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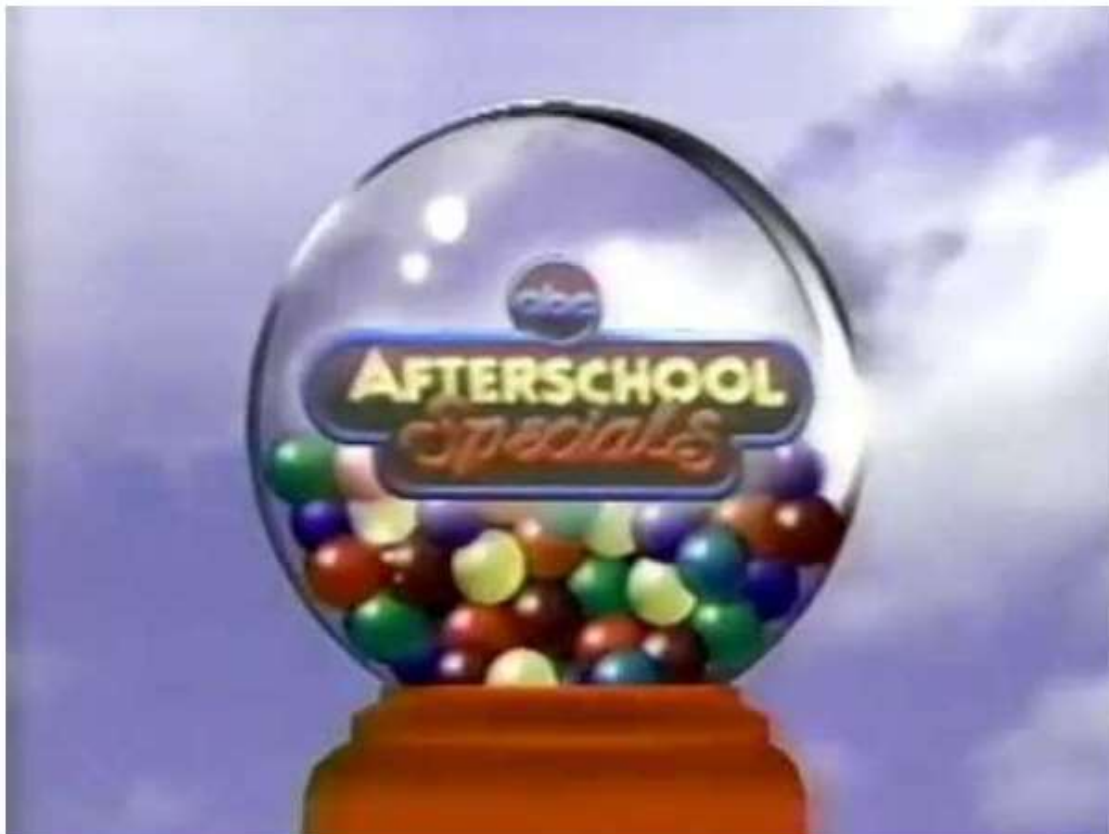
Remembering "The Wave"

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Suzy Hayman DeYoung

Suzy DeYoung is a mother of three who lives and works in Newtown, CT



I used to love watching [The ABC Afterschool Specials](#). Airing from 1972 through 1997, the enthralling dramas tackled everything from cheesy teen romance to abortion, divorce and drugs; most unusual in those days.

Though a frequent viewer, the passing years erased most of the details from those ABC Specials; until recently when I found myself flashbacking to bits and pieces of an episode that made an indelible impression on my young psyche.

I recalled fragments of the plot - a high school teacher initiating some kind of "movement" with his students...the movement rapidly growing in size and force...the student's anticipation of meeting the national leader behind the movement...and the final scene, more vividly etched in memory - particularly for how deeply it spooked me, the students discovering the true and nefarious identity of the great and mysterious leader they all hoped and planned to revere.

A quick Google search and there it was: [The Wave](#). The Wave was a short made-for-TV movie based on Ron Jones' Third Wave experiment, a true incident that occurred in a high school history class in Palo Alto, California back in the 1960's. The Wave debuted on ABC-TV in 1981.

In 1967, a high school student asked his history teacher, [Ron Jones](#), how the German people could so easily follow the Nazi's. A more didactic teacher would have answered that question with a lecture on the social and psychological climate of the time. Ron Jones, however was anything but didactic. Hoping to help his students appreciate the ease with which similar students in Germany became part of Hitler's youth, Jones began what he thought was a simple experiment in experiential learning.

Jones told his students he was leading a new movement, called, "The Wave." He proclaimed ideas about gaining strength through power, discipline and action. Jones was charismatic, funny and loved by his students and most were more than willing to follow him. Soon almost the entire school was under the spell of The Wave. Anyone who refused to be a part of the movement was ostracized or threatened. Jones convinced the students that the movement had become so big as to have expanded nationwide and that the national leader would soon be making an appearance at the school. Jones himself later admitted that he got carried away by his own experiment.

"My ego was inflated and my sense of power and control was elevated. I was liking it - the adulation, the power, the control. That's the problem; but at least I'm aware of it."

I watched the Wave again on [You Tube](#). While dated, it remains both telling and haunting.

Reluctantly my 18-year-old son appeased my request for him to watch the movie.

"It's interesting how it emerged so gradually," he commented. ***"It plays on the bandwagon effect. Kids who joined felt superior. Once the teacher had people invested, he implemented nastier stuff."***

When I asked the same of my 16-year-old son, he informed me he had already seen it as part of a class in eighth grade. "And...?" I queried. "Brilliant," he offhandedly remarked as if it were obvious. Relieved to not have to sit through what I had described as an after school show from the 80's, he patiently obliged as I urged him to elaborate:

"The best way to destroy a flaw is to show someone that they have that flaw. The teacher showed his students that they were capable of things they may not have thought possible."

"Steve Coniglio, an original Third Wave class member" evidently agrees: ***"It's my believe that it's in all of us. If you can turn around in your private moment and say, 'I guess I could have done this too,' maybe it won't happen again."***

[The Wave by Todd Strasser](#), a novelization of the film, is frequently used in classes as a vehicle for studying social and human behavior. It is now required reading in Germany.

[Lesson Plan - The Story of the Third Wave](#), a documentary produced in 2010 by Phillip Neel, an original class member, revisits the experiment and features interviews with a number of the students in Ron Jones' class at the time. The documentary received a number of prestigious awards including best documentary at the 2012 Independent Filmmakers Showcase. Though the interviews in the documentary occurred over forty years after the experiment, many former students appear shaken while recalling the experience:

"I believe it's one of the greatest lessons I've ever been taught - not to be controlled."

David Rose

"Anyone can be drawn in and became a part just like they did in Germany. That was the most enlightening part of the whole experiment - you are no different from the next person."

Nancy West,

"Anyone who is zealous about their cause or anyone who is following a charismatic leader to me is suspect, especially after this experience."

Mark Hancock

"It's good to be part of the tribe. It's nice to be a part of the village, but you need to feel when humanity is being threatened and say something right away."

Russell Mulock

"With the right manipulation any population, no matter how educated, intelligent free thinking, liberal and wanting good, can be turned and manipulated into something that could be very dangerous..I wish all young people in the country could have experienced The Third Wave."

Alyssa Hess

Wendy Brodie was overcome with emotion when asked if she was glad she experienced the experiment. ***"I'm so incredibly grateful for the experience,"*** Wendy tearfully answered. ***"It was so important in my life; and continues to be."***

Ron Jones was fired a year after the [Third Wave](#) experiment. Though his firing was not directly linked to the experience, he was not able to teach again.

When asked if he would do the experiment today Jones emphatically says no.

"It was a big error by a young teacher," remarks Jones in the documentary. ***"It puts people in real danger."***

Looking back, Jones reminisces on an essential question gained from the experience,

" I stumbled upon a bit of human nature and psyche: why do we give up our freedom for the thought of being better than everyone else?"

Dr, Phillip Zombardo, the Stanford professor best known for his famous 1971 prison experiment, feels the answer lies in what people are willing to do to go from a feeling of powerlessness to one of being empowered. ***"For most people it's an awful lot," remarks Dr. Zimbardo. "People will transgress a lot of personal values to step across the line."***

Survivors of a traumatic experience know all too well how years and even decades later the physical and/or psychological symptoms of the trauma can be re-experienced when something or someone triggers a memory of that trauma.

While certainly a gross overstatement to say I was traumatized by an ABC Afterschool Special, its chilling impact was clearly tucked away in the annals of my mind only to find itself recently, and not inexplicably, reawakened.

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