In Quarantine with Fatigue and Resignation

Book Review of Amazing Grace:
The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation by Jonathan Kozol

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Almost thirty years ago Jonathan Kozol wrote a scathing indictment of the Boston Public Schools that exploded the myth of American education as the great equalizer of children. With the passion and optimism that we have come to identify with the activism of the 1960's, Death at an Early Age exposed the reality of segregated and unequal schools and pointed the way to substantial reforms. The educational system Kozol described offered virtually no way for talent to be recognized, developed, and rewarded. Rather, for Boston's poor Black children, the schools were effective containers to keep them in their places.

As a new superintendent takes the helm of this system in a changed, and more cynical, era, one cannot but wonder whether a similar response would be stimulated if Death at an Early Age were written today. I for one doubt it. For even after winning the National Book Award for Death at an Early Age, and writing seven more books chronicling the ravages of increasing social inequality on our most vulnerable citizens, Kozol now finds it necessary to write Amazing Grace, a devastating story of life in New York City's South Bronx.

Like a pilgrim in a foreign land, Kozol quietly probes into the lives of children and families living in Mott Haven, one of the poorest neighborhoods of the South Bronx. In the six chapters and epilogue of this book, we come to know and care about individuals making extraordinary efforts to construct meaningful lives in the midst of ruin and chaos. These lives go forth next to the richest congressional district in the nation. For the residents of Mott Haven, conditions have worsened during the thirty years since Jonathan Kozol first put pen to paper in the idealistic and failed hope of making this nation a fairer place.

Using their own words, Kozol lets us into the lives of people like sixteen year-old David Washington, who tends his beloved AIDS-infected mother; 13 year-old Anthony, who eats cold oatmeal from a box for dinner but finds nurturance and hope in his attachments to an elderly poet and the Radcliffe-educated pastor of St. Ann's Church; and 11 year-old Anabelle, a sparkling child whose widowed father irons her pretty dresses each day. We also hear teachers talk about suicidally depressed students with no access to mental health care, mothers without enough money for food for their families, children who worry about when they will die.

The personal struggles of the men, women and children in this book reveal a society in which virtually everything but the prison system has broken down. Pregnant women wait four months for their first prenatal appointment. Incarcerated women receive better prenatal care than women on the outside.

When Mrs. Washington is rushed to Lincoln Hospital with AIDs-related pneumonia, she waits four nights on a stretcher in a corridor until a bed becomes available. A battered woman and her children are placed by the city in a seventh floor hotel room with no elevator or running water. The family is issued buckets to fetch water from the bar across the street. In Mott Haven the halls stink. The elevator doors don't work. Rats attack children in their beds and chew through electric wires, contributing to a constant threat of fire. Lead paint

covers the walls in public housing and in the classrooms. An incinerator spews noxious fumes into the air. The list goes on and on.

Running throughout the book is a tragic integrating theme: the deaths of children. Two children fall through broken elevator doors to their deaths; six children die in fires; 14 teenagers are shot to death. These casualties are memorialized by name in a touching list at the end of the book. The sense of death is ever-present: makeshift shrines on street corners; bullet holes in hallways; the pop of gunshots during Sunday worship. And school children know at every moment when to hit the ground. Traumatization for these children is an ordinary state of mind.

Kozol asks: How do people make sense of such circumstances? How do they handle the unbearable? Although many of the adults are cynical and tired, others find strength in religious faith. Children from families active in the vibrant church communities enthuse about heaven and eternal rewards for living a good life. Their explanations for the inequities of life on earth, however, inevitably return to the uncomfortable conclusion that they are being punished because they are poor—or Black—or Hispanic.

Amazing Grace is clearly not an easy book to read. Although the personal stories speak to the strength and decency of humans under stress, they also force the reader to face the devastation of poverty and segregation. Kozol interweaves his interviews with data on the realities and consequences of poverty and policy in our society. End notes provide source information. Perhaps the most poignant bit of data emerges from a note in the *New York Daily News* on May 23, 1994, that "'239 of 277' swings for children in the Bronx aren't 'in place' or 'need repair.'" As Kozol says, "Trivial as it is, this disappointing detail says it all." For me, this small fact dissolves the distance between those of us inside and outside the ghetto. The children who would swing in those parks are as precious as the children who swing in mine. The difference is that Mott Haven mothers are trying to raise their children in a field full of landmines.

Kozol likens the ghetto to a form of quarantine supported by "all the strategies and agencies and institutions needed to contain, control, and normalize a social plague...(p. 135)." He argues that: "So long as there are ghetto neighborhoods and ghetto hospitals and ghetto schools, I am convinced there will be ghetto desperation, ghetto violence, and ghetto fear because a ghetto is itself an evil and unnatural construction (p. 162)."

Kozol does not end this book with a little list of answers for the South Bronx's of America. He echoes the tiredness and resignation of many of Mott Hill's residents, acknowledging that many lists have been drawn by writers, committees, foundations and commissions, and they have done little good. Kozol argues that the questions that need to be asked go beyond concrete matters. "One wants instead to know...how human beings devalue other people's lives, how numbness and destructiveness are universalized, how human pity is at length extinguished and the shunning of the vulnerable can come in time to be perceived as natural behavior (p. 186)."

Despite his pessimism, Jonathan Kozol has not laid down his pen. He continues to fight the good fight in a book that is gripping, informative, deeply moral, and profoundly disturbing.