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Plus ça change

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Plus ça change...

Jonathan Kozol, *Letters to a Young Teacher*.
Crown Publishers, ©2007

Charles Angell

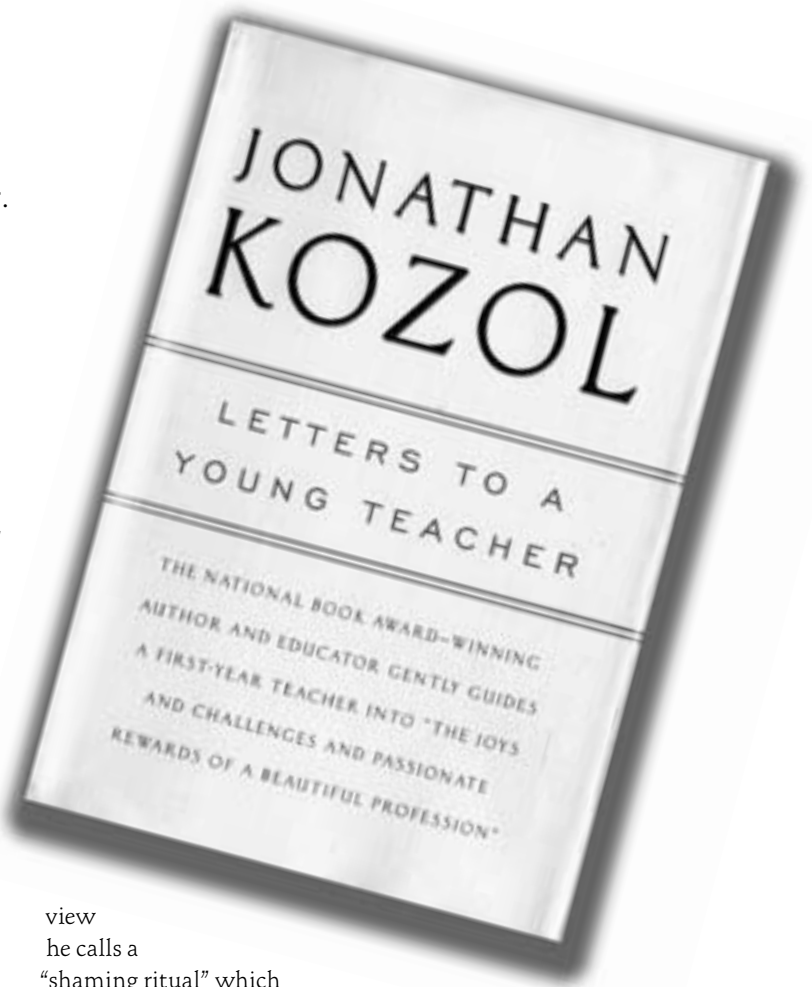
“Bitzer,’ said Thomas Gradgrind. ‘Your definition of a horse.’

‘Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.’ Thus (and much more)

And thus in his 1854 novel *Hard Times* Charles Dickens lampoons in a chapter titled “Murdering the Innocents” his British schoolmaster Thomas Gradgrind and his model pupil Bitzer who has accepted Gradgrind’s dictum that “Facts alone are wanted in life.” Schooling has no time or place for fancy, fun, imagination or—most importantly for Dickens—kindness, for what Kozol terms in the title of one of his chapters “Aesthetic Merriment,” children’s love of the “wiggly” and the “wobbly.”

Indeed, in *Letters to a Young Teacher* Kozol uses an epistolary exchange with Francesca, a beginning teacher in a Boston elementary school, to document what has gone wrong in our attempts to reform America’s public schools which to my mind he views as not much different, save in the degree of their pernicious dogmas, from the schools Dickens condemned for stultifying children’s growth. He tells Francesca early in their exchange that most new teachers “have been given almost no advice at all on strategies” for dealing with children who have “already undergone... pedagogical battering.” Administrators, he says, tell beginning teachers “start out tough and stick to the prescribed curriculum,” the “worst possible advice” since it leaves no room for the unexpected and spontaneous encounters that so often fascinate children and stimulate their curiosity.

The imminent renewal of the No Child Left Behind Act has found Kozol once again arguing for amendments to the legislation which in a recent Boston Globe inter-



view he calls a “shaming ritual” which compels “wonderful teachers” to act as “drill sergeants for the state” in order to prepare students for legislatively mandated tests. In *Letters to a Young Teacher* Kozol excoriates “the miseries of high-stakes testing, which is growing more relentless and obsessive in the inner-city schools with every passing year.” Schools have failed to create early childhood programs that would prepare inner-city children for school, started to administer standardized tests as early as the kindergarten years, eliminated recess, and reduced instruction time in core subjects in order to drill students on test taking strategies. “What children love or do not love has no role at all within the world of tough and testable accountability,” Kozol concludes, adding some paragraphs later that “if these methods actually worked, much as I dislike them, I might put aside my reservations.... The trouble is, they do not work except for the lowest-scoring children in a class, and, even then, the gains that they achieve sustain themselves for only a brief period of time. These are testing gains, not learning gains.” One has to agree. Students know how to take tests. They continually ask about class material

“will this be on the test?” They want to know exactly what material will be tested, confusing standardized testing with learning. We and the students have equated taking tests with passing tests on the notion as one test critic once said that if we weigh the sheep often enough, they will begin to gain weight. We risk creating a generation of, if not Bitzers, then sheep-like Bleatzers.

Kozol, upset as he is with high-stakes testing, grows even more agitated when writing to Francesca about the move toward education vouchers, “the single worst, most dangerous idea to enter education discourse in my lifetime.” Those advocating vouchers, says Kozol, give “parents in poor neighborhoods the incorrect impression that a voucher will enable them to send their children to the kinds of private schools attended by the children of the affluent....” As Kozol points out, voucher amounts for inner-city parents would come nowhere close to the per pupil spending normally found in richer suburban communities. They would do nothing to diminish the social inequality between urban and suburban schools. (The Boston area METCO program, whatever its defects, was expressly intended to flatten out such inequalities for as many urban students as possible.) Worse, those advocating vouchers assume a greater degree of mobility in an urban population than in fact exists. Hurricane Katrina has shown the fallacy of this assumption in the numbers of urban poor and working class who could not flee New Orleans. Yet, as we’re beginning to learn, the near destruction of the New Orleans school system has led parents to demand that the rebuilt school system do an improved job at meeting the needs of its students by providing them with the facilities and instruction that will give them mobility, both geographical and social, in the 21st century world.

The potential social injustice posed by voucher driven schools, a move toward privatizing education, most troubles Kozol. He observes to Francesca that voucher proponents who extol to parents the freedom of choice promised by vouchers talk a different game to investors who view urban schools supported by vouchers as yet another profit center for those who would make education submit to the marketplace. Kozol cites the middle class parents who want to send their children to “an independent school” and who “suddenly [ask] why they cannot get some money from the government to pay for it. Is it fair, they ask essentially that they have to ‘pay for education twice,’ once in the tuition costs for private school, and once in taxes to support a public system they do not intend to use?” Kozol is quick to point out that such a question makes education a personal commodity rather than a universal social good and

that often those who pose the question, well-meaning people, don’t perceive the inherent dangers in a voucher system when “ideology alone, entirely separate from religion, would undoubtedly inspire other interest groups [groups other than the Catholic Church]—loyal followers of charismatic but invidious people such as David Duke, militant survivalists, people not particularly fond of Jews (or Catholics for that matter)—to lay a claim to public subsidies for private education that advances their particular beliefs.” The attempts to introduce ‘intelligent design’ into the science curriculum, plans to revive single-sex classrooms, poorly thought out curricula for teaching multiculturalism and diversity, attempts to dictate what students should or should not read, all the tactics that the ideologically driven use to impose their beliefs on schools and schoolchildren, these are the movements that keep not just Kozol but all teachers who have spent many years in classrooms sleepless at night.

Poor Sissy Jupe, Dicken’s hapless girl, who when asked by Gradgrind whyever she would put a floral patterned rug on the floor, replies “they would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy—” “But you musn’t fancy,’ Gradgrind cries: “You are never to fancy.” Kozol defends the Sissy Jupes, writing to Francesca in closing that he hopes she enjoys “years of happiness among your children, plenty of hugs and lots of foolishness, many caterpillars, snails, and other interesting things that creep and crawl, unhurried hours of unfolding treasures for your children on the reading rug.” An altruistic hope certainly, but in this era when contemporary Gradgrinds opine that all knowledge must serve instrumental ends, that fancy has no place in the global economy, Kozol reminds us how narrow those prescriptions are and have always been, giving today’s politicians and the educational bureaucrats the dickens.

—Charles Angell is Professor of English and Book Review Editor of the Bridgewater Review.