

Introduction

When I was growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, in the 1950s, there was a powerful silence in my classes about race in general and racism in particular. Were my teachers' voices stifled? If so, what silenced them? Did anyone resist? Did anyone try to alter the curriculum? Connect history to ethics? Teach scientific understandings that would have challenged the myths and misinformation that legitimized racism?

I'll never know the answers to these questions. I only know that my classmates and I should have been trusted to examine history in all of its complexity and its living legacies of prejudice and discrimination and resilience and courage. Conversations would have been difficult, even painful. Many teachers today approach such discussions with apprehension because of the unexamined—often raw—opinions they will hear before their students can begin to confront the myths and misinformation that still shape our knowledge of one another.

Yet those discussions are essential to democracy. They are the work of every citizen, because democracy is not a product but a process. It is a process that can only be carried out in what Judge Learned Hand once called “the spirit of liberty.” He defined it as the spirit “which is not too sure it is right,” the spirit “which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women,” and “weighs their interests alongside one's own without bias.”

Scientist Jacob Bronowski placed a high value on that spirit. In *The Ascent of Man*, he likened it to physicist Werner Heisenberg's “Principle of Uncertainty”—the idea “that the exchange of information between man and nature, and man and man, can only take place within a certain tolerance.” For Bronowski, that principle applied not only to science but also to everyday life. He called it “a major tragedy of my lifetime and yours” that scientists were refining that principle “to the most exquisite precision,” and “turning their backs on the fact that all around them tolerance was crashing to the ground beyond repair.”

Ironically, “tolerance was crashing to the ground” in Europe in the 1930s because of dogma that ranked humanity by race. Hitler's National Socialist party used that dogma as a rationale for the murder of millions considered “unworthy of life.” How do we keep “tolerance from crashing to the ground” today? How do we encourage students to walk even briefly in someone else's shoes?

One way is by providing students with an education that is informed by history and tested in conversations that expand their knowledge, challenge their thinking, and stretch their imagination. Since 1976 Facing History and Ourselves has promoted such learning by engaging adults and adolescents in a study of history and human behavior that focuses on the moral questions in the world today. Documentaries like Orlando Bagwell's MATTERS OF RACE help us confront the complexities of history in ways that promote critical thinking about the challenges we face in preserving and expanding freedom and democracy.

We cannot afford to betray yet another generation of young people.
Education matters.

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