

## **First Person: A tribute to my teacher Howard Zinn**

By Danielle Lambert - New York Teacher - February 24, 2010



*Boston University historian and political activist Howard Zinn - 1922-2010.*

We all hope to be that teacher whose lessons forever impact the lives of our students in a profound and positive way. They say Howard Zinn, through his book *The People's History of the United States*, has been that teacher for millions.

I was lucky enough to call him my own.

Every Thursday he stood there slender and smiling, slicking back his silver hair for effect as he paused to make a point. He taught from the front of a movie theater, instead of a lecture hall at Boston University, because he needed seating for 400, at least.

The walls and floors were lined every day, with those wanting to hear him. Many were elderly, welcomed by Howard as the indispensable voices of experience.

He drew anecdotes from them of the era we were studying, deferred to them to answer when some 20-year-old challenged his views.

He quietly introduced a friend every once in a while, and you'd spend the morning with Daniel Ellsberg, or Julian Bond, or Ron Kovic ... one never knew who. But the main show for all of us was Howard.

For many, it was his wonderful storytelling; for some, his ability to make connections across history; for others, it was just an entertaining class, an easy A. For me, it was a lifeboat.

I think I had my first meltdown of despair over the state of humanity around the age of 14. The age of reason was dawning in my head, and I suffered the blossoming of an adolescent's understanding of humanity's destructive capacity.

I was a misanthropic child desperate for a grownup's hope to believe in.

My own father, however, had escaped Czechoslovakia as the Nazis marched in and still carried his own nightmares of being "detained" at age 9.

He panicked at my grief. Had he not survived to give me safety and more? It was the Long Island of the 1970s and the country was at peace. Why should I cry over what was?

Yes, horrible things are still happening now, but it's not your problem. Turn off the TV, please, do your homework. Take care of yourself; it's not your problem.

I gave up on people. I threw myself into being a someday biologist. But then, one day in a Plainview-Old Bethpage High School social studies class, Ms. Cottin sang a song.

Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Cheney were three good friends. As I recall, Heather Cottin was the fourth. She was sick the day they were murdered, that Mississippi summer of discontent.

She wasn't out registering voters. She didn't die. She lived and became a social studies teacher, and sang their favorite song.

Class dismissed and I sat there in silent tears, feeling the direction of my life shift beneath my feet. "When you get to BU," she said, "find Howard Zinn."

Being an activist was depressing as hell. I didn't expect that. I thought the adrenaline of righteousness would carry me on forever. I had traveled in Africa by then, and was serious about my anti-apartheid beliefs.

I knew we were right; other universities supported their students in raising their voices against this atrocity, and certainly our difficulties in speaking out were not anything compared to those whose troubles we sought to help ameliorate.

Still, at Boston University our phones were tapped, photographers followed us, we lost campus jobs, and some of us were expelled.

These actions were excessive, absurd, and they took an emotional toll I did not anticipate.

Many times I found myself making my way to professor Zinn in tears, angry and teetering on depression. He would sit me down and listen as if no one in the world had ever told him such an interesting story.

He would congratulate me on being part of the great journey of humanity toward something better.

He would be happy for me, for finding in myself the strength to keep going. He never let on to knowing how often that strength came from him.

Howard was the real deal. He truly believed that the drive for what is good and just in society is stronger and more commonplace than hatred and greed.

He was endlessly inspired by the care, concern and hard work he saw in people everywhere. He sounded the alarm, and called us to wake up and notice the forces that manipulated the populace toward divisiveness and violence.

He framed the discussion, however, in a deep optimism for the collective power of the desire of humanity to live in peace.

And he did this while communicating both the pain of the reality and the joy of being part of the swirling, messy, creative human experience.

I grew up eventually and became a social studies teacher myself, in no small part because of him. I teach "1900 to Today."

I have the terrible responsibility of informing 13-year-olds of some of the most heinous events in human history.

Howard is ever-present in my room because of the paradigm I learned from him. By giving my students examples of men and women rising against all odds to help others, I have learned to frame what I teach in ways that aim to be uplifting and inspiring, as opposed to depressing and defeatist.

From him I have learned that the greatest gift I can give my students is the knowledge that what they think matters, they do have a voice and they can make a difference. But it is also by the example of his personal qualities that I strive to inspire my students: to have the willingness to look, the courage to take action and the grace not to hate.

Over the years, I wrote occasionally to my beloved professor. His letter of recommendation for my graduate studies sits in my safe deposit box.

Still, after a time, we lost touch, and I always regretted allowing that to happen.

However, as our nation steamrolled toward war, I found the old despair alive and well and reaching up from my belly to shut down my voice.

I drove to Howard and heard him speak once more. And there he was, questioning our nation's direction, providing historical background, rallying our energy for the important work ahead.

The topic was harsh, the stakes our nation faced high, the topic controversial, and disturbing.

And then, pause-smile-hair-slick, he made us laugh ... and the tears in all our eyes flowed not from despair but from the best parts of ourselves — righteous outrage, compassion and the beginnings of courage.

He held hope for every one of us, even in that awful time when so many of us had so little of our own.

I walked to the microphone and said what I had come to say: "Thank you, Howard."

Alice Walker said, in her remembrance of our professor recently in the Boston Globe: "I was Howard's student for only a semester, but in fact, I have learned from him all my life."

Me too, Alice; me too.

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