

GREAT MEN AND WOMEN

By Jonathan Kozol

"I don't give a damn about semi-radicals." -Helen Keller,

Teachers in the Nineteen Seventies face a difficult job when they sit down to work out lesson-plans on U.S. history. How do the ideological hand-servants of the leading counter-revolutionary nation on the face of earth cope with a history that has been studded with so many bold, and revolutionary, and subversive, and exhilarating men and women?

Schools know well the dangers that can be provoked by ethical upheaval in the consciousness of those within a social order that depends on managed views, on manufactured tastes and falsified perceptions of our own experience. Private ethics and public management are not compatible. Schools cannot leave it to the idle chance of later years to see how open minds respond to burning mandates. Instead, the mandates are themselves examined, outlined, categorized, congealed, within the basic framework of our school experience. Each radical name, each dangerous idea, is given its ordered place within the course of study. Each name, each statement, each quotation, snaps and fits into its own pre-designated slot. If each item can be locked into its proper place, there is no risk of confrontation or surprise in later years when we are on our own and do not have, between ourselves and justice, a curricular protection.

There is, by now, a sequence by which historic figures of strong radical intent are handled in the context of the public school. First, we drain the person of nine tenths of his real passion, guts and fervor. Then we glaze him over with implausible laudations. Next we place him on a lofty pedestal that fends off any notion of direct communion. Finally, we tell incredibly dull stories to portray his school-delineated but, by this point, utterly unpersuasive greatness.

Dr. King, by classic process of detoxification, comes to be a kindly, boring and respectful "Negro preacher" with very light skin and rather banal views, who went to college to "improve himself," believed in God, believed in "fellow man" and won, as a reward for his respectable beliefs and his non-violent views, the reverence of most U.S. citizens, "both white and black"-and, then, the Nobel Prize for Peace. Left out of focus is the whole intensity, the tactical genius and the ardent fervor that awoke within his soul for just one hour, yet which inspires and establishes his greatness. Teachers do not tell their pupils, if they are not forced, that Dr. King urged his disciples to defy the law, to interrupt its normal processes and openly obstruct its execution, so long as both appear to stand in conflict with good conscience.

Thoreau comes to mind in much the same regard: a man to whom, today, the nation pays considerable-but nervous-tribute. For fifty years after his death he was ignored. In his own day he was no more well-received than younger rebels of his stamp and character are loved today. He spoke of freedom, conscience and dissent and offended nearly everyone then living in the State of Massachusetts. Moreover, he did not restrict himself to words alone, but took explicit action on his views: "How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it."

In evidence of this conviction, and in clear enactment of the sense of disaffiliation, Thoreau refused to pay his tax and was, for one brief night, put into Concord jail. His willingness to stand out from his neighbors and to differentiate his own views from those of his time was seldom blurred in the accepted manner that is taken for agreeable dissent in our own decade.

Thoreau sought none of the palliations that are used by those who cloud their statements with the satisfying ambiguities that pass for truth within the press and public schools today. "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?" He also wrote: "You may say the wisest thing you can, old man, you who have lived seventy years, not without honor of a kind, I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that. One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels."

In 1844, Thoreau made up his mind to leave behind his neighbors altogether and went to live alone outside of Concord. There was, throughout this time, a sense of living absolutely at the center of his soul, at that decisive place within himself at which he knew that it was he alone who lived his life and that it could not be lived for him by any other: "When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize ... As for adopting the ways which the state has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone."

Thoreau had words of scathing hatred for the cautious philanthropic people of his day. He also made clear what it was within their brand of philanthropic action he despised. They knew very well that what they did could not transform the social order, nor undermine their own unshakable position at the top. Thoreau, himself, did not abstain, of course, from straightforward ethics-nor from compassion of a strong and active form. Nor did he hesitate to claim a moral basis for his work or to take recourse, in a time of indecision, to the voice of his own conscience. It was the guarded character of philanthropic action and the pompous tone of philanthropic self-promotion, which he hated and attacked. They boast, he said, of spending "a tenth part" of their income in charity; perhaps they ought to spend "the nine-tenths so" and then be done with it. His own rebellion, at once more bold and less confined, took him in a more exhilarating and more dangerous direction: "We should be men first and subjects afterward . . . "

Today Thoreau is well-entombed in high school literature courses, wherein he is given limitless admiration as a nature writer. Those who wish to probe a little deeper into the political and moral implications of his views are urged by their intimidated and uneasy teachers to wait, if they can, until they are "a little older."

None of this should come to us as an immense surprise. The government is not in business to give voice to its disloyal opposition. Thoreau is dangerous. He disobeyed the law, in keeping with the dictates of his own intense and uninhibited conscience and, from this action of good faith, derived that intellectual and personal integrity that tends so much of leverage, strength and of sustained veracity to his best work. Public school is not in business to produce Thoreau and, even less, young citizens who may aspire to lead their lives within the pattern of his courage and conviction. School is in business to produce reliable people, manageable people, unprovocative

people: people who can be relied upon to make correct decisions, or else to nominate and to elect those who will make correct decisions for them.

It should no longer be perceived by us as either unreflective, unintended or erroneous that public schools will view with reservation and contain with care the words and voices of those men and women who call forth in us the best things we are made of. To pretend that public schools cannot perceive, and will not logically suppress, the danger constituted by the burning eyes of Malcolm X or the irreverent brilliance of Thoreau is to assign to those schools a generous ineptitude which they do not in fact possess. To undermine a man like Martin Luther King, or to speak of Thoreau as a naive, brilliant but eccentric country farmer, is not, as liberal critics like to say, a mindless error of the U.S. public schools. It is **an ideal instance of their true intent**.

The manner in which the **schools contrive to decontaminate** exhilarating women is, in part, a separate issue. In this situation, it is not so much a problem of the ethical debilitation of specific women. It is, instead, a matter of their virtual exclusion. In practical terms, **great women don't exist in public school**. Those who do are, with few notable exceptions, sterile relics of devitalized respectability Martha Washington, Betsy Ross, Mary Todd Lincoln and the like. Harriet Tubman comes out of the wash with more than the average portion of her spirit still intact; yet even she ends up with much of the same bloodless character as Dr. King. Dorothy Day is not yet canonized by public school. Once she is dead, we cannot help but fear what will become of her. She will, no doubt, be treated generously, but with **skilled patterns of domestication**. Emma Goldman, Elizabeth Flynn and Rosa Luxemburg, having spoken in specific revolutionary terms, will not likely win a place in public schools for decades yet to come. If, and when, in fifty years, one or another of these women wins her paragraph, or her "sub-section " in a text, it is not easy to believe she will escape that special exercise of decontamination that is reserved for those whose voice not only earnestness, but pain: not only righteous protestation, but authentic rage.

Helen Keller's decontamination in the public school offers by far the clearest parallel to that of Thoreau. Most of us know well by now the standard version of the deaf-blind-mute, glazed, dead and boring Helen Keller of the Fourth Grade bookshelf. In classic version, she emerges earnest, brave, heroic and undangerous: Harriet Tubman with white pigmentation, Eleanor Roosevelt with a few less faculties, but with the same high-pitched, pathetic voice.

"Helen Keller is a famous deaf-blind lady who can read, write and speak. She fought against great, even formidable odds, a battle that many people felt could not be won-and never would, perhaps, if it had not been for her trusted friend and teacher. Together, the two achieved things that seem all but past belief. Among the many important people whom they knew were Andrew Carnegie, King George, Queen Mary, Samuel Clemens, Lady Astor, Alexander Bell. In every respect, Helen Keller represented courage, perseverance and the highest moral values of her day."

This is the standard Helen Keller whom two million children read about each year in public school, about whom they write tedious book reports, almost unreadable because, in forty years, they have remained identical, unchanging, banal and, in factual terms, dead wrong. Here, for one moment, is the voice of Helen Keller as in fact she lived and spoke, fighting with passion to

expose the unfair labor practices of the first decades of the Nineteen Hundreds and to do battle with the U.S. social order as it still exists today:

"Why is it that so many workers live in unspeakable misery? With their hands they have built great cities, and they cannot be sure of a roof over their heads. With their hands they have opened mines and dragged forth with the strength of their bodies the buried sunshine of dead forests, and they are cold. They have gone down into the bowels of the earth for diamonds and gold, and they haggle for a loaf of bread. With their hands they erect temple and palace, and their habitation is a crowded room ... They plow and sow and fill our hands with flowers ... Their own hands are full of husks . . . "

In another passage, Helen Keller speaks of factory visits she has made: "I have visited sweatshops, factories [and] crowded slums. If I could not see it, I could smell it ... With my own hands I could feel ... dwarfed children tending their younger brothers and sisters, while their mothers tended machines in nearby factories." She then says this: "People do not like to think. If one thinks," she writes, in one of those remarks which, taken at face value, would transform from top to bottom every school in the United States: "If one thinks, one must reach conclusions ... Conclusions are not always pleasant." She then makes clear her own conclusion after visits in the factories and slums: "The foundation of society is laid upon a basis of ...conquest and exploitation." A social order "built upon such wrong [and] basic principles is bound to retard the development of all..."

The result, she says, in words prophetic of Marcuse, "is...false standard." Trade and material reward are viewed as the chief purposes of human life: "The lowest instincts in human nature--love of gain, cunning and selfishness--are fostered... The output of a cotton mill or a coal mine is considered of greater importance than the production of healthy, happy- hearted [and] free human beings..."

Of war, she says this: "The few who profit from the labor of the masses want to organize the workers into an army which will protect [their] interests..."

Of voting, she says this: "We the people are not free. Our democracy is but a name. We vote? What does that mean? We choose between Tweedledum and Tweedledee."

Of education, she has these choice words to speak: "We can't have education without revolution. We have tried peace education for one thousand and nine hundred years... Let us try revolution and see what it will do now."

Of revolution, she says this: "The time of blind struggle is drawing to a close... This is not a time of gentleness." It is not a time either of lukewarm beginnings: "It is a time for... open speech and fearless thinking... a time of all that is robust and vehement and bold."

Is she afraid? Is she intimidated by her chosen stand? Far from intimidation, she is inflamed with passion: "I love it... It thrills me... I shall face great and terrible things. I am a child of my generation. I rejoice that I live in such a splendidly disturbing time."

There is the temptation to go on: to quote page after page of this undaunted and subversive prose. Less clever than Thoreau, less skilled as craftsman in the use of words, she is more capable of soaring indignation.

The point at stake can be subsumed in these words: The special humiliation women undergo within the twelve-year interlock of public school (and, to a degree, still worse, within the Schools of Education) is evil enough to call for anger on its own. In the particular case of Helen Keller, I believe, she is not decontaminated in the public school by special reason of her being "woman," but rather in the same way as Thoreau-and for much the same cause. **She comes out: laundered, low key, admirable, heroic and yet, somehow, non-infectious.** Schools speak often of the dangers of infection among children. They offer tetanus shots to ward off tetanus, Salk vaccine to ward off paralytic illness. The way they fend off ethical epidemic has a genius all its own. It is difficult to think that Soviet teachers, for all supervision and political control, ever could fashion a more gross, more ruthless or more wholesale labor of historical revision.

There are, however, certain men and women who break all the rules and cannot be defused with quite the same deceit and glib abandon as Thoreau or Keller. These are, for the most part, rebels of a saintly, somewhat self-abasing character, often with religious ties or implications: people, for example, like Saint Francis, Gandhi or Saint Joan. The radical provocations of these kinds of "heroes" are such that the schools cannot with safety satirize or with immunity deny. For a number of reasons, having to do with many contradictions and pretensions that exist within our body of traditional ideas, school does not dare to label men and women of this sort as evil or insane. Whatever public schools may wish, therefore, a certain number of prophetic figures of this kind must, in some fashion, be respected or revered.

There is, however, a vast gulf between respect and imitation. It is at this point that the schools have carried out a solemn **act of disaffiliation**. The knife-blade **falls between respect and imitation**: between a "conscientious interest in a decent, and, indeed, an interesting and important person" and unclothed dialogue with the mandate which, in his utterance, resounds and resonates.

There is a quick and bitter instant of semantic surgery. Some people, we say, command our love and adoration. These, we say, are fine and admirable people. In certain ways, we say, they are the best and bravest, most remarkable, most admirable of human beings-but therefore (as we seem to say) just for this reason, not in any sense, by no miscalculation, no bad luck or evil fortune, are they anything like ordinary folk: i.e., like you or me. To be a brave, heroic and risk-taking man or woman, to be a person who is not afraid to be entirely different, whether saint or soldier, martyr or eccentric or incorrigible rebel: **to be someone like this is not to be someone like you or me.**

It is affirmed to start with, it is comprehended, it is unconditionally agreed, that we can afford to pay lip service to these dangerous and intoxicating human beings only because **we do not have the obligation to be like them.** Some people we honor; others we emulate, reward and ask for cocktails. This is an ugly but, I think, realistic designation of the range of proper options open to a person who intends to grow into serene and uncomplex adulthood.

"The social purpose of education," Friedenberg has said, "is not to create a nation of actively insatiable truth-seekers... It is to create a nation which can see clearly, and agree on what it sees, when it looks in certain directions." What it is expected to see, when it looks in the direction of Saint Francis, Thoreau, Helen Keller, Dr. King, is a possible object for arm's-length admiration and respect, but in no case an appropriate model for acceptable or even sane behavior.

There is, of course, a cold and brutal desecration in this process of dichotomy and insulation. It is, however, more at our expense than at that of those men and women whom we so insultingly, and so inadequately, revere. In the long run, as we seem to say, we are not sufficiently important-not enough "central to our own lives"-to believe ourselves good people but just "ordinary" folks. We live out some place on the flatlands where the stakes are low and where the issues do not count. Unlike Dr. King, we have not been to the mountain and we do not plan to go there. If we did, we might come back to our old friends and "fellow man" with a sense at very least of disconcerting irony. What then would we experience? How then would we be able to respond? What would we say?

The man who has been to the mountain does not come back to pick up in the conversation where he left off. If he comes back at all, it is to interrupt the conversation. It is to say he is no longer what he was before and that he cannot answer to the same ideas with the same mixture of delight and acquiescence. It is, most certainly, not the business of a school that serves the interests of a social order such as ours to send its pupils out on pilgrimage, or even on a two-day round-trip expedition of this kind. I believe it is at least in part for just this reason that we have been trained to feel respect for people of this sort only in their distant power or past excellence. We honor decent people after they are dead: cowards, cynics and amusing people while they are still living. There is no danger that a dead man will arise to tell us that we are degrading his best work, or that we have been invalidating all its deepest worth.

It is still more than this. A man, once dead, cannot come back to say to us that we might someday be strong and courageous too. He cannot look to us with trust, or with a sense of love or invocation. He cannot tell us to leave what we have been, and who we are, and go with him. This point goes beyond the realm of politics alone. It is not a mere decision as to which of certain men or women we may find most suitable to our ideas. Rather, it is a matter of belief that any person who, in any sense, has lived deeply, and felt strongly, and struggled bravely and spoken boldly, with a voice of real conviction, is a person with whom we might converse as child and teacher, follower and leader, friend and friend. Everything in our education, and much in our social order, takes away from us the sense of power to look to the people that we most revere as fitting correspondents for our inept dialogue. They are too lofty: We are too banal. The distance from the flatlands to the mountains is too far.

"In this life," Robert Coles has written, "we prepare for things, for moments and events and situations... We worry about wrongs, think about injustices, read what Tolstoi or Ruskin... has to say... Then, all of a sudden, the issue is not whether we agree with what we have heard and read and studied.... The issue is us, and what we have become."

It is clear, by now, that "what we have become" is, to a considerable degree, what we have first been told it is within our right or "logical range of yearning" to imagine that it is appropriate to

wish to be. The writer who tells us: the teacher who instructs us: the schooling-apparatus that persuades us that our logical, sane and proper place is on the flatlands of relaxed intent and genial undertaking, has exercised thereby a fearful power. It is the power either to endow our dreams with richness and vocation or to reduce our aspirations to the size of an inept concern and the dimensions of an uninspired concept of inert compassion.

Low expectation, as we learn in the teaching of reading in the Third Grade, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Children become, to a considerable degree, what they are told it is "appropriate" to wish to be. In this respect, I think it can be said that most of us need a sense of sanction or authentication-an empowering voice-in order to believe it is our right or our vocation to become just, passionate and risk-taking human beings. Conversely, there is limitless power of expropriation, for most children, in the voice that tells them it does not belong to them to yearn to be such men or women. We build perimeters around the ethical aspirations of our students by the very terms we teach them how to bring to their own act of self-description.

The schools instruct our children to believe in their own marginal position in relation to the kinds of people they are trained to look upon with reverence, adulation, love. The schools instruct our children to regard these women and these men as dwelling apart, within another realm, beyond our small, peripheral existence. These people, as school seems to say, command our love but live beyond our dreams. Dr. King goes to the mountain, Thoreau to Walden, Christ to Gethsemane, and Gandhi to the sea. As for us, we stay in class and write term-papers on the "question" of vocation or about the "symbolism" in a young man's or young woman's quest for truth and justice. Moreover, school goes further and makes certain that we get full credit for the time that we put in, whether in terms of grades, degrees and recommendations, prizes, publication or material reward. In such a way, school does not only stand between the child and the person he reveres, but also cheapens the relationship between them by showing the child how to turn his sense of admiration into coin that can be bartered on the common market. In a nation in which all forms of produce, intellection and vocation can be sold, consumed, exploited or traded-in, the ultimate triumph of the values of the state and social order in the face of those real dangers which subversive people such as King, Thoreau or Keller represent is to be able to turn them into a term-paper.

Nothing is sacred: least of all a man or woman whose whole being constitutes an invocation to the sense of risk, of ethics, of rebellion. It is bizarre that we should look for something different. What do we really think these schools are for?