatory, so we will spend some time unpacking the third one:

1. Critical as vital, important, and indispensable
2. Critical as urgently concerned with action
3. Critical as a theoretical framework—an engagement with issues of power, privilege, and inequality. This is the type of critical that Cornel West was talking about when he said, "If you don't muster the courage to think critically about your situation, you'll end up living a life of conformity and complacency. You'll lose a very rich tradition that has been bequeathed to you by your foremothers and forefathers."[6]

Vital, important, and indispensable. In the Introduction, I described critical hope as a meadow where two unlikely seekers meet. Freire was clear in his writing that hope can do nothing without action, and conversely, that critical perspectives that strive to overcome oppression cannot be sparked to imagine otherwise without a foundation of hope. In other words, critical hope is vital, important, and indispensable to some of our world's most pressing issues. It is as if two powerful ideas are merely ideas until this union is consummated. The result of consummation is activation: now something can be done. Hence, critical hope is urgently concerned with action.

But let's explore the third meaning of critical, which may be less familiar to folks who have not wandered into the academic territory of theoretical traditions. When I was doing my PhD, it was this area—theory and philosophy—that made me feel most like an outsider in academia because I couldn't locate or envision these complex ideas in the real world at first (I still can't sometimes). I would spend hours doing required readings for class, and I would reread them over and over, and I still couldn't make any meaning out of them if the writer didn't make any effort to root their ideas in practice or lived experience. Even the articles that were supposed to be "overviews" of theoretical traditions just sounded like a laundry list of men's names and the various universities or cities in Europe that they were associated with. This is all to say that theory can seem quite dry (at least, it did to me) until you begin to see how it is a statement of values, and a way of understanding the world and conceptualizing reality. It is fascinating to me that people can live in the same place or work in the same university and yet their understandings, realities, and values can be vastly divergent and unique.

Explicit reflection on those truths is something I have found to be a major facet of being in university settings. People (in social sciences and humanities, that is) will often ask, "What is your theoretical framework?" I wish somebody would have told me as a student that what they are actually asking is "Which things do you value the most?" and "How do you think knowledge is created?" These are valid and important questions since knowledge can take so many forms and come into existence in such different ways: Is knowledge created, constructed, uncovered, discovered, learned, mastered, or unlearned? If you tell me that knowledge is constructed through our social interactions, I will know something about what you value (my best guess is that you value human relationships and see that there are many ways of knowing the world, depending on culture and identity). If you tell me that knowledge is objectively uncovered or discovered, I suspect you may come from a scientific discipline that values accuracy and evidence-based practices. If you tell me that the colonizer's knowledge needs to be unlearned, I suspect you value decolonization and that maybe you have some solid critiques of capitalism and modernity. If you tell me that all knowledge is problematic and incomplete, I might read you as someone who values humility and sees the limits of what fallible humans can possibly know. If you tell me that knowledge is held by God, and that humans are not meant to understand everything, I might suspect that you value faith and spirituality. So

how does one describe their theoretical framework—or in the case of this book, their approach to hope—when all these truths coexist?

As much as we try to siphon beliefs into one channel so they are easily understandable or explainable, critical hope is about embracing complexity and multiple truths but always with attention to power relations, justice, and equity. It is to embrace the reality that we are dynamic beings and that many of us do not think the same way. Nobody likes to be pigeonholed, yet humans constantly try to do that in relationships because it enables age-old instincts to identify threats and connect with or strengthen one's own sense of community. You're either hopeful or you're not. You either believe in God or you don't. You're either right wing or left wing. It is dangerous and (sadly) very human to try to understand our world based on dichotomies, but this habit does not capture the complexity of human experience and existence. Paulo Freire, although he espoused a very specific view of the world (a framework called *critical pedagogy*), also forged his values in a spirit of upholding dialogue and disagreement:

> *The university that has only progressive teachers is a disaster. The university that has only reactionary teachers is another kind of disaster. What youths need is precisely the testimony of the difference and the right to discuss the difference. This is what should happen. How beautiful it is for the students who finished listening to a progressive teacher speaking about utopia, criticizing, for example, a neoliberal discourse, which is spreading now the terrible ideology of fatalism around the world, [and then] to listen, after that teacher leaves, to another teacher defending the neoliberal thought. Someone may ask, "Paulo, don't you think that this is very confusing, that we can confuse the students?" And I say, it is fantastic that we confuse the students. They have to learn how to deal with confusion; they have to be formed in such a way as to not accept everything that the teachers say, to criticize the teachers. This is not a lack of respect.*[7]

Freire understood the learning potential embedded in confusion and disagreement, and he explained this in relation to universities, but we can apply it more broadly to everyday encounters with other humans whose beliefs may not align with our own. This is all to say that as we unpack what it means to be "critical," there is also an explicit attention to the healing

power of dialogue and disagreement in these spaces of learning and leadership.

Critical—In Theory

Critical, from a theoretical and educational standpoint, often entails an analysis of situations based on issues of power, history, context, privilege, and inequity (among others). Freire often asserted some version of the sentiment that "one can only know to the extent that one 'problematizes' the natural, cultural and historical reality in which s/he is immersed."[8] Freire and his contemporaries who followed a new wave of critical theory in the 1960s and 1970s saw issues of domination and inequality, though they did not see the problem as primarily capitalistic in nature:

> *A key feature of a reconceptualized critical theory is its humility in light of the complexity of everyday life and the moral decisions all human beings must make within this foggy context. In this reality critical theory grapples with issues of power, justice, and moral action and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, gender and sexuality, ideologies, discourses, religion, education, and other social dynamics interact to construct the social systems that shape our consciousnesses.*[9]

What Freire has sometimes been critiqued for is a tendency to be vague about the ends to which all this struggle leads. What is the goal of transformative social change? To attempt to answer that question in concrete terms might be to sideline the role of becoming, the benefits of iteration, and the relevance of evolving contexts. But to ignore the question altogether skirts the biggest why of all. Thus one apt articulation of the broad ambition of critical philosophy (which underlies critical hope) is

> *to realize a world of equal citizens, in which all human beings can fulfill their talents and aspirations, in which all are nurtured, educated, and cared for generously and respectfully by each other, tending not only to their dreams and ambitions, but also humbly to everyone else's.*[10]

The crux of a critical approach to hope can be found in the directive *to tend to one's own dreams and ambitions, but also humbly to everyone*

else's. Freire believed that a considerable tool in the development of such goals was in a construction of *critical consciousness*. Critical consciousness, according to him, enables learners and citizens to read the world effectively and begin to actively redress historical injustices and current societal problems. Freire described critical consciousness in the following way:

> *The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's "findings" and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old—by accepting what is valid in both old and new.*[11]

In summary, he might have offered the following advice to somebody who wished to cultivate a critical consciousness in order to premise action on the most just outcomes:

- Engage in the deep analysis and interpretation of problems.
- Consider the reasons why things came to be as they are (causal principles).
- Be open to revising your understanding of the world if your findings suggest a different truth.
- Be aware of preconceived notions and embedded assumptions in the way that you think.
- Take responsibility for the problems you encounter (don't blame others, and don't be passive about the path to addressing these problems).
- Practice dialogue, conversation, and democratic debates; avoid "polemics."

- Be receptive to new ideas, and do not abandon old ideas if they are still relevant. It is neither about strictly change nor strictly tradition, but rather it is about "accepting what is valid in both old and new."

By way of an extended illustrative example, the following text might help to describe how a critical analysis of a situation differs from an analysis that does not take up issues of context, power, privilege, and inequity.

It All Works Out

Let's examine a mantra that I've often seen and heard (and one that I have certainly said before): "It all works out in the end." I won't lie: I feel attracted to this idea because with it comes a sense of comfort and an absolution from making decisions or taking action. This relaxed approach to hope might be a result of having experiences that have again and again taught you that it does, indeed, end quite well, whether or not you try to control the outcome. Our own experiences with outcomes comprise a vast database of evidence to support our approaches to hope. But those outcomes are drastically impacted by the positionality and identity of the person involved, and the society in which they live. Does that society have supports in place when things go wrong? Who built that society, and historically, *for whom* did they build the policies and structures in that society? If an individual is not in that group for whom society was built, then it is less likely that the structures and policies and supports will cushion that person in such a way that it all works out in the end.

For example, maybe it works itself out in the end because after a young woman lost that job, her mother had a connection to another, even better, employer at a bank who gave her a job opportunity.

Maybe it works itself out in the end because a boy's high school had enough resources to give him the one-on-one educational or counseling support he needed to get through a phase of rebellion and misbehavior in adolescence.

Maybe it works itself out in the end because someone had the healthcare coverage they needed when they got malaria and broke their jaw in Uganda (this is one I can personally attest to and will speak about later in the book).

But maybe it just works itself out in the end because a person has an amazing community of friends and family who support them through difficult times (and communities come together for people in an array of contexts).

Each set of lived experiences comprises hard-earned evidence—experiential data—that can offer up hope and faith in the face of future mishaps or contribute to a sense of despair, rage, or grief that things are unlikely to turn out well in the end.

This book wishes to question and complexify the narrative that "it all works itself out in the end" and (my favorite) "you just have to manifest the life you want to live." These ideas perpetuate *privileged hope*—the type of hope that is the privilege of a fortunate few who have indeed developed an understanding that society and systems and institutions and social relations are there to support and benefit them, and that they will not fall through the cracks. Of course, envisioning and imagining a positive outcome is essential to the active development of that outcome (what some call manifestation), but manifestation is *never* untethered from the highly political systems and structures that benefit some communities and oppress others. Do some people manage to overcome those structural biases? Absolutely, every day. But if they are swimming upstream, they are working twice as hard to manifest their positive outcome.

If we apply this idea to the earlier examples, what is the relationship to hope for the person whose mother was working two jobs as a cleaner and a cashier and she didn't know anyone at a bank who would give her daughter an opportunity? Or maybe the employers she did know offered her daughter a job as a cleaner or cashier, and she continued to earn less than she might have in other higher-paying occupations? What is that young worker likely to envision for her own future when her parents have always been precariously employed in seasonal labor jobs? Does she see people like herself represented in the leadership positions at her school, at her workplace? Diverse representation has direct implications for diverse young people's ability to envision themselves in leadership positions.

What about the teenager who made some shortsighted decisions in high school (as many teenagers do), but instead of calling in an educator or counselor for one-on-one support, the school principal called the cops? Maybe this decision was simply because there were no more teachers or

staff who could possibly find the time to support the student. Maybe the principal was just following the school policy, which is to call law enforcement instead of first offering educational support. Maybe this school was drastically underfunded because of its geographical location, or maybe teachers and staff at this school experienced high burnout rates because they were overworked and underpaid, so there were few teachers who stuck around for the long term. Does this teenager grow up to be someone who says, "It all works itself out in the end" or "I just manifested the life I wanted to live"?

And what about the person who has a traumatic accident and is not insured to get reconstructive surgery? What happens to that person if, on top of a massive hospital bill for a lifesaving procedure, they are left with the economic fallout from missing work for two or three months, and as a result, they are evicted from their home? Does that person believe in manifestation, and did they simply do a bad job of manifestation if this was their outcome?

Despite the situations that many people are born into by some divine coincidence or existence lottery, one's positionality and identity do not necessarily determine one's capacity to have hope. Although these things have a strong influence on one's hopefulness and one's ability to envision a positive outcome, this idea of hope as a function of inequality does not explain why some of the most hopeful people I have encountered have been those who have experienced the *most* adversity and the *most* suffering. It also does not explain why people from positions of tremendous privilege can experience terrible suffering and situations of despair.

Hope and hopelessness are not merely outcomes of an individual's personality, their stubborn commitment to positivity or negativity, nor are they purely outcomes of problematic societal structures. One's capacity to be hopeful or to succumb to hopelessness is tightly bound up in both the individual and in society, but it is also related to mental health, education, opportunities for coping, imagination, spirituality, leadership, luck, and so much more. There is much about a person's current circumstances that make positive outcomes more or less likely, and therefore, there are people for whom hope is more easily summoned.

But hope is a future-oriented emotion, so the joy we derive from it is not in its attainment (because in the present, the attainment of hope then becomes

joy or satisfaction or satiation). The future-orientation of hope—its place as an imagined bridge from the now to the not-yet—means that hope can serve two purposes: it can enhance the current moment, and it can indeed improve the outcome of one's future. We shift now to an exploration of the principles of critical hope, which are bound up in the idea that critical hope can and must be used to impact the future.

In the coming pages we will explore the principles of critical hope. These principles are non-exhaustive, but they are meant to get at the core ideas underlying critical hope as I have come to learn about it through the work of Freire, my own lived experiences, and other thinkers who have expanded on the idea of critical hope. The principles are as much an attempt to uphold the values of critical frameworks (examine the political aspects of education and society, tackle systemic inequities, engage in critical reflection) as they are a personal storied account of the leaders and teachers who have taught me about critical hope. Sometimes, the people who have taught me the most about critical hope have been those who asked me to simply be present with them as friends and colleagues—to dance together, to eat together, to make music together, and to enjoy laughter or suffer together through tears. There can—and must be—room for both the confrontation of difficult realities and harrowing injustices, and the joyful embrace of our communities, our imperfections, and our collective reimagination of a better future. The following are some principles that comprise this complex notion of critical hope.