

Teaching through a Crisis: September 11 and Beyond

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alison mckersie

patricia lent

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rella stuart-hunt

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alexandra weisman

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sal vascellaro

kate abell

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SEPTEMBER 11 AND BEYOND**

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INTRODUCTION

Alison McKersie

ALISON MCKERSIE is a teacher in the Bank Street School for Children and a member of the Occasional Papers Editorial Board. She holds an M.A. in early adolescence Education from Bank Street and a B.S. in Labor History and Economics from Cornell University.

Several months ago, I was chatting with some of my former students about the events of September 11. Their recollections surprised me as they referred to things I had nearly forgotten; things I assumed had left no lasting impression. They found it curious that before I reported what had happened that morning, I sought to assure two of their classmates that the school had heard from their parents that they were okay. Both Annie's and Frankie's parents worked at the World Trade Center.

On reflection, my move to provide assurances before supplying information about the events themselves was a bit curious. I was acting on the recommendation of my supervisor who wanted to keep everything as "normal" as possible, and who feared that it could be devastating for Annie and Frankie to be confronted with such news without knowledge of their parents' safety. As might be expected, there were exclamations of disbelief when I informed my students of the multiple hijackings, the hits on the Twin Towers, and their subsequent collapse. But mostly I remember there was no terror in Annie's or Frankie's faces, just immense relief that their parents were alive.

I think I did a pretty good job that morning of attending to Annie's and Frankie's welfare. I would not have been so successful had my supervisor not attended to my welfare first. She helped me navigate my way through an unimaginably challenging moment. Of course, what we could not foresee or even prepare for were all the other unknowns, including the student whose mother was scheduled to have a business meeting in the Twin Towers that day, and another whose father was due to leave on a morning flight from Newark. These students, unlike Annie and Frankie, did have looks of terror in their faces, and we spent tense moments attempting to locate their parents. In the end, the Bank Street School for Children was blessed, as we lost no one from our immediate community. We came away from that day more cognizant of our institutional strengths, and more committed than ever to progressive pedagogy as a means to societal change.

I know for myself that the days immediately following September 11 were characterized by a startling new clarity. It was as if someone had applied a highly magnified lens to life's simple routines and suddenly every moment, every gesture, every word exchanged with friends, colleagues, and family was more nuanced and more precious than before. I took nothing for granted, neither my teaching nor my students. I also understood that through this tragedy an opportunity arose, an opportunity to reflect on my pedagogy and, in doing so, to help my students explore their roles as members of a democratic society.

September 11 was an event in which we all shared in different ways. There has been no shortage of testimonies to its impact. We have been left with many fine firsthand accounts and more distant analyses as well. The decision to publish this volume of essays was fueled by a desire to provide a vehicle through which educators could share their experiences. We wanted to know how teachers were addressing the troubling questions that the tragedy raised: What kinds of conversations had been sparked among children, teachers, and parents? How had curriculum shifted in response to this heretofore unimaginable event?

Interestingly, almost every manuscript we received examined in some way the tension between an educator's professional obligations and his or her personal needs or commitments. For Megan Rose, this tension is posed as a direct question: When can I stop being a caregiver and be given care? For Patricia Lent, this tension is captured in an exquisitely articulated series of vignettes that explore the vulnerability she felt that day and for many days after. For Cynthia Rothschild and Lisa Edstrom, the tension becomes the springboard from which their respective classroom practices are launched. Rothschild allowed a new level of questioning to enter into her work with high school students, which had a transformative impact on her and her students. Edstrom created space and time in her classroom of young children for the reality of September 11 to be re-imagined through block play. (See attached CD-ROM.) For Kate Delacorte, an administrator in an early childhood center, conflict resided in the tension between the needs of her young students and their parents. She explores the complex ways parents attempt to protect their children from distressing information and to maintain a belief in childhood "innocence." At the same time, her essay makes explicit the educational commitment of her teachers in the face of the crisis to help children make sense of complex social realities. (The books for children created by Delacorte

and others about September 11 can be viewed on the attached CD-ROM as well.) Extrapolating from the work of Lent and Delacorte, Sal Vascellaro draws up a succinct and insightful list of principles to help adults respond to children living through a crisis. Finally, a year after the events that prompted this volume, Ali Weisman's 11 year-old students attempt to envision an appropriate memorial and to reconstruct the World Trade Towers site.

In many ways, poetry keeps telling us what happens in time, and this is evident in the selections we have made for this volume. Kate Abell and Rella Stuart Hunt, both teacher-poets, share their responses to the September 11 crisis and the grief that it elicited. Their poems act as photographic snapshots, bringing us into the immediacy of the moment. The strength of Abell's and Hunt's work rests in its unrelenting honesty and refusal to soften or whitewash their experiences following September 11.

The poet Czeslaw Milosz writes in "A Treatise on Poetry" that poetry is valuable in difficult times, and yet he also prefaces his "treatise" with the recognition that in our time, "serious combat, where life is at stake/ is fought in prose." To me, these words feel eerily applicable to the September 11 tragedy, because, in the end, it is the power of ideas, and the ability to express them, that is our most effective tool in managing the trials and vicissitudes of everyday life. And so, I invite you to take Milosz's words along as you contemplate the poems and essays within these pages. It is my belief that our own possibilities and self-understanding, both as educators and human beings, will become manifest in the mirror held up by these sensitive writers.

1. SAFE

Patricia Lent

PATRICIA LENT grew up in McLean, Virginia. She studied ballet most of her childhood, and then stopped dancing to attend the University of Virginia (B.A. 1980). After graduation, she moved to Boston and then New York City to pursue a dance career with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and White Oak Dance Project. A growing fascination with birds took her to Costa Rica, Canada, and all over Central Park. Inspired by a bird walk with a young neighbor, she enrolled at Bank Street College in 1997. For the past five years, she has taught second and third grades at P.S. 234 in Lower Manhattan.

The first four sections of this essay chronicle her attempts to make sense of September 11 in the succeeding weeks and months. The final section—"Corn, Beans, and Squash"—was written to and for her students at the end of the school year.

As Fast As I Could

I ran as fast as I could. The two eight-year-olds holding my hands ran as fast as I could. I'm not sure how they kept up with me as I hurtled forward in that river of running. We ran, as fast as I could, north, up the avenue, go go go, our backs to the one tower. Only one tower. Was it possible?

As fast as I could was not nearly fast enough. "It's falling!" the men yelled, arms waving. And I ran, imagining behind me the tower falling like a monstrous steel redwood. One hundred and ten floors coming after me, after us. Better to be running when it hit. I remember thinking, will it hurt, will it hurt, will it hurt?

I held the children's hands tightly, too tightly. I was propelled by terror, not bravery. Terror in my brain, terror in my blood, terror in my hands.

Hours later and for days afterward I would watch the towers implode on TV. Not a redwood after all. I would see the cloud of dust and debris chase up the street, the cloud that we outran, running as fast as I could.

I would remember, a day or two later than that, that a child (ten years old? eleven?) had said, "Look. Even the dogs are scared."

Safe

"Trish, why did you tell us it was safe in the gym when it wasn't?" Katherine asked, as we headed north that day, no longer running, but still urgent, our backs to all of it. All of that.

"I thought it was safe, but it wasn't." Our hands, clasped tightly, were damp. The air was humid and gritty. "We'll be safe where we're going."

Katherine is eight years old and frank to the core. She's far too perceptive to put much stock in the judgment of a teacher who, in one terrible moment and the horrific hour or so that followed, lost any handle on the probable or possible. My credibility was blown apart when the planes hit, when the towers fell. Walking north, holding Katherine's hand, I had no idea what was or wasn't safe.

Today, two weeks and days later, I am still at sea.

I hear, every day in many ways, how important it is to reassure the children that they are safe. They are safe at school, they are safe at home, they are safe in their city. But are they? And is it wise, once again, to assure these children of something I cannot possibly be sure of myself?

But what other choice is there?

The children, say the experts and the mothers and the friends, need to feel safe. That must be true, even now. But being safe and feeling safe are different. I cannot keep my students safe, can't even anticipate the dangers. But I am responsible, even now, for helping them to feel safe.

I rage against this new responsibility. I cower from it. I long to be reassuring. I long to feel reassured myself. But I am not sure. Can't be sure. I am undone by doubt.

November

A bicycle crashed into my father on the 14th Street Bridge while he was walking into DC. The crash broke his leg. That was February.

Two planes crashed into the World Trade Center while I was preparing to teach in a nearby school. The crash sent both towers hurtling to the ground. That was September.

Between that February and that September I learned to nurse my father, to match his frank talk with my own, to aim anger at an anonymous stranger. In June, when leukemia came crashing in from nowhere, ripping away my father's health, I learned to cry with him. I learned to take comfort from friends and brothers. I learned to live with regret. All summer long, after his death, I learned to grieve. Hourly, daily, eventually every other daily.

I did not know, that July, or that August, that I was preparing for the next great crash. I could not foresee the oncoming emergency. The frenzied evacuation, the displacement, the terrible loss. I did not anticipate the weeks

and months of nursing, frankness, tears, anger, comfort, regret, and grief. And fear.

I don't believe in spirits and heaven. I don't feel my father looking down, looking after me. I only feel his absence.

He would have worried about me. He would have insisted I tell him every detail, more than once. Till he got it, till I got it. His questions, his persistence would have been reassuring and eventually infuriating. "Oh, Dad!" he'd have said, anticipating my annoyance.

I woke this morning just before four. The air smelled hot and gritty—that World Trade Center smell that drifts north some nights, some days. I opened the window wide, to be sure. Now, nearly two hours later, my throat is scratchy, my head is thick with the smell and the smoke.

My school is down there, blanketed in that sad smell. I've learned to grieve for my school, for the rhythms and shape of my days there. I miss my school, my sense of purpose, my confidence.

But little by little I'm letting the school go. It's been a while since I walked downtown and looked up at my classroom window. Too shaken to argue, too uncertain to rage. I don't believe in buildings any more.

It's November now. And I am waiting for the next unimaginable crash.

Eleventh

Tomorrow is December. In eleven days there will be the "three months since all that" reports in the paper, on the evening news. We'll take stock again, eleventh after eleventh after eleventh. Until we do it once a year.

Taking stock. Where are we now? How are we now? Did we ever get back to normal?

Yesterday, the mother of one of my students confided, "I'm in no hurry to go back to the school. I never go downtown anymore. I'd rather wait until it looks like a construction site."

I understood. I understand. But it won't ever, can't ever. It will always be the place where, the place when. Our normal, from now on, will have to include that.

Every eleventh and every day in between, I will steal one last glimpse at that one last tower. Then I'll begin to run. And I will always be running up Greenwich Street, away from that. But I will always make it to safety. I will always be walking by Canal Street. I will always notice, a block or two south and east of Westbeth, that the sky is a brilliant blue. I will always be swept

inside P.S. 41, ushered by strangers into an auditorium to wait and whisper and wonder. And David will always arrive, anxious and relieved. Every eleventh I will be standing there in that lobby, a block from my home, shaken and safe.

That day, we all went north. But in the weeks and months since it's been hard to choose a direction. We're no longer swept along. We're not sure which way to head. Do we go toward or away or around? It's a private decision. We're each choosing our own route.

Nearly every weekend, I walk south. Down to it. To look at the hole in the sky. To trace the lost skyline. To notice the never-before-noticed buildings that lived in the shadow of the towers. To stand by my school, and measure the distance to there. To look up at my classroom window, and measure the distance to then.

I am not a resident or a tourist. I don't stay long. I try not to intrude. But I go, nearly every weekend. I think it helps. Every eleventh I feel better. Every eleventh I am more sure that I should be there, stay here.

I will be here, eleventh after eleventh and all the days in between, building my new normal.

Corn, Beans, and Squash

I've been thinking about our plants.
About the corn, beans, and squash.
About how they grew and grew.
About how they're growing still.

People keep asking about our plants.
What did we do?
What kinds of seeds?
What kind of soil?
What special this or that?

Nothing special, I say. Everything special, I think.

I've been thinking about our plants.
But what I've been thinking, I don't want to say.
Not to just anyone.
But just to you.

I know what's special.

It's not the seeds,
or the soil,
or the sun.

It's magic.

Plants don't grow as tall as children in little pots on a windowsill without some magic.

Are you surprised to hear that I believe in magic? I do. I believe in information, observation, and evidence. But I also believe in a special kind of magic. The teaching kind.

Our corn, beans, and squash grew, grew and grew so that we would learn something important. The hard part is figuring out what it is we're supposed to learn. Teaching Magic doesn't give out answers. We need to work at it.

So I've been thinking about our plants. Thinking very hard. I'll tell you what I've learned so far. I know you'll help me puzzle out the rest.

Our corn, beans, and squash are teaching us something about our neighborhood.

Everyone has been worrying. Is it safe downtown? Is it healthy? Is it all right for people to live here, for children to go to school here? Our plants grew impossibly tall and impossibly hearty to reassure us that our neighborhood is safe. Safe enough for corn to race for the ceiling, safe enough for beans to wrap around window sashes, safe enough for squash to splay out and bloom.

Our corn, beans, and squash are teaching us something about our school.

This year we shuttled from building to building, from classroom to classroom. We didn't spend as long as we should have in our own room. But still our roots have gone deep. Deep enough to wiggle through the bottom of pots. Deep enough to anchor us. Deep enough to keep us here.

Our corn, beans, and squash are teaching us something about children. About

you.

The corn has grown tall and strong and proud, just like you have. The beans have wound around everything in sight, just like you have wound around everything we've studied, making it your own, reaching for the next and the next and the next good idea. And the squash has budded, budded, budded, and . . . bloomed! Smiling yellow blossoms out of tight green buds, yelping "Life is good, life is marvelous!" Just like you.

And our corn, beans, and squash are teaching me something about saying goodbye.

The plants have outgrown their pots. They need more soil, more space, fresh air. They're leaving, a few each day. When we parade down the hall with our magical plants, I feel giddy with pride, overcome with sadness. It is so hard to watch them go.

It is the same with you. All of you.

You've grown strong.
You've grown curious.
You've grown sure.
You need bigger pots.

I am preparing to let you go. One by one by two by three, and soon all the rest.

Thank you for growing so well in my room.
Thank you for reaching high, wrapping tight, blooming bright.
Thank you for filling my year with hope.
Thank you for the magic.

2. A Story to Tell

Megan Rose

MEGAN ROSE HOLDS AN M.A. in International and Transcultural Education from Teachers College, Columbia University. She completed her B.A. at Duke University. In addition to extensive travel and volunteer work in Europe and Asia, Megan spent three years teaching photography, history, math, and English as a Foreign Language in Italy and Japan. She is currently teaching English literature to the tenth and eleventh grades at the Little Red Schoolhouse Elisabeth Irwin High School (LREI) in Lower Manhattan.

LREI is a progressive K–12 school dedicated to the practice of authentic, student-centered learning. Students in the high school are exposed to a variety of artistic experiences, with a focus on their social and emotional growth as well as academic success.

I wonder sometimes, when I see the pictures of their faces, if I remember them from morning greetings outside the firehouse on my walk to school, or if they have become familiar to me now from the missing posters.

Do I need to know them because I crave a connection to the tragedy? Something specific, a tangible little bit to mourn—small pieces that are digestible within the miasma of death.

They died down the street from me, within view, within hearing.

Later, I am reminded of Katsuzo Oda's (1985) description of the atomic bomb.

To say that I heard it is not quite accurate. The phenomenon that occurred in that instant registered on my eardrums, but I had no way of imagining what it was.

I recall stupidly thinking that the noise was due to a huge truck driving over a gap in the road. I remember being irritated at being in a street-front classroom. I remember writing on the board and shouting over the din—by this time fire trucks were screaming by my window—to my eleventh graders about literature.

Then I watched on a TV screen as the first tower fell, my student translating from the Spanish. Why did we only get Telemundo in the library? I kept

my technologically imposed distance. The only glimpse in real time I allowed myself was a rush up the fire escape to see a column of smoke, billowing out of the tip-top of my sheltered view, replacing the old solidity of steel and concrete.

I remember being detached, watching a lunar landscape on TV in a stone-cold auditorium—that's right down the street, I reminded myself—a hysterical parent in the lobby, a hysterical student in my arms. (Her family left New York shortly thereafter because her mother couldn't stand the "stench of death.") The school psychologist with a chalky face and crimson ears, a stunned student repeating, "I thought I was never going to live to see a war..." Cursing myself for wearing uncomfortable heels, we might have to flee, how can I walk far in these? I hear they've bombed the Pentagon, the Sears Tower. There are four, five, twelve planes in the air. I think this will continue until they've (who?) killed us all.

There will be no panic. I have to be in charge, I have to help the students, so I don't let my emotions come anywhere near me.

We calmly get the kids into the auditorium and close the heavy black-out curtain because if the bomb the firemen are investigating on King Street blows up, at least it will stop the flying glass. I suddenly realize the ludicrousness of the situation. These weren't the types of scenarios we practiced in teacher training. I learned how to write a lesson plan, not how to protect my students from a terrorist blast.

Gadi's just come from Israel to escape all of this; his family is gathered quietly in the lobby. Blessed Isaiah, Adria's five-year old son, hugs my legs and draws me a house. How many windows do you want? he asks. I think of all the windows in the towers. A conversation with Ruth, who'd asked me earlier, before they fell, if I wanted to run outside and see, and I thought to myself, No, I'll see them tomorrow when I walk by on my way to work, in disbelief, looking at the tail of a plane sticking out of the tower. By then I knew it was a big plane, not the Cessna I had thought. About ten people must've died, I remember the number I thought of at first, ten was an easy number, one I could wrap my mind around and cope with. The plane will freak me out enough tomorrow, and I need to focus on the kids right now. When the first tower went down and we watched it on TV, I thought how strange tomorrow would be with just one tower standing. But I knew they would fix it—it would just be strange in the meantime.

Late in the afternoon, after I account for each of my student's families, I close myself in an office. I'm amazed to get an open line through to Dad. He's

on speaker phone but grabs it when he hears it's me. I startle myself by bursting into sobs. Just as quickly as they come, I turn them off like a faucet and steel myself again. I'm eerily calm. It's the only time I let myself cry that day. It's the only time I give up the role of caregiver and am given care.

I can't remember if I said hello to the firemen that morning, like I had so many other times—the eleven who were shortly to race past my classroom window to die—or if I checked the tops of the towers from my doorstep as I usually did for the weather. When I see the Empire State Building in the fog now, it reminds me of the ghosts.

But the ghosts are crowded out by the living, who demand my attention. As the madness of that day recedes, I find the pragmatic aspects of being an educator ground me. My teaching skills are challenged by the new life that faces my students and me. In the emotional morass of the 9/11 aftermath, I struggle to come up with curriculum that addresses both surviving terrorism and the college boards. But in this endeavor, as in many others during my teaching career, I have found that my students guide me. My students speak when they are ready—all I have to do is create the opportunities for them.

In English class this has meant time for free-writes. With open-ended writing assignments, I have been able to accommodate the needs of various students to speak at various times. A beautiful fall day suddenly brings back a horrifying story from September, or a happy family memory of a visit to Windows on the World, or even adolescent concerns that are blissfully unrelated to that day. My more structured curriculum has brought about similar results. Text-based questions about justice in Dante's world produce unscripted questions regarding justice in our own time. In my class on mural painting and public art, students connect emotionally to Picasso's *Guernica* and to our local firemen, who were involved in the final mural project. Reading texts like *Othello*, or *Things Fall Apart*, or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* allows us to lose ourselves in another time or place or culture. All across our curriculum, I see students turning to reading, writing, film-making, acting, and music to express their feelings about 9/11, as well as to seek refuge from those feelings, and return to their lives.

A good curriculum takes on the unique flavor of the intersection among student, teacher, and time. The same literature that I've taught three years in a row has new meaning this year, as it should in any year. I'm pleased to discover that the job that once got in the way of my own emotional response to 9/11 now facilitates it. Helping my students use our work in class to reflect on their

experiences has helped me to do the same. They write stories of anger, fear and heartache.

I'm surprised to find that I too, have a story to tell.

Reference

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3. **Monday, September 17** and **Urn**

Rella Stuart-Hunt

Raised in the South of England and the British Virgin Islands, RELLA STUART-HUNT has lived downtown near City Hall for more than thirty years. She taught art at P.S. 234, the school her children attended and where her love of teaching was nurtured, until a year and a half ago. A painter, with a B.A. in art history, an M.A. in art and art Education from Hunter College, and an interest in the Reggio Emilia philosophy of early childhood, she recently accepted a position as an atelierista and assistant director of a pre-school. For six years she has been a member of a writers group, to which she is grateful for support and encouragement.

Daisy likes playing in the dress-up area. Sometimes she pretends to cook, taking out the box of beads, pouring them into a bowl and stirring them round and round, or she will collect some of the plastic ingredients: bread, lettuce leaves, salami, and ketchup bottle, to make sandwiches.

Sometimes she plays Mommy. She will take out the baby bottle and feed the dolls. She puts them in the cradle, covers them with a little quilt, and rocks them to sleep. She has a friend, Joe, who likes to help her take care of the dolls. When she and Joe are finished, they put everything away in the closet.

Her play has changed. Daisy's mother worked at the World Trade Center. She is one of thousands missing in the attack. She is presumed dead. Our consultant psychologist and I observed Daisy today to try to help her understand what has happened, and to help her feel safe at school.

She throws the dolls out of the cradle and onto the floor and climbs in herself. Her legs hang over the end. She faces the wall, stroking a scarf that hangs down from a hook up above. Joe tries to cover her with the quilt but she sucks her thumb and pulls the scarf down onto her. She pretends to sleep, then suddenly turns, opens her eyes and looks directly at the psychologist. "Do you have a Mommy?" she asks. He is taken aback, but recovers his composure and answers, "No, not any more. I miss her. I miss her very much." This seems to satisfy Daisy. She climbs out of the cradle and goes over to the rug, and builds herself a nest out of cushions. Daisy is four.

4. **Urn**

Rella Stuart-Hunt

Inch deep ash up on our roof
Would wash away in rain,
But for the tragic handful
Saved in an empty salsa jar:
Tostitos, Medium Hot.
It deserved a kinder vessel.

5 "Building Up": Block Play After September 11

Lisa Edstrom

LISA EDSTROM has been teaching kindergarten for the last nine years. She currently teaches five- and six year-old children at the Bank Street School for Children. Lisa has a B.A. in folklore and mythology from Harvard University, and an M.S. in early childhood education from the Bank Street College of Education.

Like most people in New York City, the children in my class were affected by the events of September 11. However, not until five weeks later did these particular five- and six year-olds begin to make sense of what happened. Through the use of block play, they were able to explore the difficult emotions and questions we all had about the World Trade Center attack.

All the children were familiar with the Twin Towers. Some had parents who worked there. One father reported that on that morning he looked out his office window, saw the plane headed for the building and fled. Two other parents who worked in the building never made it to work that day. Luckily, none of the children lost parents. But many of them knew neighbors or family friends who died. Two of the children's parents work for major news organizations. Consequently, some children seemed as informed as the average adult.

As a class we engaged in much discussion of what happened, and what the children feared might still happen. Some of this talk took place in casual situations, such as lunch. However, as is our custom at Bank Street, we also had meetings as a whole class to discuss the children's thoughts.

Prior to the World Trade Center attack, our block area was used for a farms and markets curriculum. In the days immediately following the attack, there was some non-specific, but related play in the form of superhero and firefighter scenarios with manipulatives, but the block area continued to be used for farms and markets.

Block play is an important part of the early childhood curriculum at Bank Street. With blocks the children work out mathematical and scientific problems such as balance and fractions. They develop an understanding of spatial relationships. With social studies at our curriculum's core, blocks also provide young children with an opportunity to recreate their world and "play" with it. Over a third of the physical space of my classroom is devoted to blocks, and all the children work with them every week. There are a variety of management

strategies, including optional and assigned block tasks; independent and group work; freely chosen and assigned partners; free choice or assigned structures.

The week the children decided to start building the World Trade Center I felt the farm motivation had been exhausted. But I also felt the children needed time to make their own choice about what to build next. However, I did want the entire class to share the block area space. That meant all 23 children would have a building in the block area at the same time. I sent half the class at a time to work in the area. The children had assigned partners. While trying to figure out how to work within a limited space and still have enough room to incorporate individual ideas, one of the children suggested "building up."

The first pair to start building announced that they were making one of the World Trade Center towers. A nearby pair decided to make the other. These four children worked together, building matching towers. Their enthusiasm was contagious, and suddenly towers were being erected all over the block area. Not all of the children built the World Trade Center. Some built towers that still existed, such as the Empire State Building. One group of three children built a castle instead of a tower. The buildings looked just like any that a five or six-year-old might build with unit blocks. However, their size made them impressive. The tallest tower was as high as the tallest child in the class could reach while standing on a stool.

As a teacher, I watched in amazement. I did little but listen and observe as the children worked. The energy in the room was high, but the mood was somber. This was the first time that the children as a group, and many of them as individuals, had approached the topic of September 11 through play. As the week progressed, I had to calm parents who were upset by the images in the block area and the fact that their children were talking about hard topics.

The children were invested in keeping their buildings, rather than acting out the destruction of them. They built in safety measures to insure that their buildings could withstand attack. Several buildings had special reinforcements to make them stronger in case a plane crashed into them. Some even had warning lights.

The children constructed emergency exits, expressing concern for the people who were to occupy their buildings. Several children incorporated slides to enable people to escape from higher floors. One building had a diving board on top of it and a pool down below for people to land in. Several children made parachutes for people who jumped. In an attempt to support their problem

solving, I shared with them a New York Times article about innovative emergency escape ideas that have been considered for real buildings. The children had come up with nearly every solution mentioned in the story on their own.

As the children constructed their towers, there was much talk about the bad guys who might try to attack. The anger was clear in their voices as they talked about the jails they were including in their buildings. One building had a special device to capture a plane trying to crash into it in order to prevent any damage and to seize the bad guys. Even the group that built the castle included a large dungeon to hold the bad guys.

Once the buildings were all constructed, much of the ensuing play was about people escaping from the buildings. Although not a single plane entered our block area, and all the buildings remained intact, block people were continually being evacuated. Some were not so lucky. One image that stands out in my mind is of a boy repeatedly making a block person dive to his death, despite the evacuation slide he had built. Other play included stockpiling food for emergencies and plotting to catch bad guys.

I believe that this block play served three purposes for the children. First, it allowed them to express their anger about what had happened. The block area was a safe arena in which to discuss the "bad guys" who had really attacked the World Trade Center and to explore ways in which they would respond to them. Second, the children were able to explore issues of life and death. This happened in their dramatic play, during which the children repeatedly had the block people escape from their buildings or fall to their deaths. Finally, the children took control of the building process to make their towers "better" than the originals. Barbara Biber (1951) writes that play provides,

a relief from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness that many children feel keenly as junior members of our well-ordered [or in this case not so well-ordered] adult world...[and a] chance to lay the plans, to judge what is best, to create the sequence of events (p.2).

The block play I observed was very much like the ordinary block play of five- and six-year-olds at Bank Street. The children recreated the scene of a recent experience and then through play they explored or tried to make sense of what they had seen and heard. In this case, however, the children were faced with the breakdown of the well-ordered adult world they usually explore. There had been a tragic failure of stability and security. Play provided them with the

opportunity to take control—if only for a short while—solve problems, and restore some sense of order.

The September 11 block work lasted about two weeks. The process was a natural one for the children. Blocks and dramatic play were a familiar, well used tool for making sense of experience. After this period, individual children revisited their concerns as needed, but the group as a whole was ready to move on and we returned to our social studies curriculum about farms and markets.

**See attached CD Rom for brief video of how the September 11 block building unfolded in Lisa Edstrom's classroom.*

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6. Living in Question

Cynthia R. Rothschild

CYNTHIA ROTHSCHILD chairs the Religion and Ethics Department at Brooklyn Friends, where she teaches students in grades ten through twelve. She has lived in Jerusalem and Nanjing, China, and graduated with high honors in religious studies from Wesleyan University. Cynthia writes regularly on a variety of topics, including religion and international affairs for the Foreign Policy Association. Additionally, she co-directs the nonprofit Ariadne's Children... Tools for Healthy Media Choices.

At Brooklyn Friends, the Quaker school where I teach, there is an emphasis on the whole child. Religion and ethics are integrated across the curriculum to enable students to explore meaning and justice in all facets of their education. As a teacher of religion and ethics in such an environment, I view my job as one of allowing students to explore life's essential questions, questions that I find already sit as seeds in their hearts and minds. On September 11, these questions exploded into the world (and the classroom) in the form of two jet planes. That tragic day and the following months found my students asking: "Why is there suffering?" "What has real value for me and for my society?" and, most resoundingly, "Is there a God?" I had few answers. The value that came to the forefront in my post-September 11 teaching was the value of living in question.

In the hours following the attack, my curriculum plans suddenly shifted. The students wanted to discuss fundamentalist Islam. In class, they openly expressed their frustration at trying to understand the religious and political perspectives that led to the attack. "How could anyone, anywhere, see an action like this as the right thing to do?" one student asked. I have always wanted students to put themselves in other people's shoes. But in this case I was conflicted: did I really want my students to understand such a destructive mentality? I myself didn't understand, and felt a strange sense of justice in my absolute resistance to seeing any logic in the actions that resulted in the destruction of the World Trade Center.

Despite my resistance, I continued to speak about Islamic fundamentalism, its roots and perspective. A student raised his hand. I called on him and he began to tell the story of how he had left the house the morning of September 11 with a goodbye kiss from his mother, and how the day had

seemed so normal. As the terrible chaos had unfolded, this routine kiss became the focus of his thoughts, as he was concerned about his mother's whereabouts. His question had little to do with Islamic fundamentalism, but resounded none the less. "Why do I take my mother's love for granted?" he asked. Part of me wished to leap to an answer, to tell him that out of habit we begin to take the most important aspects of life for granted, and that he shouldn't feel bad, because this was normal. Another part of me held back. This was a question only he could answer, a question based in the particular, but of universal significance. For me to answer it would not only be presumptuous, but would also allow him to let the question go rather than to keep it as his own to explore. So I told him that it was an excellent question and that I didn't know the answer.

From that question on, it became clear that the focus of the class would not be Islamic fundamentalism, but rather the students' personal reactions to September 11. Since the beginning of the year, one student had been talking about whether there was a God, a question of the utmost importance for her. Now her question had gained new force. On this day she asked, "How can you believe there is a God when something like this can happen?" It was the kind of question I both expected and dreaded. While I avoid speaking about my own religious beliefs in the classroom, I make it a point not to evade direct questions. So I replied that, to me, God was mystery and that events like this reinforced the mystery. While I felt inadequate in offering this perspective, I also felt that this inadequacy suited the occasion. As unoriginal as my answer was, it was the truth, and that was the best I could offer at that moment.

The class ended without resolution. The only clarity was that, for many of my students, religious issues now felt closer to the smallest details of daily life than ever before. In class discussions, there is hopefully always a thread of questioning and uncertainty. In this class discussion, the thread of uncertainty was a few inches thicker than usual. My task, as I now realized more than ever, was to join with my students in their questions and explorations.

In the weeks that followed, it seemed essential to give students the creative freedom to grow in relation to these issues. In my environmental ethics course, a student wrote a paper about the effects of September 11 on New York City's pollution. In my religious experience class, another student wrote about the reaction of various religious traditions around the world to September 11. Beyond allowing the traditional research paper format to be used for reflection, it became important to convey the questions, much more than the answers with which we were all left. My goal was to be with my students in the realm of uncertainty when discussing both the past and the present.

By the end of the school year, the students had found a balance between their old selves and their new sense of instability. A senior, Josh Miller, wrote of September 11:

It has been seven months since the tragedy, and I have seen people of all kinds react in their own way. People felt the need to be with others and unite as one. . . New York and America as a whole went through this closeness for a while, but as things started to get back to normal and people got back into their routines, that bond that we all shared faded.

The sturdiness has come back into their teenage voices as they argue a point in class and as they forget, as we all do at times, to appreciate the love in their lives. Yet they still ask questions about the existence of God, still see that this one day called from them emotions they never knew they had, still feel part of larger national and international currents in a way they never had before. Most of all, they, as I, still don't understand.

I have grown to feel more and more that rather than protect students from the unknown, I should encourage living close to it. The more we all realize the uncertainty that surrounds us, even as so much information is available with the touch of a button, the more open we will remain open to new discoveries. My students and I continue to search for meaning. Their reflections on the aftermath and the tragedy itself lead them and me further into questions, which is just where I would wish us to be.

7. Re-Visioning the World Trade Center

Alexandra Weisman

ALEXANDRA WEISMAN is currently finishing her sixth year as a sixth grade teacher at the Bank Street School for Children. She holds a M.Ed. from Bank Street College and a B.A. in psychology from Bates College. An interest in the emotional world of young adolescents has always influenced her thinking and work in the classroom. She wants her students to make meaning out of their experiences and connect what they do with curriculum to the larger contexts of their lives.

This is a story that takes place more than a year after September 11, 2001. It is about the complex, ongoing ways that this event has affected curriculum. It is also about the thoughtful and ingenious ways that my eleven-year-old students at the Bank Street School for Children came to “re-vision” the World Trade Center site.

In November 2002 we had just finished reading *Where the Truth Lies*, a novel by Lucy Cullyford Babbit about three communities with very different beliefs and world views. One society, the Godslanders, believe in one true god; the Tribers are polytheistic and worship four main gods, one for each of the elements—fire, water, air, and earth. These two societies are at war for religious supremacy, each committed to making all people hold its views. A third society, Sanctuary, teaches that no god exists and values science alone. The Sanctuarians have built themselves a walled city and refuse to participate in the battle between the other two groups.

Each group believes the ultimate proof of its particular world view will be revealed inside a “Sacred Cave.” The Godslanders are certain they will see evidence of their one true god; the Tribers that their multiple gods will be revealed; and the Sanctuarians that absolutely nothing is to be seen in the cave beyond its stone walls.

At the suggestion of the Sanctuarians, a child from each of the three groups is chosen for a secret mission to the cave. A desire to see “where the truth lies” fuels this mission, as these three characters make their pilgrimage to the sacred place each group claims as its own.

This book raised many provocative questions for my students. We spoke often about perspective and the ways that beliefs influence how we act and what we view as being right or true. We began thinking about holy places, wondering, as did the main character in the book, what makes a place sacred.

We talked about places in the real world that are considered sacred, and examined the reasons holiness is attributed to particular sites. These discussions led us to consider the World Trade Center site. The students saw it as a space that was sacred or holy to many people.

We decided to use the three perspectives in the novel—monotheism, polytheism, and atheism—to inform our understandings of what should be built on the sixteen-acre World Trade Center site. The students were divided into three groups, each of which composed a "World View Statement" based on what they learned from the novel. Then they used this statement as the basis for making decisions about their models.

This work represented several weeks of thinking, discussing, planning, and building. The designs didn't necessarily represent the actual beliefs of the students who built them, but rather their interpretation of the three world views described in the novel.

In looking at the models and reading the student descriptions we are left with our own questions: How do our own beliefs influence our reading of these projects? What do we think should be done with this space? What ideas would we want it to communicate? How do our beliefs shape our answers to such questions?



Godslander World View Statement

Vera, Johanna, Kala, Elizabeth, Matt

We believe that there is no God but God. We know that because we feel his presence every day. You cannot hide from God because God sees all. The universe is God's masterpiece; he created people and the world around us. God put us on Earth to follow his laws and to go to God's castle/heaven when you die.

Men and women can know how to know right from wrong by obeying God and having faith. Happiness is when

you're one with God and harmonized with him. The ultimate way to happiness is through God. We'll do anything for God and that's why we're building this structure because he told us to. The human body is simple and something to be ashamed of. The only part of our body that we expose is our ankles as humilia-

tion to God. Our bodies are nothing compared to God. "One heart, One God, One Pulse, One Purpose to life!"

Godslander "Re-visions" the World Trade Center

Our model is what we think a city would be if it were created by a Godslander. There are many buildings in this city. There is a hotel, restaurant, apartment building, a garden/greenhouse and of course the main building. The Worshiping Structure is right in the center of the town. People coming in and praying to God will use the worshiping structure. There will be classes inside for smaller children learning about our religion so they can be great followers when they're older. This building is very sacred. The worshiping structure is valuable because everyone needs to be with God. The hotel will be used for temporary stay, for anyone who just wants to come and stay for a little bit to pray. The apartments will be used for people to live in because a lot of people will want to live in this great city. The restaurant is where people can eat; whether they're staying in the hotel or just stopping by they can have some food to eat without leaving the whole city. There is a garden because a garden has flowers and plants and that is part of nature. Nature is very important to us because God made it and it was also one of the first things God made. There is also a greenhouse there because we need to keep all of God's gifts alive. You will notice that on most of the buildings we have blue and green cellophane as walls, windows, and ceilings. This is supposed to be a skylight so God can see through to protect his true followers and see through heathens. The eye on top of the Worshiping Structure is the Eye of God. This symbol is to show that God sees all. God can see anything at any time in any place.

There are many ways that our beliefs are represented in this city. For example, The Worshiping Structure is where you pray to God and pay respects. We feel that it is very important to be in contact with God because everyone who believes in him, should be in harmony. Our city is gold because gold represents royalty and God is royal. Another example is our eye of God, which goes on top of that structure. It represents that God sees all and God is always watching. God can see anything at any place during any time.

When people look at our structure we want them to leave thinking that we have the best religion. That is our goal, to make everyone believe our religion is right so they will follow it. Heathens should know that God is real and there are signs of him everywhere. Our design communicates the fact that God is everything. This whole structure was practically built for God's love. We

think that people should appreciate how kind God is to them. We hate it when they don't believe in him because he is so kind and they're repaying his kindness with hatred and harsh behavior.

Sanctuary World View Statement

Ciaran, Ewan, Hannah, Sam

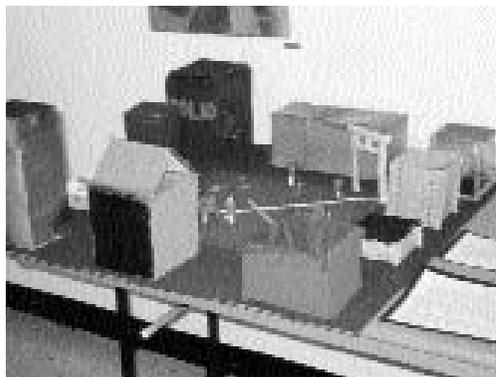
We believe in peace and controlling nature with no God. There is no reason to believe in God, except if you want to get killed in a bloody war. Religion is just as bad as God. It has brought killing and war. There is no life after death, and only one life to enjoy. We believe in exchanging individuals' ideas about the rules of science. We have many reasonable

beliefs like, science, books, world peace, and proof. We can find the best life by thinking and reasoning. We value the individual over any homogenous, self-confining community. We believe in freedom, peace, and happiness. We believe in obedience to the rules of science and Sanctuary. All answers come from science and books. The universe was not made from God, it was made by the big bang. Our aim is to stop the horrible war between the Tribers and the Godslanders, and prove to them that there is no God/Gods.

Sanctuary "Re-visions" the World Trade Center

Our model is of what we, the Sanctuarrians, believe the WTC site should look like. We have a lot of important buildings that explain our beliefs. The buildings include a hospital, police station, fire department, science lab, apartment building, library, restaurant, and the Sanctuary council. We also have an important park with a memorial in it.

Our memorial and park represent peace, recognizing the people who died there, and the controlling of nature. The arrangement of the streets and buildings are very orderly because we believe in organization. The science lab, library, and museum represent our belief in books and science instead of religion. People will get much better answers from books and science than from God. In Sanctuary, people are allowed to go where they want within Sanctuary instead of having to toil inside of a building of worship.



Our model communicates that organization and controlling nature is the way to live because if we didn't everything would be chaotic. We want people to come away from Sanctuary with a feeling of organization, peacefulness, and the knowledge that books and science are much more important than religion.

The Tribers World View Statement

Nick, Julia R., Julia M., Caity, Mimi

- Happiness is reaching enlightenment, which brings you closer to the Gods. We must always protect Nabone.
- Beautiful and good nature is a sign of the Gods being happy with us.
- Ugly and bad nature is a sign of the Gods being angry with us.
- Appreciate your surroundings and use them wisely.
- Nature is real, beautiful, and good.
- People that have one God are not protected or strong enough, and people with no God are even weaker.
- But our many Gods are always there for us.
- We kill for peace, we know it sounds weird but our pride is protected.
- When the Godslanders stop killing so will we, but until then we will keep killing in retaliation.



The Tribers "Re-vision" the World Trade Center

This is a model of the sixteen acres where the World Trade Center stood. We made a model of what we want and what should be in these sixteen acres. You can do activities such as praying, eating, working, and just walking around anywhere you want. We also have buildings for all of those things if you don't want to be outside. Our different buildings are an office building for the people who lost their jobs. The market place is like a farmer's market where you can buy food and homemade crafts. The museum is a museum with many different kinds of art, including art from 9/11. Then there is a play area. The play

area has ropes to swing on and bars to climb on. Next to the play area is the worship teepee. This is where you can worship if you want, but you don't have to worship there, you can worship anywhere.

The tower footprints have fires on them to represent that life still goes on and the fires also represent the fire tribe. The footprints also have dirt on them to represent earth. The pond and the monument in the middle of the sixteen acres is a tribute to the people in 9/11 and the firemen who risked their lives for other people. The garden is for nature and beauty and the flowers also represent new life.

Our model represents nature, peace, and freedom. It also represents the four tribes: the fire tribe, the earth tribe, the air tribe, and the water tribe. We want people to know that there is still life after tragedy.

8 The Children Keep Reminding Us: One School's Experience After 9/11

Kate Delacorte

KATE DELACORTE went to Bank Street College beginning in 1977. She has taught three-, four- and five-year-old children. In 1999, she and Adrian Hood opened the Downtown Little School, a progressive nursery school primarily drawing upon neighborhood families in Lower Manhattan. The school serves two-to-five-year-olds, both typically developing and those with special needs.

The Downtown Little School is on Dutch Street in Lower Manhattan, just a few blocks from where the World Trade Center used to be. On September 11, we were setting up for school, with families scheduled to bring their children in for short visits. The school was supposed to actually open on Thursday, September 13. Instead, on that day my co-director, Adrian, and I were in my dining room making phone calls to the seventy-six families enrolled in our school to find out how and where they were. I remember very little from those calls except for the rush of feeling that each familiar voice brought and my surprise at just how much emotion I felt for certain families. That day of calls remains just one huge blur of emotion that left me feeling depleted, though better than I had thought possible because no one had been hurt. Everyone was alive.

At a staff meeting in my apartment on Friday, September 14, we decided to see if we could find space to open on a temporary basis, in order to provide families with a place to see each other. St. Luke's School gave us their auditorium for two days and the Civic Center Synagogue gave us their Hebrew school classrooms for two days. Maybe fewer than half our families came. Some dropped by just to check in, and others came the moment we opened the doors and stayed until we closed.

These days were filled with stories. The teachers absorbed the children's stories. Adrian and I listened to the parents. And we began to sense an overwhelming difference between the needs of the parents and the needs of the children. They had conflicting realities that needed to be affirmed.

The children had seen their world explode. Some children had seen the planes hit, others had seen the fire and the smoke. They'd seen people running for their lives and things falling from the sky. Some had witnessed people jumping from the towers. Others had been trapped inside their own smoke-filled buildings. Most had run or walked through chaos to find safety. They'd

all seen, heard, and experienced too much. They needed to understand in some small way what had happened.

The parents' need was no less compelling. They needed to believe that their children hadn't really seen what they had seen, that they hadn't understood the enormity of what had happened. Above all, the parents needed to believe that they had been able to protect their children.

The first day, a four year old walked into the auditorium, talking as he crossed the threshold. "A plane hit the World Trade Center and it fell just like this," he said, and let his sweater fall to the ground. He added, "When it fell, it landed on a playground and killed all the children." His mother told us, "I don't think he really gets it."

So many parents told me what their children hadn't seen, hadn't understood or had not yet learned about what happened on September 11. And so many children contradicted their parents through their play, through their comments and their questions.

One focus of our school year was to help the parents accept what their children already knew so that they could help them understand it as much as it could be understood, and then begin to help the children to feel safe and protected. We wanted the parents to feel again as if they were able to keep their children safe and protected.

I was in charge of helping parents. I spoke to them individually and as a group, and sent home notes or talked to them on the phone. The teachers were assigned to try to normalize life at school while making it clear to every child that he or she could play about their experiences, talk about them, and ask questions. Even before the topic could be safe at home, we had to make it safe at school.

The job was difficult because the teachers were working through their own feelings and then were immersed in the feelings of these young children. But it was not as hard as it might have been because the parents as a group seemed far more willing to put their trust in us than ever before. There were fewer complaints, more honest exchanges of ideas, and a much greater sense of community than we had had before. Through sharing our fears and experiences, and our emotions, we all grew closer.

We were not, of course, in any way prepared for 9/11; nor did we really have time to consult mental health professionals about each step we had to take. Every day and sometimes each moment of every day, the teachers were faced with decisions about how to help children begin to understand their

experience. We were all feeling our way and were often overwhelmed. We knew it was important to get it right; we wished fervently that we had a blueprint to follow. We didn't. What we did have was a school philosophy that emphasized children's emotional needs. We shared a belief in being honest with children, in acknowledging their feelings, and in helping them express a range of emotions in appropriate ways.

It was hard to determine just how honest to be. It was painful to acknowledge the children's experience. It was often difficult to decide exactly what was enough and what was too much. In our favor was the fact that we had in place a variety of ways of providing the opportunity for children to play and talk about their feelings, as well as a variety of ways to communicate to them that it was safe to do both.

Something we have always done for children is to make books about issues affecting either individuals or the group. My former co-teacher, Meredith Gary, is the teacher/director of the Williamsburg Neighborhood Nursery School in Brooklyn. While her school is at some remove from our area and their experience was less immediate, she did have to talk to her children about what had happened. She wrote a book to use with her children and asked for my feedback. Then I edited it for our school and made copies for each of our classrooms. Here it is. (See attached CD-ROM for complete text and pictures of this and other books described in this essay.)

A Scary Thing Happened

A scary thing happened in New York City. A plane hit the top of a tall building called the World Trade Center. Then another plane hit the other tower of the World Trade Center.

Then both buildings fell down. There were fires and big clouds of smoke. Moms and Dads and Babysitters took their children to safety. The moms and the dads and the babysitters and kids were scared. They saw scary things.

There were people inside the planes and people inside the buildings. Lots of people in the World Trade Center buildings got hurt or even died. Lots of the people in the World Trade Center buildings got out safely, alive.

Firefighters came to help put out the fires in the buildings that fell. They came to rescue people. Police officers came to help people too. Doctors and nurses helped too. Lots and lots of people came to help. People helped each other and tried to keep each other safe.

The buildings falling down broke the phones. Lights stopped working too. Some people couldn't stay at home because there was too much smoke or broken windows. Some people couldn't stay at home because all the helpers needed to use their buildings. People stayed with friends or family in different apartments.

All of this made people scared and worried. Moms were scared and worried. Dads were scared and worried. Babysitters were scared and worried. Teachers were scared and worried. Some grown ups cried. Some grownups were very grouchy or very serious.

All you children were probably scared and worried too. It is okay to feel scared and worried. And you can ask the grownups, "What's going on?" It is the grownups' job to try to help you understand scary things like this. It is the grownups' job to keep you safe.

A scary thing happened in New York City but you are safe with your mommy and daddy or with your babysitter and you are safe here at school.

That scary thing did happen and everything was different for a while. The World Trade Center Buildings are gone. Some firefighters died. Some police officers died. Other people died too.

But now things are getting back to the way they used to be. Lots of firefighters are alive and they are working to keep everyone safe. Lots of police officers are alive and they are also working to keep everyone safe.

And lots of people are alive and they are moving back home. Moms and Dads are cleaning up all the dust. Lights are back on. Some phones are working. Most moms and dads and babysitters are not so scared and worried anymore. Stores are opening again. Moms and Dads are going back to work.

And you are all together here at school again. You can talk about what happened. You can ask questions and play about what happened. But you don't have to be so scared and worried. You are safe here at school.

We read this book to the children and suddenly everyone was talking at once. We sent the text home to the parents and there seemed to be a stunned silence. A few parents voiced some concerns.

But first, here are the children's responses.

The Children

A three-year-old girl related the following:

I'm going to say a lot to you. One day we were trying to take Ann to school and there was a serious fire at the World Trade Center and a plane hit the building and there was a black hole and a 'credible thing, the principal was crying. I was scared because I was about to jump over the fence. I don't like fires in buildings. No more towers, not TV, not lights, not nothing. I went to Mrs. Kennedy's house and things were just perfect there.

This girl's father is a firefighter. He was with her when the planes hit the towers, and he pushed her, her sister and mother to the ground and shielded them with his body. For some time, she was extremely sensitive to pushing of any kind and would weep hysterically if a child pushed her. When her father was working on the site, she played a repetitive game with small plastic animals and playdough. The animals were buried in playdough and then uncovered by a rescue animal. Some of them were found alive and some dead.

Another three-year-old child said:

The World Trade Center has a fire and people started running and I went to someone's house and people had a mask and I didn't know what was going on. We went to my cousins' house and were safe there. We had lot of fun there... and at nighttime we stayed in a hotel... and now there's nothing there. Then the people started to run and we started to run too. And every building didn't fall but the World Trade Center. It didn't fall by accident. It was very quiet when we went back home and back to the way it was 'cept the World Trade Center.

A four-year-old boy told us that "people jumped out of the window and that was scary." And it was this same child who said about our book, "I'm gonna bring that book home with me. I need to bring that book home with me."

A five-year-old boy drew a picture after listening to the book read aloud and dictated the following:

I made the building tilted so you can tell that it's falling down. I'll make some flames, some red flames like fire. I'm making an X marks the

spot. It blew up to smithereens. Now the World Trade Center is exploded. This is what really happened. I'm making a ladder so everyone can escape. People can all climb up to safety. That's smoke. The people might go through the smoke. The man died. He's racing, racing out of the flames. Oh my gosh! Something terrible happened to him.

The Parents

The firefighter father was almost certain that his young daughter had seen and understood nothing. The mother of the three-year-old girl who revealed she knew the towers hadn't fallen by accident was one of the few parents who approached me about the book. She had told her child that it had been an accident and wasn't comfortable having her child learn the truth from someone else.

Although we had closed the gap somewhat between what parents wanted to believe their children knew and what they really knew, parents still flinched when the subject came up. For the most part, the teachers did not share the dailiness of the children's preoccupation with September 11 with their families. On Curriculum Night, I spoke to the parents about what we were seeing and what we thought might be helpful at home.

I began by noting that talk of 9/11 would be conspicuously absent from the teachers' talks.

And this omission was intentional. The teachers asked me to talk about this so that they could focus on the ordinary classroom life, on the meat of their programs and their work with the children.

This desire to keep September 11th separate, in its own place, seems characteristic of everyone right now. We all want what happened and its repercussions to be over, over for ourselves and, even more important, over for the children.

But it is neither separate nor over for adults or for the children. And what seems most important for the children is to hear the adults in their lives acknowledge what they went through and also to hear adults acknowledge the ongoing nature of the experience in adult lives. Children sense our stress, our fear and our preoccupations. It is comforting and helpful for them to understand what causes those feelings in adults, to know those feelings are not the fault of the children themselves and to know that it is the adult's job and not the child's to deal with those worries.

So we ask that you continue to talk to your children when they bring up

the subject of September 11th or when they play about what they saw. And we ask you to tell your children when you are feeling sad or scared so that they know their perceptions are correct. This does not mean that you should give the children details about the latest bomb scare. It means only that you should be even more sensitive than usual about what your children are thinking and feeling.

Ultimately, whether parents agreed or disagreed with the extent of the honesty we were encouraging, whether they continued to believe their children had remained innocent or felt their children knew too much, whether they left the television on or turned it off, our differences shrank before our growing sense of community. We had weathered a painful experience together, giving and gaining support from our school family. We had built a powerful sense of togetherness, reinforced every day by the belief that, whatever our differences, we shared a common responsibility to heal ourselves and our children.

But this notion of healing was a complicated one. For some adults, healing seemed to require a certain amount of distancing, a need to move on. Some children needed to insist that they had not been scared but only brave. Some adults wanted to keep talking and talking and most of the children seemed consumed with the need to play and play about what they'd seen. For the teachers, there was an ongoing and intense confrontation between their own feelings and their best assessment of what the children needed. Each teacher had to ask, "Do I just want them to stop building that tower over and over again or is it somehow my responsibility to help them build something different?" That's a familiar enough challenge to any teacher. We are always trying to figure out when to stay out of the child's work or play and when to intervene, but the question took on new meaning last year. And we only had our best instincts and each other to inform our decisions.

We began our healing with a book I wrote. Here it is.

Some Things Are The Same, Some Things Are Different

Some things are different since that scary thing happened in New York City. Some children are living in different apartments in different parts of New York City. They can't go home yet. They have to take the subway or the bus or a car to school. One of the children even takes a boat! All these children used to be able to walk to school.

Some children are moving away from New York City. They will live somewhere else and go to different schools.

Children here don't get to play outside so much anymore. Some playgrounds are closed. Moms and dads, babysitters, and teachers worry about the smoke and the dust and the children stay inside.

And the twin towers are not there anymore. There is just a huge mess where they used to be. There are big trucks working. There are soldiers, police officers, firefighters and other emergency workers there. They are working to clean up the mess all the time.

But there is only empty space where an important part of our city used to be.

But some things are still the same. You still live with your mommies and daddies, your brothers and sisters. Your babysitters still help to take care of you.

Some of you are back in your old homes again. Your bedroom is still your bedroom. You still play and eat and sleep at home the way you used to.

Some of the places you used to go are still open, stores and restaurants. You can buy groceries or treats. You can go to MacDonaldis or Burger King.

And you still go to school here at The Downtown Little School. It is always the same here at The Downtown Little School. Your friends are here. Your teachers are here and you are here.

The twin towers will never be the same but some day the burning and the mess will go away. Cranes pick up big pieces of the buildings and move them to tow trucks or dump trucks that drive the pieces away. Barges take some of the pieces to a dump away from this neighborhood. It takes a long time to clean up what happened. But workers and their tools, their trucks and cranes, are working all the time. The neighborhood won't be the same but it will be clean and safe.

In addition, Meredith, the author of *A Scary Thing Happened*, wrote *Feeling Better in New York City*. Elisa Crowe, another teacher at our school, wrote *Go Away Terrorists*, modeled after Ed Emberly's *Go Away Scary Green Monster* (see CD-ROM).

These books helped, but our questions were never really answered. We just kept asking them of ourselves and of each other. We kept listening to and watching the children. We kept doing our best.

The Teachers

As much as we were all focused on children and families, Adrian and I realized that the teachers needed some support too. Looking back, I think what kept the teachers going was their own investment, not only in teaching and in the particular families enrolled in the program last year, but also in the school itself. We are a small school and the teachers are a tight-knit community tied together by shared beliefs about children and about education and by shared experience. Some of the teachers were here when the school first opened. Most of us spent September 11 together, huddled in a back room of the school.

We took the teachers out for dinner to a favorite restaurant in the neighborhood to thank them for their willingness to keep coming down to this neighborhood each day and for their commitment to the program. We started contributing to the cost of transportation. We gave them mittens just for fun. We met weekly as a staff. But truthfully, we did not offer them very much support. Rather, we depended on them at least as much as they depended on us, as we all struggled to provide a place for families and children that felt safe.

Moving Forward, Always Reminded

This school year began with our Separation Meeting for the parents of the twos and threes. At this meeting, I always talk a little about separation in general and offer guidelines for the parents during our phase-in period. As I thought about separation, I immediately returned to 9/11 and the need families felt last year to keep their children close. A Brooklyn family had withdrawn their twin boys from the school because they didn't want to be separated from them by the bridge. Another family from uptown couldn't handle being separated by a few miles and also withdrew their child. I decided to mention 9/11 as a complicating factor to the separation process this year. As I looked around at the faces of the families, I felt I might have done better leaving it out. Most people looked as if I'd slapped them.

But 9/11 is still with us this year. It is less pervasive and less obvious in most of the classrooms but it is here. Parents and teachers alike thought last year's twos had been in the dark about the upheaval in their world. It is true they didn't have the language to describe their perceptions but it is not true that they were oblivious. When I walk into the threes classroom now, I often see children wielding airplanes that fly a little too close to the tall towers the children have built out of blocks. Is this typical of three-year-old block play or are they revisiting what they saw last September? The teachers ask this ques-

tion. We can't be sure. But the mother of a girl in this class tells me that her daughter is suddenly talking all the time about what she remembers. The child who had not quite turned two when her EMS father was killed is also in this class. She talks about him this year and asks questions about what happened to him. When her classmates talk about September 11 in the Dramatic Play area and fight pretend fires, she retreats to another area of the classroom because "they're scaring me." And finally, it becomes impossible not to notice that the children know much too much about world events and that every scary mention on the news of war, of snipers, of volcanoes, brings these children back to the events of 9/11. Even Halloween, with its blur of pretend scary things, seemed to drag the children back to their very real fears so vividly remembered from last September.

We have two children at the school this year whose fathers died on 9/11. The other children know.

And so we are faced once again with deciding what is too much to say to our children and what is not enough. We know the parents would prefer to think this nightmare has gone away. So would we. But the children keep reminding us that it hasn't. They keep asking for our help in understanding what they saw, and what they know. That disparity between the children's needs and their parents' still exists.

The experience is less raw now and the parents have taken over some of our struggle for themselves. Some of our families are part of a study about the effects of 9/11 on young children. One mother recently expressed concern to me about the somewhat troubling behavior of her daughter. After we talked for a while, she said she planned to consult the women running this study, saying "I just want to be able to rule out 9/11. . . Of course, I know I can't."

9. Principles for Responding to Children in a Traumatic Time

Sal Vascellaro

Before coming to Bank Street College as a graduate faculty member, student advisor, and consultant to public schools, SAL VASCELLARO was the head of the New Lincoln elementary school, corporate education manager for Manufacturers Hanover Corporation, and teacher of children ages three through ten in public and independent schools. He earned a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Teaching from Columbia University in 1999.

As a member of the group that worked on the 2002 NAEYC Pre-Conference Session, "Responding to Young Children in a Traumatic Time: Voices from the Broader Bank Street Community," I was assigned the daunting task of distilling the substance of the presentations into a list of principles. While the speakers focused on responding to the tragic events of September 11, our aim was to help educators in their struggle to respond to the range of traumatic experiences many children have to live with—the death of a loved one, serious illness, violence, drug addiction, homelessness. We wanted to give them something tangible to use as they respond to the children in their care.

As I listened to, read, and reread transcripts of the accounts given by Kate Delacorte, a director of the Downtown Little School, and Trish Lent, teacher at P.S. 234, I began to realize that everything I needed to say was embedded in their stories. Each related accounts of children, parents, teachers, and school administrators directly affected by the events of September 11. They are accounts of educators summoning all their inner resources to respond to the needs of children and families at a time when their own needs were just as strong. Most importantly, they are accounts of educators drawing from their own deep knowledge of sound educational practice. Each time I reread their stories, it became clearer to me that they had something important to say to all teachers about responding to children who experience traumatic events.

Principles

Be responsive to the children.

Observe and "listen" to what they are saying about themselves in their behavior, their art work, their play, as well as in their words.

Be honest with the children

While children do not need to know all the frightening details or the full complexity of the situation, you want to represent what has happened honestly. For example, some teachers tried to shield children by telling them that the September 11 attack was an accident, although most children already knew this was not the case. An environment of trust is based on honesty.

Acknowledge the children's feelings and help them express a wide range of emotions in appropriate ways.

Sound early childhood practice already has in place the vehicles for children to express their feelings and concerns: dramatic play; open-ended expressive materials, such as blocks, paint, clay, sand and water; a routine meeting time that invites children to discuss what is important to them and becomes a safe forum for joint problem solving.

Cultivate and draw from a sense of community.

Community is achieved through communication and a predictable routine, thereby offering a safe environment for children to share what is important to them.

Examine your own feelings and attitudes before addressing those of the children.

Although this is not a simple matter, it is an essential aspect of all teaching. However, it becomes especially critical when children experience traumatic events.

Allow yourself to address children's feelings and concerns.

Be forgiving of what you consider mistakes. You can only do your best. Remember that in most cases there are no perfect words or activities to “solve” the problem. Assume that addressing traumatic events is a process that requires time, reflection, and a variety of strategies to help the individuals in your class.

Work with colleagues.

Addressing difficult problems is too hard to do alone. Discuss your questions, feelings, and concerns with other teachers, administrators, and support professionals.

Work with parents

When considering how you can address this situation with the children, it is the parents who can tell us what the child's experience has been and how the child's routines have changed. Most frequently, parents are our only source for this information.

Parents may need our guidance about how to help their children through a time of crisis.

Parents' desire to protect their children may be so great that they keep important information from the children or give wrong information or do not answer the children's questions. A recommendation as simple as "Turn off the television" can make a difference. As a regular part of your program, discuss with parents the issue of addressing difficult situations with children, so that in times of stress, this can be built upon.

Remember that there is more to a child's world (and your own) than the trauma.

While keeping the door open to addressing the traumatic event, you can also offer other curriculum opportunities that affirm the children's safety, spark their imaginations, expand their world, and are simply fun.

Pay attention to your own needs and emotions. Replenish yourself.

10 The NYC Board of Education Mandates Pledging Allegiance

Kate Abell

KATE ABELL, a fourth-grade teacher and math staff developer at P.S. 11 in Manhattan, works in her own neighborhood, where, before becoming a teacher, she was a housing organizer. She is the mother of two boys and teaches science for teachers at Bank Street. She had previously made several Earthwatch trips to Baja, CA, where she fell in love with spiders. She has been part of a writing group with other teachers for five years and considers it the single most important thing that allowed her to regain her equilibrium after September 11.

Flags flying
Fervent voices lifted
A star-spangled pressure cooker of emotion
The stock exchange synonymous with freedom as we struggle
To make sense of a world
Where deliberate calculations cause
Peopled towers to fall
On others trying to help.

There is solace in ritual.
But this one is flawed,
Pitting as it does one pledge
Against another.
Filling our void
By drawing a line in the sand.

A substitute for the world village
It takes to raise a child—
Seeking community by calling on
God to bless America.

It makes people feel better.

Likewise, heroin.

11 Forever Undone

Kate Abell

*If I live to be 100 I'll never forget the sound of the
Diamondback's rattle as it split the desert night.*

So I wrote a year—or twenty—ago.
In truth I can no longer remember the sound.
Or rather, it has been drowned out
by the aftershocks of worlds colliding.

What will I never forget?
The shape of the giant plane preserved as it plowed
through the 83rd floor of the second tower.
It jolts me anew whenever I look up at the silhouette of a jet overhead.

What will I always remember?
The wave of fear that coursed through my body when it hit me
that Jamie was within falling distance of the towers.
I feel it whenever he jumps too high on the trampoline or his roller
blades.

What will I always carry with me?
The curve of Jane's father's back as he held his two motherless children
while the minister invoked an afterlife in which I don't believe.
I see that same curve when I pass men and women contemplating
another empty night alone on the streets.

What will always be at the back of my mind?
The sight of a tower, built on bedrock, housing thousands of people,
collapsing in a minute.
I think of it whenever something seems forever.

Like my memories of what I'll never forget.

Notes

Notes

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