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You Yourself Must Change It

Kozol's Connection With Kids

Peter Thacker

*What would it mean to live
in a city whose people were changing
each other's despair into hope?—
You yourself must change it.*

—Adrienne Rich (1986)

Introduction

Back in the early 1960s I came into contact with a most significant model in my life. He was a Catholic Worker colleague of Dorothy Day running a flophouse for down-and-outers in Salt Lake City. Ammon Hennacy came to speak at the Unitarian Church in town and enlisted a group of us to join him. Every Friday night a vanload of half a dozen, often more, high school kids would sprawl on the Joe Hill House floor between the hoboes listening to U. Utah Phillips sing IWW songs. Then Ammon would preach on his favorite anarchists, be s(he) Dorothy Day, Tolstoy, or Jesus the Rebel. Ammon was known for his single-handed picketing of all things military in the Salt Lake area and, what with the Tooele Testing Grounds just a hop over the Ochre Mountains, he was kept pretty busy. Ammon believed in the “one man revolution.” You did what was right and didn’t play by anyone else’s rules, only by your own conscience. He would live this gospel in every word, every action. Nearly every single Friday night for over two years our cadre huddled in to learn and act on this lesson.

I have watched Jonathan Kozol fighting battles “small enough to matter, but big enough

to win” for four decades now, and it is my impression that he follows in the tradition of the “one man revolution.” It is not that Kozol is disconnected from others’ reform efforts. It is that he is a singular presence, a crusader, someone who is dogged in his pursuit of fairness and equality. He leads by example.

Kozol’s work, beginning with his connecting students to literature through teaching Langston Hughes’ “To the Landlord” in a Boston elementary school (an act that precipitated his dismissal), has consistently examined the inequities in our political democracy that masquerades as an economic democracy as well. His vision of schooling in which wealthy and working class, kids of color and white students live and learn together constitutes a dream of real democratic potential. To draw attention to the existing realities, Kozol has chronicled enormous inequities in the funding of poor (often black and Latino) schools and a retrenchment in the federal government’s commitment to desegregation, most recently in *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (2005). As we know from the Supreme Court’s recent decision to reconsider desegregation plans in Seattle and Jefferson County, Kentucky, the erosion of the right to equal schooling is far from over.

Sometimes the realities of American schooling leave us depressed. Fifteen years ago my foray into *Savage Inequalities* (1991), Kozol’s chronicling of the enormous gap in resources between wealthy and poor school districts,

began, and ended, with the reading of the first chapter. East St. Louis' conditions were so dire I couldn't continue. Driving into a schoolyard near the site of the New Orleans Jazz Festival while at a pre-flood reading conference, the boarded-over windows, the peeling paint, the knowledge that students walked into this building five days a week brought the book's images back with nauseating clarity.

I can't read Kozol without first despairing. How do I turn this despair into hope? I start looking for Kozol's conversations with children. Children like Pineapple from *Ordinary Resurrections* (2000) just inveigle themselves into my heart. Kozol introduces us to so many kids who are ghettoized and poveritized, yet have a spirit that will not be tamed. Kozol reminds me of the daily truths that overshadow

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the societal realities, sending me back to the classroom smiling with my students and recommitting myself to a vision of the possibility within our country. This vision, that may require generations to actualize, demands that we build beyond the obvious, beyond the seeming hopelessness of the South Bronx in our midst, to action as citizens. Thank goodness for the Pineapples of the world.

Kozol and Kids

Kozol speaks to a national audience, yet his legacy is built in conversations with young people. Kozol knows that the practical work of adults often circumscribes the reforms he espouses. But this does not dictate that he need despair. In *Ordinary Resurrections*, Kozol writes:

I hope...this book is neither bitter nor despairing, because despair and bitterness are not the words that come to mind when you spend time with children here (Mott's Haven). They live, admittedly, in what is known as a "bad section" of a racially divided city, but they live as well within the miniature and often healing world that children of their age inhabit everywhere in the United States. (p. 4)

The poignancy of Kozol's depictions of fiery, tender, smart young children has been the foundation for his critique. How can we ignore the beauty and potential of these children? Kozol finds poor children to be sensitive and wise, tender and savvy, knowing in ways that life has, perhaps, forced them to be, but childlike nonetheless. Kozol brings us so close to his "pint-sized people." In this essay not only will they be revealed, but some of his precious youngsters, North Portland students with whom he chose to converse, will reciprocate in defining how this man, cut from the cloth of a patrician, has touched the lives of children oft considered the untouchables of American society.

From the moment that Jonathan Kozol fumbled, as he often describes his entry into education, into substituting in Boston public schools, he showed an intuitive understanding of children and their hurts and resiliencies. His depiction in *Death at an Early Age* (1967) of Stephen, the mischievous eight-year-old whom teachers would send for a whipping, was both heart-breaking and inspiring at the same time. The same drawings condemned by the art teacher found themselves, sometimes wadded up, in Kozol's possession. Sensing an ally, Stephen would, with humble pride, insinuate them into the hands of his friend. Beaten, but not beaten down because Jonathan found his renderings fresh and real.

While Kozol's portrayal of Stephen is grim, there are so many other descriptions that lead us to understand the balance between childhood and worldliness forced by a life of poverty. In *Amazing Grace* (1995), Kozol is guided around Mott Haven by a seven year old boy, Cliffie, who in one moment tells Jonathan, "I saw a boy shot in the head over there," and the next, "Would you like a chocolate chip cookie?" (p. 6). The boy still lives in the magical years where reality is filtered,

where mystery plays a part, where two emotions can exist side-by-side. Things happen, and explanations aren't needed. Some things just are.

Not only are his children's words magical, but they are wisely empathetic. Elio, one of Kozol's wonderful buddies from *Ordinary Resurrections*, noticing sadness in Jonathan, queries him about his ill ninety-two-year-old father

"Is your father going to die?"

"I hope not."

"I hope not, too!"

Later in the afternoon he catches Kozol again:

"When somebody you know does something nice for you, does it make you happy?"

"Yes, it does."

"Me, too. Very happy." (p. 59)

Elio knows he, as a child, has affected Jonathan. He understands that his concern will buoy Kozol because Elio, too, would look for this kind of consolation when worried and upset.

Then there is Pineapple whom Kozol describes as a formidable eight-year-old who gets things done. This miniature mother finds Jonathan helpless as Piedad, a classmate, scrunches into a cubbyhole, crying. Pineapple notes the situation, gives Kozol an okay sign and a wink, and spends a minute with Piedad, who comes out laughing:

"I wasn't really crying," says the younger girl.

Elio says, "You were pretending?"

"It was a game is all," Pineapple says. (p. 27)

Pineapple shows not only empathy, but an intuitive understanding of another child's psychology—children with enormous hearts and precocious smarts who can give to both children and adults what is necessary to live in the world.

Kids as Societal Critics

When I taught Global Studies in the mid-1980s, I remember a film that featured eight-, nine-, and ten-year-old Salvadorans pointedly discussing the politics of the oligarchy then

being attacked by peasants. It filled me with wonder that children so young could be so sophisticated, so articulate. I was reminded that those who are oppressed are much clearer about class relations than those who live the "good life." Returning to Kozol reinforces that epiphany. Poor kids deeply understand inequality and its unfairness; its contradiction of the American dream. In *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol ventures into Camden, New Jersey and speaks with recent immigrants. These students from Woodrow Wilson High School tell it like it is. Listen to Chilly:

Over there, where I was from, America is very famous. People think of it like heaven. Like, go to America—you go to heaven. Because life there (in the home country) is hell. Then you get here and, you know, it's not like that at all. When I came here I thought that America was a mainly white nation. Then I came to this school and there are no white people. I see black and Spanish... Where are the white Americans? Well, I mean it did seem strange to me that all the black and Spanish and Asian people go to the same school. Why are they putting us together? It surprised me. And I feel so disappointed. I was thinking: "Oh, my God! This school, you know, is named for Woodrow Wilson..." (p. 156)

The ironies are direct, immediate, and personal for Chilly. How could a school named after a famed president duplicate the tyrannical realities found in her homeland?

Alexander, a Jamaican emigrant at Morris High School in New York, has a nuanced understanding of how separation spurs a sense of entitlement. Speaking of the lack of hope in his own school and the quiet privilege of those from wealthier neighborhoods he observes:

See, the parents of rich people have the money to get into better schools. Then, after a while, they begin to say, "Well, I have this. Why not keep it for my children?" In other words, it locks them into the idea of always having something more. After that, these things—the extra things they have—are seen as an inheritance. They feel it's theirs and they don't understand why we should question it... So it leaves those children with a legacy of greed. I don't think most people understand this. (p. 105)

His is the astuteness of a Ph.D. sociologist.

Combining the tenderness of Elio, the people smarts of Pineapple, and the analysis of Chilly and Alexander, you find children with a depth that belies our myths of folks in the projects. Seeing the world through the eyes of Mott's Haven guide, Cliffie, reminds us of the poignancy of the conditions within which these everyday, yet extraordinary, children live their lives.

Kozol does not speak solely to those poorly served by our system. He also enters into conversations with children of the well-to-do. Here he finds students who, when engaged, can also recognize the contradictions inside our system. In *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol speaks with an AP English class at Rye High School in suburban Westchester County, New York. Only



two percent of students are black in the high school, and it has a reputation as a strong academic public institution. Kozol's purpose is to engage in a conversation about the separate and unequal schooling as exemplified by the differences between here and the Bronx. Most of the students do not see sharing resources or going to school together as a solution to the problems of educational disparity, often blaming home lives or self-motivation for the discrepancy. However, not all students defend their privilege. David articulates a position of support for change: "When people talk this way, they are saying actually... that black kids will never learn. Even if you spend more in New York. Even if you bring them here to Rye. So what it means is—you are writing people off. You're just dismissing them." Then later he observes: "It seems rather

odd that we were sitting in an AP class discussing whether poor kids in the Bronx deserve to get an AP class. We are in a powerful position." (p. 130) Here is a young person, for the sake of justice, analyzing his class position, debunking the myth of superiority and allying himself with kids from the Bronx. Kozol knows that kids who have grown up like himself have the ability to break from their peers and see the possibility of turning despair into hope. He reaches out to them, too.

Kids Describe Kozol

In the spring of 2005, Jonathan Kozol came to Portland, Oregon to address adults at the University of Portland. Because Kozol was not doing the in-and-out lecture circuit, and was available for another full day, my colleague Rich Christen asked if he would be interested in speaking with a group of middle and high school students from the diverse, low-income neighborhoods which surround our university. Kozol was gracious, delighted to speak with kids in between his dining with dignitaries. We invited students from three middle schools and a high school. The three public schools are all on or near the No Child Left Behind "failing" list. The one parochial school invited was created to give neighborhood students of color an opportunity to excel academically. Fifty-five students from these four schools joined Kozol for a wide-ranging discussion of education both in the context of Oregon realities and national ones.

Coming into this dialogue, the group of students was divided between those who were thinking mostly about kid things and those who were already politically sophisticated. Like the Camden, New Jersey students, some were painfully aware of their circumstances. One student suggested: "In some schools, you get a better education because of where you live and how much money you make." Another wrote: [A high school in an affluent neighborhood] has more money and isn't very diverse..." One student even focused at a policy level: "There is a strong push to have strong education in private schools. We already are beginning to see public schools shut down." Portland students, too, found

systemic inequality that disturbed them, especially because they attended schools labeled as failing.

So, some students entered ready to hear Kozol's analysis of schooling. Others found their schools to be integrated and to serve them well. However, by the end of Kozol's dialogue, all, but one spoke of segregation by race and class as a societal problem. A typical comment was: "Now I get the idea about schools being separated and I think it would be better to not have separated schools."

Kozol's interactions with students connected them to him. Answering a post-survey question, "If you were taking to a friend about your conversation with Jonathan Kozol, what would you say," students revealed how powerfully Kozol affected them. Students used words like "inspired," "fair," "advocate," "deep" and "profound" to describe his expression of ideas. Students found an advocate for them:

- "He had some really great ideas about and a lot of input on how to change the problems at hand. I hope he will come help us turn our school reputation around."
- "The conversation was moving. I learned a lot about racist school problems. I know people really care."
- "I would say he does not do this just for money."

Beyond recognizing an adult who would advocate for them about issues of segregation and equality, students saw a man who truly communicated with them. Students spoke of Jonathan's grasp of issues and ability to translate them so that students could understand. One student spoke of him as: "fun and interesting. He is a joy to talk to and be with. I learned plenty of things from him today." Note that this student not only relates to the content but also the effect of Jonathan's presence: Joy is a precious feeling.

Not only does Kozol impart knowledge, "he is a very strong, opinionated person who likes to work with kids." He is "an interesting person to talk to, and he liked to be around young and old kids." The theme of enjoying being with students came up over and over:

- "He has great opinions about serious topics but is very nice. He seems to enjoy students more than adults."

- "He is famous and has lots of energy for seeing the kids."
- "[He is] a very passionate man, and you can tell that he truly believes that students can make a difference."

Perhaps most important, students felt that he had an affinity for them and saw their voices as worthy. One student suggested: "I personally liked the way he talked like we were part of the same group. He didn't try to talk to us in any special way." Another found him "cool and talking to us like we were not stupid." Students talking with a national figure and finding him so accessible, felt empowered and willing to engage in conversation about the big issues that affect us all.

Numbers of students felt so empowered that they were ready right then for civic engagement: "Jonathan makes you feel kids

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have the power/right to express their opinion," stated one student. Another revealed: "It's inspired me to want to speak publicly and make a difference" A third projected a sense of commitment: "It's inspiring and makes me want to have my opinion heard by people that could make a difference." Clearly Kozol's give-and-take inspired confidence and commitment among his young audience. An undercurrent of despair fueled by years of cuts in education funding in Oregon was superseded by a moment of possibility.

Conclusion

In "Kozol and Civic Engagement" (Thacker & Christen, 2006), we note that:

Children sustain Kozol's hope, and over the years

he has increasingly used his work to describe his time with kids, encounters that have filled him with "a renewed respect for their tenacity and courage and a sense of fascination and delight in the particulars of their emerging personalities"... He accepted that *Ordinary Resurrections* "would initially be seen as discouraging." But he also believed that, like him, sensitive readers would ultimately, "see the resilient and transcendent qualities of children... [and] that it would be seen not as a book of social despair but as a book about the elegant theology of children." "I meet all of these wonderful children," he continued, and because of them "everything I do comes from a sense that change is possible."

How can one despair when one sees such vibrancy, compassion, and possibility? Paul Loeb (1999) suggests:

Activists who practice radical patience continually address urgent issues, but they do so mindful of the larger cultural and political context within which these issues arise, and out of which other critical issues will arise in the future. They understand that success depends not only on changing specific policies but also on broadening the stream of activist engagement, building new relationships, initiating new dialogue, and opening up new opportunities for citizens to take a stand. If we work well and wisely, our efforts will help regardless of the short-term outcome of particular battles." (p. 315)

Kozol understands this and builds his community not only among the "abolitionists" of the turn of the twenty-first century, but also within the communities he fights for. The change agents are young and old, patricians and impoverished, those who intimately feel the effects of our informal apartheid and those who follow the Jeffersonian creed that all are created equal.

What becomes clear from Kozol's conversations with children is that he takes them deeply seriously. He sees them as thoughtful actors in the world whose wisdom needs to be engaged and ought to be heard. Their voices acclaim fairness and empathy. These voices cannot be ignored forever.

Children by nature are idealists. We need their idealism. Teachers need to nurture this trait, particularly as they engage with issues that affect them, ones that may seem intractable, seem to

define the world, but are actually the crucible upon which change depends. It is through a sense of civic agency that students begin to participate in public dialogue. The voice that students gain as youngsters provides the ground upon which thoughtful citizenship is built. Who better to learn these lessons, to teach these lessons, than those whose circumstances have been circumscribed?

Vaclav Havel (1993) speaks of hope as patience: "That hope is inspired by the belief in resisting and in telling the truth as a matter of principle, without knowing whether one's commitment will ever bear fruit. In a secondary way this is also a hope inspired by the conviction that a seed once sown will take root and grow. No one knows when. Perhaps for other generations. This attitude requires and cultivates patience. It is waiting as a state of hope, not as an expression of despair." (p. 24) Kozol's need to speak with, and learn from children, is the quintessential hopeful statement. Revolution as legacy, one child at a time.

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