



April 21, 2016
Embassy of Italy
Chocolate Inspiration 2016 – 20th Anniversary Celebration
Jonathan Kozol remarks on accepting the Inspired Teaching Changemaker Award

Thank you, Jane, and thank you to this wonderful group of teachers I met this afternoon - educators Deborah Williams, Kate Keplinger, Zoe Duskin, and Latisha Coleman, and all the other wonderful people I met at the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School. It was one of the most delightful, and might I add, racially diverse schools I've visited in years. I loved it.

I don't think I'm worthy of this award to be honest. I'm just an old man who's been teaching and causing trouble over the years. But I'd like to accept this award in the name of all those unnoticed but gloriously inspiring and contagiously exhilarating teachers who find me everywhere I go. They're all over the place. They're scattered, often isolated. These wonderful teachers' high morale has been eroded by a wave of orchestrated disrespect on the part of those who usually know very little about education, but know a good deal about numbers and metrics and often, it seems to me, treat our teachers as the favorite scapegoats for all the social sins of our society. That's my own view.

So I'd like to take this opportunity tonight to celebrate Center for Inspired Teaching for bringing dignity to teachers; joy and justice to their students; and a badly needed rebirth of jubilant vitality, healthy spontaneity, creativity, and sheer humanity and love back into our nation's public schools.

It's been a grim time for a lot of us who believe in child-centered learning and who believe that education should be a beautiful experience. If teachers are not happy in their classrooms – and happiness I think has a lot to do with dignity and high morale – then their students won't be happy. I see that all the time. This is even more the case in early elementary school where the kids are with that same teacher six or seven hours a day, five days a week.

It's terribly unfashionable to say this nowadays, but what the heck, I've never been fashionable. It's not often said in this era of severe, often punitive testing and "no-excuses" education, but I believe that children, in addition to needing to learn all the multitude of skills they're going to need to survive and prevail in our society, also have a natural entitlement and God-given right to know the taste of happiness in their years of innocence.

They should have a sense of safety and be protected from a fear of failure. They should have a sense of delectation, of real pleasure in the act of learning – of reading a book for

the joy it brings you, not to get a federal number pasted on your forehead. They should indulge their sense of whim and wonderment, laugh a lot, and especially for the poorest children in this nation, have the sense that life is good – or that it can be – and that it's well worth living. A lot of poor kids never get to learn that lesson.

I'm going to end on a happy note. I'm going to end by indulging myself a bit by paying a very real and special tribute to my beloved friend and possibly my closest colleague in the world of education, Jane Dimyan-Ehrenfeld. Jane is something special in this world. I won't go into all the details, but simply say that when Jane came up to Boston to become a first grade teacher, I started visiting her class. I didn't know if she were any good. I knew that she was a delightful person, but I didn't know what she could do with children. But she did magic with those children. It was something special. I'll say - just so you won't think I'm an utter romantic - that she was a good, tough teacher when she had to be, teaching the necessary skills. I always tell young teachers that if you're going to be a little bit irreverent, then you'd better be good at what you're doing. You have to work hard at it, harder than the conformist teachers do.

I walked into Jane's class, and there was this sense of magic in the room. First of all, the kids loved to come in; they were excited on Monday morning. They were rushing into the classroom, and they were getting into line – these are first graders – to get their hug. (Are you still allowed to hug children in public schools? I hope so. I wouldn't want to teach first grade, or be in first grade, if I couldn't get a hug.) Later in the day, if a child was upset or troubled by something sad, I would see this little child get up and move to wherever Jane was in the room because she was never at her desk, of course. There's a little girl I'm thinking of whom I watched one time quietly walk up behind Jane and wait until Jane noticed that she was there. And then she got an extra special hug.

There was also music in the classroom – folk music, Caribbean music, soul music, opera. I came in one day, and – what's your favorite opera? - yes, it was Verdi, *La Traviata*, playing in the background. If I ever felt depressed, I would go down to Jane's school and spend a couple of hours in that classroom. Once – because Jane was being a little mischievous and irreverent about some aspects of testing – I asked the superintendent of the Boston schools to visit her classroom because I thought that might help protect her. He did visit, and he told me after: "I didn't want to leave. It was a delight to be there. Tell her she can do anything she wants. I wish we had more teachers like her."

I'm so glad that Jane is here joining her forces with Aleta and with all the other good folks at Center for Inspired Teaching. This is a wonderful gathering of some beautiful souls. Thank you so much for this award.