

You Will Do as Directed

Ron Jones

Ron Jones, once a teacher in California, wrote the following article about an experience with a class during a unit on World War II. It may be more accurate to say he began an experiment which went in a direction he did not expect. As described in the article, the experiment took a life of its own and Jones faced a dilemma: How to end the experiment without hurting students who had become completely caught up in it. Yet, the experiment raised disturbing questions about the attraction of authoritarian ideas.

. . . for a moment it all rushed back.

Steve McDonald had been a student in my World History class. As he came running down the street shouting, "Mr.. Jones! Mr. Jones!" I had to stop for a minute to remember: Who is this young man hugging me? Steve sensed my doubt and backed up, then smiled, and slowly raised a hand in a cupped position. My God! He's a member of the Third Wave. It's Steve McDonald....

I unconsciously raised my hand in the same salute: two comrades meeting long after the war. "Mr.. Jones, do you remember the Third Wave?" I sure do: one of the most frightening events I have ever experienced in the classroom.

We talked and laughed about our secret, the Third Wave, for the next few hours. Then it was time to part. Steve turned and gave the salute without a word. I returned the gesture.

The Third Wave. Well, at last it can be talked about. The nightmare must finally be waning, after three years. I think it was Steve who initiated it all with a question.

We were studying Nazi Germany, and in the middle of a lecture he asked: **How could the German people claim ignorance of the slaughter of the Jews? How could railroad conductors, teachers, doctors, know nothing about concentration camps and human carnage? How could neighbors and even friends of a Jewish citizen say they weren't there when it happened? I didn't know the answer.**

There were several months to go in the school year and we were already at World War II, so I decided to take a week and explore the issue.

Strength Through Discipline

On Monday I **introduced my class to one of the key experiences of Nazi Germany—discipline.** I talked about **the beauty of discipline:** how an athlete feels having worked hard and regularly to be successful at a sport; how a ballet dancer or painter perfects a movement, or a scientist pursues an idea. It's **discipline, self-control, the power of the will, the tolerance of physical hardship for Superior mental and physical ability.** **The ultimate triumph.**

To demonstrate the power of discipline, I **invited the class to try a new sitting posture.** I described how proper posture **assists concentration and strengthens the will.** In fact, I **commanded them to adopt this posture:** feet flat on the floor, hands placed flat across the small of the back to force a straight alignment of the spine. "There. Can t you breathe more easily. **Don't you feel better?"**

We **practiced this new position over and over.** I **walked up and down the aisles making small improvements.** Proper sitting became the most important aspect of learning. I would **allow the class to leave their desks, then call them abruptly back to sitting at attention.** In speed drills they **learned to move from standing to sitting in 15 seconds.**

After repeated drilling, the class could move silently from outside the room to sitting at attention at their desks in five seconds.

It was strange how quickly the students took to this code of uniform behavior. I began to wonder just how far they could be pushed. Was this display of obedience a temporary game we were all playing, or was it something else? Was the desire for discipline and conformity a natural need, a social instinct? We exercise subliminally inside a world of franchise restaurants and TV programming?

I decided to stretch the class's tolerance for regimented action. In the final 25 minutes I introduced some new rules: students must be sitting at attention before the late bell; all must carry pencils and paper for note taking; when asking or answering questions, students must stand at the side of their desks; the first words of what they say must always be "Mr.. Jones." We practiced questions and answers to achieve promptness and respect. Eventually, the intensity of the response became more important than the content. To accentuate this, I demanded answers of three words or less.

Soon everyone began popping up with questions and answers, even formerly hesitant speakers. The entire class seemed more involved— listening more intently, speaking out more openly, offering greater support. There was even a marked improvement in the quality of answers.

As for my part, I had nothing but questions. Here I was creating an authoritarian environment and it was turning out to be highly productive. I began to ponder not just how far this class could be pushed but how much I would alter my belief in the open classroom and self-directed learning.

Strength Through Community

On Tuesday, the second day, I entered the classroom to find everyone sitting silently at attention. Some of their faces were related with smiles that come from pleasing the teacher. But

most of the students were looking straight ahead earnestly—neck muscles rigid, no sign of a smile or a thought. To release the tension I went to the board and wrote in big letters:
STRENGTH THROUGH DISCIPLINE
Below this I wrote a second law:
STRENGTH THROUGH COMMUNITY
While the class sat in stern silence, I began to talk—lecture, sermonize—about the value of community. Inwardly I was debating whether to stop the experiment or continue. I hadn't foreseen such intensity or compliance. In fact, I was surprised to find my ideas on discipline acted out at all. I talked on and on, making up stories from my experience as an athlete, coach and historian. It was easy. Community is that bond between individuals who work and struggle together. It's raising a barn with your neighbors, feeling that you are part of something beyond yourself—a team, a cause, la raza.

I told the class that community-like discipline must be experienced to be understood. I had them chant in unison: "Strength Through Discipline. Strength Through Community." It was fun. They began to look at each other and sense the power of belonging; everyone was capable and equal.

As the period was ending, and without forethought, I created a salute for class members only. To make it you brought your right hand up toward the right shoulder in a curled position. I called it the "Third Wave" salute because the hand resembled a wave about to top over, and beach lore has it that waves travel in series, the third wave being the last and largest. I made it a rule to salute all class members outside the classroom. When the bell sounded, with everyone sitting at attention. I slowly raised my arm and with a cupped hand saluted. It was a signal of recognition. without command the entire group returned the salute.

Throughout the day, around the school, students from the class exchanged this greeting. I would be walking down the hall when suddenly three classmates would turn and flash a quick salute. In

the library or in gym, they'd be seen giving this signal of recognition. The mystique of 30 individuals making this strange gesture soon called attention to the class and its exploration of the Nazi German personality. Many students outside the class asked if they could join.

Strength Through Action

On Wednesday I decided to issue membership cards to everyone who wanted to continue what I called "the experiment." Not a single student elected to leave the room. There were now 43 in the class; 13 had cut other classes to join us. While the students sat at attentions-I gave them each a card. I marked three of the cards with a red X and informed the recipients that they had a special assignment: to report any members not complying with class rules. I then explained how discipline and community were meaningless without action. I discussed the beauty of taking full responsibility of believing so thoroughly in yourself and your community or family that you would do anything to preserve and protect them. I stressed how hard work and allegiance to each other would accelerate learning.

At this point, people began to volunteer testimonials: "Mr. Jones, for the first time I'm learning lots of things." "Mr.. Jones, why don't you teach like this all the time?" I had been pushing information at them in an extremely controlled setting, and the fact that they liked it was shocking.... I began to think they might do anything I assigned, and I decided to find out.

To create the experience of direct action I gave each individual a specific assignment: "It is your task to design a Third Wave banner . . . to stop any student who is not a Third Wave member from entering this room . . . to memorize the name and address of every Third Wave member . . . to convince at least 20 children in the adjacent elementary school that our sitting posture is necessary for better learning." I also asked each student to give me the name and address of one reliable friend who might want to join the Third Wave. I announced that once recommended, new

members would receive a card and must pledge obedience to our rules.

By this time the whole school was alive with rumor and curiosity. Our principal came into an afternoon faculty meeting and gave me the Third Wave salute. The librarian thanked me for the 30 foot banner on learning, which she placed above the library entrance. By the end of the day, over 200 students were admitted into the order. I felt alone and a little scared.

Most of my fear came from the incidence of tattletailing. Although I appointed only three students to report deviate behavior, about 20 came to me with reports of Allan's not saluting, or Georgene's criticizing our experiment. This meant that half the class now considered it their duty to observe and report on other members.

By the end of the third day I was exhausted; I'd lost the balance between role playing and directed behavior. Many of the students were completely absorbed in being Third Wave members. They demanded strict obedience and bullied those who took the experiment lightly. Others simply fell into step and assigned themselves roles. I particularly remember Robert, big for his age and an academic drudge, though he tried harder than anyone I know to be successful. Like so many kids in school who don't excel or cause trouble, Robert was invisible. The only reason I came to know him at all was that I usually found him eating lunch in my classroom, alone.

The Third Wave gave Robert a place. At last he was equal to everyone; he could take part. Wednesday afternoon I found him following me and asked what in the world he was doing. He smiled (I don't think I'd ever seen him smile) and announced: "Mr. Jones, I'm your bodyguard. I'm afraid something will happen to you. Can I do it, Mr. Jones, please?" Given that assurance and smile, I couldn't say no. For the rest of the day Robert remained at my side, opening and closing doors for me, smiling at and saluting other class members. In the faculty room he stood silently at

attention while I gulped coffee. When accosted by another teacher for being in the teachers room, he just smiled and informed the faculty member that he wasn't a student, he was a bodyguard.

Strength Through Pride

By Thursday I was ready to wind things up. Many students were over the line; the Third Wave was dominating their existence. I myself was now acting instinctively as a dictator, however benevolent.

By now the class had swollen to over 80. A strange calm takes effect in a room full of people sitting at perfect attention. I talked ringingly about pride. "Pride is more than banners or salutes. Pride is something no one can take from you. Pride is knowing you are the best. It can't be destroyed." In the midst of this crescendo I abruptly lowered my voice to announce the real reason for the Third Wave. "The Third Wave isn't just an experiment or classroom activity. It's far more important. The Third Wave is a nationwide program to find students willing to fight for political change. That's right. What we've been doing has been practice for the real thing. Across the country teachers have been recruiting and training a youth brigade capable of demonstrating a better society through discipline, community, pride and action. If we can change the way school is run, we can change the way factories, universities and all the other institutions are run. You are a selected group of young people chosen to help in this cause. If you will display what you have learned in the past four days, we can bring this nation a new sense of discipline, community, pride and action. Everything rests with you and your willingness to take a stand."

To show my seriousness I turned to three people who I knew had questioned the Third Wave, and demanded that they leave the room. I assigned four guards to escort them to the library and keep them from entering class on Friday. Then dramatically I announced a special noon rally on Friday—a rally for Third Wave members only.

It was a wild gamble. I just kept talking, afraid that if I stopped someone would laugh or ask a question and the grand scheme would dissolve. I explained how at noon Friday a national candidate for president would declare a Third Wave Youth Program. Simultaneously, over a thousand youth groups from every part of the country would stand up in support of the movement. I confided that the students in my class had been selected to represent their area, and I asked if they would make a good showing, because the press had been invited. There was no laughter, no murmur of resistance. Quite the contrary. Feverish excitement swept the room. "We can do it!" "Should we wear white shirts?" "Can we bring friends?"

"It's all set for tomorrow," I said. "Be in the auditorium ten minutes before noon. Be seated, ready to display the discipline, community and pride you have learned. Don't talk to anyone about this. This rally is for members only."

Strength Through Understanding

I spent most of Friday morning preparing the auditorium for the rally. At 11:30 students began to show up—at first a few scouting the way and then more. Row after row filled up in hushed silence. Third Wave banners hung like clouds over the assembly. At 12 sharp I sealed the room and placed guards at each door. Several friends of mine posing as reporters and photographers began to interact with the crowd, taking pictures and jotting down notes. A group photograph was taken. The room was crammed with over 200 students: athletes, social stars, student leaders, loners, kids that always left school early, bikers, the pseudo hip.... But they all looked like one force as they sat at attention, focused on the TV set at the front of the room....

"Before turning on the national press conference, I want you to demonstrate the extent of our training." With that, I gave the salute, and automatically 200 arms stabbed a reply. I then pronounced the words "Strength Through Discipline" and the chorus replied. We did this again and again. Each time the response was

louder. The photographers were covering the ritual, but by now no one noticed them. Again the room rocked with a . . . cry, "Strength Through Discipline !"

At 12:05 I turned off the lights and walked to the TV.... I switched the set on and stood next to it, facing the people. The machine came to life, producing a field of light.... Their eyes strained and pulled toward it, but the blank screen didn't change. The room stayed deadly still; there was a mental tug of war between the people and the television. Yet the white glow didn't snap into an image of a political candidate; it just hummed on.... This trance continued for what seemed like hours. It was 12:07.-. . . Nothing. .anticipation turned to anxiety and then to frustration. Finally someone stood up and shouted: "There isn't any leader is there?"

Everyone turned in shock, first to the desperate student and then back to the television. Their faces filled with disbelief. In the confusion of the moment I moved slowly toward the set and turned it off. Immediately I felt air rush back into the room; the room remained silent, but people were breathing again, bringing their arms from behind their chairs. Instead of a flood of questions, there was intense quietness. I began to speak.

"Listen closely; I have something important to tell you.... There is no leader! There is no such thing as a national youth movement called the Third Wave. You've been used, manipulated, shoved by your own desires to where you now find yourself. You're no better or worse than the German Nazis we have been studying.

"You thought you were the elect—better than those outside this room. You bargained your freedom for the comfort of discipline. You chose to accept the group's will over your own convictions. Oh, you think you were just going along for the fun, that you could extricate yourself at any moment. But where were you heading? How far would you have gone? Let me show you your future."

With that I switched on a rear screen projector, which lit up a white cloth behind the TV. Large numbers appeared in a countdown; then the roar of the Nuremberg rally blasted into vision. My heart was pounding. In ghostly images the Third Reich paraded into the room: discipline, super race, the big lie, arrogance, violence, terror. People being pushed into vans, the visual stench of death camps, faces without eyes. The trials, the plea of ignorance, "I was only doing my job." As abruptly as it started, the film froze on a single written frame: "Everyone must accept the blame. No one can claim that they didn't in some way take part."

In the dark the last footage flapped against the projector. I felt sick to my stomach. No one moved. As if awakening from a deep dream, the whole room took one last look back into their minds.

"In the past week we have all tasted what it was like to live and act in Nazi Germany. We learned what it felt like to create a disciplined social environment, pledge allegiance to that society, replace reason with rules. Yes, we would all have made good Nazis. We would have put on the uniform, turned our heads as friends and neighbors were cursed and then persecuted, pulled the locks shut, worked in the "defense" plants, burned ideas. We now know in a small way what it feels like to find a hero, to grab quick solutions, to control our destiny. We know the fear of being left out, -the-pleasure of doing something right and being rewarded. Perhaps we have seen what these actions can lead to.

"Over the past week we have seen that fascism is not just something those other people did. It's right here in this room, in our own personal habits and way of life. Scratch the surface and it appears; we carry it like a disease: the belief that human beings are basically evil and therefore demand a strong leader and discipline to preserve social order.

"This is the crucial lesson, which started our plunge into Nazi life. Do you remember the

question? It went something like this: How could the German soldier, teacher, railroad conductor, nurse, tax collector, the average citizen, claim afterwards that they knew nothing of what was going on? How could they be part of something and then saw at the end that they were not really involved? What causes people to blank out their own history? In the next few minutes and perhaps years, you'll have the chance to answer this-question.

"If our enactment of the fascist mentality is complete, not one of you will ever admit to being at this Third Wave rally. You won't allow your friends and parents, or even yourself, to know you were willing to give up individual freedom to the dictates of order and unseen leaders. You won't admit to being manipulated, to accepting this madness as a way of life. You will keep the Third

Wave and this rally a secret. It's a secret I shall share with you."

I took the film from the news cameras and exposed it to the light. The Third Wave had ended. Students slowly rose from their chairs and without talking began to file outdoors. Robert was sobbing. I walked over and threw my arms around him. We stood in the stream of students, some of whom swirled back to hold us for a moment. Others were crying or moving toward the door and the world outside.

For a week in the middle of a school year we had shared something fully. In the four years I taught at Cubberley High School, no one ever spoke of the Third Wave rally. Certainly we thought over what we'd done. But the rally itself, everyone wanted to forget.

Questions for Discussion

1. The teacher tried to draw parallels between behavior of the students and the German nation in the 1930's. Do you believe the parallels are valid? Explain.
2. Why were the students willing to follow Jones even beyond the point at which he was satisfied? Do you feel students are more likely to obey or reject such authority?
3. Having read this story, are you willing to claim that you could not be taken in by such an experiment in your own classroom? What values separate you from such behavior?
4. How does Jones make use of terms like discipline, community, pride, and strength to convert his students? How can these seemingly positive terms take on an ominous meaning? .
5. Which of these two statements is more true: "Young people desperately want to believe in something" "Young people are so cynical that they believe in little and want to believe in nothing." Which of these statements, if true, would be more dangerous?
6. Do you believe our schools teach students more how to obey or disobey? Discuss the implications of your answer. ~