ACTS OF CONSCIENCE AND ACTS OF CARE: REJECTING NORMALCY IN A TIME OF TERROR

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September 13, 2001

I saw Picasso’s Guernica last week in Madrid. Now I feel like I am eerily living it. The surreal became the real. Life irrevocably changed. Tonight there is an opiated calm. Smoke furnaces as far as the eye can see down Fifth Avenue. The sky above Manhattan soft blue as bomber pilots missile through the clouds, stealthgrey and supersonic. I feel the need to chronicle this to keep perspective. My fear is not so much about what has happened, but the uncertainty of what will.

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There is a closing line in an essay written by Italo Calvino which reads “the film we thought we were merely watching is the story of our lives.” September 11th was not another Hollywood blockbuster, but the narrative that defines the disfigurement of our collective lives and the subsequent rage and grief that swells within. We see it on television and witness it on the subways. The theatre of war has returned and with it the trembling of a global paranoia. It’s packaged in language like “America under attack,” “America fights back,” and “United we stand.” It feels like we have descended into the dark times again with our flags pinned to our lapels and our minds full of sound bytes. And I wonder about the future of our world. How do we as educators provoke our students to learn in a world we and they know is neither secure, equitable nor fair?

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September 14, 2001

A flag at half-mast drapes the water tower in the housing project that sits across from my window on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Rain that feels not of cleansing or relief but more of grief falls since the early morning. I went to sleep despondent and woke up the same way. I know why. I can't ignore or lessen these feelings. As an educator I have always believed in the transformative role of teaching, of creating hope in myself and nourishing it in those with whom I work. I am trying with all of my strength to hold onto and replenish that this morning. The sounds of the subway have returned. They mesh with the ever-present sound of sirens and emergency vehicles. It is a constant state of vigilance and emergency. The backlash of hatred is already visible. The votaries of retribution can be heard everywhere. Civilization as we once knew it? So much of life was absent of civility anyway.

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I write this as an educator, a parent and a citizen. To whom this may concern is self-evident: each of us. The days of darkness require presence: acts of conscience and acts of care. The historian Hannah Arendt describes this responsibility as becoming “lights in dark times,” educators and artists practicing a social vigilance and wide awakeness that times of upheaval demand. As authentic persons living in the world, Maxine Greene reminds us that to live ethically, we need to always be asking “why.” This is the place where learning and moral reasoning begin. This is the time for asking why. The dark days require rejecting intolerance outright and unequivocally, with reason and critical intelligence.

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September 17, 2001

Sitting here in the office. Staying clear headed through this by staying in touch with what I feel. Want to make all the love I can before the first anthrax attack. Want to hug my daughter when I see her today like it’s the first time after a long absence. Want to call my parents, Aunt Milly and Uncle George, Uncle Frank and Aunt Paula and tell them how much I love them. Want to take out my Brecht to see if he can offer some insight on terror. There is no getting used to the boom of fighter planes or the sirens in the Orwellian air. I am mourning for the others and looking over my shoulder for when the retaliation starts and patriotism has its way. I don’t want history to march on anyone anymore. There might not be an anymore.

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Life in the post September 11th world has become a New York Post headline full of the sensational and the extreme. The world as we knew it is an open wound pussing with intolerance and warmongering, infecting our capacity to think critically. There is no returning to business as usual because there is nothing usual or ordinary about terrorism. I want to be one of those lights in dark times, one of Herb Kohl’s hope mongers. I want to feed young people’s social imaginations, stretch their historical understanding so they can name the kind of world they want to inhabit. I want to believe now more than ever in “the islands of decency” Myles Horton described 30 years ago. I want to provide the conditions and the climate where the young can learn to deal with complex problems and work collectively to solve them. I want to believe that as lights in dark times the work of education is redemptive, a discipline of hope, and that crisis is a way to break the somnolence of habit.

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September 18, 2001

Now that we have been robbed of the secure, the most ordinary is charged with reverence: the sight of the ocean and how it cooled our feet and smelled full of briny perfumes. What matters starts to appear everywhere: the bridge, your love, that old man cooing the Latino baby on the crowded bus. Looking at the George Washington Bridge last Sunday afternoon, as I have for much of my life, made me feel a sense of assuredness and solidity. And the sky of clouds that you said were so soft and gentle, soothing and appropriate for these days of mourning. Terror steals the familiar and pulls the rug out from under the very idea of safe. Life makes us reimagine every matter worth remembering.

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The mayor and the President tell us that we need to “get back to business,” “get on a plane, eat in a restaurant, go to Disney World.” With a desperate and transparent sense of calm we are urged to “return to normalcy.” It all feels like a commercial. There is a moral flippancy here difficult to accept. It makes me suspect, like when I see a restaurant without customers and a manager standing at the door soliciting patrons to enter. As an educator, I don’t want to get back to “normalcy” because it never worked. Or if it worked, it has been for the administrators and politicians, testing companies and textbook concerns. But not for those whom it mattered most. Not for kids, teachers, or parents. All of us caught swimming upstream in a system whose currents are always full of bureaucratic undertow and toxic language like: student performance, classroom management, pull-out, attention deficit order, limited English proficient, learning disabled....

Why the haste to return to a system made rigid by mandated curriculum and punitive evaluation? A system that isolates adults and children from the boundlessness of experience and interactions with each other? Why the “normalcy” that empties the spontaneous, imaginative life of inquiry from living in classrooms? Why rush back into that? A “normalcy” that measures and controls at the expense of human connection and social interaction. That is not the normal we should aspire to. It’s the “abnormal” that habit and convention have convinced us is the only one worth believing. Before returning to “normalcy,” let’s pool our inventiveness and imaginations to consider what the normal should look like: the normalcy that we want.
October 8, 2001

All law enforcement officials on high alert. National Guard at the train stations and entrances to tunnels and bridges. Need to show identification to go below 14th Street. The President goes on television with a blue suit, white shirt and red tie to announce the commencement of the bombing of Afghanistan. Kites whimsically floating in the background of the White House lawn. In New York, the flags have replaced the memorial candles. Everywhere like the Fourth of July. Only this time not calling for fireworks but cruise missiles. This is the language of the day: Tomahawk missiles, stealth bombers, guided bomb units, land based bombers submarines, Delta Force, and "Neutralizing the terrorists" according to the Pentagon. The air is acrid and bitter as we walk down Hudson Street. The reminder that the souls of more than 3000 people have not gone away. Nor will they ever. I swear I see the imprints of those towers in the sky where they once were, like ghosts, like a message coded into the clouds hanging over Manhattan.

There is no guide for how to address in our schools the events of September 11th. We are confronted with educational contexts that compel us to come to terms with the responsibilities for teaching and enabling children to learn in dark, unsettling times. Wide awakeness has to grow in a place with others actively and reflectively. To become citizens disposed to living in a global and interconnected world, young people need the time to reflect on and the tools to record what is valuable, beautiful and worthy of caring about in their lives. Let this be the normalcy we move towards: building on understanding by connecting the young with the world and not isolating them.

If education, as James Agee said, “is the one weapon against the world’s bombardment, the one medicine...which liberty, health, and joy may be shaped....” then let’s provide children with opportunities that draw on the experience of becoming adults by carrying projects out and into the world: building gardens, playgrounds, web sites, and public art works; constructing oral histories, neighborhood studies, telecollaborative projects; conducting air, water and soil studies. Let’s pursue a kind of normalcy that seeds hope and grows fifty-dimensional citizens. Through acts of conscience and acts of care, let us define a normalcy that understands that there is no right education — as Paul Goodman told us half a century ago — except growing up into a worthwhile world.

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October 9, 2001

Fourteenth Street on a Monday morning, bomb squads, Police cars and fire engines. The sirens are silent. It feels like a rape of all that is secure, all that was once taken for granted. People congregate on the street with the eyes of frightened deer during hunting season. It feels like we are under the scope of a high powered rifle. It’s the first cool day of the fall, the old business of war has come out again.

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To rush headlong back to “normalcy” in our schools without thinking deeply about the future of our children does no honor to the victims nor ourselves. We need to consider the widest range of possibilities in how we educate our children, not the narrowest. Reflecting on the future of education in New York in this irrevocably changed world, it is critical to remember that business as usual cannot be the compulsion to retreat to habits of the past. Our greatest gift is imagining the new. As lights in these dark times, the most humane reply to terror is rising out of its grasp and showing that evil acts can have unintended positive consequences.

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October 17, 2001

Wednesday morning. The air crisp. We live in a time warp. I know what it says on the calendar. It doesn’t mean a thing. These days I often prefer no music, just silence, or better, city sounds. A strange reassurance that life retains some semblance of the familiar in the din of buses, sirens, drills, and hip hop booming from a car at a traffic light. Like a well kept secret we know it’s not so. Now I tune into CNN for the latest update from the Pentagon on the airstrikes in Afghanistan. I remember as a boy watching on TV the casualty lists from Vietnam. All that has changed is that I am no longer that boy and this is Kabul not Saigon. In New York, we have gone as if by the switch of a light from the brazenness of prosperity to the doldrums of recession. And I dreamt I witnessed the Empire State building go up in flames.

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Why not a normalcy that honors the imagination of children, that nurtures their ability to imagine ways in which the world might be different? Why not a normalcy of teaching well and with love that encourages the widest depth of learning possible? Instead of reinforcing failure, why not take teaching and learning seriously by insinuating complexity in children’s lives, exposing them to the multitude of human creations that makes life rich and continuously challenging? Why not a pedagogy based on providing students with opportunities to have encounters with learning that might change their lives? Why not a normalcy that insists on acts of conscience and acts of care, to elevate our lives out of terror into a world of shared meaning?

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October 19, 2001

The Board of Education has decided to require all teachers to lead students in the Pledge of Allegiance. Arts and all after school funding to be drastically cut. We have entered Draconian times again. What is systemic is how we deprive children of experience and plunder their imaginative and cultural lives. Ground forces are reputed to be in Afghanistan this morning. Meanwhile the anthrax count has become a kind of claustrophobic national preoccupation like the body counts from the Vietnam era. I am afraid. There, it is said. What do you do with fear in a time of terror? How to find rebalance in this unfamiliar world?
Brecht said “because of the increasing disorder in our cities” artists should not invoke or speak about beauty “but only the disorder....The contradictions of so bloodstained a life....” But I don’t agree, and pledge my allegiance to all that makes a person round and human.

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This is the only normalcy we need to return to: prioritizing our education and our responsibilities to the health and happiness of children, helping them find their own ways of being children and of existing in the world. To teach to the diversity of interests and strengths of each individual child.

We cannot predict the world that is in the making. We can only make what the educator Lillian Weber called “the irrational commitment,” to human care and human compassion. All we can do is enable them to make sense of their lived lives, to make connections, and to disclose alternative ways of being in and thinking about the world. Weber reminds us: “In spite of being surrounded by threats, [that] we still have children...[and] an intergenerational responsibility [to] exist and contribute.”

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October 26, 2001

The subway cars are congested again with commuters who obstruct entry and exit. Bomb scares on Monday morning. One hundred and second street to 96th and Broadway closed. It is the season of the sociopath. Returned to Canairse, Brooklyn, today to visit the Meyer Levin School. Found the faculty bathroom to have peeling walls of lime green paint and a toilet that does not flush. Kids in their new blue and white uniforms. At lunch when they go to the schoolyard to play basketball and double dutch, you see the boundless energy and imagination that gets restrained and most times squandered. While over the loudspeaker sounding strained and underwater like the ones in the subway, the new principal enjoins her students “to work hard, listen to your teachers and get those math scores up.”

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October 31, 2001

Walt Whitman, Jose Marti, Comenicus, Socrates, Rousseau, A.J. Makarenko, Tolstoy, Paolo Freire, John Dewey, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Maxine Greene, Myles Horton, James Herndon, Lilian Weber, George Dennison, Paul Goodman, Herb Kohl, Sylvia Ashton Warner... I invoke you each at this hour of urgency as a counterpoint and a canon for inspiring children with conscience and caring. The times demand it.
There is nothing normal about growing up in a nation at war. But we have tens of thousands of children across this country experiencing this. To undo the horrors of an unkind and mad world, the only normalcy worth sustaining is the terrific responsibility towards human life and that, Hannah Arendt says, is the definition of education: “deciding that we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it, and...loving our children enough to engage them in the world’s renewal.”

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November 23, 01

On the subway not the vintage stony piercing stares of New Yorkers but the silent, existential glare of fear, of not knowing, of heading someplace without an address or telephone number. Commercial airliners have returned. Subways rattle once again. The sounds of the jet bombers have alchemized into just another air borne noise. By the river today the coast guard prevented all boat traffic from going below 79th street on the Hudson. Car alarms again. The flow of traffic and trucks. A sky anesthetized in smoky bluegrey starts to polish the afternoon into night. Kids’ voices rising above Broadway, mingling with the pigeons.

What is returning, amidst the vigilance for terror is the reverence for life. Thethrown of the ordinary: fried eggs and coffee. Gruff bus drivers and subway workers. The Mets and Yankee games. Cafes and restaurants brimming with people. Parks, riverfronts thronging with families and people in various states of repose and play. You want to walk the streets of upper Manhattan anointing the bodegas, fruit stands, coffee shops, pizzerias, and newspaper stands with the holy water of very precious things.

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References


About the Author

**David Penberg** is a staff and curriculum developer with a Carnegie based school reform project called the Middle School Initiative, which collaborates with 12 New York City public middle schools to redesign the ways they work with students. He is also involved with a large scale pre-service initiative done in conjunction with 3 community colleges and the Stevens Institute of Technology to encourage teachers to integrate the internet into their teaching repertoire. He is currently completing a multimedia worked entitled *The Rebeka/Zora Chronicles 1980-1990: A Father's Diary*.

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About the Artist

**David Darts** is an artist and graduate student at the Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction at UBC. He is interested in issues around social response-ability and the trans(form)ative qualities of creativity and is currently developing the concept of Creative Resistance. “My aim as an artist is to re-cognize and explore the silent spaces that are found in the limen; the threshold of human consciousness between images and text, self and other, destruction and creation.”

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