

Unsung Heroes

By HOWARD ZINN

A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT recently confronted me: “I read in your book *A People’s History of the United States* about the massacres of Indians, the long history of racism, the persistence of poverty in the richest country in the world, the senseless wars. How can I keep from being thoroughly alienated and depressed?”

It’s a question I’ve heard many times before. Another question often put to me by students is: Don’t we need our national idols? You are taking down all our national heroes—the Founding Fathers, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, John F. Kennedy.

Granted, it is good to have historical figures we can admire and emulate. But why hold up as models the 55 rich white men who drafted the Constitution as a way of establishing a government that would protect the interests of their class—slaveholders, merchants, bondholders, land speculators?

Why not recall the humanitarianism of William Penn, an early colonist who made peace with the Delaware Indians instead of warring on them, as other colonial leaders were doing?

Why not John Woolman, who in the years before the Revolution refused to pay taxes to support the British wars, and who spoke out against slavery?

Why not Capt. Daniel Shays, veteran of the Revolutionary War, who led a revolt of poor farmers in Western Massachusetts against the oppressive taxes levied by the rich who controlled the Massachusetts Legislature?

Why go along with the hero-worship, so universal in our history textbooks, of Andrew Jackson, the slave owner, the killer of Indians? Jackson was the architect of the Trail of Tears, which resulted in the deaths of 4,000 of 16,000 Cherokees who were kicked off their land in Georgia and sent into exile in Oklahoma.

Why not replace him as national icon with



Osceola, Seminole leader, led a successful resistance of Native Americans and escaped African slaves against U.S. troops.

John Ross, a Cherokee chief who resisted the dispossession of his people, and whose wife died on the Trail of Tears? Or the Seminole leader Osceola, imprisoned and finally killed for leading a guerrilla campaign against the removal of the Indians?

And while we’re at it, should not the Lincoln Memorial be joined by a memorial to Frederick Douglass, who better represented the struggle against slavery? It was that crusade of black and white abolitionists, growing into a great national movement, that pushed a reluctant Lincoln into finally issuing a

halfhearted Emancipation Proclamation, and persuaded Congress to pass the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments.

Take another presidential hero, Theodore Roosevelt, who is always near the top of the tire-some lists of Our Greatest Presidents. There he is on Mount Rushmore, as a permanent reminder of our historical amnesia about his racism, his militarism, his love of war.

Why not replace him as hero—granted, removing him from Mount Rushmore will take some doing—with Mark Twain? Roosevelt, remember, had congratulated an American general who in 1906 ordered the massacre of 600 men, women, and children on a Philippine island. As vice president of the Anti-Imperialist League, Twain denounced this and continued to point out the cruelties committed in the Philippine war under the slogan, “My country, right or wrong.”

As for Woodrow Wilson, another honored figure in the pantheon of American liberalism, shouldn’t we remind his admirers that he insisted on racial segregation in federal buildings, that he bombarded the Mexican coast, sent an occupation army into Haiti and the Dominican Republic, brought our country into the hell of World War I, and put antiwar protesters in prison?

Should we not bring forward as a national hero Emma Goldman, one of those Wilson sent to

prison, or Helen Keller, who fearlessly spoke out against the war?

And enough worship of John F. Kennedy, a Cold Warrior who began the covert war in Indochina, went along with the planned invasion of Cuba, and was slow to act against racial segregation in the South.

Should we not replace the portraits of our presidents, which too often take up all the space on our classroom walls, with the likenesses of grassroots heroes like Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi sharecropper? Mrs. Hamer was evicted from her farm and tortured in prison after she joined the Civil Rights Movement, but she became an eloquent voice for freedom. Or with Ella Baker, whose wise counsel and support guided the young Black people who joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the militant edge of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South?

In the year 1992, the quincentennial of the arrival of Columbus in this hemisphere, there were meetings all over the country to celebrate him, but also, for the first time, to challenge the customary exaltation of the Great Discoverer. I was at a symposium in New Jersey where I



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Helen Keller was a socialist and advocate for workers’ rights. “Why in this land of great wealth is there such great poverty?” she wrote in 1912.

pointed to the terrible crimes against the indigenous people of Hispaniola committed by Columbus and his fellow explorers. Afterward, the other man on the platform, who was chairman of the New Jersey Columbus Day celebration, said to me: “You don’t understand—we Italian Americans need our heroes.” Yes, I understood the desire for heroes, I said, but why choose a murderer and kidnapper for such an honor? Why not choose Joe DiMaggio, or Toscanini, or Fiorello LaGuardia, or Sacco and Vanzetti? (The man was not persuaded.)

The same misguided values that have made slaveholders, Indian-killers, and militarists the heroes of our history books still operate today. We have heard Sen. John McCain, Republican of Arizona, repeatedly referred to as a war hero. Yes, we must sympathize with McCain’s ordeal as a war prisoner in Vietnam, where he endured cruelties. But must we call someone a hero who participated in the invasion of a far-off country and dropped bombs on men, women, and children?

I have come across only one voice in the mainstream press daring to dissent from the general admiration for McCain—that of the poet, novelist, and *Boston Globe* columnist James Carroll. Carroll contrasted the heroism of McCain, the warrior, to that of Philip Berrigan, who has gone to prison dozens of times for protesting the war in Vietnam and the dangerous nuclear arsenal maintained by the U.S. government. Carroll wrote: “Berrigan, in jail, is the truly free man, while McCain remains imprisoned in an unexamined sense of martial honor.”

Our country is full of heroic people who are not presidents or military leaders or Wall Street wizards, but who are doing something to keep alive the spirit of resistance to injustice and war.

I think of Kathy Kelly and all those other people from Voices in the Wilderness who, in defiance of federal law, traveled to Iraq more than a dozen

times to bring food and medicine to people suffering under the U.S.-imposed sanctions.

I think also of the thousands of students on more than 100 college campuses across the country who are protesting their universities’ connection with sweatshop-produced apparel.

I think of the four McDonald sisters in Minneapolis, all nuns, who have gone to jail repeatedly for protesting against the Alliant Corporation’s production of land mines.

I think, too, of the thousands of people who have traveled to Fort Benning, Ga., to demand the closing of the murderous School of the Americas.

I think of the West Coast longshoremen who participated in an eight-hour work stoppage to protest the death sentence levied against Mumia Abu-Jamal.

And so many more.

We all know individuals—most of them unsung, unrecognized—who have, often in the most modest ways, spoken out or acted on their beliefs for a more egalitarian, more just, peace-loving society.

To ward off alienation and gloom, it is only necessary to remember the unremembered

heroes of the past, and to look around us for the unnoticed heroes of the present. ■

Howard Zinn is author of *A People’s History of the United States*.

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Teaching About Unsung Heroes

Encouraging students to appreciate those who fought for social justice

By **BILL BIGELOW**

SCHOOLS HELP TEACH students who “we” are. And as Howard Zinn points out in his essay “Unsung Heroes”, too often the curricular “we” are the great slaveholders, plunderers, imperialists, and captains of industry of yesteryear.

Thus when we teach about the genocide Columbus launched against the Tainos, or Washington’s scorched-earth war on the Iroquois, or even Abraham Lincoln’s promise in his first inaugural address to support a constitutional amendment making slavery permanent in Southern states, some students may experience this new information as a personal loss. In part, as Zinn suggests, this is because they’ve been denied a more honorable past with which to identify—one that acknowledges racism and exploitation, but also highlights courageous initiatives for social equality and justice.

One of the best and most diverse collections of writing I have received from my sophomore U.S. history students was generated from a project aimed to get students to appreciate those “other Americans.” From time to time over the years, I’ve had students do research on people in history who worked for justice. But these were often tedious exercises and, despite my coaxing and pleading, student writing ended up sounding encyclopedia-like.

An idea to revise this assignment came to me while reading Stephen O’Connor’s curricular memoir, *Will My Name Be Shouted Out?*, about his

experiences teaching writing to junior high school students in New York City. O’Connor was captivated by August Wilson’s monologues in his play *Fences*. He read some of these aloud to his students and offered them a wide-open prompt: “Write a monologue in which a parent tells his or her life story to a child.”

It struck me that I might get much more passionate, imaginative writing about the lives of social justice activists if I offered students a similar assignment. Instead of asking them to stand outside their research subjects and write in the third person, I invited them to attempt to become those individuals at the end of their lives. Students could construct their papers as medita-

tions about their individuals’ accomplishments and possibly their regrets. They might narrate parts of their lives to a child, a younger colleague, or even to a reporter.

I decided to launch this project out of a unit I do that looks at the sometimes-tense relationship between the abolitionist movement

and the women’s rights movement in the years before and right after the Civil War. I framed it as the “Racial and Gender Justice Project: People Who Made Change.” Because this would likely be the only time during the year that I would structure an entire research project around the lives of individual social justice activists, I wanted to give students an opportunity to learn about people throughout U.S. history,

I wanted these students-as-historical-activists to meet each other and learn a bit about each other’s life work.



Dolores Huerta was a co-founder of the United Farm Workers. She was especially active in organizing against the use of pesticides in the fields that were poisoning workers and their children.

not simply during the decades between the 1830s and 1860s. I was aware that this presented something of a problem, as students wouldn't yet have the historical context to fully appreciate the work of, say, Dolores Huerta or Emma Goldman. But their reading would alert them to themes and events that we would cover later, and I could fill in some of the blank spots in their knowledge as they completed their research.

I remember one year writing up and assigning a choice-list of activists for students to research. I reviewed them in class one by one, talking briefly about their work and accomplishments. Can you spell b-o-r-i-n-g? This time I decided to write up short first-person roles for students to "try on" in class and to meet each other in character. I wasn't very scientific in the choices of activists that I offered students—in fact, some, like Bessie Smith, fell a bit awkwardly into the "activist" category. I tried for racial and gender diversity; I also tried to mix the famous with the

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not-so-famous, mostly concentrating on people who worked in social movements. (If the activists were too "unsung," students would have difficulty finding out enough about them to complete the writing. See box with complete list on p. 9.) My list was unavoidably idiosyncratic and missed lots of worthy individuals. However,

in the end, if none of the people I included excited students, they could propose alternatives.

I wanted the roles I wrote up to be short and provocative. The point was not to do the assignment for students but to lure them into the activists' lives. Because my students are mostly

white—and with this group (my only U.S. History class), overwhelmingly male—I wanted to make sure that at least several of the social justice activists were white men. It was important that the young white men in class know that people who look like they do have not only been the slave owners and land-grabbers, they have also been part of a rainbow of resistance in U.S.

history. Here are a couple of typical roles (the entire list is archived on the Rethinking Schools website, http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/15_01/role151.shtml)



Abolitionist John Brown

- **John Brown:** People have called me crazy because I, a white man, gave up my life in the cause to free enslaved black people. I fought in what was called “bloody Kansas” to make sure that Kansas did not enter the United States as a slave state. And it’s true, I killed people there. But it was a just cause, and I took no pleasure in killing. I’m most famous for leading the attack on the U.S. arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Va. In one sense my mission failed, because we were captured and I was executed. But I am convinced that my actions hastened the day of freedom for the people who had been enslaved.
- **Fannie Lou Hamer:** I was the youngest of 20 children. After I married, I was a sharecropper in Mississippi for 18 years. I risked my life when I registered to vote in 1962. I’d had enough of poverty. I’d had enough of racism. I began to organize for our rights, by working with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In the sum-

mer of 1964, I traveled to the Democratic National Convention where I was a representative of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which we’d created because the regular Democratic Party wouldn’t allow blacks to participate. I sang “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” and asked the now-famous question: “Is this America?”

In class, I briefly described the project and distributed a card with one role description to each student. I gave them a few minutes to trade cards if they felt like it, but I emphasized that ultimately they weren’t limited to researching the person on the card they drew; they would be able to choose someone else if they liked. I wanted these students-as-historical-activists to meet each other and learn a bit about each other’s life work. Once they’d settled on an individual, I distributed “Hello, My Name Is ...” stickers and had them write down and wear their names prominently, so other students would be able to easily see who was who. Finally, I gave each of them a “Racial and Gender Justice Hunt” sheet. In the “hunt,” students had tasks, such as: “Find someone in the group who has spent time in jail for their activities or beliefs (or would have if they’d been caught). What happened?” I required them to use a different person in their answers to each question, so they needed to keep circulating among other class members to complete the assignment. This was a delightful activity, filled with laughter and energy.

The following day we circled-up to review some of the questions and talk over what they had learned about the different individuals. Before we headed for the library to begin research, I gave the students an assignment sheet: “Choose an individual who stood up for racial or gender justice. Perhaps this individual worked to end slavery, for women’s right to own property or to vote, for farmworkers’ rights, or to integrate schools in the South. You needn’t agree with everything this person stood for or agree with how he or she went about working for change. The only requirements are that the person tried to make this a better place to live and also significantly affected society. You may choose an individual (or group) who attended the ‘getting to know you’ gathering we

did in class or come up with one of your own. If you choose one on your own, check with me first.”

I told them that they were going to be writing about their individual in the first person, but I didn’t want to describe the full assignment until they had read and collected stories.

“The better educated didn’t like me because I was so good at what I did, and I loved speaking out to people. I can’t read a book, but I can read the people.”

For their library and outside-of-class research, I gave students written research guidelines: “Find out as much about your individual as you can. Try to answer the following questions—and be sure to look for specific stories from their lives:

1. What significant events in this person’s life shaped their social commitment? What happened in their life to make them willing to take the risks they took?
2. What did the person want to accomplish or change?
3. What did they accomplish?
4. What methods did this person use to try to effect change?
5. What, if anything, about their life reminds you of something in your life? Is there anything in their life that you relate to, or that is similar to feelings or experiences you’ve had?
6. What meaning does this person’s life have for today?
7. Find at least three quotes from the individual that you agree with or think are somehow significant.

I told them that they would need to turn in full answers to these questions with their final write-up.

Not surprisingly, some students had an easier time than others. The student doing Elaine Brown, one-time leader of the Black Panther

Party, had trouble finding anything on her life and, unfortunately, didn’t have the energy to read the entirety of Brown’s compelling book, *A Taste of Power*, so moved on to Elizabeth Cady Stanton. But by and large students were able to discover lots about their activists.

Grandma T. and Other Stories

I’ve found that it’s always better to show students what I’m looking for, rather than just tell them. So I save student papers from year to year to use as examples. My student Wakisha Weekly virtually *became* Sojourner Truth in a paper she had written for me in a previous year. I read it to the class to demonstrate the kind of intimacy, detail, and voice that I hoped students would strive for. She structured it as a conversation between a dying Sojourner Truth and her granddaughter. It opened:

“Grandma T., how are you?”

“Oh, I am fine, baby doll. As fine as you can be in a hospital bed with all of these tubes.”

“Are you going to die, Grandma?”

“I’m not going to die, honey. I’m going home like a shooting star.”

“Can you tell me a story, Grandma?”

Wakisha’s “Grandma T.” tells her granddaughter about life in slavery, being sold when her master died and of life with successive owners. She talks of her escape and her conversion:

“Later in my life is when I felt a powerful force. It was God all around me. God gave me the name Sojourner and told me to move to New York and to speak to people. I called it preaching. I often put people in tears. The better educated didn’t like me because I was so good at what I did, and I loved speaking out to people. I can’t read a book, but I can read the people.”

“You don’t know how to read, Grandma?”

“No, I was never taught. Slaves didn’t go to school or to college to be educated. The mas-

ters thought you were there just to work for them.”

“But Grandma, I love to read, and I am really good at it.”

“That’s good, baby. And part of the reason you can read and go to school is because women didn’t like to be put down by the men and wanted to work, earn money, and even go to school. So we stood up for ourselves.”

“Who is we, Grandma T.?”

Wakisha used the granddaughter’s questions to pull her narrative along. In response to questions and comments, Grandma T. continued to tell the history, weaving her personal story with movement history—both the abolitionist and women’s rights movements.

After hearing Wakisha’s piece, students and I talked about what they liked about it and what made the writing both interesting and informative. We followed by brainstorming ways that we could write about the lives of our racial and

gender justice activists. They came up with excellent ideas, including: students going to a nursing home to interview someone for a class project; a letter to a loved one, saying what you never got to say during your life; two lifelong friends walking and talking about the activities they participated in together.

I didn’t want students to run simply with the first thing that came into their heads, so for homework I asked them to write two different introductions to their piece. We began these in class and the next day they brought them in and read them to one another in pairs. I asked people to nominate exemplary openings that they heard so that these could be shared with the entire class and broaden our sampling of possible approaches.

What students ultimately produced sounded nothing like an encyclopedia. Andy wrote a story about “Nicholas,” a former member of the Massachusetts 54th, the first regiment of black soldiers in American history. Drawing largely on letters in the book *A Grand Army of Black Men* (edited by Edwin S. Redkey), Andy set his piece in a facility for seniors, many years after the Civil War. Nicholas is sitting with his regular breakfast companion, Susan, who asks him at long last about the part of his ear that is missing. “To know about my ear, I would have to tell you a story,” and launches into a richly detailed tale about his decision to volunteer for the 54th and his experiences fighting in South Carolina.

Tyler’s Marcus Garvey lies on his deathbed wondering whether or not he did enough for racial equality. He flashes back to his impoverished Jamaican childhood: “Though we had close to no money, we had heart, and each other.”

Jennifer patterned her story about Rosa Parks on Wakisha’s Grandma T. In an interior monologue, Jeff’s Malcolm X reflected on how he changed, and what he feared and hoped for, while sitting in a hotel room the day before his final speech at the Audubon Ballroom. Jonathan wrote an unusual and complex piece that began on the day Leonard Peltier was released from prison—a day that is still in the future. His daughter tells the story of how she became an activist for Native American rights after listening to her father



Abolitionist and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth

AP Images/Library of Congress

narrate a videotape-letter to her about why he can't be with her as she grows up.

Gina wrote an utterly authentic-feeling story about two young children who visit César Chávez for a class project. In her story, Chávez narrates episodes from La Causa:

"The fight was not over. In 1968, I fasted—that means I didn't eat anything—for 25 days. A different time I fasted for 24 days, and again I fasted, this time for 36 days. You know how hungry you can get when you miss breakfast or lunch—but imagine missing 36 breakfasts, lunches, and dinners."

*Tyler's Marcus Garvey lies on
his deathbed wondering
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enough for racial equality.*

"But Mr. Chávez, didn't you ever fight? Like punch them or anything?" Richard asked.

"No, no! Violence isn't right. Everything can be done without hurting somebody else. You can always show people your side with words or pictures or actions. Hurting somebody to make your point is wrong, and it never needs to be done. We never punched anyone, even if they punched us first. We just stayed at our place and showed them that they couldn't stop us."

"That's really neat, Mr. Chávez! I'm gonna do that," Linda said determinedly.

"I'm Gonna Do That"

In a myth-shattering history curriculum where heroes are regularly yanked from their pedestals, it's vital that we alert students to currents of generosity, solidarity, democracy, anti-racism, and social equality in the nation's past—and present. We don't need to make these up. They are there. Yes, we need to carefully analyze movements for change and acknowledge their shortcomings, the times they manifested those

Frederick Douglass

Harriet Tubman

John Brown

Soldier of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn

César Chávez

Sojourner Truth

Jeannette Rankin

Malcolm X

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Susan B. Anthony

Carlos Bulosan

William Lloyd Garrison

*Sarah and Angelina
Grimké*

Emma Goldman

Elaine Brown

Marcus Garvey

*Black Panther Party for
Self Defense Member*

Jackie Robinson

Rosa Parks

Bessie Smith

Bernice Reagon

Queen Lili'uokalani

Nat Turner

Henry David Thoreau

Melba Pattillo Beals

*Mickey Schwerner, James Cheney,
and Andrew Goodman*

Fannie Lou Hamer

Harvey Milk

Dolores Huerta

Fred Korematsu

Leonard Peltier



Harvey Milk was the first openly gay elected official in the United States. Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977. He and Mayor George Moscone were murdered in 1978 by a conservative city supervisor, Dan White.

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very characteristics that they sought to oppose in the larger society. And yes, we need to engage students in thinking about the relationship between strategies and aims, because not all activism is equally effective, and some can actually be counterproductive. But the curriculum that demands perfection will be filled with blank pages. As Howard Zinn emphasizes, there

are countless individuals who have worked “to keep alive the spirit of resistance to injustice and war.” Let’s work concretely toward a curriculum of hope. Let’s give students the opportunity to conclude: “I’m gonna do that.” ■

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Racial and Gender Justice Hunt

Find someone in the group who:

1. Has spent time in jail for their activities or beliefs (or would have if they'd been caught). What happened?
2. Worked against slavery or other forms of racism. What exactly did they do?
3. Worked for women's rights, workers' rights, or for the rights of gays and lesbians. What did they do?
4. Believed it was necessary to use violence to achieve justice. What did they do?
5. Worked for justice nonviolently. What did they do?
6. You had never heard of before. What did they do? Why do you think you'd never heard of them?
7. You had heard of. What new thing(s) did you learn about this person?
8. Is a white person who worked for racial justice. What did they do?