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destiny's tot

a guide for group discussions

“Destiny’s Tot” explores some of the psychological causes of bigotry. The purpose is to foster understanding of various influences in the home and the community which give rise to anti-social attitudes.

"Destiny's Tot" is a dramatic adaptation of a case history from the late Dr. Robert Lindner's book, The Fifty-Minute Hour.

Written for television by S. Lee Pogostin, it was presented by NBC-TV on January 24, 1960, to mark the dedication of the Institute of Human Relations of the American Jewish Committee.

THE STORY

Anton, leader of a storm-troop group in the 1930's, is one of the American Nazis imprisoned for subversive activities at the start of World War II. The prison psychologist, who is Jewish, undertakes a lengthy psychiatric treatment of the anti-Semitic Anton. Eventually, the doctor wins his patient's confidence and discovers in Anton's childhood the sources of his fanatic hatred of Jews, Catholics and Negroes.

Anton loathed his sadistic father, but had a secret desire to imitate his cruelty. He loved his whining, martyred mother, but was also repelled by her weakness. Thus he ran away at 14, terrified and confused. Unemployed during the depression, he was driven to steal and landed in jail. There he was befriended and tutored by a hate-mongering fellow-prisoner.

Once out of jail, Anton discovered that he, like his idols Hitler and Mussolini, had the power to sway and lead. He equipped his followers with military paraphernalia and sent them to deface houses of worship and provoke riots.

As the psychologist explains: "Anton had to find a target for his hatreds. Fascism provided everything a psychopath could ask -- a whole world of hate, targets on which to exercise brutality and revenge."

Anton left the penitentiary "cured" -- whether permanently or not the doctor never knew, because Anton entered the Army and was killed in the Pacific.

AUDIENCE

DESTINY'S TOT should be particularly interesting to parents, teachers and others who work closely with children and youth, and to community leaders and college students concerned with intergroup relations. The screening should be more than just a program feature; it should be followed by thoughtful discussion of conditions

in your community which serve to encourage or discourage prejudice. The picture is best presented in the broad context of a study project or action program which takes into account all the environmental components of prejudice.

SETTING THE STORY IN PERSPECTIVE

To insure a constructive discussion, the focus should be broadened beyond Anton and the doctor.

Historical Background

You may first wish to sketch briefly for your audience some pertinent trends in American history.

1. The American people have repelled recurrent waves of fanaticism over the years -- Salem witch hunts of the 17th century; the anti-Catholic "Know-Nothing"

movement of the 19th century; Ku Klux Klan terrorism against Negroes, Catholics and Jews in recent times.

2. During the 1930's, racist demagogues were able to capture "lunatic-fringe" followings mainly for two reasons. First, during the long depression, the most discontented elements of the population were searching for scapegoats who could be blamed for economic hardship. Second, Hitler was creating a network of subversive movements, many financed from Germany, to spread his racist doctrines in the United States.

3. Once the United States entered World War II, racial and religious hatemongering was universally recognized as a threat to America's unity and security.

4. The last 15 years have been marked by a developing American attachment to the rights of minorities. There have been historic advances toward equal justice and equal opportunity for all. Public opinion polls increasingly reflect healthier intergroup attitudes and a deeper recognition that America's strength lies in its diversity.

5. Even in today's favorable climate the bigots are still with us, stirring unrest wherever they can pander to the frustrations of the maladjusted, and the grievances -- whether justifiable or not -- of the anxious and the perplexed. The cold war brought many demagogues back into the open, parading their old hatreds under the banner of anti-communism. Since 1954, when

the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed public school segregation, bigots have enjoyed their greatest successes in the South, where they exploit race tensions to gain a hearing.

Social Background

Next you might explain the varied factors which account for bigotry in its less extreme forms. Here are some points you may wish to make.

1. Not all bigots are mentally sick like Anton, but many share some of the feelings he reveals. The confirmed bigot, researches show, has been subjected to fear, neglect or indifference, if not outright cruelty, in childhood. His emotional growth has been stunted. His search for security is carried on, during youth and

adulthood, in a society he considers hostile. He feels secure only when he is able to harass so-called outsiders and exclude them from his world.

2. Much of the prejudice and discrimination encountered in the United States today comes from persons who are not permeated with hatreds as Anton was. Some forms of prejudice are more to be explained by inertia -- indiscriminate acceptance of stereotypes and unthinking conformity with narrow outlooks and destructive practices in one's immediate community. Prejudices thus "learned," rather than inbred hatred, account for many discriminatory practices in everyday life -- so at variance with America's political and religious concepts of equality.

3. Thanks to two decades of scholarship and field work in psychology, law, education, sociology and community relations, new skills and techniques for combatting prejudice are now at hand. Parents, teachers, clergymen, youth-group leaders, recreation workers, police officers and social workers are coming to be aware of their responsibility to provide an environment in which young people can develop healthy, outgoing attitudes toward their fellows of different backgrounds. Many schools are developing human relations programs to foster understanding of the diversity which makes America strong. In many localities where juvenile delinquency is a problem, youth workers and police are being trained in intergroup relations skills, in order

to reduce outbreaks of racial friction which so often accompany juvenile misbehavior.

4. During the first few weeks of 1960, an epidemic of swastikas swept through the world, involving large numbers of young hoodlums. Some were simply rebelling against authority, with little real animus toward Jews. Others -- like Anton -- were motivated by a compulsive need to hate. In many instances, the culprits were boys who had long been showing signs of maladjustment -- warnings ignored, time and again, by parents and school officials.

-- One 16-year-old, arrested in March 1960 for trying to bomb a synagogue, had organized a "Hitler Club" in grammar school. After his arrest, one teacher recalled that she had noticed the boy drawing swastikas -- but at the time she let the matter go at that. He had asked the school librarian for Adolph Hitler's Mein Kampf. Classmates

reported that the youth wore a swastika arm-band and boasted he would give his life for "a bunch of Jewish lives."

-- A 21-year-old, the "fuehrer" of a neo-Nazi youth group, was picked up in January 1960 at his home, where police found a supply of Nazi paraphernalia. His mother said she knew of his anti-Jewish sentiments and had objected when he started scrawling swastikas and slogans on the bedroom walls. Of his fanatic organization, she commented: "I didn't like the idea. But he never really harmed anybody."

DESTINY'S TOT should stimulate constructive discussion of how to deal most effectively with today's incipient Antons.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Suppose the schoolboy Anton were living in our neighborhood today. Would we, as parents, teachers, religious leaders or youth workers, recognize that he was headed for trouble? How could our community help him take a different path?

2. Transpose the adult Anton, just launching his career of hate, from the Thirties to the Sixties. What platform would he be likely to adopt today if he were out to attract a following? Opposition to integration? To the United Nations? To the income tax? To fluoridation? To mental health programs? To Israel? To foreign aid?

3. If a rabbleroouser came to our town spreading poisonous ideas about Jews, what kind of community action would you recommend? Would you advocate exposing him and his obnoxious intentions? Or would you favor the "quarantine method," denying him the publicity he thrives on?

4. How do you account for the fact that so many teen-age vandals were involved in the recent swastika episodes? Does the

portrayal of Anton as a rebellious youth suggest an explanation? Does the picture suggest any ways in which such outbreaks might be anticipated and forestalled?

5. Suppose a youngster were apprehended for painting a swastika on a synagogue, church, shop or public building in our town. What would you suggest doing with him? How would you explain behavior like this to your own child? To a class of grade-school pupils? A group of teen-agers?

6. What strong counterforces of American tradition make it difficult for professional hatemongers to maintain a large and consistent following? What forces support respect for law and order?

7. Discrimination is the everyday way of sanctioning negative attitudes --

telling some people that they are inferior to others because of the color of their skins, country of origin or religion. Is our community guilty of doing this? Where? In schools? In the job field? In restaurants, lunch counters, movie theatres, libraries, parks, swimming pools, buses, trolleys, trains, resorts, professional and social clubs? In the neighborhoods we live in?

8. Suppose we were asked to undertake a long-range program of education to foster healthy human relations in our own town. What kind of program is needed to inoculate young people against the virus of bigotry? Does the lion's share of responsibility for rearing children of good will belong to the parent? Should the school also be expected to play an important role?

How about the churches, youth groups, employers and labor unions, civic, religious and fraternal organizations?

FOR FURTHER READING

Before the screening, you may want to brief yourself on the main findings of social science concerning the roots of prejudice.

Here are three useful pamphlets:

Fear and Prejudice, by Selma G. Hirsh, Public Affairs Pamphlet 245. A condensation of the salient points in the five-volume Studies in Prejudice. 25¢.

"The Gentle People of Prejudice," by H.A. Overstreet, reprinted from the Saturday Review. The social sanction which people with mild prejudice give to group hatred. 5¢.

"Prejudice and Mental Health," reprinted from Today's Health. Suggestions for parents and teachers. 10¢.

You may wish to have at hand a few additional pamphlets which the members of

your group may take home:

Bigotry in Action. A study of anti-Semitism in the United States today. 25¢

Deflating the Professional Bigot, by S. Andhil Fineberg. How to deal with the publicity-hungry hatemonger. 15¢.

"How Adults Influence Children," by Hilda Taba, reprinted from Childhood Education. Children absorb attitudes from casual expressions of feeling by parents and teachers. 5¢.

The People Take the Lead: A Record of Progress in Civil Rights. Democratic advances in employment, housing, education, public accommodations and other areas since 1947. 25¢.

"Prejudices: Effects on Children," by Richard Y. Reed, reprinted from Childhood Education. Why the seeds of prejudice grow easily. 5¢.

What to Do About Hate Literature. Some do's and don'ts for communities plagued by bigots. 5¢.

All may be ordered from the American Jewish Committee.

Single copy, 15¢
Quantity prices on request

The American Jewish Committee

Institute of Human Relations

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