



Bank Street

Occasional Paper Series

Occasional  
Paper  
Series

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

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Article 2

May 2003

## Safe

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*P.S. 234*

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### Recommended Citation

Lent, P. (2003). Safe. *Occasional Paper Series, 2003* (11). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2003/iss11/2>

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educate

## 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.