THE ORIGINS OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, OR
THE FREIRIZATION OF PAOLO

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A judge was asked by two people to settle a dispute between them. The first one presented her argument, and the judge said: “You are right!” The judge’s assistant whispered that justice required that the other side be heard. The second person presented his argument, and the judge said: “You are right!”
The assistant was astounded: “How can both of them be right?!”
The judge replied: “You are right!”

This folktale comes in many forms: Sometimes the judge is Nasruddin, sometimes a Hassidic rabbi, sometimes a tribal chief. But the truth is (if there is a “truth”) that the situation described originated with the mother of the renowned philosopher/educator, Paolo Freire.

Paolo’s mother was a wise woman to whom people in the community turned for advice and mediation. One day two people in dispute presented their arguments to her, and to both of them she replied: “You are right!”
“Mama,” cried Paolo, “how can both of them be right?” This was her reply:

“My son, I’m no expert with pre-fabricated correct-ic
My job is to promote a dialectic
Through listening most empathetic.

“The discourse must be dialogic
Never hegemonic
Or even pedagogic.
“The issues we must problematize
And always, always contextualize.
We must not ever dichotomize
And never, never demonize.
For then we would be fragmentized
And, God forbid, marginalized.

“This will give rise to exploitation
And the evils of globalization
With its attendant structural oppression
To be countered with an activist coalition.

“The key is in the narrative
Which always must be generative,
Providing multiple perspectives
Upon which we can be deeply reflective.

“So never judge, never say “Wrong!””
Let our shared vision empower us to be strong
As we search for our commonality
In a world of subjective reality.

“‘Hope springs eternal in the human breast.’
We must be vigilant, never allow ourselves to rest.

“Now go and do your homework
And remember what I say:
Don’t dare to bring home a report card
With less than an ‘A’.”
upon which we can be deeply reflective.