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A Story to Tell

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2. A Story to Tell

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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

Oda, K. (1985). Human ashes. In Oe, K. (Ed.) *The crazy iris and other stories of the atomic aftermath* (63-84). New York: Grove Press.