

## JONATHAN KOZOL

In the passion of the civil rights campaigns of 1964 and 1965, Jonathan Kozol moved from Harvard Square into a poor black neighborhood of Boston and became a fourth grade teacher in the Boston public schools. He has devoted the subsequent four decades to the issues of education and social justice in America.

*Death at an Early Age*, a description of his first year as a teacher, was published in 1967 and received the 1968 National Book Award in Science, Philosophy, and Religion. Now regarded as a classic by educators, it has sold more than two million copies in the United States and Europe.

Among the other highly honored books that he has written since are *Rachel and Her Children*, a study of homeless mothers and their children, which received the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award for 1989 and the Conscience in Media Award of the American Society of Journalists and Authors, and *Savage Inequalities*, which won the New England Book Award and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1992.

His 1995 best-seller, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, described his visits to the South Bronx of New York, the poorest congressional district of America. Featured on the Oprah Winfrey Show and praised by scholars such as Robert Coles and Henry Louis Gates, and children's advocates and theologians all over the nation, *Amazing Grace* received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 1996, an honor previously granted to the works of Langston Hughes and Dr. Martin Luther King.

Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison wrote that *Amazing Grace* was "good in the old fashioned sense: beautiful and morally worthy." Elie Wiesel said, "Jonathan's struggle is noble. What he says must be heard. His outcry must shake our nation out of its guilty indifference."

Ten years later, in *The Shame of the Nation* (Crown/Random House, 2005), Jonathan returned to the battle with his strongest, most disturbing work to date: a powerful exposé of conditions he had found in visiting and revisiting nearly 60 public schools in 30 different districts in 11 states. Virtually everywhere, he found that inner-city children were more isolated racially than at any time since federal courts began dismantling the landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. "They live an apartheid existence and attend apartheid schools. Few of them know white children any longer." The proportion of black children who are now attending integrated public schools, he noted, is at a lower level than in any year since 1968. "No matter how complex the reasons that have brought us to the point at which we stand, he wrote, "we have, it seems, been traveling a long way to a place of ultimate surrender that does not look very different from the place where some of us began. If we have agreed to give up on the dream for which so many gave their lives, perhaps at least we ought to have the honesty to say so."

*The Shame of the Nation*, which appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list the week that it was published, has since joined *Amazing Grace*, *Savage Inequalities*, and *Death at an Early Age* as required reading at most universities and as part of the curriculum for future teachers and for professional development in dozens of our major urban systems.

Now, in his most recent work, *Letters to a Young Teacher* (Crown Publishers, August 2007), Jonathan draws upon four decades of experience to guide the newest generation of our nation's teachers into the ethically complicated challenges but, also, "the sheer joy and passionate rewards" of what he calls "a beautiful profession."

In a series of affectionate letters to Francesca, a first grade teacher at an inner-city school in Boston, Jonathan describes the tender chemistry of love and trust she rapidly develops with her students while, under Francesca's likeably irreverent questioning, he also reveals his own most personal stories of the years that he spent in public schools.

*Letters to a Young Teacher* reignites a number of the controversial issues Jonathan has powerfully addressed in recent years: the mania of high-stakes testing that turns many classrooms into test-prep factories where spontaneity and critical intelligence are no longer valued, the invasion of our public schools by predatory private corporations, and the persistent inequalities of urban education.

But most of all, these letters are rich with the happiness of teaching children, the curiosity and jubilant excitement children bring into the classroom at an early age, and their ability to overcome their insecurities when they are in the hands of an adoring and hard-working teacher.

"Some education students who want very much to teach in inner-city schools," he writes in one of his letters to Francesca, "are given the impression that working in these kinds of schools will be a painful sacrifice – all struggle, but no joy. As I think you knew somehow before you even started out, it's not like that at all. At least, it shouldn't be. Even in the most adverse conditions, the work of a good teacher ought to be an act of celebration. It is in that sense of celebration, in my own belief at least, that teachers who have chosen out of love to work with children find their ultimate reward."

"If there is a single message I wish I could pass on to young teachers and to people thinking about teaching, that would be the one. It's not political at all, not on the face of it; but fighting to defend that right to celebrate each perishable day and hour in a child's life may, in the current climate of opinion, be one of the greatest challenges we have."

"This book cuts to the heart of what it means to be a teacher today," says Reg Weaver, President of the 3-million-member NEA. "The truth about testing, vouchers, and their impact on the public schools – it's all captured here." But, he writes, despite the formidable obstacles that teachers face, "Francesca's journey will leave you hopeful for our nation's children."

"What a wonderful book!" writes Stanford University professor Linda Darling-Hammond. "Anyone who cares about...our public education system should read it. I could not put it down!"

"Jonathan's advice to the teacher Francesca shows all the qualities that make him the nation's wisest, boldest, and most clear-headed writer on education," says historian Howard Zinn. In his descriptions of Francesca's classroom, "Jonathan conveys the excitement and joy of preparing a new generation to remake the world. Teachers, students, parents alike will find this book inspiring."

And America's most beloved author of children's books, Eric Carle, who has given us treasures like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and other works cherished by young children, writes of the stories Jonathan tells of "the magic of kids who delight in words like 'wiggly' and 'wobbly,' 'bamboozle' and 'persnickety.'" *Letters to a Young Teacher*, he continues, "is a testament to teachers who not only respect and advocate for children on a daily basis but are the necessary guardians of the spirit. Every citizen who cares about the future of our children ought to read this."

The book concludes with a challenge to teachers to speak out boldly in opposition to the growing corporate attempts to privatize our public schools and announces the creation of

a national network Jonathan has launched to support and advocate for talented but, at times, intimidated teachers who resist the drill-and-kill mentality that the federal law No Child Left Behind has forced upon too many of our urban schools.

“Teachers,” he writes, “and especially the teachers of young children, are not servants of the global corporations or drill sergeants for the state and should never be compelled to view themselves that way. The best teachers are not merely the technicians of proficiency; they are also ministers of innocence, practitioners of tender expectations. They stalwartly refuse to see their pupils as so many future economic units for a corporate society, little pint-sized deficits of assets for America’s economy, into whom they are expected to pump ‘added value,’ as the pundits of the education policy arena now declaim. Teachers like these believe that every child who has been entrusted to their care comes into their classroom with *inherent* value to begin with.”

When he is not with teachers in their classrooms, or at universities and colleges speaking to our future teachers, Jonathan is likely to be found in Washington, where he devotes considerable time to what he calls “my lifelong efforts at remediation of the members of the U.S. House and Senate.” He has spent much of the present year attempting to convince his friends within the Senate leadership to radically revise the punitive aspects of No Child Left Behind.

Jonathan received a summa cum laude degree in English literature from Harvard in 1958, after which he was awarded a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University. He has been called by The Chicago Sun-Times “today’s most eloquent spokesman for America’s disenfranchised.” But he believes that teachers and their students speak most eloquently for themselves; and in his newest book, so full of the vitality of youth, we hear their testimony.