

*from*

*Letters to A Young Teacher*

*by Jonathan Kozol*

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Uses of “Diversity”

Dear Francesca,

I thought the presentation that you made during the conference in Vermont about “diversity” last week was pretty damn amazing. I was glad you had a chance to speak. Too many of those education conferences never give real teachers any opportunity to voice their own beliefs.

I also agree with you entirely that the way the subject of diversity is introduced to children in most public schools has come to be a very bland and boring ritual in which the word itself, “diversity,” has been adulterated to the point where it can only mock reality instead of openly describing it.

“The ugly little secret,” as you put it, is that there is almost no diversity at all in most of the schools in which diversity curricula are generally used. The word,

you said, has come to be a cover-up for situations to which it can't possibly apply.

As you've noticed, this is right in keeping with the way the word is used in education journals and the media. There is a seemingly agreed-upon convention, in the written press especially, never to use a plain, unvarnished term like "racial segregation"—not, at least, in reference to the city where the newspaper is published—if there's any way the term can be avoided. This is the case even in a narrative description of a segregated school, where journalists have learned to do semantic somersaults in order not to use a word that may do injury to civic pride. High schools that enroll as few as six or seven white or Asian students in a total population of as many as 3,000, and where every other child in the building is black or Hispanic, are commonly referred to, in the parlance of reporters, as "diverse."

School systems employ this euphemism too. In a school I visited last fall in Kansas City, for example, I was provided with a document that said the school's curriculum "addresses the needs of children from diverse backgrounds." But as I went from class to class I didn't see a single child who was white or Asian—or Hispanic, for that matter. The principal, when I pressed her on the demographics of the school, said that 99.6 percent of students there were black.

In a similar document, the school board of a district in New York referred to "the diversity" and "rich variations" in the "ethnic backgrounds" of its student

population. But when I looked at the racial numbers that the district had provided to the state, I learned that there were 2,800 black and Hispanic children in the system, one Asian child, and three whites. If school boards cannot bring themselves to call things by their right names, it's not surprising that the same misleading use of language infiltrates instructional materials as well.

The pattern carries through to many of those so-called "civil rights" curricula which tend to function, as you said, not as challenges to critical analysis of present-day realities, and even less as provocations to take action on those challenges, but instead, to use your words, as "soporific pacifiers" that provide a feel-good resolution to the contradictions school officials do not dare to name.

Many deeply segregated public schools pay tribute, for example, to the history of civil rights by introducing children to a set of lesson plans about the struggles of the past while steering clear of any reference to the struggles of a comparable order that remain before their generation now. Typically, these lesson plans rely upon heroic stories about children in the South during the 1950s and the early 1960s who had the courage to walk into previously all-white schools, guarded at times by federal marshals or police, and who defied the jeers and catcalls of white students and adults, overcame their own anxieties, and at length achieved what are presented to our students as enduring victories. These may be uplifting

stories but they also fail to give our kids the slightest indication that most of the victories they celebrate have, since that time, been cancelled out by more polite but no less implacable arrangements for the isolation of black children like themselves.

I think you were being very honest when you said you feel as if you're lying to your children if you leave these false impressions uncorrected and allow the class, essentially, to swallow the idea that segregation is a shameful piece of distant history for which our nation has absolved itself, rather than an ever-present aspect of the lives they lead and education they receive today.

"Here we are in a public school with not a single white child in our class and only three white children in the school's entire population. Hooray for Ruby Bridges and for Linda Brown and all the other brave black children of the South for having left us with a legacy of social justice in our public schools, even if this legacy has been completely, and intentionally, ripped apart and shredded and abandoned in the years since all the kids we teach today were born!"

I thought you were brave to say that to an audience of influential educators who have built their own careers around "diversity instruction." I hope you made them thoroughly uncomfortable.

I also think that you were right on target when you said the way to honor heroes of the past isn't to embalm their courage in a lesson plan of arm's-length admiration but to *emulate* that courage by empowering

our students to see clearly and speak openly about the schools that they attend and neighborhoods in which they live right now. Otherwise, we place them in the strange position of believing that the unmistakable realities they see in school each day are somehow not to be believed and must be an incorrect perception or, if not a false perception, must be something that deserves a different name that carries no dishonor and bears no resemblance to the situation children of their race and age encountered 50 years ago.

The percentage of black children who now go to integrated public schools has fallen to its lowest level since the death of Dr. King in 1968. In New York and California, seven out of every eight black students presently attend a segregated school. In your school, as you have pointed out, as in almost every inner-city school I visit, white children make up only one or two percent of the enrollment.

Once, when I was in a class at P.S. 65, which was Pineapple's elementary school, I was surprised to see a white boy sitting in the second row, since I'd almost never seen another white child in the school. I asked the teacher how many white kids she had taught over the years. "I've been at this school for eighteen years," she said. "This is the first white student I have ever had!" It turned out he was an immigrant from Germany who had been assigned there by mistake. He had left the school before I visited again. The only other white child I had ever noticed in the school's enrollment of 800 students happened to be an immigrant as

well. He was a kind and thoughtful Russian boy but he, too, departed rapidly.

In the elementary district that encompassed P.S. 65, there were only 26 white children in an overall enrollment of 11,000 students, which, according to my long division, comes out to a segregation rate of 99.8 percent—an improvement, if you want to call it that, of two tenths of one percentage point on the segregation rate in southern states a century ago.

The same scenario is seen in schools that serve black and Hispanic neighborhoods even in middle-sized and smaller cities. If I took a photo of the children that I meet in almost any of these schools, it would be indistinguishable from photos taken of the children in the all-black schools in Mississippi back in 1925 or 1930—precisely the same photos that are reproduced in textbooks now in order to convince our children of the moral progress that our nation has made since. Teachers “are participating in deception of their students,” as you said up in Vermont, if these myths are not confronted and the truths that counter them are not presented to our children as a part of any course of study on “diversity.”

Most of these inner-city schools, as you also pointed out, “don’t simply make a mockery of *Brown v. Board of Education*.” They don’t even live up to the promises of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which stipulated back in 1896, as you said you felt you needed to remind your audience, that if our public schools were to be separate, “they must at very least be equal.” It’s a tribute

to the awkward game that must be played in many school departments now that it takes a first grade teacher to spell out, and hammer out, the obvious to people who design curricula in history.

Admittedly, there are limits as to how far teachers ought to delve into these matters with a class of children who are only six years old. But even while employing wise discretion and while making full allowance for the fragile sensibilities of children who are still in the first grade, I think you’re correct in saying that our teachers need to introduce a good big helping of political and intellectual irreverence into any lesson that might otherwise suggest to children in a classroom of contemporary racial isolation that they must discredit what they see before their eyes, with the result of teaching them to live with a peculiarly destructive lie.

At a New York City high school named for Dr. Martin Luther King, a classic segregated institution (96 percent black and Hispanic) in the middle of an affluent white section of Manhattan, students who apparently had thoroughly imbibed the lessons of their elementary grades went into the most remarkable contortions when I asked them if they thought it accurate to say that they were pupils in a “segregated” school. Indeed, the very introduction of that word seemed to surprise a number of the students in the ninth grade class that I was visiting. It was as if they’d never been invited by a teacher to consider this idea before.

"I don't think this is a segregated school," one student said, "because white students are allowed to come here. At least, if they want. . . ."

"Why don't they come here then?" I asked, noting that the neighborhood immediately around the school was home to thousands of white children.

"This school is *named* for Dr. Martin Luther King," another student said, wrestling oddly with the paradox this might present. But she seemed to work around that paradox in a surprising way. "I don't see how you could say this is a segregated school. Dr. King believed that every race is equal."

A few of the students launched into a heated disagreement with the students who had spoken first. "Hey!" said a tall black boy whose head was shaven and who told me that he once had been a student briefly at an integrated elementary school. "This right here"—he gestured to the students sitting all around him—"this is it! This is what it's all about." He wore an Army jacket and he had a look of shrewd impatience in his eyes. "This school is a segregated school. I don't think we need to dance around something so obvious."

A boy sitting next to him slapped his hand. "Thank you!" said a tall Hispanic girl who turned around to nod at him from the front row.

But some of the other students seemed affronted by his words and, oddly enough, appeared to be concerned that I might be offended somehow, even though I'd asked the question, by the slightly cutting way that he'd replied. I also had the clear impression

that a number of the students felt it would be disrespectful of their school if they were to let themselves concede that what he said was true.

At that point, one of the older teachers in the room jumped into the argument and asked the students what exactly they believed Dr. King had been "about." All but a few of the answers she received were very vague—"we need to learn to get along with one another" and "respect our differences," "he was a man of peace," and other accurate but imprecise assertions that suggested they had never read a book on Dr. King, or one that presented an unsanitized account of his beliefs.

Later, in the hallway after class, the teacher vented her frustration that so many of these students had arrived in the ninth grade with virtually no knowledge of our nation's recent history. "If I'm teaching in a school named Martin Luther King," she told me, "I'm not going to come in and sugarcoat the things that he believed in. This is exactly the kind of institution he regarded as a moral wrong. Students who come here have a right to know this."

Some of my white friends in New York City take it as an act of incivility when I confront them with an angry statement like the one this teacher made or with the flat-out accusation that the student in the Army jacket voiced. Several of these friends of mine are liberals or, more accurately, former liberals who participated in some of the protests and the marches in the South during the 1960s but who now reject the

practicality or, it seems, even the moral value of pursuing integration in the schools their own children attend.

Instead of conceding—even wistfully, regretfully—that racial segregation or, if they can't bear to bring themselves to speak those words, at very least near-total racial isolation is an accurate description of the status of most children in the education system in the city where they live, they bristle at this implication and appear to grant themselves some sort of ethical exemption by reminding me of all the decent things they did to help the cause of civil rights when they were young.

"I was at the March on Washington with Dr. King" is a familiar answer that I hear. Protest marches deeper in the South are also commonly recalled. Some recollect with pride that they were in the march across the fabled bridge in Selma, Alabama, which took place in 1965. I'm often struck by the nostalgia and authentic pride they seem to feel about those idealistic years in their own lives, which coincided with an idealistic era in our history. What is disturbing, nonetheless, is the apparent ease with which they use these memories to blind them to the more sophisticated system of apartheid in which they are, willingly or not, participating now.

Many black educators have expressed the same frustration you did when you spoke about the uses of the past as something like a piece of "meaningful but old and tattered cloth" that we have placed upon a shelf within a cupboard that we briefly open and then

carefully lock up again. I'd like to introduce you someday to an African-American teacher in New York who told me once, during the time when I was working on my book *Amazing Grace*, that he'd gotten to the point where he confessed he couldn't "stand to hear about the bridge at Selma, Alabama anymore" and refused to give his kids a set of lesson plans he'd been assigned for what he called "The Famous March Curriculum." Instead, he said he'd posted on his classroom walls all the stuff that he could find about the racist education system in which he was working now.

"You see," he said, "to the very poor black children that I teach . . . , it doesn't matter much what bridge you might have stood on thirty years ago. They want to know what bridge you stand on now."

He was teaching older kids than you do. I'm not sure what grade they were, but I thought of what he said when you let me read the notes you typed up for your presentation in Vermont. It seemed that all the irritation you had felt exploded suddenly. In that moment, you weren't speaking merely as a teacher who's been working her heart out every day to do the best job that she can to serve the children in her class. You were also speaking as a witness. I don't know if I would say this to you if I didn't recognize how strongly you believe it, but I think *all* teachers ought to feel the right and have the courage to speak out as witnesses to the injustices they see their children undergo. If we won't speak out on these seemingly forbidden matters, then who will?

But I also liked the fact that, even in the midst of all the indignation that you voiced, you did not leave out the sweetness and the many, many hours of sheer happiness you've known this year, as well as certain of the funny details you tucked in about the real life of a teacher in the elementary grades. I tried to imagine the reaction of the audience when you said that six-year-olds are "leaky little people" because of the many "accidents" they have. I wonder how many presentations made at education conferences ever mention matters quite so interesting as the great importance of the distance of the nearest bathroom from the classroom door. ("First graders leak!" as you explained this to me later, "either from their eyes" when they have painful quarrels with each other "or from their dribbly noses" when they're coming down with colds—or, as you put it, "from the other end more frequently.")

One of the reasons why I've found our conversations and our correspondence so refreshing is that you enjoy so much the small realities and daily misadventures, even the wet and messy ones, that take place in the classroom with your children. Even when you're speaking of school system policies that might leave another person sounding wilted by frustration, I notice that your voice still has that energetic sound of somebody who never lets herself be beaten down but keeps on coming back with a nice sense of lively combat, usually intermixed with pleasant bits of irony about the contradictions that you have to deal with.

I hope you won't mind this, but I told some

teachers in New York the anecdote you shared with me when you were working on the first report cards for your students. You said there was a box you had to check off that was labeled, "STUDENT IS RESPECTFUL OF DIVERSITY." The teachers very much enjoyed your speculations about how to answer this.

First, you said, you toyed with the idea of filling in "Not Applicable." You said there was no way that you could honestly report that they had proven they might be respectful to another race of children whom they'd never had a chance to know. Then you said you thought of writing you were sure, because they're sensitive children, that they would respect the children of another race if Boston's schools "should someday figure out that it would be a good idea to let them meet such children" by allowing them to go to school together. I knew that in the end you wouldn't yield to the temptation to write either of these things, because you knew they might cause problems for your principal and certainly would make a few waves higher up in the administration if somebody in the school department happened to be told that you had done this. Teachers learn to choose which battles are worth fighting. This one obviously wasn't worth it.

Besides, I think that your impatience with the misuse of that word, "diversity," and the whole surrounding repertoire of watered-down discussion about civil rights, comes across to children in a number of more subtle ways. The intonations of your voice, a passing glance within your eyes in reaction to a passage in a

story that you may be reading to the class, have their effect as well. The secret curriculum in almost any class, in my belief, is not the message that is written in a lesson plan or a specific book but the message of implicit skepticism or, conversely, of passivity or acquiescence that is written in the teacher's eyes and in the multitude of other ways in which her critical intelligence, her reservations about given truths, or else the absence of these inclinations and these capabilities, are quietly revealed.

Education, no matter what the rulebooks say, is never absolutely neutral. We either teach our children it's okay to write and talk about the things they think to be the truth or else we teach them that it's more acceptable to silence their beliefs, or even not to *have* beliefs but to settle for official truths that someone else has carefully prepared for them. A lot of those kids with whom I spoke at Martin Luther King School in New York had learned the second of these lessons far too well and long before they ever got to the ninth grade. The results were manifested in that muzzled consciousness in which they seemed to be entombed, that inability to scrutinize or speak about their own reality in thoughts or words that were their own.

I think we need to find the will to shatter this rock of silence starting at the earliest age possible. I wanted to cheer for you for having had the nerve to stand before an audience and say so!