

“Amazing Grace”

by Jonathan Kozol

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UEGE 5102

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Jonathan Kozol

- He is a non-fiction writer, educator, and activist, best known for his books on public education in the United States
- Kozol graduated from Noble and Greenough School in 1954, and Harvard University in 1958 with a degree in English Literature. He was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford.
- He tutored children in Roxbury, MA, and soon became a teacher in the Boston Public Schools. He was fired for teaching a Langston Hughes poem, and then became deeply involved in the civil rights movement. After being fired from BPS he was offered a job to teach for Newton Public Schools, the school district that he had attended as a child, and taught there for several years before becoming more deeply involved in social justice work and dedicating more time to writing.
- Kozol has also worked in the field of social psychology. Kozol is currently on the Editorial Board of Greater Good Magazine, published by the Greater Good Science Center of the University of California, Berkeley. Kozol's contributions include the interpretation of scientific research into the roots of compassion, altruism, and peaceful human relationships.



Kozol's Message

- In *Amazing Grace*, Jonathan Kozol portrays the sad realities of young life in the South Bronx in New York City.
- He describes children who live amongst poverty and social chaos, but who also cling to hope and love for survival.
- He tells us that children are not hardened; they are full of hope and are open to welcome life.
- He describes specific places in the South Bronx: St. Ann's Avenue, Mott Haven, Beekman Avenue, Cypress, East Tremont, Hunts Point Market, etc.

Kozol's Opening Questions

- Why doesn't America care about the children of the poor?
- Why are they neglected?
- Don't they have the right to the same educational opportunities as the children of wealthy suburbs?
- Why do we shun them?
- How can the children of the South Bronx still pray?
- What gives them hope?



St. Ann's Avenue

- “St. Ann’s Church, on St. Ann’s Avenue, is three blocks away from the subway station. The children who come to this small Episcopal church for food and comfort and to play, and the mothers and fathers who come here for prayer, are said to be the poorest in New York. ‘More than 95 percent are poor,’ the pastor says – ‘the poorest of the poor, poor by any standard I can think of’ (Schultz, 2001, p. 372).
- “At the elementary school that serves the neighborhood across the avenue, only seven of 800 children do not qualify for free school lunches. ‘Five of those seven,’ says the principal, ‘get reduced-price lunches, because they are classified as poor, not destitute’” (Schultz, 2001, p. 372).

St. Ann's Avenue Continued

- “In speaking of rates of homicide in New York City neighborhoods, the *Times* refers to the streets around St. Ann's as the “deadliest blocks” in the “deadliest precinct” of the city. If there is a deadlier place in the United States, I don't know where it is” (Schultz, 2001, p. 373).
- “In 1991, 84 people, more than half of whom were 21 or younger, were murdered in the precinct. A year later, ten people were shot dead on a street called Beckman Avenue, where many of the children I have come to know reside. On Valentine's Day of 1993, three more children and three adults were shot dead on the living room floor on an apartment six blocks from the run-down park that reserves the area” (Schultz, 2001, p. 373).
- “In early July of 1993, shortly before the first time that I visited the neighborhood, three more people were shot in 30 minutes in three unrelated murders in the South Bronx... Three weeks after that, a minister and elderly parishioner were shot outside the front door of their church, while another South Bronx resident was discovered in his bathtub with his head cut off” (Schultz, 2001, p. 373).



Mont Haven

- “Crack-cocaine addiction and the intravenous use of heroin, which children I have met here call ‘the needle drug,’ are woven into the texture of existence in Mott Haven. Nearly 4,000 heroin injectors, many of whom are HIV-infected, live here. Virtually every child at St. Ann’s knows someone, a relative or a neighbor, who has died of AIDS, and most children here know many others who are dying now of the disease. One quarter of the women of Mott Haven who are tested in obstetric wards are positive of HIV. Rates of pediatric AIDS, therefore are high” (Schultz, 2001, p. 372).
- “Depression is common among children of Mott Haven. Many cry a great deal but cannot explain exactly why” (Schultz, 2001, p. 372).
- “Fear and anxiety are common. Many cannot sleep” (Schultz, 2001, p. 372).
- “Asthma is the most common illness among children here. Many have to struggle to take in a good deep breath. Some mothers keep oxygen tanks, which children describe as ‘breathing machines,’ next to their children’s beds” (Schultz, 2001, p. 372).
- “The houses in which these children live, two thirds of which are owned by the City of New York, are often as squalid as the houses of the poorest children I have visited in rural Mississippi...” (Schultz, 2001, p. 372).
- “Some of these houses are freezing in the winter. In dangerously cold weather, the city sometimes distributes electric blankets and space heaters for its tenants. In emergency conditions, if space heaters can’t be used, because substandard wiring is overloaded, the city’s practice is to pass out sleeping bags” (Schultz, 2001, p. 372).



Kozol's Thoughts

- What is it like for children to grow up here?
- What do they think the world has done to them?
- Do they believe they are being shunned or hidden by society? If so, do they think that they deserve this?
- What is it that enables some of them to pray?
- When they pray, what do they say to God?

Kozol's Search for Answers

- Kozol is searching for explanations for the sadness heard in many of the voices he interacted with. He runs into problems because his inquiries are not resolved by factual questions. He wants to know how certain people hold up with terrible ordeals, how many more do not, how human beings devalue other people's lives, how pity is at length distinguished, etc. These are all complicated questions.
- Kozol mentions in this article that to find answers, he visited with priests and theologians. He spoke to ministers and priests in almost every neighborhood, to Gregory Groover in Hunts Point, to the priest of St. Luke's Church.
- Every time he spoke to one of these people, their conversation started with something specific (AIDS, education, welfare rules, lead poison, etc.), but ended with talk of personal pain, anxiety about the future of children, the search for faith, and even with the talk of God.

The Divides of the Bronx

- According to Kozol, there is a divide between races in New York between 96th and 97th street. He calls this the “demarcation line.”
- “The sharpness of the demarcation line, which I have never seen before at the street level, is more dramatic and extreme than I anticipated. To the south, along Park Avenue, impressive buildings stand on both sides of the street, pedestrian islands with well-tended grass and flower paintings in the center. In the other direction, to the north, a railroad line, submerged beneath Park Avenue up to this point, appears from under 97th Street and spits the avenue in two. The trains, from this point on, run along the street for several blocks until Park Avenue dips slightly and the tracks are elevated on a large stone viaduct that shadows children playing in the sun of afternoon” (Schultz, 2001, p. 374).
- “Luxury grocers advertise their willingness to make deliveries only south of 96th Street, and even liberal papers such as the *Observer* print these ads. McDonald’s announce ‘home delivery’ from 40 of its outlets in New York, but none of them north of this point on the East side...” (Schultz, 2001, p. 374).



Will times get better?

- “No one in New York, in any case, expects the racial isolation of these neighborhoods to lessen in the years ahead. A demographic forecast by the city’s planning agency predicts the population of the Bronx – both North and South- half of which was white in 1970, and nearly a quarter of which was white in 1990, will be entirely black and Hispanic by the early years of the next century, outside of a handful de facto segregated enclaves of white people and a few essentially detached communities like parts of Riverdale. By that time, the Bronx and Harlem and Washington Heights will make up a vast and virtually uninterrupted ghetto with a population close to that of Houston, Texas, which is America’s fourth-largest city” (Schultz, 2001, p. 375).
- Despite these demographic probabilities, the Bronx borough President, Fernando Ferrer, is enthusiastic that things will change for the better.
- “Many men and women in the Bronx believe that it is going to get worse. I don’t know what can change this” (Schultz, 2001, p. 378).

What children in the Bronx are facing today...

- In New York, thousands of black and Hispanic children of low income have lost their parents to the plague of AIDS.
- In 1993, 10,000 children in New York had lost their mothers to the AIDS epidemic. As many as 2,000 of these children were believed to live in the Mott Haven community and in the three or four adjacent sections in the Bronx.
- Between 1993 and 2000, HIV-infected mothers in New York gave birth to 32,000 to 38,000 HIV-infected babies.
- “According to the city’s health officials, 91 percent of children in New York who were born with AIDS are black or Hispanic, as are 84 percent of women who have AIDS” (Schultz, 2001, p. 376).
- The incubation period for development of AIDS in infants is an average of three years. Most babies die in 18 months. Only about five percent live to be 12 years old.
- A Kozol experience: “In another family in the neighborhood, she says, the father died two years ago and the mother is about to die. The four soon-to-be-orphaned children are being cared for by their 75-year-old grandmother. One of the children, a nine-year-old, is sick with full-blown AIDS. Another child, seven years old, is less sick but he’s been getting IV blood infusions. The six-year-old may be okay. But it’s the 13-year-old girl, who isn’t sick, who’s causing the most worries. She’s staying out all night, defying her grandmother. She started to do this at 11, when her father died. Recently, this girl had an abortion” (Schultz, 2001, p. 377).

How do children face these losses?

- According to Kozol, they follow this prayer faithfully:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost and now am found.
Was blind but now I see.*

- Kozol expresses shock in his article. Despite all of the hardships Bronx residents face, they find joy through song. They pray, and are open to life.



Discussion Questions

- As teachers, what can we do to help students like those in the Bronx?
- What are your reactions to the statistics mentioned in the presentation?
- If you could grant every child three things – what would it be and why?
- What is the significance of the song, “Amazing Grace” in this context?



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Recommended Outside Resources

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