

Interview with Jonathan Kozol

By Mardell Raney

*A passionate and persistent advocate for our nation's poorest inner-city children, Jonathan Kozol has spent most of his adult life teaching, speaking, and writing about the conditions and problems of urban youth. Kozol's first book, *Death at an Early Age* (1967), a devastating chronicle of children he met during his first year of teaching, won the National Book Award. *Rachel and Her children* (1988), a study of homeless families, won the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award. His most recent book, *Amazing Grace* (1995), which appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list for several months, takes place in the South Bronx, the poorest Congressional district in the U.S.—18 minutes by train from the seventh richest district in the nation. Jonathan Kozol lives near Boston, Massachusetts.*



What led to your concern for children and their problems? Why as a graduate of Harvard and a Rhodes scholar did you choose this direction?

I come from a fairly traditional middle-class Jewish family. My father is a neurologist and psychiatrist. My folks thought that after being in England and spending a few years in Paris, I would come back and do something impressive. They were putting considerable pressure on me to go back to Harvard, perhaps to go to medical or law school, or more likely to become an English professor. I might well have done that were it not for the sudden disappearance of three young civil rights

workers in Mississippi in June 1964 who were ultimately found to have been murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. It had a stunning effect on me that I still can't understand. I'd never been involved with racial issues. I was not particularly political. In fact, I wasn't political at all. But this event had an extraordinary effect. Without thinking it through, I simply got on the subway, which in those days ended in Harvard Square, and went to the other end of the line, which was Roxbury. I volunteered to spend the summer teaching at a black church which had set up a freedom school. When September came, I walked into the Boston school department and said, "I'm going to be a teacher." I wasn't certified, of course. I'd never heard of certification. I'd never heard of methods courses or any of that stuff. I asked, "Is there no way I can teach?" They said, "Well, you could be a sub." So I became a substitute teacher.

Did you enjoy teaching, and what was that experience like for you?

The first week I taught, I was in kindergarten and I was terrified, but I liked it. I survived as a substitute teacher until finally the school system appointed me a permanent sub, which is the substitute's version of tenure. By some odd coincidence, they appointed me to teach fourth grade in the same neighborhood in which I'd spent the summer. So I became a regular fourth-grade teacher. It was an upsetting year in many ways because I had no idea what conditions were like in a segregated public school in an alleged democracy. I'd gone to school in Newton, Massachusetts, which was wealthy and generally considered the best school system in the state. So I didn't know what it was like to be a poor kid in America. My kids didn't even have a classroom. We camped out in an auditorium. I described all that later on in *Death at an Early Age*. Strangely enough, it was also a transcendent experience. Many of the children struck me as remarkably beautiful and wise and good and amazingly resilient. At the end of the year I was fired for reading Langston Hughes to the children. As I said before, I was not a political radical at all. I simply wandered into the bookstore at Harvard and grabbed a few books by Robert Frost and Langston Hughes off the shelf. There was nothing new in our school and I thought the kids would enjoy seeing brand-new books. I suppose I also thought that seeing the face of a black poet on a book cover would mean something to the children, which it did. But I was fired for that. Within a few weeks I was hired by a federal government program to do curriculum for Upward Bound. A year later, I was hired by our wealthiest school system, Newton, Massachusetts, to be a fifth-grade teacher. So I taught for three years,

in all, in the two school systems. Then I returned to Boston and worked with parents of some of my former students to create what we called a freedom school. Today it would be called a street academy.

How long did you teach and would you do it again?

In all, between the public schools and the years in which I worked in our freedom schools and street academies, I spent about 10 years as a teacher or as head teacher. I miss those years very much. I sometimes think that if I still have a little strength left when I'm 65 or 70 and am not senile, I'd like to go back and teach kindergarten in a public school again. I like P.S. 30 in the Bronx a lot. If I ever taught again, I'd love to teach there. First grade. I would love it.

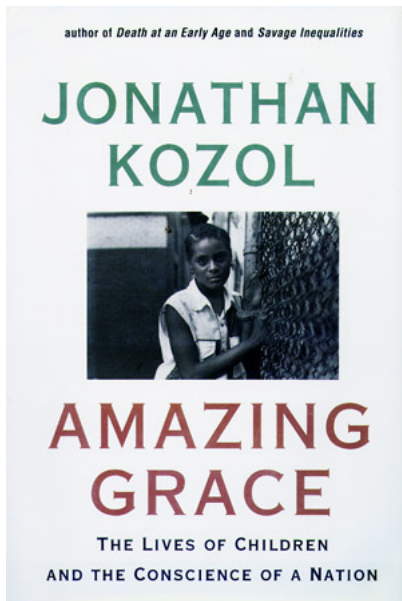
Are you interested in teaching college students or teachers-to-be—or do you prefer younger students?

I don't like teaching at the university level as much as elementary school. After I made the mistake of writing a best-selling book, I was hired to teach at Yale for one semester, which I enjoyed very much. One of my students was a very bright undergraduate from Baltimore named Kurt Schmoke who later became a Rhodes scholar and is now the Mayor of Baltimore. And there were some other good kids in the class. I also taught at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. I like being with university students, particularly future teachers. But I'm more comfortable with little kids. I like their sense of humor and their sense of mystery about the world. I spend a lot of time with a couple of teenagers in the South Bronx who've become friends of mine, but they already seem almost too grown up for me. How should I say it? I just enjoy the little kids. I like teenagers and college kids who still have a childlike side to them.

Didn't you write *Death at an Early Age* soon after you began teaching? What was the reaction to this book?

I started teaching in 1964 and *Death at an Early Age* was published in 1967. At first the reaction was relatively quiet. It was reviewed well nationally. The *New York Times* review by Robert Coles was particularly eloquent and moving. But the book wasn't widely read until the following spring when by some mistake it won the National Book Award. Then it became a best seller and has since been reprinted I suppose 40 or 50 times. I'm glad that students still read it.

Of the many books you've written, do you have a favorite and why?



Of all of my books *Amazing Grace* is the one that means the most to me. It's also the one that took the most out of me. It was the hardest to write, because it was the hardest to live through those experiences. I always felt as I was writing *Amazing Grace* that it would initially be seen as discouraging but that ultimately sensitive readers would see the resilient and transcendent qualities of children and some of the mothers in the book—that it would be seen not as a book of social despair but as a book about the elegant theology of children. That's what happened finally. The most moving comments about the book, even from politically sophisticated people such as

Barbara Ehrenreich and Toni Morrison, also pointed to the moral and religious texture of the book.

In your book *Savage Inequalities* you described some really tragic situations in six urban areas. For example, you described East St. Louis as having some of the sickest children in America. Has anything changed in those areas since then?

Some of the school systems are better off today as a direct result of aggressive litigation in the courts to challenge the inequitable funding of the public schools. New Jersey is the best example. The kids in Camden are significantly better off today. There's also been some real progress in Texas and to a lesser degree in Ohio. The low-income districts did win a very important court victory last year in Ohio—and this year in New Hampshire—and I have a lot of optimism on that score. In New York the inequalities remain extreme and probably have widened since I wrote *Savage Inequalities*, despite the fact that New York City has one of the best administrators in the country. Rudy Crew is an enlightened man. I personally like him and I know his heart is in the right place. He has a lot of excellent ideas, but there are structural inequities that even the best superintendent can't really address. I asked Dr. Crew, perhaps a year and a half ago when we had dinner with some other folks, how much is really spent per pupil, let's say in the third grade, at the elementary school I visit in the South Bronx. He said realistically it's probably \$6,000 or less per year, even though the

official figure is a little higher. But, of course, the official figure includes special education and secondary school. So I guess, after you separate the items, less is spent on mainstream third-grade elementary school. I was thinking about that. Six thousand dollars. There's a little boy I know very well in the South Bronx, Mario. He's a wonderful kid. But so are all of the kids I know there. He's seven years old, eight years old, second or third grade. If you could just pick up this little boy in your arms and plunk him down in Great Neck outside of New York City, instead of spending \$6,000 a year on his education, we'd be spending \$16,000. So what does this say about America? In the eyes of God we're told all children are of equal value. All religions tell us that, and I'm sure that in the eyes of God they are. But in the eyes of America they obviously are not. In the eyes of America, Mario is a \$6,000 baby. If you want to see a \$16,000 baby, you have to go out to the suburbs.

Is money the answer to this wretched situation?

I hear a lot from conservatives and business leaders who always ask me whether money really matters. I have friends who send their sons to Exeter, which now costs \$27,000 a year, who look me in the eyes and say, "Jonathan, can you really buy your way to better education?" I always say, "I don't know. It seems to work for your son, doesn't it?" So what's the standard here? What's the moral? Is money good for the rich, but bad for the poor? Most conservatives have never dealt with this in a straightforward manner. They're good at showing us that it's possible to run a "more efficient" poorly funded ghetto school on slightly less money if you're able to select the students you enroll, as in certain of these so-called boutique schools that we find in every ghetto, some of them semi-private or private schools. What these conservatives have never been able to explain is why they spend three times as much for their own children. Someday they'll have to explain that—if not to the public, at least to their own conscience. They get away with it now because they have the power to orchestrate opinion and lay out the parameters of acceptable discussion.

What about those parents who choose to enroll their children in public schools?

There's an additional form of inequality in systems like New York. This inequality comes from the decision of certain folks to put their kids into the public system, but then privately subsidize the school their child attends in order to employ more teachers, provide a library (most school libraries have been dismantled in the elementary schools in

New York City over the past 20 years), and introduce expensive technology. They refuse to fight for higher tax support for all the children. Instead they simply give a little extra to the public school their own child attends. The press is reluctant to criticize these parents. I think there's some fear, on the part of the newspapers, that if you condemn these parents for doing this, they will flee the system altogether and abandon the low-income children. But in a sense they've abandoned them already. Today they have the luxury of boasting to their friends, "Oh, I believe in public education." But in fact they don't; what they've created are hybrid institutions, which are not genuinely public and not genuinely equal.

When I was young, I thought all the liberals lived within two hundred miles of New York and Boston. I don't think that anymore. I don't know whether the word liberal is even relevant in this case, but I think there is more essential reverence for the notion of fair play out in the less "sophisticated" sections of the country where kids play Little League and nobody has ever heard of cafe latte. I think the old American idea of fair play gets lost sometimes amidst the ideological fevers that afflict New York and Washington and Boston.

In Savage Inequalities, you said that social policy in public schooling had been turned back almost a hundred years. Can you explain what you meant and how did this happen?

I was referring to *Plessy versus Ferguson*, the Supreme Court decision of the 1890s which accepted the idea of separate but equal schools for children of different races, even though the specific intent was not related to the public schools—it was actually a transportation decision. In any case it was a definitive decision for education in its application. It's now more than 40 years since the *Brown versus Board of Education* decision in 1954, and we're right back to *Plessy*, but beyond. We still have separate schools in almost every city in the nation, but no one who grew up in the suburbs and has ever visited these schools would dare claim that they are equal. So in that sense we're not even living up to the mandate of a century ago.

Is equality a genuine concern of educators today, or do other issues take precedence?

One thing that troubles me sometimes is that a lot of good, enlightened, innovative thinkers who work in public education never speak about these matters. These good and serious people are so busy trying to make incremental changes in classroom practices, for

example, or in application of an innovative form of software, or in better ways to measure kids' performances and so forth, that it almost seems outside the ballpark to discuss something old fashioned like "equality" or "justice." Sometimes when I'm at one of these momentous education conferences after I've given my talk and am sitting in a workshop, I might gently ask, "Are we going to spend the next five years figuring out how we can develop more innovative site-based ghetto schools? Or ghetto schools with school choice? Or ghetto schools with school-to-work components? Or ghetto schools with uniforms? Is the ghetto school acceptable to you? Is that the way it is? Is that the way it will forever be?" Characteristically the answer that I get is patronizing. They'll say, "Well, of course, Jonathan, we don't like segregation, but we're more interested in 'best practices.'" And then they'll list the 12 newest ways to guarantee efficacy within apartheid. Entire careers are built this way. We don't talk about inequality. We don't raise the specter of desegregation or increasing the tax burden on the wealthy. (Obviously we don't do that because, in order to keep our innovative project going, we have to solicit money from the wealthy!) What an awful lot of school innovation involves today in the United States is a ritual dance that you might call "the gifted evasion of the central point." And if it's done well you can keep the philanthropic gifts rolling in. You can even get them from the realtors and the bankers who are engineers of racial segregation.

How do you feel in general about current school reforms efforts?

I would add quickly that almost all these recent innovations are things I basically agree with. Almost any educator that I know would rather have a little public school than a big one. Almost any teacher I know would rather be in an elementary school with three or four hundred kids than with eight hundred kids. It's a nicer atmosphere. We'd all prefer a school with maximum local governance so that we're relatively free from filling out forms in triplicate for somebody downtown we never see. I personally prefer the kind of assessment instruments that involve a very broad look at what our kids can do, which generally goes far beyond the numbers you



come up with on exams. So in a sense all the innovations that I mention are the kinds of things that I've fought for all my life. Some of them didn't even have names when I started.

In your teaching of reading, did you teach phonics?

Yes, I actually did. With some students I always felt it was useful. But later when I taught in a wealthy suburb, I simply read dozens and dozens of paperback novels with the children—children's literature instead of basal readers. I just worked like hell to teach the sounds of letters and the forms of syntax out of the literature itself. My God, that was hard work! I used to stay up all night trying to keep ahead of my students. I will always hate *Charlotte's Web* because I had to read it at 6 a.m. in order to keep ahead of some of the kids in my class. It wasn't until years later that I learned there's a fancy term for reading books with kids, instead of basals. "Whole language" is one term they use. Labels come and go, but most of the good practices I see today are things a lot of teachers have been doing in the classroom for a century. Some of my teachers taught me that way in the 1940s when I was a little kid. It just seems to me that as educators we have to struggle on at least two levels. One is to make practical, realistic, incremental changes in the situation that we're given. The other is to never forget the structural inequities that limit all our victories or make them far too rare.

What about those children who succeed in spite of insurmountable odds?

There's a tendency for us to celebrate the students that we teach in urban neighborhoods who triumph over all the odds and win chess tournaments and go to Amherst. The press makes much of these successful children. It celebrates them like good cross bearers. But there is something wrong with a society that makes so many poor kids carry crosses in the first place and make these victories so hard to come by. That's the danger. When I wrote *Amazing Grace*, I was a little worried about making too much out of Anthony. Anthony is that wonderful 12-year-old boy who fell in love with Edgar Allan Poe. He's now one of my best friends. Anthony's doing very well, but it isn't fair to celebrate the kids who triumph if we know that they have triumphed because they were given an unusual opportunity that nobody else is likely to have. Philanthropists love to do that. They're always rescuing a certain child and then making much of it. Finally they haul the poor kid out to a benefit dinner to stand up and thank them, which is a pretty ugly thing to do. But then those benefit dinners

are pretty ugly generally. The tendency is always to point to the triumphant exception. I think we should be careful about doing that.

This isn't a fair question, but were you able to reach any conclusions about what determines who survives or overcomes under these terrible conditions?

I wouldn't even dare to try to single out a single factor. In fact that's exactly what bothers me about some of these magic-pill solutions that I hear about. "The answer is self-image." "The answer is schools where principals have more control." "The answer is children with two parents in the home." Most of these single explanations are baloney! The answers are as multitudinous as human experience. For many of the children that I know who have no father in their home, the greatest sense of moral strength comes from their grandma. Grandmothers are the hidden weapon in many of the families I know in poor neighborhoods, especially black and Hispanic neighborhoods. In other cases it's profound religious faith that keeps some of the children strong. In other situations it's a stunning sense of humor that enables them to turn their sorrows into smiles. Or it may be the fortuitous good luck of running into an extraordinary teacher, minister, doctor, or whatever. There are so many different reasons. If I were forced to narrow it to one reason, I would probably point to the religious factor, but that's simply because I'm spending a lot of time with children at a church in the South Bronx. So I see that particular light glowing very brightly.

Contrary to what we hear, you commented that most of these inner-city children come from two-parent homes.

I meant that in this special sense: Almost every inner-city family that I know has a strong grandmother backing up the mother, and sometimes there is a formidable aunt as well. When I visit and they offer me dinner and I'm not hungry, I sit down and eat anyway. Because you don't argue with these women any more than I would argue with my own grandmother. My grandma is long gone, but I have a lot of surrogate grandmothers in that neighborhood.

Since the publication of *Amazing Grace*, I've gone back more than 100 times. I tend to go back most often when I'm worried about things at home. I spend a lot of evenings with a woman named Bernice King, who's no older than I am but a lot wiser, and I'm very grateful for the strength she gives me. The people in the neighborhood don't get too many blessings from the world but they give them freely. If we saw

them as they really are, perhaps we'd value them more. Perhaps we'd start returning some of the blessings that they give us.

Does traditional assessment or testing have a valid place in education, or should we be testing for different attributes and skills?

I don't scorn the importance of enabling low-income kids to do well on exams. I go out of my way to say that because many conservatives today have a sinister way of stereotyping almost anyone who grew up in the 1960s. They assume that we all believe in love beads and still drive Volkswagen bugs. Even in the 1960s, I thought that we needed to empower kids to be competitive in ways that were essential for survival. And certainly, as someone who had to pass a lot of exams in order to get into Harvard and to graduate, I do not scorn realistic things like these. Still a lot of the most beautiful things about the children that I know will never show up on exams. And they don't fall into the area of mechanistic competence that would be useful for the bottom line of any corporation. Indeed, their best qualities, which have to do with gentleness and mercy, would be dangerous for many corporations. I worry very much as business increasingly appropriates the right to dictate the curriculum in public education, because I don't think that business has the right to do that. I don't think that schools—or childhood—ought to exist to serve the needs of business. It ought to be the other way around.

Are you in frequent contact with business leaders, and what do you discuss?

I spend a lot of time with business leaders. I don't know why they like me, but some of them do. I argue with them constantly, however. They'll say, "Jonathan, you know I care about these kids a lot. I look at them and I see my future entry-level workers." And I always want to say, "I don't. Why do you need to look at Mario and see your future entry-level worker? Why not look at Mario and see your future CEO? If you need entry-level workers, look at your own son and let him be your entry-level worker. Let Mario go to Harvard Business School and buy your corporation!"

How do you feel about the school-to-work movement in education?

Almost all the school-to-work agenda nowadays is heavily class-oriented, even though this isn't openly admitted. I'm always hearing

people say that in the inner city we need to teach these kids how to accommodate themselves to the needs of business. There are inner-city schools today where they even teach courses in which students basically spend a whole semester learning to write resumes and how to go for interviews. They don't waste time with junk like that out in the wealthy suburbs. Those kids are polishing their French pronunciation and getting ready for their SATs, so they can go to Smith and Wellesley and Vassar. I'm uneasy about this emphasis. When people say to me, "I look at this little boy, Mario, and I see my future worker," I think: Why? Why not think of him as a future doctor? Why not think of him as a future preacher? Why not think of him as a future prophet? Why not think of him as future poet? Why not look at him and see him for the only thing he really is, a seven-year-old boy? I hear people say, "We should 'invest' in this little boy because he'll be important to the economy when he's 26 years old. So if we invest in him now, he'll be a more productive worker when we hire him in 20 years." I think that's a rotten reason to invest in children. Why not invest in him because he's a child and deserves some happiness before he dies?

This is not to say that I don't know some very honorable business leaders, and I assure you I'll still hit them up for contributions if I need something for any of the kids I know. But I still get nervous with this nonstop business emphasis in education.

Do you consider yourself an activist as some people have called you?

Yes, I do. It's a wonderfully old-fashioned word reminiscent of the 1960s, and it doesn't trouble me at all. That was a remarkable period and I very much regret the way the media has misconstrued the nature of that decade. An awful lot of young people now when they think about the 1960s somehow think that it means sex and marijuana and Mick Jagger. That's not what I remember. I remember decent people from all religions working hard for almost no money and living on donuts, coffee, candy bars, running freedom schools and street academies, and voter registration struggles. I don't remember dissolute experiences. I remember Mickey Schweiner and James Chaney and Marian Edelman. That's what I remember, and it's something I wish we could recreate.

What do you say to audiences and individuals today when they ask what they can do for these urban children?

Usually it's young people—college students—who ask me what to do. A lot of them feel troubled but helpless about the inequities in our society and they don't know what to do about them. They feel sort of paralyzed. I think they're asking me to suggest a list of books to read. I don't do that. I tell them to go out and join Teach for America. I give them Wendy Kopp's phone number and say call her up. Or go to a school of education and get certified as fast as you can. Then go to a school in a poor neighborhood and jump right in before you lose your nerve. Or go to Washington and work with Marian Edelman and other advocates for children.



Jonathan Kozol and a friend from Amazing Grace.

A lot of college kids are scared that they'll change their mind and want to do something else later, and then they'll be trapped. Life's not like that at all. Almost everybody interesting I know has changed careers at least three times. I

like people who wander intellectually and wander spiritually and wander in their careers. Many of the intellectuals who are important in my life are people who took a long, long time deciding what their lives would be like.

Is education today conducive to this kind of lifelong change and growth?

There's a tremendous emphasis in public schools today on what is called outcome-based instruction. Sometimes it makes sense, but an awful lot of times it is unbearably prescriptive. It makes teaching absolute misery. It means that if you do everything right you'll never have a moment of surprise. It's ruthlessly predictive. It also assumes that if we itemize, enumerate, and label every outcome, we can actually predict the lives our kids will lead and where they're going to go. At its very worst we now see middle schools in urban neighborhoods which are already designated according to specific careers: "health sciences," for instance, which in the inner city does not mean becoming a physician. It means bottom-level jobs within the healthcare industry. I see programs like this all the time, allegedly preparing kids for careers that they have never really chosen. Most of the interesting people in the world didn't have the slightest idea of

what they wanted to do when they were 15. Almost all of them received broad liberal educations after high school, which empowered them to choose amongst a multiplicity of choices.

Was there one special teacher who had a great influence on your life at some critical point?

The teacher who meant the most to me when I was at Harvard College was a wonderful soul named Archibald MacLeish, a poet and playwright. He was a good poet, but I think he was an even better teacher and one of the kindest human beings I ever knew. The only thing he did for which I never will forgive him was sending me off to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar because I didn't like Oxford at all. I left as quickly as I could. Even then he was forgiving. I gave up my Rhodes scholarship during the first year and moved to Paris. I happened to run into Richard Wright the third week I was in Paris and a few weeks after that I met William Styron. And I discovered I was in the hotel in which Allen Ginsberg had been living. I stayed in Paris for several years learning to write. MacLeish was the only teacher who not only understood this, but encouraged it. He did not consider it wasted time. When I came back from Europe and decided to become a teacher, I went to MacLeish and again he encouraged me. I said, "This means that I'm giving up any thoughts I had of becoming a writer," and he said that's okay. A few years later when I brought MacLeish the manuscript of *Death at an Early Age*, he gave me a kind of benediction and he said we never can predict the way our lives will go. The year I'd given up writing was the first year I'd lived through something that was worth writing about. For some reason, many of the people I've admired had a lot of changes of direction in their lives.

Are there others who've been major influences in your life?

Thomas Merton had an important influence. Dorothy Day, too. I met her once when she was in a cranky mood. I made the mistake of going to visit her after dinner when I'd had some wine. I think she thought I was coming for sanctuary at the shelter. I very much value her book *The Long Loneliness* and always recommend it to future teachers along with Merton's journals. Toni Morrison is another writer who matters a lot to me. And Paulo Freire, who does not get mentioned much within the clever pedagogic journals but who probably has had more influence on serious teachers in inner-city schools than almost anyone I've known. Erik Erikson, Robert Coles, and Elie Wiesel are important to me, too. Henry Giroux is a sociologist that I especially admire. Most of these people were "wanderers" in different ways.

I also have a special affection for two political activists in California, one of whom is dead and one still alive: Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Dolores was Cesar's co-director in the United Farm Workers, a brilliant and empowering woman. They were both deeply religious people but also very practical, with a vibrant sense of humor. Both would have been good teachers.

What are you doing these days, and are you still in contact with the urban educators you've met?

These days I spend a lot of time either alone here in the woods where I live with my dog, Sweetie Pie, or else with the kids in the South Bronx, or with teachers or teachers-to-be or school administrators. I spend a good deal of time talking with school principals, whom I like, by and large, and with whom I empathize. And school superintendents too—especially urban superintendents, many of whom are black or Hispanic. I've known several of these superintendents in two or three different jobs. I've followed them as they were hired in one system, welcomed in upbeat editorials, then progressively broken down, fired, and then hired somewhere else. A lot of these men and woman talk to me quite candidly. Often late at night, especially when there are no crowds around, we just sit and have a beer and talk. It's a tough job. They feel they're being bludgeoned by bombastic voices of right-wing ideology. There's almost a national assumption that these folks are nincompoops, that they're all incompetent. It's totally unfair. Most of these superintendents are deeply committed, tremendously intelligent human beings who have to shoulder all the worries of our society. It's as if the position of school superintendent was invented so that in every city we can find one man or woman to die for our sins. Urban superintendents typically get fired within two years, or else they quit, or die in office. Dr. Crew is very unusual in that he has survived for several years. I hope he survives longer because he's excellent.

There's been a lot of discussion about qualifications for young people entering education. What should we be looking for?

A lot of superintendents ask me what I'd look for if I were picking elementary school teachers. I always say that obviously we want people who can teach arithmetic and reading. We want young people who have an ability to relate to children and also a reasonable appreciation of survival needs in our society. But if I had to narrow it down to one characteristic, I would always hire teachers whom I would want to have dinner with, or a teacher I wouldn't mind getting stuck with on a long plane flight to California. I would look for people who

are capable of making the world seem joyful, people who are a delight to be with, people who are contagiously amusing human beings. To me, that's more important than almost everything else. I would put the emphasis on the capability to create contagious enthusiasm for life. There are a lot of teachers like that, but not enough.

Should schools of education change the way they prepare teachers?

If schools of education were to do one thing different, I wish they would add to their entrance requirements that the dean has to spend a weekend with each person he or she is going to admit. If you can't stand them, don't inflict them on school children! I'd also like to see more emphasis on the liberal arts in schools of education. I wish there were more courses on great poetry and fiction, and less on "tricks" for teaching poetry and fiction. I think there's too much mechanistic stuff. But this may just be a reflection of my bias.

How can you still be hopeful after all you've seen?

I meet all these wonderful children.

Do you think change really can come? Or is it too late?

Oh my God! If I thought it was too late I'd think of a different career. I'd become an animal doctor—I'd kind of like to be a vet, to tell the truth. Or else I'd write obscure metaphysical poetry, which I enjoy. No, no. Everything I do comes from a sense that change is possible.

BOOKS BY JONATHAN KOZOL

- *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts & Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools* (NAL-Dutton, 1967)
- *Free Schools* (Houghton Mifflin, 1972)
- *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far From Home: A Political Indictment of the U.S. Public Schools* (Simon & Schuster, 1975)
- *Children of the Revolution: A Yankee Teacher in the Cuban Schools* (Delacorte, 1978)
- *Prisoners of Silence: Breaking the Bonds of Adult Illiteracy in the United States* (Continuum, 1979)

- *On Being a Teacher* (Oneworld, 1981)
- *Illiterate America* (NAL-Dutton, 1985)
- *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (Fawcett, 1988)
- *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (HarperCollins, 1991)
- *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (Crown, 1995, and HarperCollins, 1996)

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