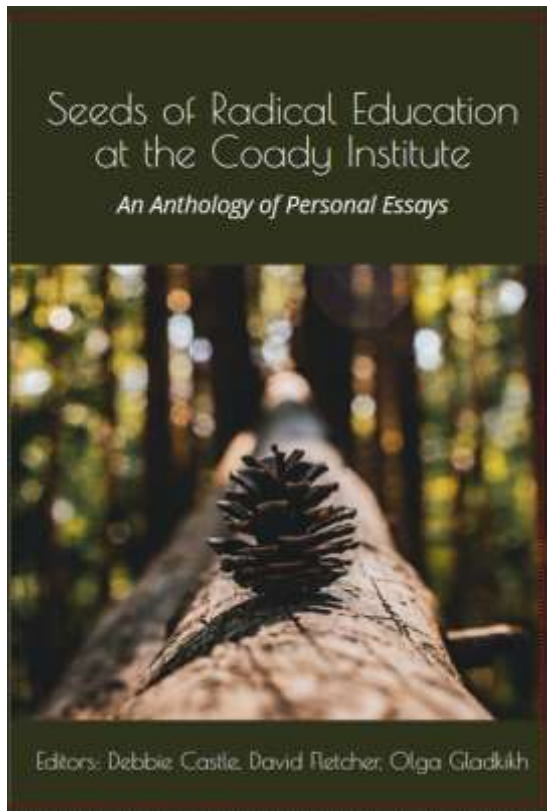


# Towards an Abundant Life for All through Transformative Adult Education

By Dr. Wilf Bean



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### III

## TOWARDS AN ABUNDANT LIFE FOR ALL THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE ADULT EDUCATION

Wilf Bean

The truth is I had much to learn about Moses Coady, Jimmy Tompkins and the Antigonish Movement when I accepted a staff position at the Coady International Institute in the spring of 1987. A dozen years earlier I had discovered St. Francis Xavier University (StFX) in Antigonish when searching for a creative place for further study. Their distance Masters in Adult Education fit well with my work with the Dene Nation (then the Indian Brotherhood) in the Northwest Territories.

In the North, as one of several “white advisors” I was working with Dene (indigenous) counterparts to urge the federal government to recognize indigenous rights through land claims to the vast Mackenzie River basin, Treaties 8 and 11 area. Recognition of such rights was made urgent by the proposal to build a gas pipeline from Arctic gas fields through the Mackenzie Valley to southern Canada. The minority Trudeau government, needing to maintain NDP support, had appointed Justice Tom Berger to lead an inquiry into the conditions for such a project. Among other things, the work with my Dene colleagues included workshops in Mackenzie River communities in preparation for Berger’s community hearings.

While I didn’t fully understand it as “adult education” then, it was an engaging, challenging and transformative experience. The Dene way of life was being threatened by the sudden onset of outside resource interests. Young indigenous leaders, graduates of residential schools, were combining with their elders to insist on their inherent, collective rights. In the growing movement, both individuals and social structures were being challenged and transformed. I wanted to learn more about similar social change and liberation movements around the world that might apply in the North. But I didn’t want to leave my work – so the StFX distance study worked for me!

While I didn't learn a lot through my studies at that time about the Antigonish Movement, I did learn more about the centrality of transformative adult education in various social movements around the world. From these I became excited about Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy<sup>1</sup>. In the late 1970s, after Berger declared a 10-year moratorium on Northern development to give time for Indigenous claims to be settled, I left the North. After working for several years on cross-cultural education and international solidarity, I decided to pursue doctoral studies. I chose the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, where Paulo Freire, then in exile from Brazil, was a time-to-time visitor. Ironically, it was during my studies in Toronto that I also learned more of the importance of the Antigonish Movement and of its revolutionary adult education and cooperative development approach to poverty alleviation in Atlantic Canada during the 1920s and 1930s.

From both my work in the North and through my graduate studies, I became excited about the potential of transformative adult education not only for individual betterment, but also for the reorganization of whole societies into more equitable and participatory democracies. The 1960s and 70s were a time of decolonizing struggles around the world. Various movements were mounting liberating adult education programs to alter not only national structures, but also to change people's consciousness from colonial dependency to more democratic empowerment.

In Tanzania, for example, Julius Nyerere, himself a teacher before becoming the country's first president, mounted a massive national program of education for adults. His programs encouraged people to think critically about developing themselves, their society and their nation, not according to colonial wishes, but in their own best interests. Nyerere's emphasis on "Ujamaa" – the idea that one only becomes fully human through community – was the foundation of both his educational approach and of his vision for the nation. In Guinea Bissau, a national literacy program helped citizens learn to read and write, and to become more aware of their own situation and how they might best develop it in their interest.

In the Caribbean, Cuba's emphasis on free education for all, including at all educational levels, highlighted the importance of education as essential for creating an equitable, just, participatory society. Their massive year-long, nationwide adult literacy program sent young urban students to live with isolated rural peasants. During the day, the students worked side by side with their hosts. In the evening they conducted basic literacy classes. Overall the program proved to be an enormous success, not only by greatly increasing literacy, but also by transforming both urban students and rural peasants into a common "nation" recognizing their interdependence and common humanity. The program became a model for many other newly-democratizing countries, including Nicaragua and Grenada.

Through my graduate studies with Professor Deborah Barndt at OISE I learned details of the transformative adult education process in Nicaragua. Having lived in Nicaragua at that time, she was intimately familiar with the program mounted after the Sandinista revolution. Equally important as the content she shared, she

demonstrated the methodologies of “popular education” in her teaching. Unlike much of my educational experience, her seminars were highly participatory and included photography, theatre, poetry, storytelling and cartooning. She demonstrated the Freirean approach that when you begin with questions around learners' own reality and experience – not with what a teacher, or someone else thinks they should know people are motivated to engage in dialogue through which new knowledge and understandings are constructed. I came to understand this fundamental dialogue process, respecting and exploring the experience and wisdom of the learner, as essential to transformative adult education.

Through Deborah and others, I learned more of other adult education movements in North America. I discovered the historic union tradition of study groups leading to social action – an example at that time were the grape pickers of California organized by Cesar Chavez. Through study, reflection and organizing, pickers mounted a national boycott of California grapes. This resulting economic pressure helped workers secure greater labor rights. I also learned of the important educational and organizing work of Myles Horton at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. Myles Horton had first helped organize exploited black garment workers to get a living wage. Later, moving towards the civil rights era, he encouraged poor black and white citizens to come together at Highlander to share their problems and study solutions – before integration was legal or accepted in the surrounding society. Again, he began with the people discussing their own understandings of their situation and, through challenge and dialogue, helped them move to research, organize, educate and act. Important civil-rights era programs of voter education and registration came out of these Highlander gatherings.

It was also during my studies at OISE that Dr. Jack Quarter increased my awareness of the value of cooperatives and credit unions as alternatives to profit-oriented organizations. Changes in consciousness alone are insufficient, Jack emphasized, without corresponding institutional forms. Self-managed organizations such as cooperatives allowed owner/members to pool their strength to work for social betterment, as well as financial success. Several workers cooperatives were being established in Toronto at the time of my study as alternatives to privately run businesses. It was through related research and involvement that, ironically, I began to appreciate more deeply the importance of the Antigonish Movement as an effective combination of adult education and cooperative organizing in the Maritimes. Upon completion of my doctoral studies, I was eager to accept a staff teaching position at the Coady.

### **Arrival at the Coady**

When I arrived at the Coady in 1987 I learned from then Director Dr. A. A. MacDonald that the Coady was one of three entities at StFX arising from the Antigonish Movement. Fr. Moses Coady was the first director of the Extension Department and it was from there that he, along with Fr. Jimmy Tompkins, Rev. Hugh MacPherson and A.B. MacDonald, orchestrated the organization of the movement throughout the Maritimes

during the 1920s, 30s and 40s. Given its success, many around the world came to study the methods and approach as a means of “self-help” for poverty-stricken peoples.

By the mid-fifties, during the concern for international development following the Second World War, this demand led to the formation of an institute dedicated to training international workers in the movement’s approach and techniques. When Moses Coady died in 1959, the year the institute was initiated, it was named the Coady International Institute to honour his founding contribution. Recognizing the continuing need for further graduate-level training of adult educators in the region, in 1970 the university established the Department of Adult Education with Dr. Teresa MacNeil as Director. I had not realized earlier that in completing my Masters through this Department, I was already studying within the tradition of the Antigonish Movement. It was not accidental that the program was innovative and creative in its practitioner orientated, distance education approach.

When I joined the Coady staff there was a regular cycle to work. From January to May, teaching staff travelled overseas to conduct various workshops and projects with overseas partners. From June to December staff were in Antigonish to teach in the flagship six-month Diploma Program.

The Diploma Program brought together somewhere between 40 to 55 early to mid-career international development practitioners, each of whom had practical experience in their own organization. While English was the common language, they came from a wide variety of countries and differing types of development organizations. Participants lived together in residence and studied in adjacent classrooms. While the disadvantages of being separate from the rest of the StFX campus were sometimes acknowledged, Dr. MacDonald also noted that being “at the other end of the football field,” away from direct oversight by University administration, gave the Coady greater freedom for experimentation and creativity.

The existing staff team had a wide range of overseas and regional experience in training and education for social change. While the Institute had been originally established to teach participants about the Antigonish Movement approach, Dr. MacDonald described the Coady in the late 1980s as being at a time of broadening to including other global approaches. The Coady had decided that based both on its own history, as well as on the vibrant adult education movements emerging around the world, it wanted to strengthen adult education as one of its foundations. As the staff member designated as the “adult educator” and also “Diploma Coordinator,” I was invited to work with other staff team to deepen this element of the program.

In the Antigonish Movement, Moses Coady and Jimmy Tompkins emphasized an approach combining adult education with the creation of cooperatives and credit unions – people’s organizations owned and controlled by the members. Like the later movements I had studied, they understood that people’s empowerment included both changes in consciousness and in the material world. Our staff project was to include these global approaches, along with that of the Antigonish Movement, into the Diploma Program. To do this, we drew on

the work of Paulo Freire and other popular educators who understand transformative education to be at the heart of social movements for empowerment.

We identified some key popular education principles we wanted to include in our program design:

- **Everyone Teaches; Everyone Learns!** There is a high degree of participation expected from everyone. The distinction between teachers and learners is minimized. Freire distinguished between education as “banking” in which the teacher is active in depositing “knowledge” into the passive learner’s account, and education as the “practice of freedom,” a process of dialogue and enquiry through which both teacher and learner develop new knowledge and understandings.
- **Education must be Relevant!** The learning process begins with learners identifying and describing their own personal experience, and sharing this in small groups. In debriefing, they assess their own experiences in the context of larger social and historical forces shaping their world. Through this, they come to see themselves within this bigger picture and understand more deeply how they fit into the larger world. Of course, knowledge from beyond one’s experience is vitally important, but it must be linked and relevant. And the learner must have the space to create her/his own meaning through dialogue and critical assessment of the “outside” knowledge.
- **Education Moves to Action!** Freire strongly believed to be human is to be engaged in creating and recreating the world. History is created by human action and it is everyone’s calling to be involved. In this, Freire echoed Moses Coady who said, “In a democracy people don't sit in the economic and social bleachers; they all play the game.” Both agreed that the purpose of education is to equip people to work towards social change. True education is a continuing process which enables all to engage more effectively in transforming the world to be more just and equitable for all.

Of course, we faced interesting challenges in trying to implement these principles within the Coady Diploma Program! To begin, Diploma participants come from around the world, with differing experiences and cultural understandings. The above educational principles were developed from within communities and groups who shared a common social, cultural reality. How might they apply in our situation where, initially at least, participants were individuals, not yet feeling themselves to be members of a common community?

Secondly, we were in reality an educational institution, part of a larger university, offering a six-month Diploma Program in which some of us had institutional power over others. We were not a community or typical social group in any usual sense. At the same time, however, the educational space we did have had been largely created and maintained by social activists with the clear intent of empowerment of disadvantaged peoples towards a

more just world. We had a tradition and space that allowed us to be creative and experimental in pursuing this end. And the more I became aware of the actual history of the Antigonish Movement, the more I recognized that it embodied in its own way the same principles of popular education now being practiced in many other parts of the world. Consequently, to convey the tradition and spirit of the Antigonish Movement, we needed to go well beyond a traditional classroom educational approach.

### **The Three-week Adult Education Workshop**

The Diploma Program was generally composed of a variety of courses, some core and some elective, organized into several semesters throughout the six-month period. To implement our popular education approach, it was agreed we would create an introductory three-week Adult Education Workshop involving all participants. This workshop proposed to both introduce the concepts and practices of popular education, and also help to create a caring and connected Coady community among the approximately 50 participants and Coady staff for the duration of the program.

Our highly-participatory approach employed a variety of popular education methods. What follows is a generic description of some elements of the introductory Adult Education Workshop developed over the first few years. Thanks to my colleague, Olga Gladkikh, who incidentally joined the institute the same day as me, for keeping thorough notes throughout our early workshops.

A key element of the workshop was the organization of participants into Home Groups. Small, face-to-face groups seemed to be an almost universal part of transformative social movements. Whether the study groups of the Antigonish Movement, the Ujamaa villages of Tanzania, or the Base Christian Communities of Latin America, or many other examples, small groups have been a space to share experiences and develop common analyses. They are a place to build trust, support and mutual critique, a place to begin to feel one's own strength within a supportive group. In the workshop, we organized Home Groups of six to eight participants, intentionally representative of the diversity of countries, gender and religious backgrounds of participants. Each group also included one or two staff members whose role was to participate as an equal group member.

To begin with the learners' reality, our first morning began with Sociometric Exercises, asking participants to line up according to distances they had travelled, alphabetically by the name they wished to be called, and by the size of the organizations in which they worked. They then lined up according to their length of experience in adult education in whatever way they may define it, and briefly shared why they stood where they did. This was followed by a brief presentation on dimensions of adult education and a question and answer discussion.

Following this discussion, we presented an overview of our proposed agenda for the three weeks. Participants were then invited to go into their Home Groups to consider if the proposal met their expectations and to return

with comments and suggestions for change. In this, we were attempting to model that liberating education is by agreement. It is not the part of teachers to define what learners should know, but rather, in respecting learners as adults to maximize their agency through negotiation of the course to be followed. Of course, recognizing the power differentials between staff and participants, the diversity of participant's cultural backgrounds, and the fact participants had only recently arrived in Canada, the negotiations were generally more symbolic than real. Nevertheless, we felt it important to recognize that participants were all adults with the capacity to best determine their own interests.

Coming from around the world to this residential program, participants had arrived at least a day or two earlier. In preparation for the first day of classes we asked each to draw, in whatever way they wished, a picture or Sketch of their Work Situation. The drawing was to show a bit of who they worked with, the type of work they did and the overall aim. Thus, in the afternoon participants shared their drawings in their Home Groups, identifying both differences and similarities in their work situations. At the end of the day, all returned to the plenary, reporting back briefly on their conclusions and reflecting on the experience in their Home groups and on the overall day.

Throughout the remainder of the workshop, days began with participants meeting in their Home Groups to reflect on and draw learnings from the work of the previous day. They then came into the plenary session where we used a variety of participatory, popular education methods to introduce new areas of discussion. Methods included Sociodramas, Role Playing, Simulation Games, Videos, short written assignments, reflections on readings, and lecturettes by various staff. Subject content included adult education theory and examples, and introduced other themes to be explored more deeply later in the Diploma Program including gender, health, environment, communications and project planning. Regardless of the content, participatory methodologies were used.

Through the Home Group's reflection each morning and reflection/evaluation sessions at the end of each week, we attempted to create a rhythm and space for the Action/Reflection cycle emphasized by Friere as being at the heart of becoming fully human. For him, humans not only act in the world, but also have the capacity to think and reflect on their actions, then act in new, more effective ways. For Freire, this ongoing cycle leads to human development, empowerment and emancipation, both at the individual and societal level. It is the process through which humans create history and progress. Alternately, colonization and oppression occur when people are not allowed to live out this cycle. Dehumanization occurs when some authority or structure "thinks for" others and controls their actions, thereby keeping them from acting in their own best interest.

In the adult education workshop, we also introduced and reflected on the Antigonish Movement. Through movies, readings, and presentations by local citizens, we came to recognize the power inherent in the radical people-based approach of Frs. Moses Coady, Jimmy Tompkins and the many others involved in the movement.



People in the isolated Maritime fishing villages were challenged to form study groups to analyze their situations and to consider new forms of local organization where the benefits no longer flowed to the wealthy merchants beyond. Again, through small groups, people worked to identify their own solutions to their problems. Then, through regional conferences, these small groups were linked to recognize the larger structures that kept oppressive institutions in place. Throughout, people were challenged to trust their own abilities and to get involved!

In the Diploma Program, participants were inspired by the movement's transformative adult education approach and challenged to consider how such an approach might — or might not — work for them. While the contexts varied greatly, participants identified how in their own situations people could empower themselves through studying their own reality, then organize to make changes. In the remaining weeks and months of the Diploma Program, participants pursued courses chosen to fit their own needs and context. Options included further study in adult education and training of trainers. At several intervals throughout the program, participants came together in plenary for days of evaluation and reflection on their ongoing learnings.

Overall, the adult education workshop attempted to share, both in content and methods, an approach to transformative adult education and social empowerment which could then be adapted to participant's own contexts. Evaluations at the end of the three weeks, as well as follow-up formal evaluations and informal discussion, confirmed the value of this approach.

Moses Coady said, "If we are wise, we will help the people everywhere to get the good and abundant life." The means, for him, was adult education. For myself, my experience at the Coady has been one of profound learning, confirming the maxim that in transformative education, everyone teaches and everyone learns. It was also confirmed that we do know how to help people work for "the good and abundant life for all." While the world may still be far from making this life available to all, transformative adult education is an available means of working towards a world of greater social justice — if we have the will!

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.

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