

**THE MAGNIFICENCE OF GETTING IN TROUBLE:
FINDING HOPE IN CLASSROOM DISOBEDIENCE AND
RESISTANCE**

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Over forty years ago, Howard Zinn identified the problem as not one of civil *disobedience*, but of civil *obedience*. He confronted the problem of remaining obedient to laws and rules even “in the face of the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war and cruelty.” Framed in an early childhood context, this article explores the value of events of young children’s classroom *disobediencies* (civil and not), layered upon elements of Zinn’s body of work that examines the role disobedience plays in the human potential to contribute to the common good. It is apparent that children find ways to function as “good”—as in kind, generous, contributing, skeptical, thoughtful, and courageous members of society even in the face of narrow, stingy, and mindless schooled notions of goodness as compliance to prevailing rules of order. In the spirit of the hopefulness that Zinn never abandoned—the lens on these children’s moments of disobedience is directed away from a viewpoint that presumes the “good” child is the one who obeys. The snapshots of children in this article, viewed with a wide aperture, bring light to the possibilities inherent in these small acts of kindness, awareness, curiosity, justice—and disobedience. In his work, Zinn shone necessary light on pictures of history that showed the cruel reality of human behavior; but more profoundly, he offered *hope* through a concurrent human history of “compassion, sacrifice, courage [and] kindness.” Zinn asked us to remember the times when people “behaved magnificently,” and within this paper are descriptions of moments of disobedience in which children are behaving *magnificently*—moments that Howard Zinn would, perhaps, have celebrated.

On January 19, 2010, Howard Zinn participated on a blog/talk radio program, *Authors on the Air*, answering questions from teachers. In

response to a warm welcome and thank you for appearing, Zinn, ever at ready to inspire teachers to dissent, replied, "How could I refuse?" I listened carefully to this program, mostly because I wanted to hear anything Howard Zinn would have to say to us; but I also listened because I knew that the question I had submitted was on the list to be answered. Sadly, there was not enough time and my question was not raised on the program. On January 23, I wrote to Howard Zinn directly to ask the question that now guides this paper, but, again, ever so sadly, with Zinn's passing that same week, there was not enough time.

What I hoped to learn was what Howard Zinn might have to say about young children—those in grades K-3—and the impact of school-imposed compliance. This article is my response to the question I had posed—a response that draws on what I have learned over the years from Zinn's writings in the context of my experiences advocating for young schoolchildren:

Question for Howard Zinn, *Authors on the Air* 1/2010: What do you think is the impact on children's construction of themselves as 'good' based on the degree of their blind compliance to the authority of school rules? And then what do you think the impact is on their ability and willingness to function as *good*—as in kind, generous, contributing, skeptical, thoughtful, and courageous members of society if/when their construction of goodness may be based on more narrow, stingy, and mindless notions? Finally, what do you think might shift schoolteachers— especially teachers of young children — out of a mindset that presumes the *good* child is the one who blindly obeys?

Finding Zinn: "I Do Not Claim To Be Neutral, Nor Do I Care To Be"

I did not find Howard Zinn through his work as a historian. I found Howard Zinn because, as a teacher of young children in a public school in a large urban district, I wanted to better understand disobedience and the consequences—unintended or not—of the daily oppression of children. I was troubled by what I came to see as my shortcomings in effective action on strong feelings I was having about the impact of schools-as-they-are on the children who are compelled to spend their days there. In seeking to better understand the spirit of disobedience as perhaps the spirit of possibilities, I began to read. I stumbled upon

Howard Zinn as a person who advocated dissent and seemed to understand the complexities and consequences of both disobedience *and* obedience. In pursuing his work, I began to feel that I was not alone.

In my early years of teaching, I tried to understand points of view about obedience and control that pervaded the schools where I worked—to see from the perspective of other adults who worked with children alongside me. I tried to learn about the system and how it “worked,” and consequently constrained us from truly responding to the children as they came to us. I tried to accommodate the “standardized management” mode of curriculum problem solving (Henderson and Gornik 2007, 399), and even while trying to be satisfied with this way of being, I resented that it seemed to be expected that the weak and tasteless broth of the “basics” was enough to offer *these* children. And then I was caught in a quandary—trying to consider these other perspectives slowed me down. Instead of advocating for children, I found myself equivocating. Instead of speaking out for the families of the children, I found myself negotiating between the school and community. And I was conflicted. I did not claim to be or care to be neutral anymore. I grew concerned that perhaps by knowing the game better and becoming more proficient at playing it, I was becoming a player—and so a collaborator. I did not want a more even playing field—I wanted the game-playing to end. I worried that by agreeing to take “baby steps,” when I what I really wanted was to run like mad in my stocking feet and then *slllliiiiidde*, I was losing momentum.

Later, after I left my classroom of children for a classroom of teachers of children, I continued to spend time with children, but in a *variety* of classrooms in my roles of researcher and field supervisor. In these classrooms—in city, suburban, rural, big, small, diverse and not-so-diverse districts—I witnessed the deeply oppressive nature of schools not just in *my* big city district, but *everywhere*. My level of concern rose. The sense of urgency I felt and still feel recalls Bill Ayers’s discussion of his feelings during the Vietnam war and his days as a fugitive resister, “Everything seemed urgent now, everything was accelerating - the pace, to be sure, but also the stakes, the sense of consequences.... Humanity itself, it seemed to me, was what was at stake.... You could not be a moral person with a means to act, I thought, and stand still. To stand still was to choose indifference. Indifference was the opposite of moral. If we didn’t speak out and act up, we were traitors” (2001, 117; 62-63). In schools as they are, there lies a similar “imminence of harm”, and so, a similar urgency is called

for. Perhaps lives are not being lost as they were (and are) in war, but most assuredly, in schools day after day, there are lives being wasted.

Tommy: "Honest and Therefore Unmanageable"

Howard Zinn introduced me to Tommy Trantino. In seeking out evidence to support my observations of children's awareness of the injustice of authoritative impositions and of possible rebellion in their hearts and minds, I found Zinn's discussion of the powerful teaching of "obey the law...often powerful enough to overcome deep feelings of right and wrong" (Zinn 1997, 399). In this discussion, Zinn chose to illustrate the power of the "law of the land" via a well-chosen excerpt from Trantino's *Lock the Lock*, written in 1972 from New Jersey's death row. In this essay from the book, "The Lore of the Lamb," Trantino wrote metaphorically of the cost of compliance, using his six-year-old self to express the ache:

I was in prison long ago and it was the first grade and I have to take a [sh*t] and even when you have to take a [sh*t] the law says you must first raise your hand and ask the teacher for permission so I obeyer of the lore of the lamb am therefore busy raising my hand to the fuehrer who says yes Thomas what is it? And I Thomas say I have to take a - I mean may I go to the bathroom please? Didn't you go to the bathroom yesterday Thomas she says and I say yes ma'am Mrs. Parsley ... but I have to go again today but she says NO and I say but Mrs. Parsley judge ... ma'am I gotta go make number two! Eh? she says and I say eh ... I GOTTA TAKE A [SH*T] ... and again she says NO but I go anyway except that it was not out but in my pants that is to say right in my corduroy knickers but this kinda taught me something about prisons at a very early age let's see now I was about six years old at the time and yes I guess that even then I knew without celebration that if one obeys and follows orders and adheres to all the rules and regulations of the lore of the lamb one is going to [sh*t] in one's pants and one's mother is going to have to clean up afterwards ya see? (1972, 17)

This is what I felt children *should* be saying/*would* be saying if they knew they could. Trantino captures the degradation of powerless-

ness and of bending to the rule of law “with no room for making intelligent and humane distinctions about the obligation to obey the law” (Zinn 1997, 399). In considering the cost of children’s compliance, I think Zinn and Trantino are clear—the cost is too high. “From death row, first grade is remembered as a prison, as a place where [sh*tting] one’s pants is preferable to disturbing the order of the classroom” (Leafgren 2009, 55). The strength of Trantino’s words represents the urgency that my time in classrooms with children has engendered—he seems to be speaking for the resistant child we see pushing against the tight constraints of order, and giving voice to their power and vision. As Zinn wrote for the book jacket of *Lock the Lock*, “The first few pages stunned me, and I never recovered. I haven’t read a book in a long time that has hit me so hard—a book so fierce, so poetic, so wise, so heartbreaking. It exposes our time in a way which will embarrass us all before our grandchildren.”

Julian on the Wall: “Individual Acts Of Courage In The Face Of Authority”

I once knew another “Tommy”—an “obeyer of the lore of the lamb” who, from an early age, seemed to understand that while there is a price to pay for breaking the rules, there is sometimes a higher one to pay for adhering to them. He was named Julian and his power and vision came in his ability to *see everything* in spite of the blinders in place via school. Julian was in the “other” kindergarten, the one down the hall from mine. Julian had the darkest eyes I’ve ever seen, a perpetual motion machine for a body and a vocabulary as large as his drive to use it: enormous! Mrs. Buttercup, his teacher, had silent playtime and a well-used frowny-face stamp. While I did not share a classroom with him, I quickly got to know Julian. We were “hall friends” and “wall friends”: I greeted him on nearly a daily basis as he stood in the hall outside of his classroom—sent out as punishment; and I visited him “on the wall”¹ every kindergarten recess. In spite of Mrs. Buttercup’s admonitions that I was “rewarding” him, I would stand by him on the wall and talk. “We talked about the reasons he was being punished and made plans on how he might comply with the rules in his room. He always planned to try, but was also almost always eerily realistic about his chances in meeting his teacher’s rigorous standards for order. His sentences on the wall went unabated” (Leafgren 2009, 213).

One day, I was in the classroom with my children. The door was

open; we were all working on one thing or another and the room was enveloped in the relative calm of conversational tones and random hummings. I could hear Mrs. Buttercup's class pass our room on their way to the restroom. The line was quiet and orderly. The children finished at the restroom and the line began moving past my door on their return to their classroom. Suddenly, Phwaaat!!! Oooooofff! It was Reuben, a classmate of Julian's, falling and hitting the hard tile floor. As I reached the door of my classroom to check what had occurred, I could see Julian move from his place at the end of the line to help Reuben up; I heard his voice, "Are you OK, Reuben?" and then, Mrs. Buttercup's, "That's two, Julian: you're talking and you are out of line. You're on the wall at recess." And the class moved on and away from our door.

Witnessing this moment, seeing so clearly the goodness of Julian's act—his ability to see Reuben's need for care and then *act on it*—and then seeing his disobedient goodness being punished—has changed the way I see *everything*. This moment became, for me, a "truth event"—and since the event, I am compelled "to invent a new way of being and acting" in response (Badiou 2001, 41). This moment, this truth event, is what has led me to ponder so persistently the question of the goodness of (dis)obediences. Fidelity to the truth provoked by Julian's act is what has led to the questions I posed to Howard Zinn relating to the conflicting "goods" children experience in school: the "good" as experienced in school as order, silence, and stillness; and the "goodnesses" of kindness, a curious nature, a lively energy, a willingness to see the needs of others—an "urgent, singular situation[s] of need" (Badiou 2001, 15)—and "individual acts of courage in the face of authority" (Zinn 2004).

Julian was disobedient. Encountering Reuben's "singular situation of need," Julian had not complied with the school line rules—*No talking* and *Stay in your place in line*—when he moved to assist Reuben to his feet and inquire into his well-being. Julian's situated act of responding to Reuben's need illustrates an ethics of thinking the situation "according to the event" (Badiou 2001, 15) rather than by the prevailing ethical principle of obedience to authority. As Zinn warned, it is presumed by most that "if you disobey the law, even for a good cause, you should accept your punishment" (Zinn 2003, 3), and Julian did. As he always did, accepting punishment for his verve, his interest in other children, and his fully present nature that seemed to be offensive qualities in the context of school.

The other children witnessed Reuben's fall, too—but no other child (or their teacher) seemed to have seen in that fall a moment of need, and a clear call for a moral response to that need. Perhaps, their attention was directed to maintaining their status as “good” kindergartners by staying quiet and staying in line. The other children in Mrs. Buttercup's class also witnessed Julian's punishment, and so knew him as “bad”—bad because he got out of line, bad because he had to go on the wall. It does not take long for five-year-olds to be indoctrinated into believing that goodness equals compliance.

Julian and I knew the goodness in his act of non-compliance to the rule of the line. I still regret the lost opportunity for his classmates and what they might have learned from the event of Reuben's fall about the goodness of Julian, and about the complexities of goodness and compliance, about questions of right and wrong. “While we are waiting for young children to be developmentally ready to consider these issues, they are already developing values and beliefs about them” (Boutte 2010, 170).

Waiting for children to “be ready” is a common state of being for early childhood teachers. A focus on developmental theory often leads to a point of view of children as intellectually and socially immature—as incomplete. As children's capacities for empathy and compassion are underestimated, it becomes common practice to create structures of control for children out of an assumption that the children will not be capable of making thoughtful, just, and humane decisions about ways to be in the classroom without those structures. As Zinn has cautioned (in Ellis and Mueller 2004), it is common practice to hold such structures in highest regard, as a kind of *system to believe in* out of a fear of chaos. When I inquired of other teachers about Reuben's fall and Julian's rescue, most agreed with Mrs. Buttercup that Julian had to be punished: “What if all the children had gotten out of line to help him? It would be chaos!” and that Julian needed to know the limits, “Give him an inch and he'll take a mile.”

Zinn troubled this notion: that if we allowed disobedience to the law, we would have chaos. He noted the words of Gertrude Scholtz-Klink, chief of the Womens' Bureau under Adolf Hilter, in her explanation of the Nazis' Jewish policy: “‘We always obeyed the law. Isn't that what you do in America? Even if you don't agree with it personally, you still obey it. Otherwise, life would be chaos.’ Life would be chaos.... It is a phrase that has appeal for most citizens, who, unless they themselves have a powerful grievance against authority, are afraid

of disorder" (Zinn 2003, 108).

Causing a Little Trouble Now and Then: "Close The Gap Between
Law And Justice"

"The fact is, Solomon," he continued, as he roped the popcorn machine onto his cart, "to cause a little trouble now and then is maybe good for a man."

Mr. Jerusalem (All Kinds Junk-
Bought and Sold), in Jean Merrill,
The Pushcart War (1964, 74)

Mr. Jerusalem has a point...that causing a little trouble may be good for a man, a woman, *or* a child. Trouble agitates, makes turbulent, upsets, *disrupts* that status quo, and so creates dissonance and uncovers new possibilities. And yet much of a teacher's typical day is spent in enacting disciplines that emphasize solving the "problem" of undeveloped and disruptive children, and rarely looking for the good that might be found in those troublesome acts.

In considering the potential value of children's acts of disobedience, some thought must be tendered to the moral, social, psychological, physiological, and/or spiritual conflict that may have given rise to such acts. Zinn discussed civil disobedience as "the deliberate, discriminate, violation of law for a vital social purpose" (Zinn 1968, 119). When Reuben fell, Julian—who was often "in trouble" for attending to his classmates and for acting on his own volition—recognized his classmate's need for help and comfort. Even while knowing the rule, even though he must have been aware that breaking the rule would likely lead to punishment, Julian chose to transgress the order of the line in order to go to Reuben's aid.

This act appears to represent a nascent sort of civil disobedience. While I doubt that Julian carefully weighed his options, determining deliberately that his violation of the rule of the line would serve a vital social purpose, I have no doubt that he acted out of genuine concern for another. Rose (1999) suggests that such conduct in early childhood classrooms may work to resist dominant discourses and confront injustice. He writes, "One line of thought views justice as about *relations with the Other*," and cites Derrida's discussion of justice as arising "in a particular relationship to the Other, as a response to suffering that demands an infinite responsibility" [concluding that] ... justice here is

closely connected to the practice of an ethics of an encounter” (Rose 1999, 146). Julian lived in the encounter, always—and I believe that it was in the encounter that Julian engaged in civil disobedience.

Civil Disobedience

Civil disobedience is the deliberate, discriminate, violation of law for a vital social purpose. It becomes not only justifiable but necessary when a fundamental human right is at stake. (Zinn 1968, 119)

Civil disobedience is an unlawful act urging a reconsideration of a law or policy without threatening the community’s political structure. (King 1963, 84)

Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward.... Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. (Thoreau 1848/1966, 225-226)

Civil disobedience is an act of courage and conviction and a commitment to principles and values outside the status quo... civil disobedience can never come from the right because the right makes all the laws and manipulates the political and social environment which from jump street necessitates acts of disobedience...notice it doesn’t come from the left either because the left also makes laws politically and socially manipulates and seriously deliriously promotes political correctness and that is obedience in addition when storms rage and the beast is out of the cage the left has been known to sleep with the enemy...from my perspective civil disobedience is a willful deliberate fully conscious act...it comes from the heart the mind the soul and the spirit of the actor...it is always a response and not a reaction to its need for expression civil disobedience is by nature humanistic...i am represented in this matter by the lore firm of moses christ thoreau gandhi & king and their worldwide associates. (Trantino 2005)

Each of the descriptors of civil disobedience above suggests that qualities of balance and thoughtful reflection play vital roles in the pursuit of justice, fairness, and compassion inherent in themes of civil disobedience. Civil disobedience to a rule or law (written or unwritten) is not disobedience for the sake of disobeying, but derives from encounter with injustice, and need. Julian was disobedient. He was also responding to an encounter with another's need for help. In a moment of civil disobedience, Julian committed an unlawful and humanistic act with courage and conviction, responding to his conscience and expressing his connection to Reuben's need, and responding to it with heart, mind, and spirit. Such acts in violation of rule and order will always have a vital social purpose.

Compliancism: "Neatly Suppressed... Under The Supposition That They Had Better Keep Quiet And Just Learn Their Lessons"

CLASSROOM RULES:

1. Respect others and their property.
2. Following directions the first time given.
3. Keep hands, feet, and objects to yourself.
4. Raise your hand to speak.
5. Stay in your workspace.

Getting out of line to help Reuben was not Julian's only school-room transgression. He was often in trouble—and from what I could observe, he was in trouble because he refused to comply with schooled expectations of disinterest, stillness, silence, and a stagnant kind of order.

"Getting in trouble" represents an event that is determined by some superseding authority—the state, or the school. In recent years, the pre-service teachers I work with in my courses have shared examples of behaviors that children get "in trouble" in their early childhood classrooms. The following were the most commonly identified as troublesome acts from a recent discussion board: talking out, not doing work, off task, reading, raising hand, not raising hand, laughing, moving, coloring the wrong color, not paying attention, not listening, running, not having homework, refusals, arriving late to school, asking to use the restroom, rolling eyes, not having pencil, sharpening pencil, standing at desk, raising voice, working ahead, lying, misuse of chair, helping pick up crayons you did not spill, touching papers on walls,

asking a question, getting out of line, touching someone, whistling, and dancing. In each case, the qualifying characteristic of being an instance of "in trouble" was that there was a response of punishment (also withdrawal of reward) by the person in authority over the child: the teacher. Children are thus burdened with the fear of retaliation for what *must* seem to them as unreasonable and capricious standards of behavior. This is oppression.

Troublesome here are not only the kinds of acts of non-compliance that cause children to get "in trouble," but also the troublesome nature of the teacher responses. In examining these in-trouble events, it becomes apparent that the events do not prompt a responsive dialogue between child and teacher. In fact, in hundreds of instances where children are "getting into trouble" one might be able to count on one's fingers the number of times that teachers made a thoughtful effort to actively engage children in social problem solving or empathetic caring, or to consider the context and the event itself as maybe being *good* for the child and the class. This is likely an artifact of what Zinn notes of an American ideology that "leaves no room for making intelligent and humane distinctions about the obligation to obey.... It is stern and absolute, unbending." (Zinn, in Ellis and Mueller 2004). Most people accept this dominant pattern of ideas, and if one joins them, one is less likely to get into trouble. Zinn notes, "even I have to fight it, for it was put into my bones at an early age when I was a Cub Scout" (Zinn 1997, 463-64; 1991).

Thomas suggests that the role of school has become a "means of control and regulation of school children," and warns that in the discourse of formal schooling, a weak teacher—perhaps one who engages in social problem solving or empathetic caring – might have only "an inadequate and dangerous control of children whose social incompetence could lead to a threat to the social order" (2002, 92). With the social order at stake—a social order dependent on children who know and unquestioningly follow the rules and laws, the conversation about what is possible among the people sharing a classroom becomes narrow indeed. Thomas's suggestion echoes David Purpel's lament:

Let us then indeed move to the question of which values are actually being taught in the public schools.... Students are urged to be polite, respectful, and obedient to adults in general and school personnel in particular...that those who flout the rules and expectations deserve to be punished. Students are

expected to talk, write, move and go to the bathroom when they are given permission.... Students are required to do things they may not wish to do and are taught that this is a good thing.... My sense is that the values taught in the schools are very much in the line of puritan traditions of obedience, hierarchy, and hard work, values which overlap nicely with the requirements of...a social system that demands stability and order. There is an ideology here that puts very strong emphasis on control—adult control of children is mandated and legitimated and children’s self-control of their bodies and minds is demanded. (Purpel 2001, 89)

Yet there are many ways that teachers might respond, especially considering the potential in the adult responses for meaningful adult-child interaction. Teachers might resist the dominant discourse of the classroom that presumes the “good” child is one who blindly complies with the authority of school rules. Rose (1999) looks to “minor politics” as ways to consider the small moments and small events that are not so small to small children, even though they have been treated as trivial by major politics. Minor politics is conducted in “cramped spaces” and engages with small everyday concerns:

These minor engagements...are cautious, modest, pragmatic, experimental, stuttering, tentative [and] are concerned with the here and now, not with some fantasized future, with small concerns, petty details, the everyday and not the transcendental. They frequently arise in ‘cramped spaces’—within a set of relations that are intolerable, where movement is impossible, where change is blocked and voice is strangled. And in relation to these little territories of the everyday, they seek to engender a small reworking of their own spaces of action. (Rose 1999)

In troubling the in-trouble events in early childhood classrooms, perhaps teachers and other adults may, in interrogating their comfortable and entrenched responses to children in the classroom, begin to frame responses that might allow for potential disruptions for *good*. Teachers might take note that they share these cramped spaces with the children. Making movement possible through stretching the boundaries of those cramped spaces may allow one to see children as kind,

generous, contributing, skeptical, thoughtful, and courageous members of society by considering that “goodness” may be based on more than narrow, stingy, and mindless schooled notions of compliance.

In the words of Howard Zinn (2005):

I [don't] want ...to prepare [children] to take their obedient and accustomed places in the world so that they [will] then teach... their children to take their obedient and accustomed places in the world and then the world [will] continue as it always has been because unless people become disobedient and unless people step out of line, the world continues in its old ways.

Three Chances to Respect the Rules (or Little Rabbit Foo Foo): “The Problem Is Civil Obedience”

One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.
(Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963)

A society that gets rid of all its troublemakers goes downhill. (Robert Heinlein 1988, 8)

When we go outside, children, you will line up nicely, even if there is an atomic bomb. (Wenner 2004, 3)

Democracy isn't about falling in line.... Democracy is for people to think independently, be skeptical of government, look around and try to find out what's going on – and if they find out that government is deceiving them, to speak out as loudly as they can. That's democracy. (Zinn 2001, 8)

Howard Zinn did not merely write about the problem of civil obedience; he fully engaged and learned to see opportunities to confront this peculiarly topsy-turvy problem. “As soon as you say the topic is civil disobedience, you are saying our problem is civil disobedience. That is not our problem.... Our problem is civil obedience.... Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world, in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war and cruelty (Zinn 1997, 463-64). In confronting the problem of civil obedience, Zinn found inspiration in the “neatly suppressed” energies of his students at Spelman College. His students there were young ladies, “sedate, controlled, careful...

under the supposition that they had better keep quiet and just learn their lessons and become important people in the black community” (Zinn, in Ellis and Mueller 2004). But with Zinn, as they studied with him (and he with them—women, black, southern) “the actual workings of the justice system over the course of our history, [and how] it favors the rich over the poor, the white over the black, the orthodox over the radical” (Zinn, in Aksan and Bailes 2007). And they were no longer sedate or careful; rather, “humming, seething” participants in history.

Kent State

In Ellis’s film version of *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, Zinn explained that he saw on the college campus a huge amount of intellectual energy—human energy, and began to see the *human* resources the college wasted in merely academic pursuits. He supported and applauded the actions of students in confronting the problem of civil obedience. As one who was arrested and beaten himself, he was also aware of the risk and potential consequences of such action.

Laurel Krause, sister of slain Kent State student, Allison Krause, has applauded Howard Zinn as “the only historian to understand and write about the massacre at Kent State correctly” (Krause 2010). Indeed, Zinn has cited the protests and subsequent shootings in several of his discussions of the problem of civil obedience and the possibilities inherent in civil disobedience. “The Cambodian Invasion provoked nationwide protests, and on the campus of Kent State University, in Ohio, trigger-happy National Guardsmen fired into a crowd of unarmed student demonstrators, killing four of them, crippling another for life” (Zinn 2002, 118), and noted that “student rebellion... has evoked from those who once decried student silence, not praise, but a shower of Commencement Day warnings against going ‘too far’” (Zinn 1968, 5).

In 1970, a month after the May 4th Kent State shootings, Zinn was invited by the students of Newton North High School, in Massachusetts, to give their graduation commencement speech, and subsequently proved their commitment to that invitation in the face of hysteria on the part of administration, and threats of boycotts, violence, and walk-outs. Zinn recalls speaking passionately about his feelings about the Kent State shootings, and about “the right of young people to refuse to fight in an unjust war.” He wrote that “for years after that I would run into young people who stopped me on the street... saying, “I graduated from Newton North in 1970 and I’ll never forget that day,”

which confirmed for Howard that “education becomes most rich and alive when it confronts the reality of moral conflict in the world” (Zinn 2002, 120).

Never forgetting. Being “hit in your gut” (Zinn and Macedo 2005, 31) leaves a lasting impression. I grew up in next town over from Kent, Ohio. I was a high school student in 1970 and participated in the student moratoriums of the time, and I, too, will never forget that day. I have traveled back to Kent nearly every year to observe the May 4th commemoration, to hear the speakers, to simply be with others who wish to respect the importance of that day. And just as it was in 1970, there are those who share the sense of loss and the power of protest; and there are those who object to the observance, and believe, in one way or another, the students “got what they deserved.” Every year on the candlelight walk and vigil, there are hecklers. Sadly, many of the current students at Kent State know little of the historical significance of the event on their campus, and many view the protests as pointless, and the killings as a logical consequence of disobedience.

The following are excerpts from letters to the student newspaper *The Daily Kent Stater*, representing those points of view (emphases mine):

You’re the governor of Ohio. You call in the National Guard... What would have happened had he not called in the National Guard? That isn’t a chance anyone in his or her right mind would take.... It’s not shocking that the guardsmen would want to break up this large, out-of-control crowd by asking everyone to disperse. *But this crowd wouldn’t listen....* When people are so focused on one idea, or thought, their entire logic is skewed. This can be said for the fanatical liberals who were protesting the invasion of Cambodia at the time of the shootings.... *They were asked to leave — to go back to their dorms....* Four students died, including students who weren’t even part of the protest. *This is the most disturbing factor for most people — that innocent, good-natured students were shot, students who weren’t disobeying a direct order from the National Guard.* The order was only given for the students’ safety because *let’s face it, a few thousand students protesting at Kent State wasn’t going to end the invasion of Cambodia.* (Schirra 2005)

Now, I am not saying anyone deserved to die or be shot — what happened was terrible. However, there is something to be learned from the event so that it's never repeated again, and that lesson is that *when trouble is a brewin', it's best to curb curiosity and keep your distance....* If you do stay away and anything bad happens, you can be assured of two things: You will be able to read about it in the newspaper the next day, and that bad thing didn't happen to you. (Baldwin 2005)

Unlike the Boston Massacre, which also shouldn't be viewed as an example of good, sound protest, the May 4 shootings are not a history-changing event.... Rather, it was a bunch of students *who had three chances to leave* — the first coming from the university through leaflets, the second coming from the Kent State police at 11:50 a.m. and the final coming in the form of an advancing National Guard.... These students *had three chances to respect the rules....* They chose to stay. And 13 seconds of gunfire later, they unfortunately knew what could happen.... Sad to say, it isn't "Four Dead in Ohio," but four dead (*in vain*) in Ohio. (Norvell and Schooley 2005)

Three chances to behave. This brings to mind a children's song—a rather morbid one of a misbehaving rabbit and a very authoritarian good fairy:

Little Bunny Foo Foo
I don't wanna see you
Scoopin' up the field mice
Bop 'em on the head!
I'll give you 3 chances,
And if you don't behave,
I will chop your little head off!

Flaming' Hot Cheetos: "Through Some Kind of Dialogue Between Me and My Students, We Made Some Decisions"

If Flamin' Hot Cheetos were outlawed, then only outlaws will have Flamin' Hot Cheetos. (Rudin 2006)

Lunchtime with 47 children — all kindergartners and first-graders

— was an adventure, and sometimes, an ordeal. My co-teacher and I shared this time with the children as a way to build community, literally breaking bread together. The children sat together at tables of eight, some bringing lunch from home, and some eating the lunches we served them in our cramped little room. The children often shared items from their lunches and usually this was fine.

One day, however, there was an event. Preston had been sharing his Flaming' Hot Cheetos with Milton—one for you, one for me. Preston's one-for-me, he ate, but Milton's one-for-you, he was saving "for dessert." When the bag was empty, Preston wanted more, and so tried to reclaim the Cheetos that Milton had piled next to his tray. Milton refused, and the battle ensued. It had been a long, trying lunchtime—a lunchtime that was less breaking bread and more opening ketchup packages. I threw the Cheetos away, and announced to the entire class, "That's it! No more sharing of lunches. You eat your own and no one else's!" There was an uncomfortable silence and with Preston and Milton's shocked faces burned in my memory, lunch went on.

The "rule" was in place, and the children and the teachers followed it. There were a few enforcements that occurred when children forgot, and until the day that Nakita and Kayla swapped their entire lunches, no one seemed to question it. Duwan saw them swap, and asked me, "Is it sharing if you trade your whole lunch?" I didn't know, and let it go.

Later, while at the carpet, Duwan asked about it again, and I asked the children, thinking that we'd tackle this new twist that might require an interpretation of our rule. But Shayla asked, "Why do we even have that rule, anyway?" Preston knew: "Because Miss Sheri got mad," and Milton added, "Because we fought over Hot Cheetos." And it stopped me—thinking, Preston is right—we have this rule—a rule we were carefully following and even re-interpreting—*because I got mad!*

Nikita said, "Why don't we change it?" And, *she*—six-years-old and *so* socially aware! —went on to make the connection between rule and law, and the *purpose* of rule/law to support the needs of the people who it serves: "Just because two people needed help that day with their fight doesn't mean that *all* of us need a rule to make us not fight over lunch." Another child (I couldn't tell who—so many were speaking about rules and laws, about lunchtime and how it worked, about fairness, about rules for some people when others don't need it...), and I was in such a state of awe...(still am)), said, "Remember Rosa Parks? She knew the law was wrong. She didn't follow it, because she wanted

on. After some time, the pigeons became part of our walk—we began to count them, try to see if we could identify which ones we'd seen before, and determine if they had a special place that they liked the best. We began to scan the crevices in the buildings and the ledges of the ornate windows and doors to find their roosting places. We wondered if they studied us, too—perhaps predicting our route.

One day, after a long holiday weekend in the late fall, two new students joined us. J'mil and E'mir were brothers, a kindergartner and first-grader joining our multiage classroom, and the children were orienting them to the ways we were in our downtown classroom. On their second day of school, we began our biweekly-mile-long walk to the city's large library—each child holding cloth bags full of books in one hand, and their partner's hand in the other. As we passed a large bank building, a dozen pigeons bobbed into our path, and J'mil screamed and ran—kicking at the pigeons, waving his arms, book bag flapping, and partner left behind. I had neglected to consider this first walk for the brothers as being a different experience from the first walks of the class—experiences that forged an understanding of the city and how we learned ways to traverse it together. We should have told J'mil and E'mir stories of our walks and given them an idea of what to expect. I started to approach J'mil, but I wasn't needed. His partner, Serise, had caught up with him, and gently took his hand again, saying, "it's okay, J'mil. They're just pigeons. This is where they live. But they let us walk here anyway."

There is nothing in this moment that smacks of disobedience—civil or otherwise. But there is a clear sense of a child—a five-year-old little girl—understanding that she is capable of having an impact on a person, and, on the world. In considering that we share spaces—that humans living in the city share a space with pigeons and that became an opportunity for her to show strength, influence, and *kindness*.

If, early on, I had followed the "rule of school," and punished the children who had chased or run from the pigeons on our first walks, they might not have chased them anymore. But they would not have learned to see the pigeons in a fresh light, in a different mood.

Zinn shared his heartfelt wish for children that they have opportunities to begin to "understand the social, environmental and situational roots of the hostility" (Zinn 2007, 169 in Boutte), and that "such antagonisms divide people, thus making it difficult for them to solve their problems." Most important, children should have experiences to help them understand that such situations are not inevitable – that one

can act in ways to ameliorate those hostilities (Boutte 2010, 169). Just as Serise did in helping not only the soon-to-be-kicked pigeon, but in helping J'mil understand the space as she did: a space to be shared and to be enjoyed even more so *because* of that sharing.

Our little band of travelers joined together to learn a space and our place in it. We learned about the ways people and animals and resources came together to create mood. In recollecting the SNCC's resistance to the establishment, Zinn wrote, "Its radicalism is not an ideology but a mood. Moods are harder to define. They are also harder to imprison" (Zinn 1985, 274). In this case, the mood was not so much about fearlessness in the face of power, or rejection of authority and respectability, as it was for the students involved confronting the hard politics of racial injustice. It was about trusting one's vision for what is right and fair and kind, and feeling the power of small actions that one can have impact on the hard places, those "roots of hostility."

Revolutionary change does not come as one cataclysmic moment (beware of such moments!) but as an endless succession of surprises, moving zigzag toward a more decent society. We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world. (Zinn 2004)

Cupcakes: "Wheeling My Little Pushcart Of Ideas Into The Marketplace"

"Priorities. Lack of priorities. That's why these people can never get ahead." No, this is not a quote from Ruby Payne; this how one of my graduate students, a first-grade teacher working on her master's degree, closed her tale of a little girl and birthday cupcakes. The teacher regaled her fellow students with several stories that revealed a narrow middle-class sensibility that I soon learned was shared by her classmates. Citing examples of "designer" clothes, elaborate haircuts, too many video games, and expensive shoes, the teachers agreed "it was no wonder" the families of the children they taught "stayed so poor." I listened, waiting to hear if there might be someone who would raise a counterpoint. Then the first teacher told about the cupcakes:

So, last year, one of my little ones—and of course, she was a mess—always late, never had her folder in the basket, so

needy—had her birthday. Now, this is one who always needs more time to bring in her field trip money and whose clothes are a mess, but on her birthday, her mother comes in with her carrying a huge white box. Oh—it's 28 cupcakes. Not just cupcakes. Not the kind you bake yourself, like I do for my children—but the fancy ones with neon pink frosting and faces of characters made out of candy in them. I know they must have cost at least \$1 each. Maybe more. Now, isn't that ridiculous? I can't even afford to buy those for my children! Priorities. Lack of priorities. That's why these people can never get ahead.

My heart sank as I watched every head in my class nod up and down. Agreeing. Approving. It sank for the little girl, and it sank for the other children whose teachers blame them for their poverty, supported "by a commonsense folk theory... 'it's your own fault...if you work hard enough, you'll get goodies like everyone else'" (Zinn and Macedo 2005, 37). In this case, the teachers' middle-class sensibilities (and insecurities) were offended by the mother bringing in "goodies" for her child when, apparently, she hasn't worked hard enough. That cupcake money did not really belong to her since she did not *really* earn it; and worse, how can people be trusted with (our) money when they spend it on frivolous cupcakes instead of rent, or a car payment. I wanted to confront this notion of worthwhile (and not) priorities, and place the child in the foreground, where she belongs. I said, "So, for about \$30, this little girl's mother was able to let her feel like a princess for a whole day. For \$30 she provided her little girl with a 6th birthday she will never forget, one that she got to share with her entire class, so that they could remember it with her. I'd say that it was a bargain—a wise purchase." I asked them to consider carefully what was meant by saying one could "afford" or "not afford" something, and what it might suggest when one compares what a student has with what *'my children'* have (or deserve). We discussed Dewey's theme of the best and wisest parent and wishing for all children what we wish for our own (1900, 19).

Boutte asks us to consider two four-letter words – *hate* and *love* – that are largely ignored in teacher education programs:

In educational settings, *love* connotes that all humans deserve the right to dignity, freedom, and equal opportunities. On the

other hand, *hate* in educational settings is defined as a lack of compassion and lack of respect for the rights of others. Like hatred in a social sense, it is usually not intentional but often results from lack of knowledge. Professing love for children and humanity without reflective and collaborative action is inadequate (2010, 165-166).

I trust that the teachers in this class, and the others I meet every semester, came into the profession determined to care for their students and to make a positive difference in their lives, but that “does not negate the fact that without guidance and appropriate knowledge bases, educators are likely to inadvertently contribute to oppression—despite good intentions” (Boutte 2010, 166).

Engaging teachers and prospective teachers in efforts to see more in people than their poverty, their non-compliance, their difference, is a tricky thing. Most entering teachers have very little experience in considering, for instance, the reality of class society, or “the complicated socio-cultural and sociopolitical issues that mediate teaching and learning in an increasingly diverse world” (Boutte 2010, 165). The teachers are victims of the same gap in an educational system that ostensibly teaches about ideals of democracy but not the realities of class, discrimination, and oppression within our democratic society. One must wonder, then, if so few of us have developed the vision and the tools to respond to such issues, “Who will provide children with the necessary critical skills and knowledge base they will likely need?” (Boutte 2010, 165).

I do not think I pleased the teachers in my class when I confronted their cupcake consensus. More than one claimed to feel “attacked” and others said things along the lines of, “Well, that’s just a matter of opinion.” It is difficult to continue in suggesting perspectives that have potential to disrupt the dominant discourses—discourses that serve as “regimes of truth [that] make assumptions and values invisible...totalising discourses that force everything and everyone into the same way of thinking and acting” (Foucault, in Dahlberg and Moss 2005, 142). It would be easy to claim that “we are merely servants of the social order...only following orders,” but if we *do* wish for all children what we wish for our own, we “do not have the option to be ignorant, to be unaware, or uninterested in the social, cultural, moral and spiritual significance of what we do in the name of education” (Purpel 2001, 72).

In disrupting regimes of truth that pervade the field of early child-

hood education and the content and character of our teacher education classroom, I found it extraordinarily useful to bring Howard Zinn's voice (on CD) directly into the classroom. I often play this excerpt on the very first day of class to explain that I would not be neutral in my views, that I would be honest with them about where I stood, and that I would not be willing to collaborate with a world view that allows—*promotes* “poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war and cruelty.” As Howard Zinn did, I made it clear to my students that they did not have to agree with me, but that they did need to understand that they

were entering a marketplace. The marketplace of ideas is not a free market. The marketplace of ideas has always been dominated by the people who have the most resources to throw their ideas out into the world. And so, I never felt that I was being overbearing in presenting my ideas. My students had already been out in the world. They'd already had many years of education before me. They'd already grown up in families. They'd already been watching television. They'd already been reading the newspapers. I didn't think I was in danger of overwhelming them. I was wheeling my little pushcart of ideas into the marketplace and saying, 'Here try this!' (Zinn 2005)

An Ivy Plant named *Billie*: “People Behaving Magnificently”

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. (King 1961/1991, 52)

A teacher who is in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own. (Greene 1988, 14)

In the film version of *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, Zinn's former Spelman College student, Marion Edelman Wright, discussed his impact on her, then and now: “He was constantly pushing to say this is not right, and we will challenge that which is not right.... His capacity for moral outrage...has throughout fed my spirit, feeds my spirit now.... Having Zinn affirm one's own instincts was an enormously important thing for me...who had a deep yearning to be free and to challenge the status quo—and so did he!” (in Ellis and Mueller 2004). Howard Zinn was a historian, a playwright, an author, an

activist, but most of all, he was a *teacher*—the best sort of teacher, living the vocation of teaching described by David Purpel:

To put matters bluntly, the vocation of teaching is not about improving instruction, or about developing an integrated curriculum, or even providing for a smooth and orderly school organization, but rather it is to participate in the struggle for a just and loving community.... The major question that we need to ask educators is not ‘what is your philosophy of education?’ But ‘what is your philosophy of life and what are its ramifications for education?’ (2001, 77)

I love how Howard Zinn framed the same idea, referencing SNCC, “It wants to demonstrate to the nation not what kind of *system* people should believe in, but how people should live their lives (in Ellis and Mueller, 2004). I translate this idea, this *mood*, in trying to engage my students—soon to be teachers of young children themselves—in asking the questions that matter. More often than not, they are seeking answers to the best way to “deal with troublemakers” and worrying about whether or not they will be able to “control” so many students at one time. I spend my days trying to hit them in their gut with the complications of responding to not only the needs of the children who they will *see* every day (and hopefully, really *see* them), but to the larger commitments teachers have to be socially aware and socially responsible, *and* to create and support opportunities for their young students to be socially aware and socially responsible. And in helping them *see*—through stories of children, and through action *with* children—that the children and *they* are capable of meaningful attention and interaction with the world.

One such story that had profound impact – helping me see more than ever how much there was to learn from children and their clear vision—was one that occurred in an African-centered school that I was privileged to teach in for several years. Over the course of the school year, one class of kindergarten children shared a significant history and identity, co-constructing with the Elders “a particular view of social reality” (Sears and Marshall 2000, 200, in Leafgren and Broadway 2005, 14). These Elders—community members representing the Elder tradition in Africentric principles—volunteered every day in our school, opening the day with *Harambee*, teaching children words in Kiswahili, helping with building projects and field trips, playing drums, and coun-

seling children (and teachers). The security of their relationship with the Elders allowed the children to engage in *wanting* to recover the original difficulties of life – to engage in “a true *conversation* between young and old” (Jardine 2000, 119-23). It was during one of these conversations that six-year-old Gavin asked, “does anyone know what lynching is?” (in Leafgren and Broadway 2005). He had heard of this, seen a reference to it while watching CNN with his mother, and sought to know—can things like this *really* happen? I found a video of Billie Holiday singing *Strange Fruit* (Meeropol 1939), and with the Elders, the children and I watched and listened:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Children are not oblivious, innocent, or helpless. With respect for them as intelligent and capable human beings, needing to know what’s true, and needing to know that there were ways to respond to such truths—as Abel Meeropol did by writing the poem/lyrics upon seeing a photo of a lynching—the Elders and I spent most of that morning talking. The Elders were able to share their experiences, including one female Elder telling of a memory from childhood—a tale of a 6-year-old little girl, on a church picnic, spotting a noose in a tree. Children are not blind to the horrors in the world; they need us to show them ways to live in and against those hard places. Alice Walker shared her excitement at being part of the demonstrations in the Atlanta movement going strong in 1961, and noted Zinn’s role in that participation as her *teacher*: “Part of what made it possible to do that was that he was with *us*—he was with the students” (Ellis and Mueller 2004).

Earlier that year, Gavin had brought a small ivy plant to the classroom. We had been making the room homey and some children decided to bring pillows; some brought framed art and photos (these were in addition to the family photos on our Ancestor Wall); a few brought ceramic figures; and Gavin brought an ivy plant. We spent some time deciding on where to place it for both the health of the plant and the ease of view and access, and Gavin often stopped by the shelf where it was placed to check on its well-being. At the end of some long days, I visited the plant, too. I called it Gavin, and looked to it as representing, in some sense, the health of our relationship, and so worried if

it looked a little droopy. I told Gavin about talking to it and sometimes apologizing to it for a harsh word or wrong decision made that day, sometimes sharing an idea that I had for the next day. He liked that.

On the morning after our discussion about lynching and the viewing of Billie Holiday singing *Strange Fruit*, I overheard Gavin whispering in the back of the room. He was talking to the ivy: "Don't worry Billie, we heard you." I asked him, "Is the ivy named *Billie*?" And Gavin said, "Today it is. It's like when you talk to the ivy to talk to me after I went home. It's whoever is not here, but is still here. I want Billie Holiday to know I heard her and that I won't forget." I do not think I ever saw the ivy plant look so green and so tall.

In writing this tribute to Howard Zinn and the impact he has had on my life as a teacher of young children and of teachers of young children, I mourn his loss. I worry that never will there be another of his ilk—with his power to move hearts and minds, to offer words and ideas to "hit you in your gut." And, at times, I allow myself to fall into hopelessness and despair. Mourning him while *seeing* what there is to see in classroom after classroom—we're not 30,000 feet away from the damage, are we? Marion Edelman Wright, in Ellis and Mueller's film (2004), said it clearly, "I cannot understand how there aren't more people who are not *profoundly* upset at the racial injustice, at the economic injustice." In pondering the dearth of moral outrage in response to what surrounds us, I feel a burning despair at the role that school plays in it sustaining, even broadening "the gap between a superficial understanding of reality and the knowledge of 'something that hits you in your gut' [via] the dominant pedagogy designed primarily to domesticate and create obedient workers" (Zinn and Macedo 2005, 31).

But there is more to see than the darkness of injustice, cruelty, selfishness, and the physical, economic, emotional, and spiritual violence. One can also see bright glimmers of hope—"only human beings can move me to despair. But only human beings can remove me from despair" (Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel, in Simons 2006, 35). Zinn offered through his work a clear vision of the cruel reality of voices of history through his work; but more profoundly, he also offered HOPE through a human history of "compassion, sacrifice, courage [and] kindness." Zinn asked us to remember the times when people "behaved magnificently," and here, I am fortunate to be in a position to share such magnificence in the actions of children. Often in moments of disobedience, children such as Julian, Serise, J'mil, Gavin, and Kayla have displayed the sort of compassion, sacrifice, courage,

and kindness that Zinn has witnessed in moments throughout history. In the spirit of the hopefulness that Zinn never abandoned, of the hopefulness to be found in spending days with children—enjoying the “fun and fulfillment in the fact that we have been involved, with other good people, in something worthwhile” (Zinn 2004)—I am optimistic. And as Howard Zinn so wisely and optimistically explained:

An optimist isn't necessarily a blithe, slightly sappy whistler in the dark of our time. To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something.

If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory. (Zinn 1993/2002)

NOTES

¹ Going “on the wall” is a common punishment in grade school. It means the child must spend all or part of recess standing against the wall of the school building, watching the other children play.

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