

## エリン・グルーウェルと『フリーダム・ライダーズの日記』:教育学における実験

## Erin Gruwell and The Freedom Writers Diary : An Experiment in Pedagogy

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## Introduction

*The Freedom Writers Diary* (1999) and *Teach with Your Heart* (2007) chronicle Erin Gruwell's five years as an English teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. Due to an unusual set of circumstances, Gruwell spent one full year as a student teacher with the same students at Wilson instead of the usual one semester. *The Freedom Writers Diary* gives us that year and the four that follow in diary form. It is a somewhat unusual diary for several reasons, perhaps the main one being that she taught most of those 150 students for all four years. The school she taught at was also unusual in that it contained two distinct populations: a minority of upper middle class white students in an elite program and a lower class, mostly black, Latino, and Asian majority. Gruwell, as a new teacher with no experience, was given the students nobody wanted. She fought to keep those same students for all four years of high school.

*The Freedom Writers Diary* is also unusual in that it was written jointly by Gruwell and her students (150 of them) over the course of those five years, but she is the only writer identified by name. All the student entries have only numbers in order to protect their privacy. Halfway through their senior year the diary won the Spirit of Ann Frank Award and was also published by Random House. It has recently been translated into Japanese and made into the movie *Freedom Writers* starring Hilary Swank.

All of this is unusual but not completely unprecedented. High school mathematics teacher Jaime Escalante's story was told in Jay Mathews' book *Escalante* and retold in the movie *Stand and Deliver*. High school English

teacher LouAnne Johnson's "*My Posse Don't Do Homework*" became the movie *Dangerous Minds*. All three taught students nobody basically wanted: mostly non-white, from low-income, single-parent families, and from neighborhoods where gang warfare, drug sales, and police harassment were an ordinary part of life. Yet Escalante, Johnson, and Gruwell were all able to make and develop personal relationships with their students as well as high level academic skills.

How did it happen? One reason is that all three were able to listen to their students and to learn from them. As Marvin Hoffman says, "We must open ourselves to listening to students' voices, to receiving and accepting who they are and what they care about."<sup>1</sup> This act allowed them to see their students as individuals and understand the lives they were living and the burdens they were carrying. The first time Gruwell did this it terrified her. During her year as a practice teacher she had taken her students to see *Schindler's List* at a theater in her town, the all-white, upper-middle class suburb of Newport Beach. At the theater and later in the restaurant where they ate dinner, the students were viewed with fear and loathing. Shortly afterwards, one invited her to come for a tour of his neighborhood in Long Beach. The half hour drive and sight of gangs, drinking, drug sales, and prostitution terrified her. He then commented: "I think you've had enough for one day." But it was the world he and most of her students lived in every day.

Another reason Gruwell and her students were able to build relationships of trust and

responsibility was the large amount of time they spent together. They spent hours and hours working on class projects, raising money to bring people like Zlata Filipovic (author of *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*) to Long Beach, and editing their diaries. Since Gruwell began as a student teacher and then continued at an entry level, she didn't have money or department budget for extras. So she moonlighted weekends at a Marriott Hotel and sold lingerie at a department store to earn that money. Her husband did not exactly appreciate the way she was devoting herself to her students and ignoring him and they divorced during her first year as a regular teacher. It was her students who supported her then.

As they learned to open themselves to each other, through class activities and their diaries, they learned how many experiences and problems they shared: drug use, gang violence, evictions, friends and relatives murdered, and family members in prison. They gave each other support in time of need. Gruwell was included too as she first went through a divorce and later experienced the death of her father.

They had developed a family-like network of support. They didn't realize how essential this was until after graduation: without the support of each other, most of them were lost. Many had been admitted to colleges in and out of California, but without a network of support they began to drown. They created The Freedom Writers Foundation to give each other that support and also spread the ideas they had developed in high school. Gruwell found enough support for this at her old school, California State University, Long Beach, to create a program of studies.

#### Discussion

All of this is very nice, but what is the connection with *my* experience here in Japan? What does all this have to do with Japanese students? In order to answer, it is necessary to look at Gruwell's experience as a student teacher and see how she first made a connection with her students. She experienced daily harassment in class as a student teacher. The students told her they would make her cry and that she wouldn't last a week. One of those

students, Sharaud, had been transferred to Wilson from another high school for threatening a teacher with a gun. He wore the jersey of his old school and taunted both his classmates and Gruwell. To put him in his place, another student drew a racial caricature on a piece of paper and passed it around. Gruwell took it & showed it in class. The cruelty of the caricature made Sharaud cry. She told the class that this was the type of thing the Nazis did to the Jews in World War II in order to dehumanize them and make it easier to carry out the Holocaust. But then she found out that none of her students knew what the Holocaust was. She says in *The Freedom Writers Diary*: "I immediately decided to throw out my meticulously planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum." And this decision and its consequences set her course for the next five years.

To get some perspective on what she did, I recently showed several classes of university students (a total of about 90 people) the Japanese translation of *The Freedom Writers Diary*. It includes the caricature of Sharaud that inspired Gruwell's question. I repeated her comments about such caricatures dehumanizing people and thus making the Holocaust easier for the Nazis. Although Japanese students are very knowledgeable about the injustice of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, like Gruwell's students, they had no knowledge of the Holocaust that killed 6,000,000.

In order to understand the Holocaust, she and her students went to the Holocaust's Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. They also saw *Higher Learning*, a movie dealing with racial and ethnic prejudice in a university context, and then went to see *Schindler's List* at a predominantly white upper-class theater in Gruwell's town of Newport Beach. The prejudice they received there led to a front-page story in a local newspaper, which in turn led to death threats and hate mail. It also led to Gruwell and her students meeting Thomas Keneally, the author of *Schindler's List*, and through him the movie director Steven Spielberg.

But in order to give her students a sense of responsibility and to "earn" the right to meet

him, she required each to write his or her autobiography. Spielberg read all of them and told them how amazed he was at their courage. Newspaper coverage of the class's Universal Studios trip and meeting Spielberg led to student teacher Gruwell meeting considerable resentment from the regular staff at Wilson.

*The Freedom Writers Diary* chronicles how Gruwell created a sense of tolerance. The diary entries give the books they read and movies they saw. As a number of them were unknown to me, I went about reading and watching what I could. The students read Frank Bonham's novel of gang life, *Durango Street*, and Morton Rhue's *The Wave*. Based on an actual event at a high school in California, it tells of a history teacher recreating Hitler's youth movement. They also read Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Elie Wiesel's memoir of being a 16-year-old in Nazi death camps, *Night*, and 11-year-old Zlata Filipovic's record of two years under siege in Sarajevo, *Zlata's Diary*. Gruwell also read to them parts of Washington Post reporter Peter Maass' narrative of the war in Bosnia, *Love Thy Neighbor*. They read them, so I read them too. As they did, I watched *Hoop Dreams*, a documentary of two talented young black basketball players from the Chicago area and how they were used and then discarded by the schools which had recruited them. Although *Higher Learning* is officially fiction, it tells much the same story. It shows how social, ethnic, racial, political, and other groups on campus and off take advantage of the insecurity and confusion of new students to recruit new members. Japanese university freshmen experience similar recruitment drives as the school year starts.

As Gruwell's year as a practice teacher had ended with the publicity of the Steven Spielberg meeting, it generated considerable resentment by her colleagues. In her first year as a regular teacher she was assigned freshmen with low-level reading skills. "Let's see what you can do with these kids, hotshot!" the English department head said. Somehow or other she met that challenge and Gruwell and her students met Miep Gies, the Dutch woman who helped shelter Ann Frank and her family and Zlata Filipovic. As before, this generated backlash among the

English teachers at Wilson High School because Gruwell wanted to teach these below-level students another year because she didn't have the seniority. She conducted her own campaign to keep them and was successful.

They read J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. They watched a video about Rosa Parks and some ordinary young people who became heroes during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. As Diary entry 75 describes them: "They were seven whites and six blacks on the bus, most of them college students. They were called the Freedom Riders, and their goal was to change segregated interstate travel... and they wanted the world to know that change was necessary and that being tolerant of each other is good." It was this video that was the catalyst for Gruwell's students becoming the Freedom Writers. Those young people on the bus chose to fight racism and accepted the consequences.

The Freedom Writers likewise decided to fight intolerance using their diaries. They decided to bind all of their diaries together and present them to the Secretary of Education in order to help him understand the problems many teenagers faced in America today. *The Freedom Writers Diary* explains how this entailed staying at school until 10 or 11 p.m. editing their diaries, raising money for a trip to Washington, D.C. to present Secretary of Education Richard Riley with their volume, and then touring sites connected with American history and civil rights. They also visited the Holocaust Museum. As one student commented in a diary entry after the Holocaust Museum visit: "It seems as though everything tied together." They could see the way all the hate crimes and prejudice were connected and how *they* needed to act. It was the inaction and moral paralysis of so many Germans that led to the concentration camps and six million deaths. And although many of the world's nations swore that they would never again let such crimes against humanity or "genocide" occur again when they created the United Nations. Yet, as Peter Maass chronicles, they also did every possible thing to avoid labeling the killings in Rwanda or Bosnia as genocide in order to avoid keeping

their promises. The powerful members of the U.N. and their leaders showed no moral courage at all.

One point of confusion occurs. Gruwell's students saw the video about the Freedom Riders, visited the national Holocaust Museum as they had visited the one in Los Angeles, and wrote about moral courage. Yet there is no mention of Sophie Scholl and the German university students of The White Rose who were executed by the Nazis in 1943 after writing and distributing pamphlets telling the German people to stand up and oppose Hitler's tyranny.<sup>2</sup> Was Gruwell unaware of their activities?

Likewise, although the students had read Elie Wiesel's *Night* along with Ann's and Zlata's diaries, there is no mention of Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, his reflections on life in Nazi concentration camps. Whereas Wiesel was a teenager who lost his faith in God, Frankl was a mature man who kept it. Nevertheless, Gruwell's activities with her students largely embody Frankl's central point: the positive search for a meaning in life was the key to surviving the death camps. This search for a meaning in life is what kept the Freedom Writers together.

Frankl likewise makes the point that not only is suffering an ineradicable part of life but it is often a task presented to each person by life as a responsibility which needs to be accepted. He told his fellow inmates at Auschwitz that "human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning" and that that meaning includes suffering and death. By talking about the suffering in their lives, both generally in their class activities and personally in their diaries, Gruwell and her students were able to realize this. And because of this realization, they were able to focus on spreading a message of tolerance.

In his Postscript 1984 to *Man's Search for Meaning* Frankl comments that young people turn to drugs because of their feeling of the meaninglessness of their existence: they have nothing to live *for*. It is also connected with the knowledge that there is no meaningful employment available for them and the only way they can make money is by selling drugs. But if they can dedicate themselves to some-

thing, to a goal, they can find meaning in their lives. And this is what Gruwell and the Freedom Writers did. They dedicated themselves to spreading the idea of tolerance. Along the way they won the Spirit of Ann Frank Award and had their diaries published as *The Freedom Writers Diary* by Doubleday, the same publisher that published Ann Frank's diary, and later saw it made into a movie.

Viktor Frankl also gives us a hint to another dimension of *The Freedom Writers Diary*: it embodies mystical experience. Jaroslav Pelikan defines *mystical* as "the immediate experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality."<sup>3</sup> Dorothee Soelle's *The Silent Cry* tells us that this experience is accessible to anyone. She calls her book an "attempt to democratize mysticism" and a reading of *The Freedom Writers Diary* shows the validity of her comment. Soelle lists three stages of the mystical journey: being amazed, letting go, and healing/resisting. Certainly the stories of the Freedom Writers embody those three stages. Their spirit of life and wonder, the suffering they have experienced (as well as their ability to stand apart from it), their ability to let go of the violence around them, and their ability to live (as Soelle says) a life of compassion and justice. These things and doing their utmost to spread that healing message to others all illustrate the quality of mystical experience.

Gruwell personally illustrates these things in her refusal to be bound by the opinions and requirements of others. When she is told there is no English Department budget to buy books, she either asks her father for the money ("as an early Christmas present") or works side jobs on weekends to pay for them (she distributed them to her students free of charge). When she is told she has no seniority in the department and thus cannot expect to keep the same students a second, third, or fourth year, she campaigns to do so. When she is told there will be backlash, she accepts it. When her students talk about inviting Zlata and her family to come to California or going to Washington, D.C. to see where the Freedom Riders began, she accepts their requests. She steps out in faith when there is no rational way she can imagine getting school permission or paying for

such things. Although Gruwell's books say nothing about her religious background, her actions illustrate a strong religious faith and trust in God.

Harvard-educated Dr. Atul Gawande has written two books about medicine which give us some perspective on Gruwell.<sup>4</sup> They talk about hospital training, the decisions and mistakes, problems they encounter and try to understand and solve. His stories talk about diligence, persistence, ingenuity, and treating people morally and humanely. And although Gruwell is not a doctor, she embodies many of those qualities, sometimes paradoxically. For example, Gawande talks about how doctors use their intuition to make decisions and cites Gary Klein's *Sources of Power : How People Make Decisions*. Klein's book, however, deals with people who have extensive experience in their fields whereas Gruwell is only a novice. Many of her decisions seem to be made on whim, yet they prove unerringly correct. She exhibits no religious background, yet is unerringly moral in her judgments. What lesson are we to draw from this?

### Conclusion

The book she and her students wrote charts an essentially religious journey. It shows us an "education of the heart" which fits the Ministry of Education's policies on moral training. It also charts the growth of an extremely mature and questioning group of students whom school administrators had written off because of their academic and economic backgrounds. As such it is inspirational. However, in strictly pedagogical terms, Gruwell is a horror. She does not follow administrative guidelines or guidance. She has no respect for her senior colleagues or educational traditions. She disregards her planned curriculum at the drop of a hat. Yet, not only did her efforts win the hearts of her students and lead them to start a nationwide movement to spread tolerance, but she also won a Teacher of the Year Award. The latter did not, however, prevent her from losing her job at Wilson High School when her main sup-

porter, District Superintendent Dr. Carl Cohn, retired. Their efforts force us to rethink our priorities in education.

### Notes

- 1 In Marvin Hoffman *Chasing Hellhounds*, x.
- 2 As published in Inge Scholl's *The White Rose* or Annette Dumbach and Jud Newborn's *Sophie Scholl & The White Rose*.
- 3 *The Melody of Theology*, 171.
- 4 *Complications* and *Better*.

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