

Paper Clips and Shoelaces

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PAPER CLIPS is the name of a documentary film. This is the description that Netflix gives for it: *Whitwell Middle School in rural Tennessee is the setting for this documentary about an extraordinary experiment in Holocaust education. Struggling to grasp the concept of 6 million Holocaust victims, the students decide to collect 6 million paper clips to better understand the enormity of the calamity. The film details how the students met Holocaust survivors from around the world and how the experience transformed them and their community.*

I mention it because it was the inspiration for the teacher who emailed me recently, and whose email I posted here, telling me of the project he'd designed for his 6th graders. Paper clips are a pretty prosaic object and he chose something similarly, ah, pedestrian: shoe laces. Six million shoelaces. It could have been jelly beans, I suppose, or erasers: any small object that kids could collect that would show them, in the aggregate, the magnitude of 6 million, a concept that is hard for all of us to grasp.

<http://www.hbook.com/blog/2007/03/six-million-what.html> is the address of Roger Sutton's blog, which he kindly sent to me to let me know that he had commented acidly on the mindlessness of such a project. And a number of his blog-readers have responded with their comments, most of them simliarly critical.

I'm fond of Roger, whom I've known for a good many years...(I would tell you the number of years but you would have to go out and collect M&Ms or - better - malt balls - in order to perceive the magnitude). But I don't really agree with him or his intellectualizing readers on this one. I don't think the teacher's project is mindless or silly or lazy. It may not WORK for all kids. Some of them will look back and wonder, in years to come, "What did we tie all those stupid shoelaces together for?" But heck, nothing works for all students. I myself look back and haven't a clue why I memorized the binomial theorem in 1954.

But there will be others on whom it makes a huge impact. And if you rent and watch the film...which I recommend...you will be quite convinced that there is a large group of former children in Tennessee who will not ever forget six million paper cliips and what it taught them.

In June I will be participating in a workshop for teachers at the Holocaust Museum in Washington. I might ask their opinion on projects like this one as a teaching tool; if I remember to ask, and if they respond, I will post their opinions.

In the meantime, though, I do want to say that I hate to hear the efforts of dedicated, hard-working, underpaid teachers sneered at.

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