Foreword by Howard Zinn to ***Lessons from Freedom Summer***

Surely one of the great social movements in the history of the United States is that extraordinary burst of energy and courage that took place in the 1950s and 1960s in the South – the struggle for equal rights for African-Americans. Its roots went far back, to the anti-slavery movement in the decades before the Civil War, and to that brief period after the war when black people voted, held office, demanded that promises of land and freedom made in the heat of the war be fulfilled.

Those promises – embodied in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution – were not kept, and there followed almost a hundred years of segregation, humiliation, brutality, poverty, lynching, enforced by the states, with the tacit consent of the national government. In reaction to that terrible period, African-Americans, their indignation long pent-up, rebelled all over the South, and changed not only that section of the country, but the consciousness of the nation itself.

The highlights of that story have been told many times – the Montgomery bus boycott, the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the street demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, the march from Selma to Montgomery – all of that agitation forcing the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, The heroes of that struggle have become known: Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael.

However, the history of our country, as told in our textbooks, and in the culture at large, is mostly still confined to those highlights, still focused on certain important individuals. There are a thousand stories which are part of the larger one, and which remain untold. There are countless individuals, anonymous, unheralded, whose commitment, whose bravery, have not been recognized.

This book is one of many attempts to recognize the untold history of that time, to tell, in this case, one important story – of the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, and the Freedom Schools that emerged during that summer. And also to bring to the forefront those unnamed individuals who played a crucial part in the struggles of that summer.

In doing that it is challenging, not only the orthodox history of those years, but the very idea of a history told from the point of view of the authorities – a history confined to the "important" people, and therefore ignoring the struggles of ordinary people. This orthodox approach perpetuates the idea that history is made from the top, and leaves to the mass of the people the most feeble of roles – that of voting every four years for a member of the Establishment chosen by the elite of the two major parties.

In recounting the history of the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, and the extraordinary experience of the Freedom Schools, this book does more than suggest a different view of history. It presents a unique approach to education, one that is not the outcome of abstract theorizing, but that has been forged out of a rare educational experiment, carried out, unbelievably and yet necessarily, in the midst of an ongoing social struggle.

The Freedom Schools were a challenge not only to the social structure of Mississippi, but to American education as a whole. They began with the provocative suggestion that an entire school system can be created in a community outside the official order, and critical of its suppositions.

That experience, and this book, ask questions which get at the heart of what education should be about. Can we, somehow, bring teachers and students together, not through the artificial sieve of certification and examination but on the basis of their common commitment to an exciting social goal? Can we solve the old educational problem of how to teach children crucial values, while avoiding a blanket imposition of the teacher's ideas? (The key to that, suggested in the pages that follow, is in asking questions rather than arrogantly giving answers.)

Can we forthrightly accept as an educational goal that we want better human beings in the rising generation than we had in the last, and that this requires a bold declaration that the educational process cherishes equality, justice, compassion, and a global community? Is it possible to create a hunger for those goals through the fiercest argument about whether or not they are indeed worthwhile? And can the schools have a running, no-ideas-barred exchange of views about alternative ways to those goals?

Is there, in the war-torn, troubled atmosphere of our time a national equivalent to the excitement of that great social movement of the Sixties? Can a new movement in our time be strong enough in its pull to create a motivation for learning that even the enticements of monetary success cannot match? Would it be possible to declare boldly that the aim of the schools is to find solutions for poverty, for injustice, for race and national hatred, for violence and war? Can we turn all educational efforts into a national striving for those solutions?

There is certainly no point expecting the government to initiate such a questioning. Social movements like the one in the South came into being precisely because government ignored its charge, made in the Declaration of Independence, to assure for everyone an equal right to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. The people themselves will have to begin, perhaps to set up other pilot ventures, imperfect, but suggestive like that of the Mississippi Freedom Summer. Education can, and should, be dangerous to the existing social structure.

HOWARD ZINN, 2008