September 3, 1999

Dear Mr. Kozol,

Thank you for coming to Brandeis this week to help us begin our school year by thoughtfully addressing the social and moral issues you write about in Amazing Grace. My freshman seminar in the humanities, “Becoming an Educated Person,” has read this book as one of its assigned texts for the last several years, and it was inspiring to see you and hear you in person after having had so many passionate discussions about your writing with my students.

I come to Amazing Grace with a strongly sympathetic bias, and am always surprised, concerned, and challenged to see the variety and strength of responses Brandeis students have to it. The fact that your book proposes no clear answers to the difficult problems you write about is disturbing to all of us. People’s responses to that disturbance take a number of different forms, all of which are generally represented in a class discussion. I have made the first writing assignment in our seminar a letter to you, and the results are enclosed. Here is my own contribution:

As a college student at William and Mary in Virginia in the 60s, I read Death at an Early Age along with a number of other books about the injustices in our educational system. It broke my heart to see that the justice we were fighting so hard for in our part of the country was not a reality outside of the South, either. My teaching career, which began as a Peace Corps Volunteer in a Chadian high school, has taken me all over the country and the world, at every level from preschool through adults. Thirty years after meeting your writing in Death at an Early Age, I encountered Amazing Grace with admiration and not a small amount of despair. How could things still be so bad, even worse, so long after awareness had been, I thought, raised about these injustices? Once again, confronted with a reality I could not accept, I found myself trying out all the variety of responses I notice in my students:
“No matter what I do, these problems will still exist, so I might as well do nothing.”

“Starting right now I’m going to drop everything and move down to the South Bronx and devote myself to helping the people there.”

“Why doesn’t Kozol talk about some of the good things that people are doing and experiencing in this neighborhood?”

“With all the resources our society keeps pouring into the ghettos, if things are still this bad they must be hopeless.”

“Life is hard and then you die.”

Finally, I remembered the one I’d decided upon thirty years ago, which still makes the most sense to me today:

I hate that such poverty and injustice and pain exist in the world, as I know most of my fellow human beings, rich and poor, do. I’m not the only person who ever cared about this; in fact, much of human expression has been devoted to considering these problems. No easy, clear, or lasting solutions exist. However, I believe that a society can and must be judged according to the efforts it makes to ask and ponder and work toward answers for questions that it knows in advance won’t go away. Isn’t that the shape of life? We don’t know what it’s for, where we come from and where we’re going, but such uncertainty immobilizes only the weak and lazy. Those who have the courage to pose and consider intractable questions give meaning and worth to their lives and to the lives of others. They are powered by grace, able to contemplate ambiguity and mystery without despair, and, like the people in your book, they just keep going on against all odds. My (other) favorite author, Samuel Beckett, expressed this view of art, which, for him, as for me, accompanies and attempts to give form to the chaos of life:

I speak of an art... weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road... I prefer... the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express. ("Three Dialogues")
Just as you answered the obligation to express, and to allow the voices of the South Bronx to express, I feel obliged to put such expressions before my students and require them to work out their own relationship with these terrible questions. The only response I will not allow them, at least as long as they’re in my class, is to refuse to respond. I like to think that this week’s forum with you made it just a little bit harder for most members of the Brandeis class of ’03 to choose not to think, speak, or do anything about the situation of the poorest of the poor in their own nation. I have no specific answers for those who want to know what they should do, but as long as they’re committed to continuing to ask this question, primarily of themselves, throughout their lives, I believe that their lives will be blessed with grace. What more could a teacher want for her students?

Thank you for your work, Mr. Kozol. It makes mine easier and less lonely.

Sincerely,

Jane A. Hale
Associate Professor of French
and Comparative Literature
Dear Mr. Kozol,

I am a first year student at Brandeis University where you recently spoke about your book *Amazing Grace*. As you can imagine, I was none too thrilled with the prospect of having to do summer reading upon my entrance into college, but after reading your book, I’m happy that I did take the time to read such an enlightening piece of work.

Before reading, it was obvious to me that the United States was not a perfect place where gold lined the streets. Also, I was fully aware that poverty was an institution that did exist in a country as powerful as the United States, but I was never prepared to bare witness to the many hardships that these people live through everyday of their lives. I was completely blind to the idea that people lived in conditions comparable to those of a third world country right here in our own backyard. I felt so depressed each time I finished reading that I could read no more than a chapter at a time. In saying this I mean no insult, but only that your attention to detail and ability to capture the plight that these people endure takes a great deal of effort and is worthy of great admiration.

In addition to that, another thing that disturbed me was the fact that the politicians and those responsible for the maintenance of a place like the South Bronx would completely turn a blind eye to what these people are experiencing. As a resident of suburban New Jersey, I admittedly am guilty of such acts. Many times I have been through places like Spanish Harlem or the South Bronx simply to get to a Yankee game. I was completely oblivious to what was actually happening in a place that was only one half hour away from my home. Now, with the new knowledge that I have attained through your book I have a totally different perspective of what goes on around me. The
closed environment that once encompassed me has now been busted open and exposed into much more.

Your book sent a very strong message to me and many others, but in addition to the book you forum was extremely enlightening as well. Hearing about your experiences and stories of what these people live through every day of their lives seemed even more meaningful when they were addressed more personally. I especially agreed with you when you mentioned that to change, things must be churned a little and even hurled into a state of protest or revolution (peacefully of course). With such a book, we, as a society, are driving forward one more step in the right direction. The message of these people has a very strong significance and it is wonderful that you were able to make that message heard. Your work has definitely opened my eyes and I can only hope that it has done the same for many others beside myself.

Sincerely,

Aaron Weinglass
Dear Mr. Kozol,

Thank you very much for coming to Brandeis and leading the forum on your novel, Amazing Grace. Although I was unable to attend due to a prior obligation, I heard that it was a very stimulating discussion.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading your book. It opened my eyes to a situation that I was never aware of before in my life. I grew up in a suburb of Chicago and attended a private day school and high school before coming here to Boston for college. Thank G-d, I have never experienced first hand the poverty, misery, and degradation facing those depicted in your book. I am shocked when I read about the conditions that the residents of Mott Haven live in.

The person I feel closest to in the book is Mrs. Washington. She faces insurmountable hardships. The fact that she and her son have to lug buckets of water up seven flights of stairs when they are staying in a shelter near Times Square just to drink or bathe is ridiculous. The rude and inhumane treatment that she receives at the welfare office and in the hospital makes me extremely frustrated. The welfare worker that calls over a police officer when Mrs. Washingtons file is missing acts as if she is not a human being with needs and feelings. I understand Mrs. Washingtons urge to hit her. It is appalling that when she is sick, she has to wait in the hospital waiting room for four days, only to be taken to a room with bloody sheets on the bed and used bandages on the floor.

Her daughter, Charlayne, who lives in a dangerous building swarming with drug dealers and addicts, arouses my compassion and indignation. That building sounds so scary to me, and a testament to its danger is the fact that it takes the police three hours to decide who will have to go to that neighborhood and answer a call for help. Even police officers are scared of Mott Haven. That is no place for children to be living. In order to thrive and grow into mentally and physically strong and capable adults, children need an environment where they can feel secure, and be nurtured and loved. While reading, I felt the desire to take those children out of their hell of littered bullets and dirty needles and bring them to someplace safe and warm.

I am alarmed by the staggering statistics that you quote. The fact that the infant mortality rate in a segment of New York City is higher than in many Third World countries is inexcusable. That the schools of this area place close to last for reading scores, that “less than 70 of the 1,700 children in the building qualified for graduation,” and that fungus grows in the social workers room where children go to seek solace for depression are terribly upsetting facts. I am filled with indignation at the decrepit condition of the schools where these children attend, ironically to shape their futures. From the description of their environment, their futures look very dismal indeed.
Despite the overwhelming suffering, some manage to hold on and exhibit admirable inner strength. When Mrs. Washington shares the news that David was accepted to the city college and was weeps with unfettered happiness, I am elated that one of his dreams is finally realized. Your description of her manner is that of someone who despite her numerous problems manages to be a beacon of hope in her dark and dismal surroundings. She tries to dress stylishly, keeps her apartment clean and neat, and reaches out to her neighbors with a kind and compassionate hand. That is extraordinarily commendable. I am filled with a profound respect for her.

At this time of year, right before the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement, I am constantly taking stock of myself and trying to better myself and my actions. Mrs. Washington inspires me by reminding me the importance of giving selflessly to others. We are all members of the human race and we are all responsible for each other. If my friend or neighbor is hurting, I should also feel an ache inside of me. I am reminded of the phrase “think globally, act locally.” From thinking of those in Mott Haven, I will be spurred to do charity work in Waltham. Although it is not much, it is a beginning of trying to make things better.

Thank you so much for writing this book and bringing your readers into the lives of the struggling and poor of New York City. Thank you for giving a voice to those whose cries have gone unheard and whose plight has been ignored. Thank you for opening up my eyes.

Sincerely,

Ariella Brunwasser
Reaction Paper on Jonathan Kozol's Amazing Grace

On Page 1 of Amazing Grace, I believed that I was fully aware of the poverty levels in American cities, and of the measures that certain cities were taking to alleviate this situation. Jonathan Kozol did manage to prove me wrong, if nothing else. The only thing I was aware of were statistics, numbers and the occasional homeless person on the streets of Boston. While I know that there are usually two parties to blame in crisis situations, it’s hard to imagine the amount of blame placed on one party in this book. In my opinion, the needle exchanges in Chapter three were evidence of a city hall that was partially concerned about aiding a temporary cure, one that could never eliminate the drug problem in the Bronx, or anywhere else for that matter. Whether the rest of the world feels guilty about their predicament or not, not enough effort is put into aid and assistance, and their situation will, most likely, remain unchanged in the near future.

As for my thoughts on the matter, I can only reiterate what countless philosophers, theorists, and even socialist or communist thinkers have spoken out about or written up; how is it possible, that in nations where there are so many people with so much money, there are simultaneously so many more people with so much less? I do not have sufficient funds for it, but I never pass a needy person by without looking for the last fifty cents in my pocket, and I cannot see why this would be different with anyone else, not for self-gratification, or for a personal ego-trip, but because it is simply the right thing to do.
Dear Mr. Kozol,

I want to begin this letter with a great big THANK YOU! Thank you for coming to Brandeis University to speak about your book, *Amazing Grace*. Thank you for writing the book, *Amazing Grace*, and opening my eyes to the problems in our society today.

When I first began reading *Amazing Grace* I did not like the book and really did not want to continue reading it. But as I would sit down little by little and read small sections of the book at a time, I began to become intrigued by the characters and situations that they were faced with. I had to read the book in small sections because it made me so depressed. I could not handle reading more than fifteen or so pages at a time about the lives that these people realistically live day in and day out! That tended to upset me even more. By the time that I finished the book I had a great appreciation for it and for you. After hearing you talk about your book the other day, I was even more impressed. I think that it is wonderful that you visit Mott Haven regularly and keep in close touch with many of the residents.

Your book affected me in many ways. I am not going to run out to New York and drop out of school and help these people in your book and others like them, but I am now more aware of what life is like for people who live in a different lifestyle than I do. I learned that wonderful people can emerge from not so perfect living situations. I know that from now on I will never hesitate to try to make a difference in someone’s life.
I have always prided myself in the amount of community service that I am involved in, but now I see that there is more to helping others than just collecting them food from a food drive or raising money through various fundraisers; I realized that I was missing the most important part of community service, the part that you understood and are making me now understand; that the most important thing is to just be there for people, to be an open ear to which they can talk to and share their story. Anyone feels at least a little bit better when they can talk to someone who really wants to listen. This is what you were able to do when writing, *Amazing Grace*, and I am sure that the people who shared their stories are grateful to you for helping them to share with the millions of people who read your book. I hope, that like me, they are able to find many open ears and open hearts.

Thank you again,

Jennifer Nadler
Mr. Kozol,

I would first like to start off by saying happy birthday, and thank you for writing *Amazing Grace*. *Amazing Grace* is definitely the first book of its kind that I have ever read. The book amazed me. It opened my eyes back to reality. I have been fortunate enough to be raised in the second wealthiest county in the whole United States. So, to say the least, I have never before seen many of the social injustices that you speak of in *Amazing Grace*. I have always been under this pretense that the things you discuss which take place in front of Mrs. Washington’s eyes happen elsewhere. We live in the United States of America, the most powerful country in the world. The country that flies over to other countries to help their poverty stricken yet we cannot lend a hand to our neighbors who live in our own backyard.

My father too had a very unfortunate socio-economic childhood. He grew up on welfare and food stamps. He was mandated to become the breadwinner of the family by age 18 while trying to put himself through school. My father is a self-made man, and he frequently tells me of his horror stories of growing up in Downtown Detroit. But, to be honest with you I never really got it, I never understood what he was saying and why he was telling me these sickening accounts of his childhood. On the contrary, now I do understand, and that is thanks to you Mr. Kozol. *Amazing Grace* touched me; I have given copies of the book to my father, my grandfather, my rabbi, and my old high-school English teacher. When I say the book touched me, that does not mean I ran out and started volunteering more at soup kitchens or giving more of myself to an organization like the Salvation Army. But through my readings of *Amazing Grace*, I have started
living a different style of life. Amazing Grace has forced me to constantly be thinking, not only of myself but also of others around me. And it has just transformed me into a more conscientious, compassionate, kind, and more caring individual. And for this I thank you.

With much debt and gratitude,

Mark Tapper
Dear Mr. Kozol,

Greetings from Brandeis University! My name is Hilary and I am a student who had the privilege of hearing you speak on the contents of your novel, Amazing Grace. Attending your forum was truly a blessing in disguise. But before I tell you how I was affected by your lecture, let me start with a brief prerequisite about where my thoughts were directly before you spoke.

Preceding the lecture, the freshman class was broken down into small discussion groups of about twenty to thirty students, accompanied by one professor and several very strong opinions. I was incredibly turned off by the majority of the reactions given by my fellow students. One girl in particular spoke of the extreme amounts of pity she had for the people of South Bronx. I thought to myself: “But look at the title!” Amazing Grace is a story of hope and survival, and it was certainly not written to evoke sympathy from its readers! I pity her for being so naive and closed-minded!

However, her comments prompted me to deeply analyze the very question that I know plagues the mind of each and every one of your readers: why don’t people do anything? My class discussion easily provided me with every single excuse ever conceived: no time, no money, no opportunities, or simply the notion that they have no idea how to get involved. The truth is that we are all afraid. And we have every reason to be, for when it comes down to it, the lifestyle described in your novel is indeed very frightening.

From this I arrived at the one aspect of your novel that did not fulfill for me what I needed it to. After reading your novel, I was still afraid. In fact, I was terrified. Even with viewing the personal aspect of the lives of the people in South Bronx, their struggles were still a horror story for me, instead of one of inspiration. I myself am going to be a teacher when I grow up, and every part of me wants so much to teach in the South Bronx, or in a place just like it. However, the idea just seemed so frightening to me that the only thing running through my head was an endless array of questions. How could I ever hope to educate a child coming from such an environment filled with drugs and violence?

So, this was my mentality when I entered your forum. To be honest, Mr. Kozol, after sitting through my hour long group discussion, I wasn’t even going to go. However, only five minutes into your lecture, I was so very thankful that I had decided to attend. Your many stories about
touching and being touched by the lives of children was all that I needed to hear, and I was completely won over. Your stories of Ciranno (spelling?) and Anthony will forever stay in my heart as just two of the thousands of examples that testify for the joys and gifts of children; they truly are miraculous human beings.

I came home from your forum on such a high - I have never before been so excited about my future. My friends laughed at me, my parents laughed at me, and I could think about was the beauty of the life that I have waiting for me. Thank you for showing me a sign that I am heading down the right path and for giving me the inspiration to get there. I was truly moved by your lecture and I gained a deep admiration for your work from hearing you speak. Good luck in all your future aspirations, and I hope you had a happy birthday.

Sincerely,

Hilary Barshay

[Signature]
Dear Mr. Kozol:

I would like to start off by saying that I am extremely thankful that you took the time to speak with us at Brandeis University on September 1. In your presentation I felt that just like in your book, you were extremely informative and compassionate with the events going on in the South Bronx. Although I didn’t get the chance to converse with you after your presentation, I would still like to have the chance to discuss some of the issues pertaining to what is going on in the South Bronx.

I felt that a lot of the messages and information discussed in your book are extremely important and should definitely be taken seriously by more people in this nation. While reading this book, I found it extremely difficult to actually visualize a neighborhood in such an impoverished state. The squalid conditions that these people have to live in made me realize how extremely lucky and safe I actually am. When you spoke about the little children being shot on the street and the many diseases that claimed the lives of so many, I finally understood how precious life actually is.

There were a couple of things that irritated me in your book. When you touched upon the subject of education I was extremely shocked to see how you viewed the importance of schooling. I totally agree that New York City should be giving more money to inner city schools and should provide these schools with educated and qualified teachers. Where you lost me is when you said that Stuyvesant, which happens to be the best public high school in New York City, should not receive additional money that is not given to all of the other schools in New York City. I feel that the students at Stuyvesant
should be given every advantage possible because truthfully they are the future; not the kids going to inner city schools that will end up dropping out or selling drugs one day. I want to better the kids that already have proven that they have goal in life. I see where you can disagree with me but, this is how I feel.

Thank you for your time and I hope to speak to you soon

Sincerely,

Jeff Feldman
Dear Mr. Kozol,

First of all, congratulations on Amazing Grace. It is a very well written book that has brought me much insight on the world that exists outside of my little bubble. Before I read your book, I had never really thought about the desolate and squalid conditions that existed in our United States. I just carried on my own life almost blind to the problems. Yes, I knew there was poverty; but to me, poverty was just another one of those dry terms. In my mind, poverty sort of held a literal dictionary definition. I carried no images of faces, of houses, or of streets to my definition of poverty. Amazing Grace made the situation seem so real, I could actually see the sunny faces of the children coming up to you and greeting you. In the background behind the children, however, I could also sense a feeling of desolation from the grim, unclean streets. I could see the hungry giant rats and the drug dealers at the corners. The juxtaposition of the two is what made the book so powerful and so unforgettable.

At certain parts of the book, I was really shocked to read about how disrespectfully the people of Mott Haven and the South Bronx were treated when they ventured into the more affluent sections of New York City. Anytime that they walked into a fancy store or anytime that they sought treatment in a good quality hospital, they were looked at as though they didn’t even belong there. They were poor and they were dirty. They weren’t welcome. The staff working in the stores and at the hospital had no compassion for the people of the South Bronx, and I wondered to myself what I would’ve done if I had been that staff person. Would I have acted in the same manner or would I have treated them compassionately as if they had been a wealthy customer? The truth is, and I’m ashamed to say it, nine times out of ten I probably would’ve acted just as stoically if I had not read Amazing Grace.

Amazing Grace made me think deeply about what exactly we are doing to those who are less fortunate by trying to ignore their situation and continuing on with our own lives. The problem actually just becomes worse when we do this. Reading about Mrs. Washington and the daily trials she and her son had to go through especially touched me. I love my mother very much. I don’t know how I could handle life if I were in David’s position and see that my mom was going to live the rest of her years in a squalid, depressing situation. Mrs. Washington basically had no where to turn to for help. All the institutions created for the purpose of helping poverty-stricken people such as welfare and social security failed her. I just have one question for you, Mr. Kozol, how did you go into these neighborhoods,
experience all the negative aspects of life in the South Bronx, and not get really depressed about it? Did you get depressed? For me, I just think I would get so upset and depressed if I were to experience that kind of lifestyle everyday. I tend to absorb the energy around me, positive or negative, and that energy can have a great deal of effect on the way I feel for days and even weeks.

Lastly, I just think that the title *Amazing Grace* was very symbolic to the book. It is a reminder that despite all that a person may not have in his or her life and how poor he or she may be, the spirit of the person never dies. The title, a positive one, contrasts the not so pleasant context of the book and calls to attention that despite all the horror that go on in those people’s lives, they can still find good aspects of life to cherish and thrive on. I have much respect for those in the South Bronx who continue to bring hope to the children, educate them, and support them.

Sincerely,

Alexander Lo’
Dear Mr. Kozol,

Thank you for spending time coming to speak to the Brandeis freshman class about your inspirational book *Amazing Grace*. You came to speak at my high school (Seven Hills in Cincinnati, Ohio) a few years ago, but it did not have the same impact on me before I had read your book and before I was in the Brandeis mindset. I do not think there could have been a better selection for a university where social justice is such a major part of campus life and the education. I had so many conflicting emotions while reading your book, but I consider it to be a call to action. I think it is important to look at it beyond just Mott Haven, though. If someone reads this book and is moved to write one check, one time to an organization in the South Bronx, I don’t think that is a solution. I took this book to be a wake up call that our educational, medical, and other systems are failing us. Several people saw this as an attack on the government or the rich people or whatnot, but for me, it simply reaffirmed my ideas that education will help correct problems in our society. With education comes empowerment for the poor to fight for themselves. With education comes awareness on the part of the upper classes as to what the problems are. America is the wealthiest nation, yet we constantly score lower than other countries on tests. It is not just that we need better schools, but we need to cut the disparity between good and bad schools. In Cincinnati, the decision has been made unofficially to start as many charter schools as possible. There is a feeling that there is no way to reform the system from within; it must be broken down from the outside. Most importantly, hatred, ignorance, and bigotry are not unlearned in school. Graduates of some of the best schools in the country have led such sheltered, productive lives that while they may be intelligent and well meaning, they have no ability to be productive members of society because they don’t
understand society as for them it was just a few blocks wide. There seemed to be a lot of bitterness in the community toward whites or the rich or the government. With more education, that blaming could be turned into empowerment to take action against the perceived “oppression.” I am not advocating a violent uprising, but there are several ways for the community to help themselves or enlist the help of others in other ways than pity check writing. No one wants to be pitied, and unfortunately some people felt that after reading the book.

I would have liked to know a few other things. I know you tried to answer the question about the changes that have occurred since 1996, but I would like more specifics on the effects of welfare reform in general. Is is working for areas of poverty? Has the Democratic administration been better as well? In New York, what affect has Guilliani had? I was also bothered by two things that you said or mentioned in the book. First, why was the New York Times not getting to this area? Second, if the people of Mott Haven were truly willing to leave to find a better place, why are there not more relocation programs?

Finally, I wanted to thank you for a few specific things you said. First, thank you for not offering your solutions to these problems. I know that bothered a lot of people, but one person does not have the right to claim all the answers. The problem is far too complex for that. Second, I wish that our generation had the same drive to stand up and fight and go to jail for our beliefs that our parents’ generation had. I thank you for saying that you would be there on the lines with us. I hope it comes to that someday. Thank you again for your time. I hope we will all see changes in our lives, but I do not think it can be done without all sides working together.

Sincerely,

Elida Kamine
Dear Mr. Kozol,

Thank you for coming to Brandeis University to speak with us about your book, *Amazing Grace*. Your book has stimulated many discussions and has brought out strong emotions and feelings that have provided the Brandeis Community with questions, new thoughts, and creative ideas.

I have personally found your book very powerful and inspirational. You bring out the worst of a bureaucratic government and society; its negligence, its power, and its injustice. But, you also have shown the strength of man, the power of faith and the strength found in community. You show the hope and grace of the people in Mott Haven and have given many of them a sense of love and care that they had probably never had. You have given the South Bronx a voice, the people who live there a friendly ear, and maybe without your or their knowledge, a little hope, too.

*Amazing Grace* has affected me greatly. Reading the book almost seemed like reading fiction, always causing me to think that this was not America, rather some other country. But, it was America and it was a loud reality check. It brought to me feelings of guilt and of thankfulness; guilt that I haven’t and probably will not do anything about the situation and thanks that I am not in those circumstances. I also experienced such awe for the people in reading about their faith, living amazing faith and grace. Their faith and
the grace of the children showed the hope of the community, the candle of hope in the
darkness of despair and disorder.

I deeply appreciate you for coming to share your insight and knowledge about the
situation in Mott Haven, you honesty in keeping us informed of the problem and progress
of the neighborhood. Some people are critical of you. They think you haven’t done
anything for the people. They said you made money off their story. You probably did.
However, I thank you for going back to the people of Mott Haven for all of us, even after
you finished your book. You have made a difference in the lives of these people as well
as in the lives of those who have read your book and listened to you speak about it.

I would finally like to thank you for your encouragement of all of us to do good
things. Even though I have performed community service and have helped my
community back home, you have rekindled that love of helping those less privileged than
myself through service.

Once again I thank you for your book and for coming to Brandeis.

God Bless and Happy Birthday.

Sincerely,

Moses K. Ong
Dear Mr. Kozol:

The following essay was assigned in my university seminar in which we have been analyzing your book Amazing Grace. I opted to forward my reaction paper to you as a means of expressing my personal outlook on your work. I thank you for your willingness to let the voices of the S. Bronx be heard:

Unlike books I have read in the past, Jonathan Kozol’s Amazing Grace struck me in such a way that I found it very difficult to endure long reading sessions; the content of the book was emotionally draining. At times, I found myself laughing and crying all at once or completely stunned by an astonishing entry. Kozol’s book showed me the severity of child suffering taking place right in my own backyard. These events in the South Bronx are atrocities occurring today in America, and yet not even the local police can control them. It makes me angry to see a murder story on my local news channel covering a single death and to know that many of the killings of innocent people in the South Bronx go unnoticed. The situation causes me to question why the government doesn’t take more action to aid the poor; it causes me to wonder if my government has any conscience at all. If I were in a position of economic need, would I be thrown into an area where everyone was in the same position as myself? Would I rot there as a forgotten name for the rest of my existence?
Amazing Grace did hit me with an amazing wave of reality; however, it did not cause me to give up hope for the future of the poverty stricken. People helping people is what makes the difference and if the government refuses to provide assistance than someone else will have to take a stand. I have listened to natives of the Bronx speak of the tremendous help that social service agencies have begun to provide for the region. An interesting research topic on the reading might identify the recent efforts in the South Bronx by social service, volunteer, and relief agencies. By interviewing agency and community members, local businesses, charities, and other organizations, a current documentation of relief efforts may be established and, in turn, determine where and if the needs of the community are being met.

I applaud you for all of your efforts. Happy belated birthday.

Sincerely,

Christina Bean
Dear Mr. Kozol,

As a student who read *Amazing Grace* and attended your forum, I would like to offer you my opinions on both the book and the forum. I truly enjoyed reading your work and found it enlightening to the horrible situation of some people in our country. I strongly believe that the more privileged people in our country should be aware of the living conditions of the less fortunate.

With that said, I did have some problems with *Amazing Grace*. I truly do not understand your purpose in writing this book. Did you want to enlighten your readers? This you certainly accomplished. Were you encouraging your readers to help in any way? On a personal level, *Amazing Grace* gave me a desire to help change the situation of the people in Mott Haven, but not a way to do this. I wanted to know with what organization I should be involved to effect change in places like Mott Haven, yet you never mentioned these organizations. At the forum, a student asked what we could do to help without drastically changing our lives. You answered that she should become a schoolteacher and move to Mott Haven. I did not feel that this was a fair answer. She, as I, wanted the name of a person to contact about clothing drives, food drives and things of that sort. I do know that these things may not change the situation for everyone in Mott
Haven, but it is certainly possible that they help individuals. I truly believe that everything helps, but you seem not to agree with me.

Beyond the lack of information of how to help remedy these situations, I also found *Amazing Grace* terribly lacking in hope for the future of Mott Haven. At our forum, you spoke of some hope, yet I saw none of this in your writing. This brings me back to my original question: What was your purpose in writing this book? If you were trying to effect change, why did you not present any hope for this change? If you were only trying to enlighten the public to the horrid situation in the South Bronx, I must admit to you that I find this truly unsatisfying. I am only eighteen, and not quite ready to give up hope on these types of situations yet. Although I found *Amazing Grace* well written and informative, I did find it terribly lacking in hope.

Sincerely,

Rina Mazor
Dear Mr. Kozol,

I learned from the reading of your book *Amazing Grace* and the lecture that you gave the freshmen class, that such awful living conditions society does exist today, that people cannot afford food, heat, medical treatment or other basic modern necessities to life. This society is not across the world. I live in New Jersey so the community of Mott Haven is literally in my backyard. I am so close to it and yet so unaware of just how desperate the situation is there. I had no idea that the welfare systems, and medical centers were such difficult places to navigate when you really need them. The runaround and discrimination that they give off is enough to make these people suffer at home rather than be treated in a hospital where they are treated as less than human. I could not believe that in the 1990’s when we are at our height of knowledge, technology and understanding, we let this go on daily, without some kind of commotion made. It seems to be very normal for these people to find out in the morning that a neighbor’s child did not make it through the night or that a friend died of a hit and run or a drug overdose. Even the children take these blows without flinching, unaware that life can be different elsewhere in the world. That in the same city as they reside, other children are in wealthy homes will lots of food, doctors, toys and all the material things in the world. The things that the children of Mott Haven yearn for can be found in their closets. Children should not be forced to grow up and learn in such an awful environment.

However, Mr. Kozol I question your motives in writing this book. These people
told you their life stories and invited you into their homes. But you are not a
philanthropist who will help out their lives. You are an author who was doing research for
your latest project, which happened to be them. You wrote a book, lecture about the
book, sell the book and you are being paid. You are earning your livelihood off their
miseries. What you may show the world by telling their story will not give them
immediate hope and help. Tonight in Mott Haven some child will probably die. By
standing in front of the freshmen class at Brandeis University and telling us that the only
way we can help is to become a doctor or teacher and go there is not an encouraging
enough reason to justify your profit from their struggles. While they made a friend in you
and you have visited many times since the book was published, a friend will not put heat in
their homes, food on their table or medicine in their sick child. You open our eyes to the
situation yet you offer us no means of an idea as to how to go about correcting it. I found
myself walking away from your lecture feeling guilty for being born into a comfortable
lifestyle, attending a private university and all the other things that I have been lucky
enough to have that the children of Mott Haven will never see. I wonder if we cannot
help these people, then what was your purpose in writing the book. You disturb us from
our happy lives and leave us in a limbo as to how to proceed. If you cannot give us much
of an idea as to help the situation, why inform of it, since we cannot help. All we can do is
sit here and feel guilty for a situation that is not our fault and that we cannot even help to
correct.

Sincerely,

Sharon Schlesinger
First of all, I would like to thank you for coming to Brandeis to speak to our class at the New Student Forum. Throughout the summer and immediately before the forum, I was anxious to hear your thoughts on the issues *Amazing Grace* raised and answers to our questions. Honestly, I wish I could say I came away from it all with a clearer mindset and concrete opinions on the various issues raised by the book, for I had minimal knowledge of the situation in Mott Haven beforehand, but I did not. I was more confused than ever.

The fact I felt such a wide spectrum of emotion before, during, and after my reading of the book was the true “eye-opener” for me. Everything from anger, wonder, depression, apathy, amazement, guilt, sympathy and happiness washed over me as I read the stories and tried to absorb everything. Throughout the past two weeks, I have heard basically the same so-called “observation” come out of my peers’ mouths. It is something to the effect of, “One thing I learned is that this kind of stuff really does happen this close to home and I never thought about it in so much detail before.” That is true, but trite, and I struggle to find something else meaningful that I learned. Also I have heard several of my peers sneer, “Why did he write the book when there is nothing in reality that can be done?” Why do people recycle when in reality nothing on a large scale can be done to save the planet Earth? With the risk of intentional fallacy to you, what I perceived as the purpose of *Amazing Grace* was a book that needed to be written and story that needed to be told. It is a starting point, in order to get all of society to open up and begin to talk about the issues. Solutions cannot be discussed without first identifying the problems. *Amazing Grace* allows people of all different backgrounds to at least open up the lines of communication and prioritize the problems that lead to solutions.

The one thing that affected me the most was the hospital situation you described so vividly. As I read the text, I literally could not believe was I was reading. I wanted so badly for it to be fiction. Reading about the environment of some of the hospitals you mentioned in the South Bronx, including the so-called “better” ones, physically sickened me. I felt ashamed by the segregation in the maternity ward at Mount Sinai Medical Center. As someone who is pondering a career in medicine and knows several of my peers who are considering it also, this is one of the most disturbing concepts I can fathom. It makes me not want to have any part of it, but I face a dilemma. Should I turn my head the other way in medical school and beyond like those before and after me, or should I continue to wear my societal blinders, head in the opposite direction and find a satisfactory job. Unfortunately, those do seem like the only options. Why can’t I make my own option, and help bring down the system?

There is so much more I could write, but it is difficult to find the right words. This is the issue I am most passionate about, and I thank you for writing *Amazing Grace* in order to bring this out into the open. My opinions may be muddled and hard to express but I do appreciate the book for what it is and what it stands for.
Sincerely,

Linda Clifford

Brandeis University, Class of 2003
Dear Mr. Kozol,

I would like to thank you for coming to Brandeis University. It was an honor to hear you talk about your book, *Amazina Grace*, and your views on poverty in general. I was fascinated by the children’s lives, as well as shocked by their reality. I would like you to know that your book touched me. I believe you gave those children and their communities a voice that was always present, yet has remained unheard by a majority of society. Your book has inspired awareness. I have recently had many conversations with my peers about *Amazina Grace*, and have found that there are many people who share my opinions. There are also people who do not for reasons of their own. But, whether or not their opinions were similar to mine I believe that these children’s stories and pain touched everyone that I talked to.

This summer I worked as a lifeguard in Leominster, Massachusetts. The pool was across the road from the projects and as a result I met many of the children who lived there. Although this area is not nearly as dangerous and unhealthy as the South Bronx, these children still lived in circumstances that were foreign and sometimes unimaginable to me. A particular child caught my attention one day. He was very small and had a playful smile. The “baby pool” was not open this year because it did not meet the Board of Health requirements. As a result, many of the younger children swam in the large pool, and those who did not have life jackets layed on the steps. Due to the many heat waves we experienced this summer the steps often became overcrowded with children attempting to stay cool, and we therefore had an extra guard stand near the steps. This particular boy was much smaller than the rest of the children, and I was concerned that he would be trampled by the older kids entering the pool. So, I knelt down and asked him where his parents were. He looked up smiling and responded, “My dad’s in jail”. I eventually was able to track his mother down, but his response stuck with me. At that particular time I was also reading your book. I was shocked by his response because I would’ve never expected it in the first place, and because this child lived with a reality that I had never fully accepted because I had never been that close to it. The children in your book reminded me of this boy, because they were so aware of their surroundings, as horrible as they may seem to most of us, and yet still seemed to possess such innocence.

My experiences this summer and your book helped open my eyes and helped to make me more aware of the hardships these children face. Your book also helped me to realize that these children, especially, were just like me. They did not choose this lifestyle, they did not choose this reality.

I also felt that the book was extremely well written. Rarely did you allow your opinions and reactions to surface. I felt that this made the stories even more real. I often had to take a break from your book in order to let the reality and my emotions sink in. There were also times when I felt as if the stories couldn’t possibly be true, particularly in the beginning.

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Probably the most difficult task was convincing myself that something that felt so surreal could be a reality. Denial, shock, depression, guilt and helplessness are the emotions that best describe my feelings while reading your book. I believe, however, that your writing technique was essential to the books purpose and necessary. You did nothing to “jazz it up”, and at first I felt it was very stark and almost lacking emotion. I later realized that the emotion came from the reader, and for me it often came in overwhelming amounts.

I would like to thank you for coming to Brandeis once again. You have inspired awareness and many important conversations that are often too few and too rare. Thank you for providing a way for those children to touch my heart, I only hope that one day I will be able to repay them.

Your newest fan and supporter,

Michelle Giumette
September 7, 1999

Dear Mr. Kozol:

I recently read your book, *Amazing Grace* and was very confused by the message that you were trying to deliver. At first, I was very bewildered because it appeared that you were exploiting the situation in the Bronx just to make an entertaining reading. The people described in the Bronx are in a very unfortunate situation. It is not easy to live a life when you never know where the next meal is coming from and one has to constantly look over their back to see if they are safe. After initially reading your book, I interpreted the story as a way of making money by writing a story that could capture the public's attention.

It appeared very ironic to me that you were making so much money in this book when you were constantly describing how poor and bad the people had it in the Bronx. After I read your book the first time, I really wanted to understand the whole irony in the situation. It just didn't seem right to me initially that you were cashing in on the peoples' misfortunes in the Bronx.

However, after listening to you come to Brandeis and explaining the book to everybody, I began to understand the point that you were trying to make throughout the book... It began to become clearer that as a writer you wanted to bring awareness to the Bronx. It is important that people become aware of situations like that.

I appreciated the time in your speech when you told us how we as individuals could make a difference. It seems so hard how one person can make a difference in a situation as poor as that in the Bronx. It is important for people to become doctors and teachers and reside or return to the Bronx and bring with them what they learned. The eight-hundred number and web site that was given to us as a class was also very helpful. I plan to pass the knowledge I learned from you and try to make a difference in the Bronx in some manner. I really applaud everything that you have done now to try to help the people in the Bronx. I only hope that they appreciate everything that you have been trying to do for them. I look forward to seeing your next book when you describe how you became welcomed by their community especially since you were such an outsider to them.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Adam C. Klein
Student at Brandeis University

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