

Teaching Ideas for
ROUND AND ROUND TOGETHER
Taking a Merry-Go-Round Ride into the Civil Rights Movement

QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

Role of television: Television was getting started at the same time the civil rights movement was revving up. From 1955 to 1960, the number of U.S. households with a TV rose from 50 percent to 90 percent. What kind of impact do you think this increase in TV ownership had on the civil rights movement? How would watching TV news reports of protests affect people differently than reading about them in newspapers or magazines? Think of a recent public event and compare the impact of different kinds of news coverage of that event: on TV, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. If the Internet had existed back then, how would it have helped—or hurt—the civil rights movement?

Role of civil disobedience: The book quotes religious leaders arrested at Gwynn Oak, who explained that they broke “the letter of the law” to call attention to the “gap between ideal and practice in our democracy.” (See page 186.) Do you feel this reasoning justified their actions? What are the pros and cons of such an approach?

Different groups / different strategies: Several organizations with different philosophies took part in the civil rights movement: the NAACP, CORE, SNCC, SCLC, the Urban League, and others. How did their strategies differ? How and why did they manage to work together? Would using only a single kind of strategy have worked? Why or why not?

Economic issues: The owners of Gwynn Oak Amusement Park feared “economic suicide” if they integrated the park. Do you think these fears were reasonable for business owners in the 1950s and early 1960s? What advice would you have offered the owners for how to operate an amusement park at that time so that a prosperous business would have resulted with an integrated clientele?

Role of young people: “If not now, when?” asked CORE activist Charles Mason (page 53), expressing the impatience that young people in the 1960s felt with the slow pace of change in ending segregation, and their irritation with older people who thought the young people were “rocking the boat.” What role did the impatient energy of young people play in the success of civil rights protests in Baltimore and elsewhere? Do you think young people today are agents of change? Why or why not?

Unfinished business: Change takes time. Clearly things are different today than in 1947 when the merry-go-round arrived at Gwynn Oak Amusement Park. Many who took part in civil rights protests then now hold important government positions—including several who were arrested during protests in Baltimore, such as Judge Robert Bell. But as Judge Bell noted (page 213), the job is not finished. What examples of discrimination in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, age, or gender still occur today either in the U.S. or elsewhere in the world? Why do you think certain types of discrimination continue to exist?

FOLLOW-UP PROJECTS FOR STUDENTS

Write “diary” entries for three participants (or observers) in one of the protest demonstrations described in the book, imagining what it might have been like for those individuals to be at the event and how each would have seen the event differently. For example, how would the experience of the Gwynn Oak protest of July 7, 1963, have been viewed differently for 11-year-old Lydia Phinney Wilkins, 8-year-old Tom Coleman, one of the adult or teen protestors arrested at the event, a police officer, a park owner, a heckler, or a reporter?

Investigate the use of music in protest movements. Protestors at both the July 4 and July 7, 1963, demonstrations at Gwynn Oak Amusement Park sang “We Shall Overcome” and other protest songs at the pre-protest rallies and as they were being arrested. Explore the role music has played in the civil rights movement and in other social movements, such as the women suffrage movement, labor union protests of the 1930s, anti-war protests of the 1960s, Tea Party rallies, as well as in political campaigns. Students could perform the songs and explain the role the music played in the movements, after doing Internet and library research.

Create a “special edition” of a newspaper that might have appeared after one of the protests in the book. The newspaper should cover the protest in a variety of ways: news stories, interviews, feature stories, editorials, letters to the editor. Students with access to video equipment could create a “TV special” on the protests.

Investigate the use of nonviolent protest in other social movements, such as those Gandhi led in India, anti-apartheid protests in South Africa, and the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Tunisia and Egypt. Compare these movements with the civil rights movement in the U.S.

Interview participants in local protests. To find interviewees who took part in civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s, students could contact the local office of the NAACP or search local newspaper archives. Students could also interview local people who have been active more recently in protesting current issues, such as cuts in the school budget, a local zoning change, a tax increase, or an environmental issue. Ask what propelled these individuals to become activists, how they feel about the experience, and what they’ve learned as a result.

Explore Symbols. The book makes the point that the merry-go-round on the National Mall can be seen as a symbol of the struggle against segregation. So can the site of the amusement park, which is now a Baltimore County recreation area. Both now have “historical markers” in place telling of the events of 1963 at Gwynn Oak Amusement Park. Have students write essays, stories, or poems exploring the idea of how a merry-go-round or the park can serve as symbols and what they symbolize to the students. Students could write similar compositions on other places or objects in their local communities that they feel can also serve as symbols.