

## **FROM... *On Being a Teacher* by Jonathan Kozol**

### **First Person Singular and Plural**

In order to be able to achieve the sense of inner leverage to perceive the schools as institutions we have power to transform, students and teachers need to feel they have the right, the license and the sanction to speak out in the first person plural: "we." People, however, cannot easily say "we" if they do not first achieve the sense of self-possession to say "I."

Schools, by tradition, do all that they can to train us not to speak in the first person. In the classic situation in the elementary grades, if a child speaks in rude, impatient words to a school teacher, there is a stock response that comes out often in a kind of singsong. "Is that any way," the teacher asks, "to speak to me?" Instead of saying me, however, teachers often seem to step away and speak as if they had replaced themselves by someone else: "Is that any way to speak to ... Miss O'Brien?"

It is, for just one moment, as if she were not "in presence" in the room, but locked up somehow in the closet with the chalk and chalk erasers. In the universities and high schools, we hear the same thing for example, in those "regulations for term papers" which instruct the students to avoid the sound of their own voice: "The paper should have a clearly indicated introduction, body and conclusion. Do not use the word I except in the conclusion.

It is as if the students can't admit that they are there until they are about to leave the room. It is the ideal language for an alienated people in a mechanistic land. Those who do not know that they exist, and live, and breathe, in the first person are the perfect workers to press buttons on sophisticated instruments in vast and modern industries of war or else to press those buttons that release the bombs and napalm on defenseless villages in foreign nations.

Pilots and presidents who live and breathe in the third person can make the gruesome choice to wipe out a whole continent, destroy a population or obliterate a city with a single weapon, then go to bed and sleep for eight good hours in uninterrupted peace. It isn't just a foolish English lesson, then. It is something far more frightening and more disturbing.

One of the ways by which a teacher can begin to fight this myth, right in the context of the public school, is by providing students with direct, exciting access to the words, the voices, the whole manner of self presentation, of some of those men and women in our own or former times who have been able to transcend this inhibition and who do, as a direct result, feel power to speak out in their own words and to regain the sense of their own voice.

"In most books, the 'I', or first person, is omitted. In this book, it will be retained." These words are from the first page of *Walden* by Thoreau. That, he says, is "the main difference" between his own book and those of other writers.

There will be dozens of other examples of this willingness to speak out in first person pronouns in the later sections of this book. Merely to quote from famous people is, however, less effective, in my own belief, than another method which many teachers put into effect without a tactical intent, but pretty much by nature. This is in a literal sense to learn to speak out and to be, an open and at all times undisguised "first person," exemplified in the very ways that we behave with students and in the words we choose to speak in the course of conversations with them. I do not mean simply that we ought to be prepared to state our own opinions within earshot of our pupils (although I do mean this, as well), but that we also need to be first persons in the eyes of children in the deeper sense of letting all our own complexities, our viewpoints, hesitations, dreams and passions and our vulnerable aspects, too become apparent to the class.

I think that many seasoned teachers will perceive in this a recommendation which is far more subversive than it may at first appear. It is subversive both of the age-old school tradition of professional behavior on the part of educators and also sad to say of many teachers' age-old concept of themselves. Few of us are encouraged, in the course of teacher preparation, to grant ourselves the luxury of being just plain human beings within the eyes of children.

The concept of professional behavior, as it has been defined for fifty years in public education, is devoid of almost all intensities. The teacher does not easily yield to indignation, weep for passion, rage at grief. All that we love in drama, all that we find breathtaking in a film, all that is tragic, comic, intense, extreme, remarkable, is filtered from the teacher's manner. If film and drama were restricted to the range of feelings present in this type of classroom, the theaters would quickly empty and the people would pour out on the streets. Only the schools command a captive box office, because attendance at their presentation is compulsory.

Sometimes, seeing the traditional gradeschool teacher standing there within that room, blackboard behind her, chalk dust about her, one wonders what would happen if, for a terrible moment, she should lose control, forget herself and swear. Swear right there, in front of the class, like ordinary people do, without the time to qualify her words. Would the children smile? Would she be smiling too? It seems at times as if the sky will break in pieces, the roof collapse and the walls come down in timbers if the teacher, walking across the room before the class, should bang her knee on the edge of a table and it should start to bleed. One wonders if, perhaps, it wouldn't even bleed like the knees of other people. If it did bleed, it would tell the children she was human.

The professional inhibition I have just described is one that was carefully molded and foisted upon us by successive generations. It is a pattern which self-respecting teachers will no longer tolerate today, and everyone who cares for kids and teachers as well as for the future of American education must rejoice as a result.

In making this statement, I do not intend to recommend, instead, the whimsical and irresponsible behavior, which was identified with the counterculture of ten years ago. This sort of behavior (exemplified often in a slipshod manner and a disrespectful style of dress) seems to me, indeed, almost more dangerous than the style it was intended to replace. Moreover, it cannot conceivably win us allies where we need them most. It either alienates or, at least, disquiets many parents who might otherwise have given us support.

I do believe, however, that we ought not to be scared to let our real emotions show to do so, moreover, every bit as openly with our students as we would with our adult friends, our families and (if we have children) our own kids. There are certain instances, of course, when teachers have excellent reason to conceal particular aspects of their lives, not only from their pupils but from anyone at all; there is no reason on earth why teachers ought to feel compelled to share all of their private feelings with their pupils in ways they would not do even with adult friends. But teachers also have the right to laugh, the need to cry, to demonstrate anger, pain, anxiety or fear, right in the classroom just as openly as they might do in their own homes.

We do not make ourselves professionals by rendering all our motions stiff and wooden and our humor or exhilaration rigid and unreal. Teachers can weep when we are mourning someone we have loved, and we can tell our children we are feeling rotten if we just wake up one morning and feel sick. There is no reason why we have to tell the class we need to "wash our hands" or "freshen up" if what we really need to do is use the toilet; nor is there a reason why we cannot swear like hell if, by bad luck, we should fall down and twist our leg or bang our knee.

Teachers can bleed in every way, inside and out, and students should know it; they will not hate us as a consequence, because they bleed as well. They suffer too, and do not simply need to "freshen up" when they request permission to "go down the hall." They sweat also, often laugh, and sometimes need to weep.

This is, I think, the most important way of all by which we teach our pupils the power and license to speak out, and cry, and breathe, and live, and love and someday struggle in first person pronouns: first to say "I" and one day to say "we."

### **Extreme Ideas**

Often, if a student tries to give expression to a strong belief, especially if that student states his views in terms that seem to lead in the direction of a real dispute, teachers tend, by an automatic reflex, to try to cool things off and to persuade the student to tone down his views: "Peter, isn't that a bit strong?"

If the student agrees to backtrack and retreat, then he often wins respect or even praise for self-control: "That sounds more sensible."

In actual fact, and by direct result, as there comes to be less to believe, the teacher says it sounds increasingly believable. The same thing happens with a strong opinion which has not been rounded off to fit the class consensus: "Okay ... David says that black Americans are now fighting for their rights and Susan says that we need law and order. . . Well there might be truth in both of these positions Long pause... At last the resolution: "Why don't we see if we can't find a third position?"

The teacher seldom comes right out and states the truth: "Look, we're going to have an easier time together if you'll just cut back on your convictions for a little while." Instead, there is the absolute suggestion that the third position is more true than either of the two extremes: that truth lives "closer to the middle." One consequence of this idea is the viewpoint, reinforced by many modern school materials, even of the most sophisticated kind, that anger, conflict, confrontation of all kinds are nothing more than a perceptual mistake: "Nobody really disagrees with someone else once we have explained ourselves with proper cares. Hence, the new and profitable field of bogus classroom ethics known as "conflict resolution" or as "clarification" of our values and our former points of view.

The message of this new material is clear: Confrontation is perceived as if it were the consequence, in almost every case, of poorly chosen words or of inadequate perception: "We have to learn not just to talk, but also how to listen, how to understand .

The message here is that, if we learn to listen well, we will not hear things that we do not like. To hear things that we do not like is to hear incorrectly.

There are these words in the Bible: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." A vision is, by definition, both expansive and extreme. It is, precisely, the exclusion of the vision from the public classroom and, in particular, from the inner-city school which guarantees that apathetic mood, those arid and unstimulating class discussions, so easily mistaken by observers for "a lack of pupil motivation."

It is not simply a case of pedagogic styles that fail to elicit the intensities and emotions of our pupils. It is, rather, a case of school mandated absence of intensity which has successfully excluded such emotion. The conventional wisdom of the U.S, public school is the virtue of the low-key, the cautious, the consensus view.

Because a vision of justice is incompatible with such a preference, the students have learned, long years before the secondary grades, to leave their sense of passion at the classroom door. The bias against extremes is paralyzing in its impact on the teacher and the student both.

All intense ideas or radical views are treated as inherently suspect, while moderate statements ("notions," not "convictions") are given credence from the start. The term radical is universally described in textbooks as a sickly aberration of a healthy state of mind called liberal. In the same sense, revolution is defined as an unwholesome word, an agonized distortion of a healthy term: reform.

There is a phrase, consistent with this view, found often in the textbooks, press and magazines: "extremists on both sides." The purpose of this phrase is to make people believe that there is something evil, in all cases, in extreme ideas. This, clearly, is not so. Extreme devotion, for example, to the implementation of the details of annihilation of the Jews is not the same as an extreme determination to assassinate the Nazi leaders. "Extremists on both sides" is a deceptive phrase. It tries, once more, to get a student to believe that there is always more truth sitting someplace in the middle. It also tries to get a child to believe that there must be a genuine "middle" every time. This, too, is simply not the case.

A ruling principle, in many high school texts, goes some what in these terms: "All extremes of action or belief are equally unwise. Sooner or later, all will lead to self-betrayal, selfcorruption or deceit."

The Soviet Union is the traditional example of the failure or inevitable distortion of extreme beliefs. The textbooks never speak of the extreme success of that most memorable revolution that took place two hundred years ago in the United States, nor of the extreme importance of the revolution which is, in a sense, still taking place today in Shanghai and Peking. Nor do they speak of the extreme ideas of Malcolm X, Saint Francis or Saint Joan.

The truth is that extreme reaction to extreme ordeal is not only healthy and intelligent at times, but also very often the sole ethical response of honorable people in the face of human pain. How can we begin to render this unpopular point of view both potent and persuasive to our students? My own approach is to confront the issue head-on, in subjective terms, by stating some of these arguments to children outright, much as I have stated do with one another in the real world. Many teachers, however, will probably react to this suggestion much as they have done before. They will ask why we must state such matters to the class when, instead, with richly assorted data scattered all around the room, the children can discover all of this themselves? Although this is a method that I always find peculiarly circuitous, I see no reason to object to teachers who prefer this means of getting an idea across to children. I simply think that we are being far more candid if, at least at some point in the game, we state it in our own words, too.

The other approach, delineated above, is to make available a broad array of relevant quotations of a number of "extreme" ideas and points of view, stated by people like Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson, for instance people whom the textbooks have already taught the children to revere.

"The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." Jefferson wrote these words in 1787. Many teachers nowadays discover that direct quotations of that kind drawing on the real (extreme) beliefs of highly reputable and patriotic people tend to stir up an extreme response in children, while simultaneously they leave the teacher partially protected from attack.

William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist who lived and wrote in Boston over a century ago, also spoke about the matter of extreme reactions in dramatic terms. Asked by a friend why he was "all on fire" with his rage, Garrison replied: "I have need to be all on fire, for I have mountains of ice about me to melt."

Henry David Thoreau, whose quotations and convictions recur (and will recur) again and again within this book, is a man I take to be a model of straightforward talk and of unhesitant denunciation of whatever it was that passed for conventional wisdom in his time. He proved also to be indignant and remarkably unbridled in defense of a style of speech for which them right here, and as we all he would be graded very, very low in all too many of the U.S. public schools.

"I fear chiefly," Thoreau stated in 1854, "lest my expression may not be extravagant enough. . . I desire to speak somewhere without bounds."

Of all such expressions of conviction on this subject, the one I like the most is that of Martin Luther King. In "*Letter from Birmingham Jail*" (1963) he wrote these words: "Was not Jesus an extremist for love? . . . The question is not whether we will be an extremist, but what kind of extremist we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?"

Apart from straight quotation, there are also many concrete and well-documented cases of extreme behavior, based upon extreme belief, which did not lead into a self-destructive or corrupting end result. What if, for instance, teachers were prepared to put aside the obvious betrayal of the dream within the U.S.S.R. and to speak instead of the extreme success of public education in post-revolutionary Cuba or of the extreme success of health care in post-revolutionary China? In order to do this, teachers need to have good indeed, impeccable data and resources. The rebel, here as in almost all other situations, must be an infinitely more careful scholar than the writer or speaker of innocuous and inoffensive views. I have tried to give a lot of leads for interesting and helpful source materials in the final pages of this book.

The ultimate approach in attacking this dilemma is not the lesson of "the right quotation," nor of "the right example" from the distant past. It is the power of the teacher to articulate a point of view in words of passion equal to the substance which those views convey. This alone provides a class of students with an inviolable precedent for honest exposition of their own intense beliefs. A teacher who reverts, in every case, to colorless understatement and to oblique expressions of belief cannot offer pupils any credible lessons in the virtues of outspoken, lucid or extreme ideas.

The hidden curriculum, as we have seen before, is the teacher's own integrity and lived conviction. The most memorable lesson is not what is written by the student on a sheet of yellow lined paper in the lesson pad; nor is it the clumsy sentence published (and "illustrated") in the standard and official text. It is the message which is written in a

teacher's eyes throughout the course of his or her career. It is the lesson which endures a lifetime.

### **The Hero in Jail: "The Truth Will Make Us Free"**

In trying to select historical examples of freethinking men and women, teachers are forced to consider the question of their own protection in the face of potential critics on all sides. The ideal rebel, from a tactical point of view, is a person who has been already canonized by public school.

The area of black studies offers us an obvious example. I have always been fascinated by the life and work of Malcolm X. Nonetheless, in approaching the topic of racism with students, I think the words of Martin Luther King are bound to be much better starting points. They offer a conservative school board far less reason to give the teacher a hard time. King has already been credentialized by TV, press and public school while Malcolm X has not. The point, however, once having made a tactical choice of biographical subject, is to refuse to accept the falsified version of Dr. King which school administrations will too frequently be asking us to sell.

Dr. King is regularly presented to our students as a noble, decent, but incredibly predictable and rather boring human being, who did a certain amount of "good" for his own people, adhered at all times to peaceful means, and never became impatient with white people.

Textbooks omit from the story of his life the only facts that make him genuinely great and worth our real respect. One of these facts, for instance, is that Dr. King, while peaceful in his tactics and devoted to the principles of Gandhi and Tolstoy, was nonetheless a militant and unyielding man who fought great battles and broke unjust laws, spent months in jail to dramatize the limits of conventional efforts carried out within the letter of the law and urged the rest of us to find the willingness to do so also.

Dr. King spoke his mind freely, if perhaps somewhat too late, about the U.S. role in fostering needless and unjustifiable devastation in Vietnam and in other parts of Southeast Asia. He frequently expressed his outrage at the fact that Lyndon Johnson lied, first to the nation, then to the entire world, spoke of peace while dropping bombs on innocent civilians in Vietnam, leaving behind so many victims maimed, crippled or blind.

"America," said Dr. King, "is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." He spoke these words on June 4, 1967. Ten months later, a sharpshooter in Memphis would prove his words correct by killing him as well. He was murdered on the terrace of a Memphis motel, a bullet fired through his throat.

Teachers can share with students the profound convictions that were honest reflections of the character of Dr. King, not the sanitized and prizewinning plastic preacher, but the man who spent so many days and nights in prison cells, lived with the constant threat of death and danger from the Ku Klux Klan, and also had to live with the blackmail of the

F.B.I. Teachers can also extract, from straight respectable sources like *The Congressional Record* and *The Boston Globe*, a number of important stories on the ways that Dr. King was blackmailed by J. Edgar Hoover.'

None of this may please the local school board. As usual, however, the source of the material seems the key to our protection and survival. Any school that seeks to fire a teacher for the honest, undistorted use of documentation from the U.S. Senate and *The Boston Globe* is asking for considerable humiliation. In this way, teachers can with relative impunity make use of the life and words of Dr. King to pose some interesting questions to the students in their classes.

What is the reason for a man or woman to spend time in jail for his or her beliefs? What does it mean to be a "free" or "unfree" person in a nation that allows so little true and lasting freedom to its poorest citizens?

Are people free in any way that really counts if they are compelled to spend their lives within a prison made of lies? Dr. King once said that people who are not prepared to die for their beliefs aren't fit to live. Teachers might provoke a standing debate even if they do nothing more than ask their students how they feel about such words. If the issue proves disturbing to the students, then the students might well bring it home to ask their parents, too.

Thoreau provides another dramatic example of a man who is included in the textbooks and curricula of public schools, but one who is denied most of those values and convictions that have given him a place in history. Ironically, with Thoreau, just as with Dr. King, the school boards have excluded from the acceptable life story virtually every item which compels them to include him in their textbooks in the first place. They are forced by his heroic and historic acts of civil disobedience to contain him in their province of consideration; but they are forced, by their alarm at this same power of disobedience, to delete or neutralize that very virtue. We might well wonder why they bother with him at all if it were not for the obvious reply. They have to present him, respect him and defuse him, precisely in order that students will not meet him on their own. The dangers of disobedience, like those of sainthood, must be neutralized in warm, well-lighted rooms.

The purposes of the educational system would seem bizarre and self-defeating were they not so cleverly effective. It requires no conspiracy to bring about this intellectual emasculation. It is the natural behavior of well-educated and appropriately domesticated adults. All of us are complicit in these deeds, though many teachers have at last begun to learn the ways to free themselves from this complicity.

Like so many rebels of the past ten, twelve or fifteen years, Thoreau was thoroughly detested by a number of his fellow citizens. Once he had been dead for many years, the schools and critics decreed that he had been a brilliant writer. It seems to be a rule of thumb in the United States, as in most other nations of the modern world, that the only

acceptable rebel certainly the one whose greatness is most certain and unclouded is a dead one.

If students could get an early look at some of the strongest political writings of Thoreau, they probably would find it much less difficult to understand why citizens of Massachusetts felt uneasy with his views. "How does it become a man to behave towards this American government today? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it."

Thoreau was enraged by several attitudes and actions of the U.S. government, above all our toleration of the slave trade and the war with Mexico. Very few of the students that I meet in public schools today know anything at all about the war with Mexico. If they have even heard of it, I find it is the famous battles they remember. They do not remember either the purpose or the outcome. Few of them know that most of Arizona, all of California, Utah and Nevada, and a large part of Colorado and New Mexico, would not be parts of the United States at all if they had not been stolen wholesale by the U.S. Army. This, of course, is the real meaning of the war with Mexico.

One night, in 1846, Thoreau defied the U.S. government in the most dramatic way he knew. He spent a night in Concord jail as price of his refusal to pay taxes to support the Mexican war.

"When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country [i.e., Mexico] is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize . . . . As for adopting the ways, which the state has provided for dealing with the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too long and a man's life will be gone."

The heart of Thoreau's political opinion is contained within his essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. Curriculum guides generally make reference to this work but then divert our students to those sections of his longer books in which Thoreau speaks mainly about nature, woods and streams. These passages, of course, are beautiful and moving. This, however, is not the part of Thoreau's work that makes his name important in the history of ideas. Nor is it the part that renders him an influential moral force in almost every corner of the earth.

Teachers who care about Thoreau, and plan to speak of him at all, have it in their power to insist on going back to his essential work. School officials may perhaps inquire why it is that we do not restrict ourselves to his less controversial work "the writing about nature."

Teachers can comfortably answer that it isn't writings about nature that have rendered Thoreau a central and seminal figure for so many of the world's nonviolent leaders. Why waste our students' time on aspects of the man that count the least?

I find that candid questions of that sort tend to disarm our interrogators. Many (hard as it may be for their potential victims to believe) have simply never thought of it before. Their tendency is less to be offended than bemused. It is experiences like these which lead me to withdraw my credence from various radical theories of "conspiracy." People pass on, often unknowingly, the lies their fathers and their mothers lived by. It seems to me that this statement comes much closer to the truth than any of the demonizing theories.

As in earlier chapters, what I am proposing here is the radical rediscovery of the innermost moral meanings of those heroines and heroes who have already been canonized by the public schools. Even when teachers choose their symbols and examples with great care, however, they still may be faced with serious trouble, inflicted by a hostile school board or a school official who is not "bemused" but, frankly, out to get them. It would be foolish, and misleading to young teachers, if I were to argue here that merely to invoke such names as Helen Keller and Thoreau and Dr. King, and then to defend them with a totally unexpected lack of guile, is going to serve as absolute protection against people who know very well exactly where their own selfinterest lies and view our actions, therefore, as a threat.

Some administrators are, in truth, vindictive or afraid. Others are innocent of either malice or intelligence. And others still are highly intelligent, quietly grateful, and very much on our side. In this respect, as with most others raised within this book, there are, in short, no simple guarantees.

### **Postscript**

Every distortion, every exclusion, every action of emasculation or denial of those men and women we have reason to revere, appears to find its curious counterpart in another body of American leaders who are clothed in the trappings of profundity and ethics which do not appropriately belong to them. While King is diminished, Lyndon Johnson is progressively transformed into an ardent activist for social justice. While Thoreau is appreciated as a sensitive man of nature, Emerson is exalted as the ethical and intellectual rebel he was not. While Garrison, Brown and Frederick Douglass are denied, and frequently forgotten altogether, Abraham Lincoln is given unwarranted praise and credit for the emancipation of the slaves.

The latter example is particularly disturbing to anyone who believes, as I do, that there are some genuine reasons to admire Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln was, unquestionably, one of our most distinguished presidents; we do not make him more distinguished, rather we tarnish him a bit, by attributing to him virtues he did not possess. The textbooks describe him as a "brave, heroic, kindly and generous man-famous, above all, as a fighter for the freedom of black people." The same books also speak of him as "Honest Abe." The second statement may very well be true. The first is not.

Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, as historians make clear, not because he was a partisan of equal privilege for all but-as ample evidence attests-because he was

advised by friends that it would be to his political advantage to adopt this action. He did so, moreover, only after many years of desperate struggle by the real emancipators of black people. Those real emancipators of the blacks were, in large numbers, black themselves. Those who were not black were predominately the northern abolitionists. If it were not for the long and often dangerous struggle undertaken by these activists and constant agitators, Lincoln would not have been under pressure to emancipate black people.

This version of the truth is seldom stated in the books that school officials order for our classroom use. We can ascertain the truth, however, in any number of scholarly books which give an accurate history of the United States in the 1800s. Lincoln assigned to the black race a secondary role in our society. His attitude, indeed, is difficult to distinguish from that of the most committed segregationists of the 1980s. He did not simply believe that blacks deserved a separate and unequal role. He said so-and he did it in a speech which ought to be part of every U.S. text.

"I am not," he told his audience, "nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social or political equality of the white and black races . . . I will say in addition that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which, I suppose, will forever forbid the two races living together upon terms of social and political equality; and in as much as they cannot so live, that while they do remain together there must be a position of the superiors and the inferiors; and that I, as much as any other man, am in favor of the superior being assigned to the white man."

Lincoln was, in many respects, an honest man. We should be honest, in turn, about his honesty. He was honest in describing his profoundly racist views. This is perhaps one reason why so many black men and women do not particularly like to see his photograph posted on the walls inside their schools.

We need to treasure the relatively small number of distinguished people who have risen to high office in our nation. One of the ways to do this, I believe, is to praise these people for their genuine and unquestioned virtues while we concede, without a bit of hesitation, these prejudices, that narrowness of outlook, which they held in common with their generation. Lincoln will not appear to our students to be a lesser man for his deficiencies. He will appear to be more interesting, and more human, and more real and therefore a person with whom both black and white kids can identify and grapple, or else struggle to confront. The truth, here as in all ways, makes us free.