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Book Review. Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope by Jonathan Kozol

Michael Jenuwine

Indiana University Maurer School of Law

Jane E. Barden

University of Chicago

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ORDINARY RESURRECTIONS: CHILDREN IN THE YEARS OF HOPE, by Jonathan Kozol. *New York, Crown Publishers, 2000. 388 pages.*

A pencil sharpener that devours pencils, a spelling test, an upcoming birthday, a gummy pink eraser that smudges carefully prepared homework, a cold to battle, a half-pint milk container that refuses to open at lunch, and other such mundane happenings most often comprise the daily concerns of childhood. Going to school, doing (and avoiding!) homework, teasing a classmate, comforting a friend, playing a game with others in an afterschool program, and watching television at home in the evening are most often the primary activities of childhood. Empirical evidence of segregation, statistics on pediatric and maternal AIDS, and theories of child development aside; children are children. In *Ordinary Resurrections*, Kozol reminds us of this through his portrait of the lives of the children of Mott Haven section of the South Bronx as they are lived from day to day.

Having examined the big picture of life in the least affluent areas of the South Bronx in *Savage Inequalities* and *Amazing Grace*, Kozol intended *Ordinary Resurrections* to be a detailed look at life in Mott Haven through a narrow lens trained on the children he'd encountered in preparing these previous works. His goal, simply stated, is to focus on discerning "what a child's life is really like and what distinguishes one child's personality from another and inner world from those of twenty other children who may live in the same neighborhood and go to the same church or school and from the vantage point of someone at a university or institute who has to think in terms of categories, might appear to lead the same kind of existence" (p. 15). Using the afterschool program at St. Ann's church in Mott Haven as a home base, Kozol details his interactions with children in this impoverished neighborhood. From assisting with homework or playing games after school to observing in elementary school classrooms and paying visits to children and their families at home, Kozol worked to understand the lives of these children in their own context.

In *Ordinary Resurrections*, Kozol introduces the reader to the perspective of children growing up in poverty, surrounded daily by gang violence, broken families, homelessness, and demonstrates that normal child development still occurs through the interactions between these youth and the adults and peers in their lives. By recounting experiences of the children of Mott Haven as they encounter the most basic facets of everyday life typically taken for granted by adults, Kozol places traditional views of childhood in an untraditional context. Too often, current media accounts of

minority children in urban settings focus on instances in which impoverished children become violent and are labeled as “superpredators.” Rather than justifying the prosecution of younger and younger offenders in the adult criminal justice system, Kozol re-establishes the naivete of the majority of youngsters in this population, creating the perspective that the children of Mott Haven are the silent victims of forces over which they have no control. By describing situations such as the seriousness of eight-year-old, asthmatic Isaiah, testing his walkie-talkies with his mother “running around in circles in the snow while he’s back here in ‘Houston’ sending . . . commands . . . ‘Mission Control to Mommy, Do you read me?’ ” (pg. 90), Kozol helps the reader remember that children of all classes are more alike than different.

Kozol also focuses on the informal sources of support that exist to help the children and families in Mott Haven to overcome the obstacles of poverty and everyday life. In one instance, he describes the informal structure provided to seven and a half year old Elio by Katrice, the cook at St. Ann’s afterschool. “He was in a fight this afternoon. When I arrived I found him in the kitchen, sitting on a blue upended milk box in the corner opposite the stove. Tears in his eyes, he had the overheated look of the unjustly persecuted. When I asked Katrice what happened, she just nodded at him as if that was all it took to make it clear that he’d been misbehaving” (pg. 13). The responsiveness to structure by even the least attentive child as illustrated by the creative use of the extremely limited resources available to the staff of St. Ann’s afterschool program help to show how the patience and commitment of adults is paramount in fostering the educational and emotional well-being of young children. As Kozol describes his observations of the nurturance and caring displayed by the priest and neighborhood women employed in the program who struggle to meet the needs of all who come to St. Ann’s seeking help, it is easy to see parallels in the effectiveness of residential treatment program interventions, whose clients hail from environments strikingly similar to Mott Haven. Kozol also describes interactions in which the children respond to the needs of the adults in their lives. He tells of a conversation in which Elio asked Kozol what he was thinking about. Kozol told him that he’d been thinking about his aging father. Elio replied “I knew you were thinking about something sad . . . Because you looked like you were going to cry.” Elio patted Kozol’s wrist and stroked it with the his hand. “Do you feel better now?” he asked Kozol (pg. 57). These illustrations of the empathy expressed by the children he observed show the amazing strengths possessed by children we encounter in treatment settings, and their ability, despite the adverse situations under which

they often must exist, to understand our limitations as treating professionals.

The work reads like the “book of episodic memoirs based on hundreds of small bits and pieces of recaptured conversation with high-spirited and energetic children” (p. 369) that Kozol describes in the Acknowledgments. Though his narrow lens focuses more clearly on the lives of actual children than most writing about disenfranchised neighborhoods and their inhabitants, the overall effect was of somewhat disjointed stories about each of the children on whom he focused. Acknowledging the limitations imposed by maintaining confidence, the methods by which he gathered data, as well as his own obvious desire to include as many children as possible, Kozol’s account provides a decent balance between breadth and depth. However, with the stated goal of a narrow focus on the lives of children, perhaps a greater amount of depth about the lives of specific children would have allowed the reader to discern more clearly “what a child’s life is really like and what distinguishes one child’s personality from another and inner world from those of twenty other children who may live in the same neighborhood and go to the same church or school . . .” (p. 15).

Kozol also avoids much discussion on the impact his presence had on the observations about which he writes. While he talks about the mixed reactions of the teachers whose classrooms he occasionally visits, Kozol fails to describe the possible influences that the presence of a 63-year-old, white, Jewish, former teacher in their afterschool program, homes, and classrooms may have on the children’s behaviors. While the continuity of his presence clearly created a strong rapport between Kozol and the residents of Mott Haven, it is undeniable that his purpose in being there, together with his reputation and frequent note taking while visiting shaped the very interactions he was observing.

Writing on life in a neighborhood like Mott Haven is ripe for commentary on the injustices suffered by residents, children and adults alike. Kozol’s previous writing, with its goal of exposing these injustices allowed the forum for such commentary. In this work detailing the experiences of children, Kozol’s commentary, though most often accurate and thought-provoking, seemed, at times, preachy and less effective than simply allowing the children to speak for themselves.

This book, he says, is about “the children’s games and stories, and their silliness and sorrows, and the many intricate and sometimes elegant theologies they manage to create in order to invite into their lives the little mysteries that make them brave” (p. 7). Indeed, this book is about these things and much more. It serves as a reminder that children will be children, even in

the most seemingly unlikely places, and that we as professionals do well to cherish and nurture our young charges in these “years of hope.”

*Jane E. Barden, MSW
The School of Social Service Administration
The University of Chicago*

*Michael J. Jenuwine, PhD, JD
Mental Health Services and Policy Program
Northwestern University*