

The background of the entire cover is a grayscale image of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes in a slightly wavy, draped manner.

A Persistent Reformer

JONATHAN KOZOL'S WORK TO

PROMOTE EQUALITY IN AMERICA

EDITED BY RICHARD OGNIBENE



Introduction

RICHARD OGNIBENE

Jonathan Kozol was born in 1936, and after he wrote a novel in 1958 as a result of a Harvard English class requirement, he published his first non-fiction book, *Death at an Early Age*, in 1967. Between then and 2007, he has published eleven more, although there were additional books whose concepts and data were blended into some of those eleven and thus not generally included when discussing his body of work. Kozol's books offer analysis and criticism of an American educational system that unfairly separates students based on race and class, one that treats minority students poorly and reduces possibilities for them to improve their lives; it is a dual system that funds education inequitably, producing harmful consequences for poor children including school facilities that are dismal, a curriculum that is limited, and novice teachers who accept jobs in their schools as a last resort and then leave as soon as they can. Although most famous as an educational critic, Kozol has also written about poverty, illiteracy, and homelessness, conditions that condemn whole classes of people and whole geographic areas to lives of impoverished despair and fear, circumstances that are not congruent with the traditional idea of "the American Dream." Kozol's life's work has been to make these conditions and these people visible to those who would rather remain ignorant and to motivate them to act in accordance with our political and Judeo-Christian ideals which call for individuals to assist all citizens in their quest for a good life, the liberty to pursue their dreams, and the opportunity to achieve the happiness desired by everyone.

Readers of Kozol's books are generally aware of the unusual way in which his work as an educational and social reformer began. As several of the chapter authors point out, Kozol's life was one of privilege. Raised in the wealthy community of Newton, MA, he was the son of a well-known Harvard-trained physician and a mother who had a career in social work. Kozol was educated in a Massachusetts prep school and had a virtually guaranteed admission to Harvard, where he majored in English and graduated summa cum laude in 1958. He abandoned his subsequent Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford in less than a year and went to Paris where he lived among successful and aspiring writers on the Left Bank, the well-known intellectual and artistic section of the city. The bohemian life style of this environment did not have the desired effect of helping him write another novel, and he returned to the United States in 1963, a time when the struggle for minority civil rights had become the preeminent social reform movement of the day. Kozol is Jewish and politically liberal like many others in that era who shared that religious and cultural background, and he was raised in a family that honored the tradition of Old Testament prophecy that encouraged speaking out against evil and injustice. These factors combined to prompt Kozol to volunteer to teach reading at a Congress of Racial Equality site in Boston. Later, after three civil rights workers were murdered in Mississippi in the summer of 1964, two of whom were Jewish, Kozol decided to become more involved in civil rights work and sought to become a teacher in the Boston public schools, as he was advised to do by an African American pastor who was prominent in civil rights activities in the city. Not certified to be appointed as a regular teacher, he was hired as a long-term substitute to teach at the Christopher Gibson School in Roxbury, a poor section of Boston. Kozol's effort to enrich the curriculum with literature that would appeal to his students of color met with official disapproval, and he was fired near the end of the 1964–65 school year. The subsequent support he received from parents of minority students in the community made Kozol a celebrity whose story helped to expose the racism in the Boston public schools. Based on the journals he kept during his year of teaching, he wrote *Death at an Early Age*, whose success, including a National Book Award, launched Kozol's career as a writer, activist, and social critic.

Some forty-five years later, Kozol remains a notable leader in the fight for a socially just and integrated society whose schools offer genuine equal educational opportunity for all students. Kozol's reputation as a social and educational reformer is such that he is in constant demand as a speaker on college campuses, before civic and professional organizations, and, of course, for educators who teach, administer, or counsel. In addition, with the publication of each book, Kozol tours bookstores, appears in a variety of media outlets, and writes popular journal articles that summarize aspects of the book. Many of his books became best sellers and were awarded prizes; all of them are still in print, and several are perennially used as texts

in college courses. In both the popular and scholarly press, when discussing differences in funding schools, the phrase “savage inequalities” is virtually always used, and that phrase is the title of a famous Kozol book. In dialogue about racial separation in American schools, another Kozol title, “the shame of the nation,” is a similarly convenient term to describe that important issue. Kozol’s prominence is illustrated by his role at the most significant example of collective action by teachers in decades, the Save Our Schools rally in Washington, DC at the end of July 2011. He was the first keynote speaker at the two-day conference that preceded the July 30th march of 5,000 teachers and others who came to protest the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the way it has shaped American educational practice since its passage in 2002. Speaking from the platform on the day of the march, Kozol’s passionate criticism of NCLB went a little longer than organizers wanted, but even the 100 degree heat that day could not moderate his disdain for a law against which he protested with a nearly three-month public fast in 2007.

Kozol’s affinity for teachers is increasingly evident in books he has written in the last twenty years. When he finds caring and effective teachers in dysfunctional schools in poor areas, he describes their work and holds them up as models for the profession. What is less well known is the way in which his books or appearances before teacher groups affect individuals with whom he or his ideas come into contact. Literature about preparing teachers to work in urban schools often contains citations from students who attribute their decision to teach to a Kozol book they had read (Clift, 2009). Kozol seems conscious of his effect in this regard and can articulate criteria he employs when meeting individuals he might recruit for urban teaching (Kozol, 2007, p. 116–117). He also inspires veteran teachers to resist mandated requirements or curricula that they believe interfere with student learning (Jaeger, 2006). As will be shown in several chapters in this book, Kozol has been relentless in trying to improve public education in a variety of ways. His effort on behalf of urban schools, he tells us, is motivated by “the premise that no matter how grim the context—how many teenage mothers there are or how much drug use, violence or despair there is—a spectacular public school can make the difference” (Interview, 1992, p. 64).

Kozol has many conservative critics who fundamentally disagree with his views about everything. Early in his career, Kozol was a harsh critic of the various levels of American government that sought to use schools to promote an accepted official history that eliminated examples of dubious state-sponsored activities and the dissenters who questioned them. According to conservative writers, the idea that citizens and students should be encouraged to ask critical questions about our past and present history made Kozol’s ideas a threat to our American heritage. Another aspect of conservative orthodoxy is that government money should not be the mechanism used to solve social problems. Kozol’s perspective is just the opposite. Funding inequities are a significant cause of the inadequacies of urban schools, but

the idea that the federal government should administer programs to reduce those inequities is contrary to conservative views about taxation and “big” government. Conservatives also abhor initiatives to create programs to rebuild the infrastructure of urban neighborhoods where housing, medical care, and job training could help those who are poor recreate their lives with hope and dignity. Other critics employ personal attacks. Kozol has been called a frustrated person whose purpose in life is to spread resentment; because of his longevity as a social critic, he has also been labeled a relic from the sixties. Kozol’s writing has been attacked because it is harsh and too passionate, and because, in the critics’ view, he fails to offer detailed solutions to the problems about which he writes.

Those who criticize Kozol have failed to notice a shift in his perspective and writing style. His earliest writing was polemical and connected to the social critical tradition that prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s whose purpose was inspire social and political change. When asked why he wrote books his response was “I write to change the world” (Interview, 1993, p. 56). Kozol’s more recent books are more personal and are filled with sensitive descriptions of adults, youth, and schools in troubled urban areas. These later books portray responsible adults with moral sensibilities, resilient children who successfully resist the lures of the destructive environment in which they live, and urban teachers who defy stereotype and are fully committed to providing a caring and motivating learning atmosphere despite the chaos in the neighborhood and the dysfunction of the school system. “I guess I’ve resigned myself,” Kozol has said, “I think maybe the most a book can do is simply to witness” (Zimmerman, 1996, p. 7). Over time, as one observer noted, Kozol, without losing his passion for social reform, has become “the gentlest angry man” (Feeney, 2000, p. C 1).

In 2005, Kozol received the Puffin/Nation Prize, a significant financial award “given to an individual who has challenged the status quo through distinctive, courageous, imaginative, and socially responsible work of significance. . . . The prize is intended to encourage the recipients to continue their work, and to inspire others to challenge . . . prevailing orthodoxies . . .” (Nation Institute). The wording of this award well represents the view of the contributors to this book. Each of the seven chapters examines a book or books written by Kozol, reviews and analyzes the perspective presented in those books, and carries forward the analysis and connects it to the contemporary status of those issues. It was not hard to make those connections. The problems Kozol addressed in his books are still with us today, and, as will be shown, we would be better off as a nation if the insights and suggestions in those books had been accepted and implemented.

Chapter 1 examines issues related to segregation, using *Death at an Early Age* (1967) and *The Shame of the Nation* (2005) as the vehicles for that examination.

Poverty and its consequences are the issues presented in Chapter 2. The chapter draws upon *Amazing Grace* (1995) and *Ordinary Resurrections* (2000) to look at poverty in a specific community. *Savage Inequalities* (1991) is the focus of Chapter 3 and provides information that makes possible a detailed assessment of the effects of inequitable school funding. These issues, segregation, poverty, and educational funding are the ones most associated with Kozol in the mind of the public and in the press.

Teachers and teaching are the topics treated in Chapters 4 and 5. *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home* (1975) and *On Being a Teacher* (1981) are the texts used in Chapter 4 that advise and instruct teachers about ways they can and should express their own views and help students acquire the skill to ask questions about important social issues. Chapter 5 examines Kozol's ideas about effective classroom teaching as discussed in *Free Schools* (1972) and *Letters to a Young Teacher* (2007).

Chapters 6 and 7 conclude the book with an investigation of issues related to literacy and homelessness. Kozol wrote two books on the first topic, *Children of the Revolution* (1978) and *Illiterate America* (1985), and a single text, *Rachel and Her Children* (1988) about the conditions and consequences of life without a home.

Segregation, poverty, school funding, effective teaching to create good citizens and good learners, literacy and homelessness are all critical issues today, and Jonathan Kozol has supplied insight about these matters in the past that help frame questions and solutions that will improve our nation's well being in the present and in the future.

REFERENCES

- Clift, R. (2009). Structures, curriculum, and teacher education. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, 11(1 & 2), 73–84.
- Feeney, M. (2000, May 17). The gentlest angry man: Author Jonathan Kozol has made education reform his life's work. *Boston Globe*, C 1.
- Interview (1992). Jonathan Kozol, a candid conversation with the outspoken author and educator about the crisis in America's schools—and what we should do about it. *Playboy*, 31(4), 51–66.
- Interview (1993). *Savage Inequalities: An interview with Jonathan Kozol. Educational Theory*, 43(1), 55–70.
- Jaeger, E. (2006). Silencing teachers in an era of scripted reading. *Rethinking Schools*, 20(3), 39–41.
- Kozol, J. (2007). *Letters to a Young Teacher*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Nation Institute. The Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship. Retrieved from www.nationinstitute.org
- Zimmerman, C. (1996). A conversation with Jonathan Kozol. *The Plough*, 47, 1–7.