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Introduction: Teaching Through a Crisis: 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.