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Abstract

Now is the time for teachers to face honestly the basic problem within ghetto schools--that black parents, children, and leaders do not like or trust their schools or the white staffs of the schools because the schools have done nothing to deserve their trust. Reasons for the failure of the schools to adequately educate over 10% of graduating Negro children lie within the educational structure and the teachers' attitudes. Teachers who will strike for pay, better working conditions, and extra benefits will remain silent about racist textbooks. Supervisors instruct teachers to remain aloof and formal in all contact with the black community. Also responsible are the teachers' colleges and schools of education which fail to psycholcgically and intellectually prepare the majority of teachers for the reality of ghetto schools. Many idealistic young people active in the Peace Corps, Civil Rights Movement, and Freedom Schools are not allowed to teach in inner city schools because they lack the required education courses. But teacher participation must take place because only teachers who are personally involved on the side of the black community can make education work in the ghetto classroom. (JM)

THE ENGLISH RECORD

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A TALK TO TEACHERS

Jonathan Kozol

We meet, I'm afraid, at a tragically appropriate moment. The nation is divided between a false facade of superficial mourning for a dead man [Martin Luther King] it seldom genuinely honored and a more authentic and gut-level terror that we are soon going to be obliged to pay a terrible price for the racism and brutality his murder symbolizes.

The over-riding fear, the constant question, is whether or not we are about to have a summer of unending urban riots. To my own mind the most saddening fact of all is that, in the long run, in terms of the ultimate issues, it is not going to much matter. More people may die and another thousand buildings may perhaps be burned or battered but the same problems will be with us even after the wreckage has been cleared away and, riots or not, destruction blatant and overt or destruction only gradual and ordinary, the same bitter problems of a divided society and of a nation torn by bigotry will still be with us in September.

I think that in America we love to believe in apocalyptic interventions. It would be comforting almost to think that a rebellion, no matter how devastating, no matter how expensive, would at least have the ultimate result of settling our problems. It is—unhappily—not so.

Broken glass and streams of blood will be good covers for news magazines in the middle of the summer—but they will not even begin to solve our problems. Probably they will not even destroy us.

They will *scare* us for a while and force our newspapers to write long editorials. And then we will go back to our ordinary American lives again and to our old, more quiet ways of dying.

It is for this reason, I believe, that now is as good a time as any to take an unforgiving second look at some of the ways in which we have defined the basic problems. I would like to focus on the schools. I would like to focus on the teachers. And I would like to get beyond some of the unproductive things that have been said already.

Jonathan Kozol won the National Book Award in 1968 for his "Death at an Early Age," subtitled "The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public School," published by Houghton Mifflin Company. Mr. Kozol is now Educational Director of the Store-Front Learning Center in Boston's South End ghetto and continues to be one of the country's most articulate critics of racial prejudice in American schools. This paper was presented at the Annual Spring Conference of the New York State English Council in New York City, April 26, 1968.

The problem within the ghetto, stated in the very simplest possible terms, comes down to a very few plain and painful facts: Black kids, black parents and black leaders do not—by and large—either like or trust their schools or the kinds of white people who work in them. A great many black people, given even half a chance, would dearly love to burn the whole mess down and—unhappily, in a good many cases—would not be very much the losers if they succeeded.

I say this not facetiously but because I believe that many Negro people have been fortunate enough to recognize fairly early in their lives that the schools were not their friends, that the schools were not going to stand beside them in a struggle, that the teachers were not likely to stick out their necks on crucial issues.

I am going to try to be as frank as possible in attempting to anticipate the reactions to this statement among many of the people in this audience. Many of you, I can imagine, will protest at this kind of disloyal assertion on my part and will want to stand up and tell me that I am being insolent and speaking out of turn, needlessly defiant and unjustly disrespectful to my fellow-teachers: Don't I know—these people will want to ask—how many of the dedicated teachers of the inner city schools have given their lives to the education of young children?

To this, I am afraid, that there is only one real answer: It does not matter, in the long run, what I *think*—what matters in the long run is what the black communities BELIEVE. And what they *do* believe at the present time, throughout the nation, is that professional teaching hierarchies, principals, superintendents—are servants and acolytes of a hostile, unfriendly and ultimately unmerciful white structure which has trodden them down and kept their souls and lives in prison for over three hundred years and which still today oppresses their children, murders their leaders and disdains their own humanity.

If this is the case—if this is what the black communities believe—then the challenge for us is *not* to withdraw into a militant and stiff defensive posture in which we ward off criticism with our pious platitudes of "professional experience" and "long years of dedication" but to ask ourselves instead just exactly why it is that all our "professionalism" and all our inheritance of reiterated "dedication" seem to have had the ultimate effect of compelling most black people to despise us?

The deepest, most direct and most immediate personal experience that a black child in America is ever likely to have of white society is that which he will have within a public classroom—in the person of the school teacher. That experience, as we well know, is anything but happy. Bitterness and cynicism

are the primary inheritance that most black children in America take from the classroom.

"Hate whitey!" cries the 14-year-old Negro student standing on the corner.

"Hate whitey!" repeats the 16-year-old drop-out as he sees a white policeman cruising through the ghetto.

But who is this whitey?? What white people do they *know*? What white man or white woman have they ever faced directly, known with intimacy, had a chance to assess and study and evaluate and learn how to trust or distrust—hate or admire?

Well, you know the answer as readily as I do: sometimes it's a slum-lord, a grocer, a money-lender, police officer or social worker—but in almost *all* cases it is a white school principal or a white school teacher. And it is from us, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, whether we can admit it or not, that black kids sooner or later get the message that white men and white women are people who—for one reason or another—they cannot take for real. Some teachers keep on repeating the same question, as though they haven't an idea in the world of a possible answer: Why don't they trust us? What on earth could we be doing wrong?

I don't think we really have to look far to find the answer. Teachers go out on strike for all sorts of good and palpable and powerful reasons: they strike for pay, they strike for better working conditions, they strike for extra benefits, occasionally they even strike for issues which have something to do, specifically, with the immediate demands of education: but *when*, the black community asks us, *did we ever strike to bring about racial integration? When*—they want to know—*did we ever strike to get racist Scott Foresman readers taken out of any grade-school classrooms? When*—they ask—*did the junior high school teachers of the ghetto ever strike to have the dishonest and openly bigoted and destructive Allyn and Bacon social studies textbooks taken out of their shelves and classrooms?*

You called us *culturally deprived*—the black parents tell us—you told us that we were the ones who lacked stability and values. All the while you, as the teacher, remained the keeper of the classroom and the guardian of its books and values. You were the ones who could examine those texts and prepare the lessons, ready the lesson-plans, state your approach, your purpose, your methods, and your evaluations. Yet all the while you failed for some reason to make the one most important and most obvious and necessary evaluation of them all: Are these books, are these values, are these areas of evasion and dishonesty consistent with democratic principles and with all that you (the teacher) are supposed to have known about the "professionalism" and "moral dignity" of education?

Allyn and Bacon, publishers: *Our America,*—a textbook for fourth grade children on our nation's history:

> 'Our slaves have good homes and plenty to eat.' . . . Most Southern people treated their slaves kindly. . . . 'When they are sick, we take good care of them.' No one can truly say, 'The North was right' or 'The Southern cause was the better.' For in Our America all of us have the right to our beliefs.

You were there—you were in the classroom—you were the one who had the education and the professional judgement and, supposedly, the moral character: *What did you do—what did you say?* (the Negro mother asks us) *If you ever protested, you must have done it in a whisper: we never heard you. . . . American Book Company, Publishers: Our Neighbors Near and Far:*

> The streets of this Oasis city of Biskra [in North Africa] are interesting. There are many different people upon them. Some who are white like ourselves have come here from Europe. Others are Negroes with black skins, from other parts of Africa. And many are bronze-faced Arabs who have come in from the desert to trade in the stores. . . .
>
> These people are fine looking. Their black eyes are bright and intelligent. Their features are much like our own, and although their skin is brown, they belong to the white race, as we do. It is the scorching desert sun that has tanned the skin of the Arabs to such a dark brown color.
>
> Yumbu and Minko are a black boy and a black girl who live in this jungle village. Their skins are of so dark a brown color that they look almost black. Their noses are large and flat. Their lips are thick. Their eyes are black and shining, and their hair is so curly that it seems like wool. They are Negroes and they belong to the black race.
>
> Two Swiss children live in a farmhouse on the edge of town. . . . These children are handsome. Their eyes are blue. Their hair is golden yellow. Their white skins are clear, and their cheeks are as red as ripe, red apples.

You were there—you were in the classroom—what did you say? What did you do? We were the uneducated—(the Negro mother, the Negro father tells us)—we were your maids and ironing-ladies, garbagemen and janitors. We were the ones who were illiterate, we were the ones who were culturally deprived. Daniel Moynihan has told the whole world what was wrong with *us*—but who has yet been able to explain to the world what in God's earth could have been wrong with *you?*

Allyn and Bacon, Publishers, Our World Today, another geography textbook, this one for junior high school:

> The people of South Africa have one of the most democratic governments now in existence in any country.
>
> Africa needs more capitalists. . . . White managers are needed . . . to show the Negroes how to work and to manage the plantations. . . .

The white men who have entered Africa are teaching the natives how to live.

You were there—you were the guardian of our children—what did you do?

And this (these things) the Negro child remembers—and the child who read that book five years ago, of course—is the full-grown black teenager of today, and he wants to know what you were doing or saying on these matters: He wants to know why you were silent, when you were the one who was the adult, the grown-up—the professional in that public classroom. You kept the cupboard. You prepared the meal. And what you fed the child—without remorse—was poison. Whether you taught math or physics, Russian, Chinese, English, French or cooking—you were there. You were an adult and you said nothing. There is no way in which you can escape responsibility.

The Negro mother and the Negro father speak to you, quietly: You went on strike (they say)—you went out on strike for your "professional rights and dignities" but you never once went out on strike for your rights *or* our rights as respectable human beings.

"Why is it they don't trust us?" ask the sweet and bewildered white school-ladies to each other.

Because we're frauds and it took the Negroes a long time to figure it out: but now they know it.

A couple of years back a highly respected board of inquiry sponsored by the Massachusetts State Board of Education issued a report documenting the fact of racial segregation in the Boston Schools. The report was signed by outstanding figures in all areas: the Catholic Archbishop, leaders of the Jewish and Protestant communities, the presidents of Boston University, M.I.T., Brandeis and Northeastern. . . .

In response to this report, a young Boston teacher, assigned to a third grade class within the ghetto, initiated a brief letter simply asserting in an unbelligerent manner that she, and other school teachers, were aware of the presence of racial segregation in their classroom, were aware of the deficiencies of their school buildings, and shared the sense of impatience and of discontent evinced both by the State Report and by the Black Community. She—like others—had heard the children singing when they were walking on the picket lines and she knew very well the words of one of the songs they sang:

"Which side are you on?" the song was asking, "Which side are you on?" It came out of the labor union struggles of the 1930's and was taken over by the white and Negro people in the Freedom Movement.

So here was this young white girl in the school system

trying, with a good heart, to give an answer and she appealed to her fellow-teachers in the system to do the same.

Ladies and gentlemen—there were at least 4,000 professional employees of the Boston Public Schools at that time. *Not 20 people would stand beside that one young teacher by affixing their signatures at the bottom of her letter.*

"Which side are you on?" the black parents were demanding.

And 3,980 professional employees of the Boston School System gave their answer. Then . . . in their faculty rooms, over their sandwiches and over their cups of coffee, the dedicated white ladies sat and stared at each other in sweet bewilderment —asking the time-honored question: "Why is it they don't trust us?"

Because they had done nothing to *deserve* being trusted: because they were not *trustworthy.*

The distance and the withdrawal on the part of a school faculty from its immediate community is, I think, well-known to many of us. Those among us who are acquainted with the classic faculty-room dialogue within a ghetto grade-school or a junior-high know well, I think, how older teachers coach the younger ones about the ways in which to deal and talk with Negro people: *Be careful,* is the message: *Don't be unguarded or informal. Don't let yourself be known to the black community in any way that might be vulnerable, that might reveal your feelings.*

The first advice that I received from my school supervisor was not to make use of the informal and casual word OKAY.

"I noticed you used the word OKAY three times this morning, Mr. Kozol"—said my superior. "OKAY is a slang word, Mr. Kozol. In the Boston schools we say ALL RIGHT, we do not say OKAY."

It seemed not worth the pain, not worth the trouble to reason with the man—to try to tell him that OKAY could be a very good and powerful word, that ALL RIGHT says nothing, that OKAY says everything, that President Kennedy used to say the word OKAY to his brothers, that good reporters say OKAY to their editors, football captains to their managers, pilots to the airport. I wanted to tell him that OKAY was a good word, an American word, an OKAY word—a word with life in it, and energy. But I didn't even argue with him. I just looked at him and nodded—and denied myself and said quietly, "All right."

There was the time, too, when I took a child over to visit in Cambridge. We visited the museums, went to call on an old classmate, had lunch with my girl friend, and went back to my own place to set up an electric train lay-out in the kitchen. The principal of my school heard of this visit in short order and later wrote of it in her report on me. She indicated in her report

that unattractive conclusions might well be drawn of a man who takes a young child to visit in his home. Said the principal in her report, "I told Mr. Kozol of the possibilities. . . ."

I think, also, of the tragedy of a PTA meeting in my building at which I arrived a little late—late enough to stand a moment in the doorway and look out at the extraordinary scene in front of me. Parents on one side—teachers way over on the other. In the middle—a huge safe space of unoccupied and untouched chairs.

I looked and watched and wondered:

How did this happen?

Was it conceivably a random accident?

Was it just a fluke of timing?

Obviously—with all mercy, all reservation, all wish to be wise and kindly and compassionate and back-bending—one could not CONCEIVABLY write off the professional STUPIDITY, VULGARITY and sheer ROTTENNESS of the school principal and faculty in allowing this kind of situation to develop.

Was it not, I had to ask myself, part and parcel of the same stupidity that prevented white teachers from dropping in on Negro families, from driving kids home, from fooling around in a comfortable and easy-going way out in the schoolyard? Was it not the same tragedy, the same ignorance, the same brutality which allowed a school faculty to drive through the ghetto every morning with eyes looking neither to left nor to right, nor, in some cases, one felt, even down the middle? Teachers on one side—parents on the other. In the center, an area of graphic sterilization. No germs might travel, no blackness, no ugliness, no race-contagion, could journey the distance from the seated mothers of a black community and the prissy teachers, their legs and souls up-tight together in their safe and sexless little corner on the aisle.

I would like to be able to deserve to be called generous by my fellow-teachers and I recognize all too well that, in ringing such a note of outright indignation, I bring upon myself once again, as I have done before, the concerted rage of a profession of embattled people, teachers in panic, principals in frenzy, aroused to vengeance at the implications of their personal cowardice, deceitfulness and pathos.

Yet it is true. It is there before us every day. And the very rare exceptions only stand out to prove the rule.

Avoidance of intimacy—avoidance of blackness—avoidance of humanity. At times, the tragedy involved in such a stance withdrew into the background and all that remained was a kind of wild absurdity.

Absurdity seemed uppermost in a confrontation that devel-

oped once between our principal and one of the other Fourth Grade teachers. The teacher in question, a woman, happened to be Negro and happened to live in Roxbury and happened, as a matter of fact, to live in the precise neighborhood in which the school was situated. The principal had advised us to observe unusual caution in regard to any casual or day-to-day involvements with the black community. She did not, of course, use those words, but it was apparent to us all that this was her real meaning. So this teacher, the Negro woman I have just mentioned, went up and asked the principal what she expected of her.

"What if I'm in the supermarket," she asked, "and I meet the mother or father of one of my pupils there? What do you think I'm going to say?"

The principal was taken aback, obviously baffled by the situation. It did not accord properly with a reasonable understanding of such matters that a person ought to be living within the same community in which she also was a teacher. Our principal, however, was good at regaining her composure—she never lost it for long, nor lacked of authoritative resources for regaining it. And so in this case too she soon regained her self-possession, looked directly into the eyes of this young teacher, and said to her simply:

"Well then, in such a case all I can do is to advise you not to forget your professional dignity."

It is hard to know exactly how she meant this, or how indeed one is to lose dignity in the purchasing of groceries except by confirming to the mothers and fathers of a community that you, like them, possess an alimentary canal, need food, spend money, buy things cheaply. It is hard to know—but I don't even want to ask. What I would like to do instead is to ask what we can do for our part to change these things and to break down these walls of inhumanity.

I think, to start with, we have got to ask ourselves straightforwardly where most of these teachers and administrators *come* from—and in what ways they have been prepared for teaching. This, of course, is the real question and I am afraid—no matter what we say—the majority of us already know the answer.

They come from schools of education.

They come from teachers' colleges.

They do *not*, by and large, come from the liberal faculties of our major universities, but from those faculties which are geared to teacher-training.

I think it is time to place some of the blame where it belongs and to cease trying to placate those who are most likely to take offense at words of frankness.

Some schools of education (a few) are relatively competent and provide a rich and humane education. (For the sake of politeness, let us assume that the education faculty from which any of my listeners may have graduated was one of the exceptions.) By and large, this is simply not the case. Education schools, in their great numbers, are institutions which perpetuate precisely the kinds of uneasy and defensive behavior which I have been describing. At times they offer, I suppose, certain courses which may be truly helpful in a very few and highly selective areas of learning. Much of what they teach, however, is *not* necessary at all, has little relevance to the human or intellectual or moral demands to be placed upon a classroom teacher, and leaves her worse off than she was before she started.

In every other field we are willing to acknowledge the failure of a process of preparation when the products of that preparation prove unequal to the responsibilities for which they had thought that they had been prepared. *Only in education, it appears, do we attribute the blame for failure not to the training institution, not to the Education School nor even to the teacher—but to the consumer, the victim, the public, the Negro family and the Negro child.* Teachers, filled full with all the newest codification—with all the most recent and most sophisticated formulas of condescension concerning the supposedly undermotivated, lethargic and culturally disadvantaged Negro child—go out into the ghetto, memorize the words of their sociologists and suddenly find themselves bewildered and helpless, overwhelmed by the realities which are imposed upon them. Sometime—seeing the bewilderment with which so many education school graduates respond—I wonder if they would not have been better off in the beginning if they had had their courses, their training, their preparation right on the spot, right in the ghetto all along? What did they gain from all their courses in the philosophy of education, in methods and materials, in sociological examination of so-called "culturally deprived" but a wearisome and inappropriate and somehow dehumanizing sense of condescension—and an inflated and artificial image of their own individual importance as "professionals"?

Teachers tell us very frequently of the hostilities they encounter, the disappointments they face, the distrust their presence repeatedly engenders in their Negro pupils.

There was no such distrust of teachers in the Freedom Schools of Alabama and Mississippi.

There is no such distrust of teachers in the tutorial classes run by the various militant Negro community organizations in this country.

There is no such distrust in the classrooms of those experi-

mental grade-schools begun and operated by the black communities.

Nor, I think we remember, has there ever been distrust of that sort within the Headstart Classes, Upward Bound Programs, or other independent educational projects of the War On Poverty.

Yet none of these programs that I have named are dominated by those whom we designate "professionals." It is, indeed, one is almost tempted to believe, the adamant *non*-professionalism—the amateur exuberance and uninhibited sense of personal commitment—which makes such programs possible and successful.

Why can we not bring some of the same energy and exuberance into the public classrooms? Is there no way to bring into these classrooms right away the kinds of people who will be able to earn the confidence of a black community because they will in fact share its aspirations? There are thousands of young, bright, brave and revolutionary pupils in the liberal colleges of this country and I know from my experience—from recent weeks and hours of long discussion among the parents and leaders of the black communities—that they are still needed and still *wanted* within the schools that serve the inner cities.

For all the recent militance, for all the rhetoric of separation, for all the talk about black schools with all-black children and black teachers, the authentic leaders of the black community will still tell us frankly that they cannot go it alone without white teachers. For a long while to come, the situation is going to remain the same—and the only question is whether we are going to give those children the worst or the best—the dreariest or the most exciting—the narrowest or the freest—that we have to offer.

The liberal and radical kids are there in our colleges right now. We send them to the Peace Corps, we give them to SNCC and S.D.S. or else we let them out on loan to Senator McCarthy but—poor economists that we are—we do not allow them to give their lives to the black children of the inner cities. Not, that is, unless they have previously agreed to have their brain picked dry and their outlook rendered sterile within the thankless surgery of one of our schools of education.

It is a reasonable question, I suppose, whether such kids would stick it out forever in a public classroom. Would they remain in teaching? Would they last for ten years? Would they last for forty? Would they be "dedicated" forever to their "professional" responsibility and obligation? In a curious sense, I almost hope that they would *not*—not, at any rate, in the manner in which those words have been interpreted up to now.

Rather an impulsive and energetic and unpredictable amateur than a drearily predictable, dedicated and dehydrated professional—and rather a person dedicated to life, and love, and danger, and activity, and action than to the wearisome and unchangeable sterility of chalk and stick and basic reader.

Recently in Newton a parent complained to a School official at an open meeting: "There is so much teacher-turnover within this system. Many of our teachers seem to leave so soon, after only three or four years in many cases, sometimes after seven."

Said the School official: "Of this we are not in the least ashamed. We would rather have teachers we can't keep than teachers we can't get rid of."

There, I believe, in few words, is a very good and adequate answer.

I see no shame in having high teacher-turnover—if what we are turning over is something fertile and exciting. Rather have a lively, attractive and exciting girl who will quit after five years because she has the healthy urge to marry—than a girl who will never quit, for that reason because she will never get an offer.

Many older people, I can well imagine, might consider the kind of proposal I have made impractical. They will tell me that young people, by and large, are selfish and ambitious to settle down, raise families, buy their ranch homes in the country, hire maids, have holidays abroad, earn lots of money. Young people, they say, may *talk* idealism but they will not act upon it. They will not make the sacrifice to stand up and serve as teachers.

When people tell me this—I always look at them for a moment—to think about their motives—and then I say that I do not know the kinds of young people they are speaking of. It was not the selfish and self-centered spoiled daughter of the selfish and the opulent rich man who ran the Freedom Schools in Mississippi and Alabama, who worked with the poor and the hungry for the Peace Corps in Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil. It was not the young man dreaming about a ranch-house and a million dollars who gave up his studies and his comfort and his security to go down South and risk his life, his respectability or his career, to walk a Negro citizen to the City Hall and give him the courage to go in and demand the right to register to vote.

Michael Schwerner was not thinking about cocktails, about sports cars or ranch-wagons when he lay down his life three years ago in Mississippi to help to make this nation free.

James Chaney was not calculating how he could make it to the top when he was buried at the bottom of the mud beneath a wall made out of stone in Mississippi, because he believed that black people still had the privilege to be free.

The young Unitarian minister, James Reeb, murdered three

years ago in Selma, Alabama was not worrying about nailing down a fancy parish, sending his kids to fancy schools and buying his wife a fancy way of living when he walked out upon the streets of that racist city and received a club over his head; and fell; and died.

There is a new nation within the old one in America. It is better than the old one; it is honest and it is not selfish and it is not afraid. The oldtime teachers, the oldtime autocrats, the oldtime political school administrators do not really want to believe that this can be the case. It is too threatening. It hurts them very badly. They are involved with guilt and with the memory of cowardice and with the fear of an unspeakable retribution. They knew about the racist books within their shelves and did not speak. They saw the Negro parents across the room and did not smile. They heard the moral challenge—the plea—coming out from within the black community and they did not answer. And now they are unwilling—they are unable—to believe that we can be more decent.

It is up to us to prove that they are wrong.

400,000 Negro kids are going to be attaining the age of eighteen this season. Of those 400,000, not 10% will have received an education equal to the white standards.

It will not be due to their mothers and their fathers.

It will not be due to a defective family-structure.

It will not be due to any inherent lack of intelligence or motivation.

It will be due to ineffective and irrelevant and dishonest EDUCATION.

There is no way to get around it. The facts are there and they are devastating.

We are going to have to look those facts straight in the face and take them seriously. The sweet white lady in the classroom who wears blinders, cannot make her way through to a rebellious generation of black children. The white bigot or false liberal who teaches his lesson, locks up his room, and hops into his car to return to his nice home within the safe suburbs, cannot and should not have a serious role within a ghetto classroom. There is only one kind of person who can make it work—and that is the person who, in his class and in his life, is ready to take a militant stand beside the black community. There is no other way to do it.

Often now, when I have finished with a lecture of this sort, young people come up to me, teachers just beginning or people who believe that they would like to teach, and they question me, and they ask me, it seems—almost as if it were an amazing and undecipherable riddle: "How is it, Mr. Kozol, that you were

able to go in, as you did, to an angry and revolutionary Negro area and into a turbulent and unhappy and properly embittered classroom, a room in which kids had had substitutes half the winter, or emotionally unstable teachers, or teachers who despised them, or—more frequently—teachers who simply didn't really ever care—and did not right on the spot receive a knife in the side or, at the very least, an eraser or an elastic or a paperclip or a spitball in the eye?"

When this question is asked, I often am aware that the questioner expects a complicated answer—a subtle and elaborate and self-complimenting explanation of how I worked out and contrived some amazing and fascinating English lessons guaranteed to hook the most apathetic and lethargic students. It just is not so. There is a far more simple-minded answer. "Listen," I say; "I walked into a ghetto classroom, an inept amateur, knowing nothing. In my lapel there was a tiny little button that the children in that classroom recognized. It was white and black—an equal sign—you remember it, I hope—it was the symbol of the Civil Rights Movement in America. The children had *eyes* and they could *see*—and they had hearts and minds and they could feel and know. And they knew what that little button stood for. On Saturdays sometimes they saw me on a picket line in front of a dilapidated building whose absentee white landlord had been negligent. On Fridays sometimes, a little while before supper, they would see me and my girlfriend coming up the stairs of their own home to visit with their mother and their father and sometimes stay for dinner.

If it was revolutionary you may say, with a smile, it certainly was the most natural and easy and deeply satisfying kind of a revolution that a man or a woman could conspire.

Then—on Monday—I was in the classroom; and the kids would say "We saw you Saturday." Or another child would say, "He's got a pretty girlfriend." Or another one would say, "He's got a junky old beat-up raggedy car."

But the thing is—they were not angry any longer. And I wasn't a very excellent or fancy teacher—I can assure you—but I was someone they'd seen out in the real world and someone they were willing to take on as a real friend.

Well, there aren't many picket-lines any longer in America, and they don't sing Freedom Songs in this country any more, but the kids out in the ghettos are still turning to us in the same way and asking us the same question that they asked before.

"Which side are you on?" is what they're saying.

And, truly, there is no way to get around that question.

It hurts sometimes. It hurts terribly, I know. But each and every one of us has got to come up with his own answer.