



Bank Street Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2003
Number 11 *Teaching Through a Crisis:
September 11 and Beyond*

Article 6

May 2003

Living in Question

Cynthia Rothschild
Ariadne's Children

Follow this and additional works at: <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Terrorism Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rothschild, C. (2003). Living in Question. *Occasional Paper Series, 2003* (11). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2003/iss11/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.

educate

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.