

Dear Teachers: Letters to Another Hero

September 15, 2001

Dear Friends,
I write this hoping that those closest to you are safe at this tragic time.

And I write to you, now, during the week we all sit stunned, grieving, hoping you will once again step forward to speak to English teachers—this time through the NCTE journal *Voices from the Middle*. I'm appealing to authors—those who write novels students love and those who write professional texts teachers respect. This letter will explain that appeal.

I have many friends in the New York City area through publishing companies, as I know you do, too. I still wait to hear if some of those folks have found their friends or loved ones who were missing. Every day my husband Brad and I hear from a friend who has a friend who is missing. It's far away—for us still a television screen—and yet here in our home in Houston. In alternating waves, I first wonder what I can do and then sit stunned, believing I can do nothing.

Last night, while believing I could do something to be a part of the healing, I decided to stop production on the December issue of *Voices from the Middle*, an issue devoted to young adult literature. The topic is still relevant as all the contributors had written about the power of literature; however, starting on Wednesday, some called or e-mailed asking if I could pull their articles for them to make revisions, wanting their words about the power of literature to carry a slightly different message. Then, last night, as I was thinking about how teachers across this nation have truly provided the consistency and normalcy our most vulnerable have needed, I decided that in this issue of *Voices*,

I'd like teachers to hear the voices of many of their favorite authors in the form of letters. Not that I'd want to tell any author what to say, but I can hear these letters offering teachers heartfelt thanks for bringing literature to children, for being with children this week, for keeping them safe, for always showing them the power and the beauty of the written word. So, I'm writing to you in hopes that you might be willing to share your thanks for teachers' efforts, your personal thoughts about this week, or your thoughts about the power of literature.

It's a letter, not an article. It should be written in letter format—Dear Teachers. Length—well, 625 words is one page in this journal so I'd suggest around 400–600 words—but that's only a suggestion. The problem with this idea is I need this immediately—meaning Sunday, September 23, is the absolute deadline. Send it to me, at this e-mail address. Is there any way you can carve out an hour between now and then to write a letter to middle grade teachers such as I'm describing? It's the personal voice now that comforts folks; I want *Voices* full of that voice. And, of course, I want the best voices—thus I turn to you.

Each of you writes powerfully. Teachers need to hear those powerful voices now. All week, as many of us have sat home following news reports, teachers have been in our classrooms, keeping our children safe, reminding them that yes, spelling tests still count or that of course we're safe playing outside or that extra hugs for lonesome ones are available here, in teacher's arms. Now, we need to give back to these unseen heroes. I hope you'll write a letter offering teachers the thanks I know you each can eloquently describe.

Kylene Beers
Editor, *Voices from the Middle*

Dear Teachers,

As a nation is shattered by the pain of thousands of families, we struggle to find explanations and answers, to decide what should be the appropriate course of action, to assume our own responsibility. As we try to build a sense of community and offer support to each other, I would like to express my gratitude to you from whom so many receive so much.

For the security your students find in your classroom to be themselves and be respected for who they are, thank you.

For your willingness to listen with an open mind and an open heart without prejudice, thank you.

For sharing with your students the richness and complexity of life and for exposing them to literature that expresses such diversity, thank you.

For guiding your students in exploring and expressing their feelings in search of understanding themselves and others better, thank you.

For helping them discover that there are no easy answers to the major quests in life, and inviting them to reflect with authenticity and courage, thank you.

For instilling in them respect for all life forms and a determination to protect human lives, thank you.

For sharing a message of hope, and a commitment to an existence of justice, thank you.

For letting them know in this moment of confusion and pain that reflection needs to be nourished by compassion, that revenge and justice are very different concepts, that to answer to violence with violence will only create more suffering, thank you.

And for having chosen to be a teacher, striving daily to be the best person you can be so that your students can learn from who you are, thanks in the name of all students you guide, and of their families, who you reach even if you may not be aware of it.

Alma Flor Ada

Dear Teachers,

As I spent another night clicking the remote and watching news sound bites, I could not help but think of the many teachers in my life who have exhibited such bravery in being with children during this past week. All I wanted to do was curl up in my house and weep; I was sick at heart and could not seem to find a way out of that despair. As the days of tragedy unfolded, I received calls and e-mails from middle school teachers and administrators across the country and realized that while many of them felt as I did, they had spent their days and evenings helping the children in their care find hope and feel safe again.

As I read their notes to me, I was transported back to my own middle school years and remembered a cold, November day when our social studies teacher told us President Kennedy had been killed. We were in the middle of a snowstorm when our teacher came to class late and told us something terrible had happened. We were twelve; our immediate response was that the basketball game had been canceled. Our teacher responded by telling us that we were immature and needed to think about something other than

ourselves and then told us what had happened. As an adult, I now can see that he, too, was afraid—that he, too, was perhaps questioning a world he never thought he would see. As a child, I felt afraid and I felt guilty. There was no one at our school who tried to help us heal. I was fortunate because I had a father who knew that I cared about the world. He spent days watching television and reading the newspapers with me. We talked about peace and politics—he told me that each day each of us gets to choose whether we will make the world a better place or one that is unsafe or painful for those around us. We each get to choose.

For sharing with your students the richness and complexity of life and for exposing them to literature that expresses such diversity, thank you. —Alma Flor Ada

I'm so thankful that in my world today I spend my days with teachers like you who choose to help children understand themselves and the world in which they live. You carefully choose literature to share so our children can find hope and make their way in a world even we no longer understand. One teacher told me she read Gordon Korman's *No More Dead Dogs* last week so her children could have some relief from the constant fear and pain. Another teacher wrote that she had read John Marsden's powerful picture book poem, *Prayer for the Twenty-first Century*, and her children added their written prayers to the millions of prayers we

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renewed by hope.**

—Laurie Halse Anderson

have all offered during this week. Your children read newspaper accounts and survivor stories; they told their own stories and added their voices to the collective memory of these horrific events. They wrote letters, collected teddy bears for children, and looked for ways to make a difference. You didn't make them feel afraid and guilty—you helped them know that our words and the written words of others can help us heal and find our strength. In Elizabeth Berg's novel, *Durable Goods*, she says, "I'd been taught tenderly, and that's how a lesson stays." I'm so grateful to each of you for the many examples of tender teaching I have witnessed in this past week.

When these children are my age and they are remembering learning of this tragedy while sitting in a middle school classroom, I know they will be thankful they were with you as they learned that life and people are unpredictable and inexplicable. They will be grateful that you went deep inside yourself to find resources to help them feel strong, secure, and aware. Emily Dickinson's words remind me of the legacy you are giving our children:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—

And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops at all.

Thank you for believing that our world can be a better place and filling children with the hope that they can have a part in making that a reality.

Janet Allen

Dear Friends,

I don't know about you, but I'm hurting. It feels like time is frozen, the clocks are broken. I am fractured. One piece of me can't stop crying. Another is despondent. One piece is five years old and wants to hide under the covers. Then there is the angry warrior who lives in my heart, stoked on adrenaline and howling for battle.

But I'm a grown-up. (How did that happen?) And I'm a Quaker. (How did *that* happen?) So I have to reach beyond the primal responses for something constructive. Damn, this is hard.

Deep breath. Here is what I know to be the truth: we must stand together in love. Let the hatred bubble up and allow compassion to brush it away. Be patient with the pain of others. Be patient with our own anger and grief.

A friend told me that in times like these, he turns to poets, not politicians. It made me think of this quote from the late Yiddish scholar, Leo Rosten:

In the dark colony of the night, when I consider man's magnificent capacity for malice, madness, folly, envy, rage, and destructiveness, and I wonder whether we shall not end up as breakfast for newts and polyps, I seem to hear the muffled cries of all the words in all the books with covers closed.

Open the books and let the words out. Read to make sense of the madness. Let the words wash over you until you can rise up, renewed by hope.

Katherine Paterson said that good words, good books ". . . pull together for us a world that is falling apart. They are the words that integrate us, stretch us, judge us, comfort and heal us. They are the words that mirror the Word of creation, bringing order out of chaos."

Books staunch the flow of blood. They dry tears, calm fears. A good story will coax the five-

year-old out from under the blanket. A well-spun tale will calm even the warrior. Stories help us make sense of the universe. They mend the pieces of a broken spirit.

My job is easy. I listen for the sound of beating hearts and write down the notes I hear. Your job is much harder. All those kids—those restless minds, those hormones, those muscles, those hands, feet, faces, eyes—you teach them.

Thank you.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for your courage and your grace. Thank you for showing up, for keeping Kleenex on your desk, and for assigning homework, especially homework that made parents turn off the television and drive out at 8 p.m. for posterboard. (You know who you are.)

You are our heroes. You are our firefighters and our police, our doctors and our soldiers. You make the world a safe place for our children. We cherish you.

Sincerely yours,
Laurie Halse Anderson

lives on the line each time they take up their pens. There are writers like this in Afghanistan now, people who defy the Taliban on the page and risk being executed for doing so. There are others of these brave writers in Indonesia, Nepal, and China—forming sentences that cry out for justice. I'm not one of these.

But I do have something in common with all of these heroes—the firefighters, the police, the journalists, the doctors. All of us, each one, had a teacher. Someone like you, who didn't get to take time off and wrestle with it like I did, but instead told us that the world had unlimited possibilities, who reassured us that despite all the chaos, we were important and that whatever we chose to do would matter, and perhaps most importantly, gave us the encouragement to imagine something better.

You showed up, just like the people who dug through the rubble.

I had someone like you, too. I am blessed.

Love,
Kathi Appelt

Dear Teachers,

Since the attacks in New York City and Washington, I have struggled with words. What can I say that hasn't already been said? What could I possibly add? How could my small voice make a difference?

In my work as a writer, this loss for words is not unusual. I often find myself staring at the blank page, hating that page, loving it at the same time for all its possibilities, and too often making bargains with my muse. However, it has come to me over the past several days that my job is a kind of "luxurious" one in the face of so much tragedy. I can do nothing as important as the firefighters, the police, the emergency personnel, the soldiers, all of whom risk their lives from moment to moment. In so many ways, it makes my job feel, while not insignificant, at least secondary.

And unlike those brave people, I've had the luxury of time. Time to let it all wash over me, to mull it over, to let it sink in. And still words are hard to find. Yes, there are writers who do put their



Dear Teachers,

Last week, I, along with countless others, was at my desk trying to make sense of a different world. A new book was on my screen, struggling to come to life, even as the rest of the world seemed to be in flames. How little sense it made, in content, and effort. And then I received a surprise note from a teacher, who told me how her young students, in an equal state of shock, had turned to books for solace, understanding, and a sense of life. It was a reminder to me of the role books, stories have in our ongoing lives. That stories join us to something bigger than self, that books allow us to touch others, even as we learn who and where we are—and at a time when we feel most alone.

It was a reminder, too, that we who write the stories, are so very dependent on those who carry forth our tales and put them into the hands and hearts of readers. For this we are not just dependent upon what you do, but forever grateful for making a circle of being complete.

In thanks,
Avi

Dear Teachers,

It's sad that it takes a national catastrophe to serve as a wake-up call to us all, but if it does succeed in wresting us from our lethargy and misplaced priorities, then perhaps something good can emerge from the rubble of September 11. If, as I firmly believe, our children are this country's greatest treasure, then our teachers are America's second greatest treasure. For too long we have said those words, but given little action to back them up, to actually make them true. Perhaps now is a good time to finally do so.

Having benefited greatly from the encouragement, discipline, and attention of wonderful teachers throughout my academic career, I speak with great experience when I say that whatever I have achieved in my life I owe, in large part, to them. That, I feel, is a debt, a real debt and thus one that should be repaid. How? By instilling in our children a love and respect for teachers that is sorely lacking today. Teachers work long hours, are paid

far less than they should be, are often asked to be teacher, disciplinarian, referee, social worker, juggler of too many children to watch over with too little money and resources to do so, along with a half-dozen other roles, many of which have nothing to do with inspiring the young to want to learn. The number of good people leaving the profession is compelling evidence of how far off track we have gone as a country. It seems we treat our children and our educational system as something not to lavish with our attention and resources, but as something to be simply endured. It was not always that way. It should not be that way. And the fact that even under these deteriorating conditions, we have hundreds of thousands of people who have dedicated their lives to giving our children the tools to succeed in life is all the impetus I need to stand and applaud every time I see a teacher cross my path.

And during the recent tragedy, teachers across this land—as much as the firefighters and police officers and other rescue workers who risked and, in many cases, lost their lives in trying to save others—are also heroes to us all. They kept the schools safe and relatively normal, they reflected on and discussed these terrible events with our children, they read to them, they held their hands, they wept with them. These heroes delivered the message that as awful as the events of September 11 were, our children could go on and help create a better world, one where people settle their differences with words and reflected thought, not with planes and bombs. They held us together as a nation. In the midst of shouldering the staggering responsibility of educating our young, they were in the trenches with our greatest natural resource during these appalling events, reassuring them, telling them it would be all right, that the world would go on. How could we possibly ask for anything more of them? And isn't it time to say thank you? And with actions as well as words. I'll be glad to go first.

Thank you, teachers.

With great respect and admiration,
David Baldacci

Dear Teachers,

Last night, at the Barron home in Colorado, my children lit another candle. Carefully, they placed it on the windowsill above the kitchen counter. The light wavered a little, but shone through the glass and out into the world beyond.

I thought of that candle today as I sat to write this, thought of small hands lighting that candle. And those thoughts turned to you, to what you do daily, to the flames you light in our children, to the light you help nourish in each. You have always done it, really, lighting the candles in young people. But in the past week, you have done it with extraordinary grace and compassion and courage and professionalism. You have lit our children's candles, and kept them aflame, even when the winds of horror and cruelty have blown their very hardest.

I want to thank you—both as a writer and as a parent—for being there this past week with our nation's children, for showing such devotion to our most vulnerable. For bringing such humanity and true goodness into their lives. For lighting so many candles.

In my books, I often write about heroic young people, boys and girls who have overcome some major obstacle in their lives. In every case, these characters accomplish this task by reaching far inside themselves and finding unknown reserves of courage, wisdom, and devotion to those they love. Clearly, this journey of the hero is a metaphor for life, not just for characters who ride on dragons and whisper to unicorns, but for all of us. And there is nothing more heroic than the teacher who helps a young person discover those vast reserves inside himself or herself, who gives him hope when all seems hopeless, who shows her dreams in the midst of nightmares, and teaches us all to face fear with strong determination. You have been that hero.

Thank you so very much,
T. A. Barron

Dear Teachers,

As I'm writing this, I'm sitting in my new office in my new apartment in Brooklyn, New York.

My view is one I've always wanted—the New York City skyline. We all know how that skyline changed on September 11, 2001. I walk up here now and am reminded every day of just how important it is to work with children. I am reminded, too, of the wretched power of evil and hate that visited each one of us, and continues to do so. It is a tall order to not be afraid right now. You'll read this letter in December; I'm writing it in September. Perhaps my thoughts will change a bit over the next months. Perhaps they will not.

I want to thank you for being in your classrooms on the day that changed America. I've thought often of what was required of you that day. You had to deal with the tragedy personally; you were the person the children looked up to. I well remember when I was twelve and President Kennedy was shot. I was in math class. My math teacher came into the room crying and told us the news. She was pregnant and she held her stomach like she was trying to shield her unborn baby from the pain. She stood before us and wept. I remember the funeral procession in Washington, the pictures, the loss, but a huge part of that tragedy for me has always been defined by Mrs. Brown's courage to cry and not leave the room. I remember another teacher storming through the halls—furious, sad. Both responses were valid, real, and necessary. The commitment to walk into a classroom each day and teach children whatever comes, whatever madness the world throws at you, is an act of supreme love and courage. It is impossible to be a teacher and a coward.

I do believe each one of you was there with your gifts and your personalities for such a time as this. I believe you were placed right on the battle line to hold back the full intent of that evil from spreading. I believe that now you are fighting with renewed passion against hate. I know you're tired. I know you want to shield each and every student from malevolence and the horror of war. I also know that there are so many ways in which you have shown your students that this monstrosity won't be the final word. "Mankind has been di-

It is impossible to be a teacher and a coward.

—Joan Bauer

minished,” said the president of the Philippines. Yes, she’s right. But not forever.

It’s easy to see a sight like we did in New York City when the planes hit, the twin towers went up in flames, the buildings impossibly collapsed, and think that the bad guys are in charge. They are not. We have weapons to fight with. Hope. Love. Peace. Justice. Wisdom. Unity. Perseverance. Sacrifice. Those are the weapons you handle every day in your classrooms, whether the children are learning them at home or not. They are learning them from you. I wasn’t always the greatest student, but I learned mightily from my teachers. At this writing, my husband knows eight people who lost their lives in this tragedy. Evan had been invited to that financial technology breakfast at Windows on the World. He did not attend because we were moving from Connecticut to New York City. It brushed us that close. I thank God every day I still have him.

Here in New York a sadness and mourning have covered people like a shroud. There is a spirit of heaviness. Candles burn in windows and on porches of our new neighborhood, photos of those who died hang in windows, on gates, at bus stops, at stores, restaurants. In the first ten days, the smell of smoke here was still strong. Resolve is strong too. How do we make sense of madness? We don’t. We give ourselves to being part of the solution. We write and teach and remember how fast things can change. There’s an urgency now to overcome. I agree with that.

I just returned from a long car trip back and forth to Chicago where my husband and I drove our 19-year-old daughter and her friend to the University of Chicago. We were planning to fly. Chose not to. We pulled onto the FDR Drive and saw the long line of fire trucks and ambulances waiting to come into Ground Zero to help. It was a remarkable experience driving across the country seeing the flags flying from trucks, cars, and vans, flags flapping from oil refineries, from barns in Western Pennsylvania, neon lights blinking GOD BLESS AMERICA. We ate dinner in Cleveland. When people found out we were from New York City, they came up to the table to tell us they were

glad we were alive. We talked about teachers in the classroom over that long car trip. Jean and Kate offered an important insight.

A teacher is as important to a classroom as a mayor is to a city. While the adults looked to the President, the mayor, the governor to make sense of this tragedy, children looked to their teachers.

You were the president on September 11th, the mayor, the governor.

You were there. They will remember you for the rest of their lives.

We’re going to make it. It won’t be perfect. It won’t be easy. The landscape has changed. But hope is a strange thing. It doesn’t come at times of ease, doesn’t appear when all is going well. It comes at times of profound sadness, of national tragedy. It just shows up—this audacious, compelling, belligerent hope—it digs in its heels and refuses to leave. We think surely it must go eventually. The moment is too fierce for it to stay. But it sits with us, walks with us, watches us when we sleep, covers us like a blanket in our homes, in our classrooms. The gift of hope burrows deep. It is the antidote to fear and evil.

Hope is one of God’s most precious gifts. In times like this we learn how strong hope really is and how strong we can be because of it.

Thank you, friends, for being there.

God bless you all.

With admiration and affection,
Joan Bauer

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Dear Friends,

It’s been a week since the attack on our country—on my city—and I’m still reeling. Who isn’t? But yesterday, during a long walk, I passed a fire station where children’s cards were displayed. *Thank you, they said. We love you!* They had made sandwiches and baked cookies for the firefighters. They’d collected socks. They’d created a shrine of candles and flowers and poems. As I stood grieving along with others, I gave thanks not only for the obvious heroes of this tragedy, but for the brave and caring teachers who had been there to help their students through this terrible time. At that

moment I wished I were a classroom teacher, too—because being with young people is life affirming. Because having children depend on you makes you strong. Because listening to them makes you wiser.

I wondered, as I started my walk yesterday, if I would be able to get back to the “Fudge” book I’m writing, if I’d be able to find the humor in any situation again. By the time I got home, thanks to the children, I knew I would.

Thinking of all of you,
Judy Blume

Dear Teachers,

On September 11, I met with two groups of students at a scheduled event at Hickbees in San Jose, California. I had thought that the event might be canceled, given the terror of that morning, but teachers and parents had phoned in, hoping that the event would continue as scheduled, for they felt they needed something to lift their children’s spirits.

I confess that I was not sure I had it in me to lift anyone’s spirits that day, but I did my best. At the end of the presentation, a teacher asked, “Given the events of this morning, I wonder if you could speak to our children about hope?” All I knew how to do in response was to talk about books—books that enrich us and make us aware of all that is good and noble in our world, books that come into our hands from teachers and parents.

Afterwards, I thought about those teachers and about all teachers who are the spokespersons for hope for each child each day. I was a teacher for fifteen years, and I know the challenges of being in a classroom every day, of having to surmount one’s own fears and worries in order to guide the fragile lives that have been placed in our care.

When *Love That Dog*, one of the books I spoke about that day, was published, the publishers made up a bookmark with these words at the top: “A story about how words can change your life.” And I suppose that is a good summation, not only of that book, but of how I feel about so many books, and it is why I write: because books have enriched

and changed my life, and I have witnessed how they have enriched and changed young people’s lives. Books can teach us empathy by allowing us into other lives and other worlds; they can show us ways to be strong and to surmount our fears; they can remind us that there is beauty and kindness in this world.

But *Love That Dog* is also about a great teacher, a gentle, kind, guide who offers inspiration to her students in the form of poems. When readers ask me “Who was the model for that teacher?” my reply is: all of the gifted teachers I have met when I travel across the country and throughout Europe, all of the teachers who are in the classroom every day, offering inspiration and “raising the bar” of expectations.

Do not feel you are unsung heroes. Many of us know how much you give, how important you are to the shaping of young lives. I am not the only one who is grateful to you, but I’d like to thank you for all that you do.

Yours, with gratitude,
Sharon Creech

Dear Teachers,

By the time you read this there will be all kinds of perspective on the events of the week following September 11, 2001, which is when I’m writing it. I’ve been listening for the past week to news people and peers and strangers talk about the heroism of the rescuers; the police and fire fighters who have relentlessly returned to “ground zero” in hopes of saving maybe just one life. At the same time I’ve been watching psychologists and other child experts talk about how we as adults should walk through this unprecedented time with kids, and it occurs to me that there is another set of rescuers out there who have been and will be relentlessly returning to “ground zero” to rescue the kids who are responding to this and other traumatic events in their lives. I want to thank those of you who go back and go back and go back to a child when it appears he cannot be saved, those of you who look at his behavior, ugly as it sometimes gets, as a signal to you rather than something to

condemn. I want to thank those of you who painstakingly search for just the right story at just the right time for that child who is afraid to talk about *her* fear, because the only power she has over her life is control of the secret, but can talk about the fear of the protagonist, and therefore inch toward expression of the problem. And I want to thank you for being the person with whom she can talk about that protagonist.

I want to thank you for the hundred and eighty some odd days per year you walk into that school building, asked to do the impossible: respond to “accountability” standards that often appear ridiculous; respond to a mountain of paperwork that seems destined to bury your passion for your job under nothing more than its sheer volume; respond to complaints about too much or too little homework, educational versus extracurricular priorities, and on and on and on . . . and still have enough left to respond to the desperate look in a child’s eye.

Make no mistake about it (everyone else is using that phrase, I guess I can too). I know I have the easy job. I write my stories with the single vision of telling the best story I can. I talk about sex and abortion and religion and unspeakable atrocities. I stack the f- word upon the s- word upon the f- word again because that’s how I hear kids talking, but I only have to get it past my editor.



You have to get it past parents and administrators and other teachers; if it’s challenged, you’re the one who stands up for it. I want to thank you for standing up for it, and for all the stories, and all the kids you stand up for.

Our world just got a little edgier, a little more dangerous. In many cases, you’re the people charged with explaining that edgy, dangerous world to the kids who have the greatest fear of it because they live in homes that don’t provide safety. It shouldn’t be that way, but it is. One kid will fold while another dons a suit of armor while another will disappear while another will turn to comedy. You’ll have to guess. You’ll sift through the rubble and look for things that make sense. I want you to know there is one person out here who knows a little about what that is, and thanks you for it.

But there is another piece to all of this I have to mention. An hour ago I saw a report on hate crimes related to these recent events. A man walked into a store and killed another man of *Indian* descent. A message to “sand niggers” was written on a window. A young man drove his car eighty miles an hour into a mosque.

When I was a boy, I lived in a small town with a number of Japanese Americans. They were among our school’s finest students and best athletes. I remember wishing I could grow up to be Japanese. One of my best friends lent his name to Mr. Nak, among the all-time favorite fictional characters I have created. His father had fought with a crack Japanese outfit in Europe during World War II, his aunts and uncles spent that same war in America’s concentration camps. Their families were smart and respectful and generous, and I remember being astonished when I learned about the camps, and that my friend’s older cousin spent many elementary school afternoons being chased home, his pursuers yelling “Dirty Jap!” The owners of the Standard gas station used to find him hiding in the restroom until it was safe to come out. My friend and I went on to college together, lived as roommates, then spent a year playing Route 66, actually flipping a coin at major intersections to help us choose whether to go right or

left. One intersection was a doozy because we ended up in Honolulu. We walked down the beach one day feeling the heat and watching the crowd and he turned to me and said, "How does it feel?" I said "How does what feel?" "Being in the minority," he said. Almost twenty years after I first stood behind him waiting for our first-grade desk assignments, I got it. I said, "Probably not anywhere as bad as it felt for you at home." He crinkled his nose and shrugged, passing it off like he did so many things. He's never said another word about it.

There will be oblivious kids like me in your classes. There will be stoic kids like my friend and wounded kids like his cousin. There will be kids whose parents stood and cheered (or would have, had they been there) as John Rocker strode to the mound after his ill-advised *Sports Illustrated* interview. Those kids would have stood right with them, because it's way more important to be accepted by your parent than it is to do what's decent, even if you *know* what's decent.

It scares me that we're starting to talk cowboy talk. "Wanted Dead or Alive. We're comin' to smoke you out." I have been angry and, in times of simplistic thinking, have wanted my anger avenged. I have great appreciation that our leaders have been quick to separate American citizens of Mid-eastern descent from the culprits masterminding this terrorist act. But kids are young and need concrete answers; simple ones. And cowboy talk is simple. As educators we have an enormous task—that of making certain that those same Americans of Mid-eastern descent don't turn out to be the American Indians or the Japanese Americans of my generation. Sometimes the line between righteous anger and hatred is an extremely thin one, and we want to be careful here that we don't hand our children an attitude that will come back to shame them.

I was talking with a friend who works mostly with five and unders who have been sexually molested, physically or emotionally abused, or neglected, sometimes all of the above. She was as astonished by the events of September 11 as anyone, as glued to her TV set. But she said a sober-

ing thing. She said, "If the world could see some graphic image of the damage done to kids daily in this country, hurting them, turning our backs on them, excluding them, isolating them, compromising and taking advantage, it would see a 767 crashing into a tall building every day." Perspective.

So now teachers are the firemen and policemen of the country for our kids; the rescuers. Hate is the fire. It is the bomb; it is the rubble. Our leaders will do what they do to deal with the big picture. We are left to sort through each of the photographs.

One more thing to thank you for: for letting me say it.

Sincerely,
Chris Crutcher

Dear Teachers,

Much in the same way that many of us remember where we were and what we were doing when John Kennedy and Martin Luther King were killed, today's American children will have the horrific occurrences of September 11, 2001 as a benchmark in their young lives. And much in the same way as 1963 and 1969, many of today's children will be overwhelmed and completely incapable of making sense of this latest obscenity that the adult world has thrust upon them.

I was ten years old in 1963 and sixteen years old in 1969 and know now that I was very fortunate. I had parents who were politically and socially aware, adults who were able to give me and my siblings at least a rudimentary understanding of what had happened. We still sensed and were alarmed by the fear and uncertainty that were all around us, but our parents were able to supply a welcome mooring which gave us an assurance that, despite the cries to the contrary, this was not the end of the world.

Many of my peers, and many of today's children, have not been so fortunate. Their parents seem incapable or unaware or unwilling to see the impact that the news of the day has had on their children. Many parents seem to say, "The children don't understand or don't need to understand what's going on and I'm too _____ (you fill in the blank: busy, tired, shook up, worried, unin-

formed) to talk about it. Besides, someone else can do a better job of explaining this.” Guess who, almost by default, that someone else turns out to be? The teacher. And I say how fortunate for our country.

How fortunate we were in '63 and '69 that there were tens of thousands of Miss Henrys there to give a sense of continuity and security to their frightened, suddenly not-so-worldly students. How even more fortunate we are at this unimaginable time in 2001 to have tens of thousands of Mr. Alums in front of their classes tomorrow answering the unasked question, soothing the un-

You, more so than any other profession, hold the hope for our future in your hands every day. How fortunate for this country.

—Christopher Curtis

spoken fear, providing the unoffered consolation. In other words, being a teacher. I know it's not much to offer, but please accept my heartfelt admiration for the Herculean job you do. I know it may not often seem to be the case, but you are greatly appreciated. Many of us realize you are asked to do so much that is not in the teaching plan or a part of the curriculum. In this case, many of your students will ask that you explain the unexplainable, and the impressive thing is you will make a hell of an effort to do it.

As your students ask you why, please help instill a much needed voice of tolerance and understanding into the frenzied madness that is being whipped up. Please take the time to let them know how important it is that we look beyond and get beyond the immediate, knee-jerk reaction that we all feel.

This is neither the end of the world nor the end of American civilization as we know it, and many children need to hear that from the person who is one of the pillars in their life, their teacher. You, more so than any other profession, hold the hope for our future in your hands every day. How fortunate for this country.

Thank you sincerely,
Christopher Curtis

Dear Teachers,

I've always said that my heroes are people who have survived difficult childhoods and good teachers who stay in teaching. After the terrorist attacks, I obviously add to that police, firefighters, EMT workers . . . and so many others.

As a former English teacher, I wonder what I would do, what I would say if I still were in front of a classroom. I'm not sure of the exact words. I'm not sure of how I would handle it, how I would react.

What I do know is that there are many teachers out there who are not sure either . . . but that you are out there doing the best that you can . . . and that best is quite wonderful. You are offering comfort. You are giving your students the chance to find the words that they need to say. You were able to put your own grief and shock and sadness aside, enough to go back into the classroom and teach. You've given them books to read . . . books to educate, to entertain, to take them into other worlds, to help them to understand their world a little more. Because of teachers and schools, they've been able to go back into a routine, back to something they know.

I looked up the word hero in the American Heritage Dictionary and the first definition was “a person noted for feats of courage” and then it said “or nobility of purpose.” Some of you may perform feats of courage in your classroom but I believe that for many of you, it's your nobility of purpose that makes you heroes. You care about the kids. You care about the subject matter. You care about communication. You give them your best and want them to do their best.

There are many days I miss being in front of a classroom, of sitting in a faculty room, being with others who care about their students and about the subject matter. The reality is that I made another choice, to be a full-time writer. Thank you for making the choice to be a teacher.

I am grateful to you. You continue to be my heroes.

Sincerely,
Paula Danziger

Dear Teachers,

I have been where you are today. Of course, nothing I had to deal with can compare to the events of September 11, but I've watched young people troop into my classroom the morning after various local or national tragedies, dressed in aloof disdain, or wrapped in gentle tears, fear thinly veiled in their eyes. Many are silent, arms wrapped around themselves in self-protection. Some laugh—a little too loud and too long. A few joke around like it doesn't matter, but it does.

As an adult, and a teacher, and a person who is expected to deal with the complexity of emotions that adolescents toss at you on a daily basis, you must first deal with your own grief and fear. Your heart pounds with terror when a door slams too loudly or a fire siren screams outside your classroom window. You want to cry, but you're not sure if you should cross that line of personal propriety in front of your students.

It's okay to weep, to show your emotions, to let them see your humanity. But adolescents live in self-designed rooms full of mirrors that reflect only themselves. They need to voice their own fears, share their anger and sorrow. They need to talk, they need to be able to ask questions, even if the questions have no answers right now, and they need to write.

The great thing about being an English teacher is that every human thought, every passionate idea, every emotional response is a writing activity. Victories and tragedies—whatever happens in the world—is potentially a writing lesson. That's the basis of literature. Great writers have always captured the best and worst of how one segment of humanity deals with another. The jealousy of Othello or the heroism of Beowulf. Gulliver's criticism, Sydney Carton's sacrifice, Jane Pittman's dignity. Writers and poets weep with us and express our pain in words that we are incapable of expressing. That's power.

We need to show our students that power and how to use it. By writing our feelings, we release them. Let them write poetry—strong freewriting expressions of anger, fear, frustration, and grief.

Let them write essays and stories. Let them write letters to heroes and heroines of that day, as well as to families who may need an emotional boost in the coming months after the initial attention has faded.

And let them read. Show them how great poets dealt with tragedy in their own lives. I would expand their world, and introduce them to "Sonnet" by Alfred Duckett, and "The House on the Hill" by Edward Arlington Robinson, and Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay," or "Acquainted with the Night." I'd find poems about heroes and sorrow, as well as those which deal with victory and triumph. Poems with humor are infrequent, but wonderful. Laughter is sometimes what students need after trying to digest a tragedy. Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" is delightful nonsense, but manages to hide quite a bit of meaning beneath its foolishness. Choose your own favorite poems and writings that fit the mood and the needs of the students you teach. The words are there—waiting to soothe and heal.

Our children need our support, protection, and understanding. They need hugs and encouragement and reassurance. They need for us to light a candle, no, a blowtorch, to show them the way. They need for you to wrap them in literature and love. I know you can do it. You always have. Peace be with you.

Sincerely,
Sharon M. Draper

Dear Teachers,

Here's a short story about me, the power of literature, and the World Trade Center. It just so happens that this is a true story which is the subject of my forthcoming book for YA readers, *Hole*

Your heart pounds with terror when a door slams too loudly or a fire siren screams outside your classroom window. You want to cry, but you're not sure if you should cross that line of personal propriety in front of your students.

—Sharon M. Draper

in My Life—a book I wrote as a tribute to literature because it has always nourished me during hard times.

When I was in high school I decided to write books. This did not seem to be a monumental decision, but it was a monumental task. And the only reason I held any hope that I could eventually write books is that other writers wrote about their trials and tribulations, and their odd writing struggles, on their way to writing great books, which gave me hope. And like me, their hope was nourished from reading the potent work of others. Call it a chain of hope linking one generation to another. As a young man I was aware that each book I read gave me a boost toward my goal. So I read. But the writing didn't come—not good writing. Still, I had books.

And then I did something foolish. I got involved with a group of drug smugglers. This seemed somewhat romantic, and since I was not good at writing books, I figured living like a book was the next best thing. One thing led to another, and I hooked up with a British underground film maker who had a ton of hashish and wanted to make a good bit of money. I was flat broke, and the prospect of making a lot of money very quickly seemed too attractive to pass up. Plus, it would pay for my entire college education, which I figured was a good step toward writing.

Together, we sailed a yacht from St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands up to New York City. This was in the summer of 1971. After three weeks on the sea where I saw nothing higher than distant transport ships, I woke one overcast morning to find myself below the tip of Manhattan and there, rising above me, were the twin towers—one complete and the other almost. The moment I saw them I loved them and thought of Mayakovsky's great poem, "A Cloud in Trousers"—that's exactly what they looked like—two massive pants legs holding up the sky. He loved New York and, as many great writers, wrote tributes to the city, and, I thought, someday I would too. A few weeks later, the Secret Service (there was counterfeit money involved) and Customs Officers converged on the Chelsea Hotel in New York and soon I was ar-

rested, in court, and sentenced to six years in a federal prison. My life was a complete meltdown. I had still not written any books, and now was in prison. It was bleak, but they had a library.

I started reading, furiously. Even though I was behind bars, my mind wasn't confined to the cell I occupied. I also had a job in the hospital running the X-ray machine, and from being in the hospital I saw a lot of action, and had the opportunity to help others, which helped me. It wasn't long before I began to write. I had an old Constance Garnett translation of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and I used it as a journal and wrote in my cramped handwriting between the lines and around the margins. We were not allowed to keep journals, and if we did they were confiscated. But my *Karamazov* was left undiscovered by the guards, and I figured my journal writing would be the raw material for my first novel. It made sense to me. So many writers had turned adversity into inspiration. From prison, I applied to college, and when I was accepted the parole board granted me an early release so I could move on with my education. But first, as I was checking out of prison, the release guard noticed my secret journal, and it was taken away. I was crushed. I had always figured that prison was worth the time spent if the result was a book. It seemed a fair trade to me. But suddenly the book was gone, and prison seemed such a waste.

When I was released, the WTC was finished and I went down to look at it. It was incomplete when last we met. But now it was complete, massive and powerful—and I was on parole, down and out, but struggling to complete myself. Now the WTC is gone, and I have reached many of my goals. The lessons of history have revealed that everything has a beginning, middle, and end—except for literature. Books are an expression of who we are, what we feel, and how we carve out a new world where one didn't exist. There is no ending to the power of literature as each generation rises up to express itself. And as much as I've admired the buildings, and as deeply shocked as I am by the savage attack on innocent people, I know that somehow it is my place in life to express the hope

I still feel for the next generation of writers—to continue the chain.

In troubled times I've always gravitated toward books. The other day, in order to pull myself together, I walked over to the Boston Public Library. I sat in the great research room surrounded by books which sat cover to cover on the shelves. There were millions of them and they got along so well with each other. I wanted to climb up and be one among them, to touch them, lean on them—each volume a little tower of hope.

For students, you are their tower of hope.

“Dear Teachers.” Copyright © 2001 Jack Gantos. Teach peace,
Jack Gantos

Dear Teachers,

When I was a child during World War II, even though the bombs and guns never came here, I anxiously scanned the skies for enemy planes and was frightened on those dark nights when almost all lights had to be kept off. Later, nothing could calm my terror of the atomic bomb or soothe my horror at the photos I saw in *Life* magazine after the death camps were opened. But I was able to take courage from a book called *Brave Girls* and another called *Snow Treasure*, both about the wartime heroism of children.

I know that you, as teachers, are aware that books can do much to help children understand terrible, cruel events, can show them the unconquerable strength of the human spirit, can reassure them and give them hope—and I am grateful.

I am also grateful that you, as teachers, know that children can be comforted by feeling useful—by being allowed to help those harmed by disaster and those who are themselves helping to aid victims and to right whatever wrong has been done; children can easily feel isolated and useless when adults are involved in a great enterprise which has no role for them.

While World War II was raging, we schoolchildren felt part of the war effort when we knitted little woolen squares (mine looked more like trapezoids!) to make afghans for wounded soldiers, and when we filled small white boxes with toothpaste, combs, and other toiletries for the troops.

Your students are older than we were, but I know you will be able to help them find ways to help that will mean as much to them as our efforts did to us. I am grateful that you, as teachers, understand that opportunities for self-expression can solace children and help them process terrible events. Tears came to my eyes the other night when I saw, on television, a “Wall of Hope” made by children in Holden, Maine, prompted by their teacher—a school corridor wall covered with drawings and words expressing patriotism and love.

While most of us sat stunned and grieving in the week after the September 11 tragedy, you were there in classrooms across the nation, helping the children of America understand what has happened to their country and doing all you could to comfort them and let them express their feelings. Again on television, I saw a warm and sensitive teacher gently leading her class in an open discussion of the horror, skillfully drawing out their feelings and listening respectfully to their responses and their ideas for solutions. And I know that in the weeks and months ahead, teachers will continue to do the same, and that you will introduce your classes to books that will soothe and inspire them, and that you will invent projects like the Wall of Hope.

As a writer, words are my primary weapons against injustice, prejudice, violence, and cruelty, and my primary means of communicating love and compassion, loyalty and joy. But right now, children cannot wait for us writers to shape our words into fiction and nonfiction, poetry and drama. I am more grateful than I can say that you are there for the children of America in ways we cannot be.

Thank you and God bless,
Nancy Garden

While World War II was raging, we schoolchildren felt part of the war effort when we knitted little woolen squares (mine looked more like trapezoids!) to make afghans for wounded soldiers, and when we filled small white boxes with toothpaste, combs, and other toiletries for the troops.

—Nancy Garden

Dear Teachers,

I stood in disbelief before my TV on September 11, 2001 watching the nation's indestructible Twin Towers explode in flames and collapse.

I stood horrified as firemen, policemen, and rescue workers disappeared under the black clouds of hell that engulfed them.

I listened trembling on my phone to stories of friends who had run down stairs to safety then turned around to help others. Then I watched as the Pentagon exploded into flame.

I saw the hole where a hijacked jet was driven ten feet into the ground by American heroes.

And the bells tolled and the alarms rang and voices screamed. Heroes were created, lived, and

**A camera turned on a school-
teacher leading her young
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**Dust was swirling, people
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precious charges north.**

—Jean Craighead George

some died. Helplessly, I, like everyone else across America, wondered what to do. The frustration was as brutal as a sledgehammer beating.

I didn't know. Millions didn't know. But one group did. A camera turned on a schoolteacher leading her young class calmly, quietly to safety. Dust was swirling, people were running, but the

teacher was smiling and chatting as she herded her precious charges north. Under her arm was a book.

They were gone from the screen.

I closed my eyes. I knew what that lovely teacher was doing. She was sitting somewhere with her little cluster of children and reading to them. She would read until the parents came.

And, I saw little faces lose fear as they were carried into the story and out of the holocaust.

Teachers, I thought. They of all of us know best what to do—carry on. Carry on with literature, science, the arts. In quiet classrooms across the nation the teachers calmly sent the message to our children that knowledge is a conqueror. What heroes you are. Not just September 11, 2001, but every day.

Thank you,
Jean Craighead George

Dear Teachers,

The day after Pearl Harbor, I wore a dress with a zipper in front, not a real zipper, but one embroidered on a white background with blue thread. I can picture that dress as clearly as if it hung in my closet today. How afraid I was that morning; how reassured I was when Mrs. Benham, my kindergarten teacher, ran her finger from the top of the zipper along my neck, and under my chin. "Chin up," she said, and sat me next to her as she read us a story. Since then, I've always associated books with being safe, and warm, and contented.

As a writer of children's books, I've been lucky enough to crisscross this country visiting schools. In Unalakleet, Alaska, children knocked on the their teachers' doors every evening for help with homework, to listen to a story, or just for companionship.

In Mount Vernon, Ohio, a teacher, book under her arm, went directly from her classroom to visit a child in the hospital every day. Each year in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a teacher cooks a Thanksgiving turkey with all the trimmings so the children can celebrate together as a school family. In St. Albans, New York, a fourth-grade teacher gave a shy child enough confidence to begin writing down her own words . . . and fed her book after book.

Teachers routinely spend their own money for gifts, for classroom decorations, and most of all for books . . . books that show the beauty of our language, the strength of our heritage. And it seems to me that next to parents, no one in this country is more important than the teacher who nurtures, shapes, and encourages our youngsters.

Since the tragedy at the World Trade Center, I've thought of all of you constantly, hearing about the courage of the teachers in New York City, knowing that it would be up to you to find the right words, the right book, to reassure your students in the months ahead. I believe you will be able to do that. I know you will. How blessed we are to have you, how blessed the children are.

Gratefully,
Patricia Reilly Giff

Dear Teachers,

There are no words; pictures are enough.

The smoke still floats over Brooklyn as I write this. I can smell it in the air. The number of missing and presumed dead tops 5,000. The stories of individual grief spill out in 30-second time frames on TV. My city, New York City, is a wounded giant.

I am not a theologian; I do not have the definitive word on the nature of evil. I am not a military strategist, so I don't know what we should do on the battlefield. And I am not a fortune-teller, so I can't predict what will happen in the future.

But I am a teacher.

Like you, I have spent the recent weeks listening to students in class. Like you, I have been reading their e-mails that give voice to their fears about what will happen to them, and what will happen to their country. "I'm so scared," Robyn writes. "Will there be more attacks?" I hardly know what to say, but like you, I know how to listen. And like you, I know that literature offers some answers.

Literature teaches me the range of human behavior, from the nobility of Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird* to the evil of the Thane of Cawdor in *Macbeth*, from the goodness of Morris in *The Assistant* to the barbarism of Jack in *Lord of the Flies*. And literature offers me solace. One of my favorite poems in times of tragedy is Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Epitaph for the Race of Man," in which she asks after a flood where "trees and homes are uprooted," does a poor farmer "drop upon his shadow"? The answer is a resounding NO! for he "sculls across the roof. . . (with) a pocket full of seeds."

It is teachers who are the ones with the pocket full of seeds.

It is teachers, across the country, who show me what is actually taking place right now—the caring, listening, nurturing, and tending to myriad questions from wells of pain and doubt. From the classrooms of New York to the classrooms of Hawaii, teachers across the land are making noble efforts to help students come to terms with an event that defies explanation or analysis.

Maybe the best answer comes from my wife, Elyse, also a teacher. When she called the other day and I asked what she was doing, she answered, "I'm in school doing my regular schoolwork."

In these irregular times maybe what is needed most is exactly "regular schoolwork." This is not to say we forget or don't take action, but is to say that teachers provide the continuance of continuity, the rule of regularity, the port in the firestorm that allows us space and time to regroup and rebuild.

We wait for the flood waters to recede, the wreckage to be removed, the building to begin, knowing that after the flood it is the teachers with their pockets full of hope, the seeds if you will, doing their "regular schoolwork" for the many mornings to come that have to shine brighter than the darkness that surrounded us on that horrific day.

With love,
Mel Glenn



Dear Teachers,

Think back to the week before the terrorist attack. You pushed hard to teach, feeling the tension of too much curriculum and the need to prepare your students for impending assessments. You felt the pressure of a dominating future.

Now think back to September 11th. Your students were filled with questions, bursting with talk. On that infamous day you pushed your plan for

You are in a privileged position to hear these voices—so loud, contradictory, yet filled with passion as only teens can explode. When they know you listen with genuine respect, they speak at length.

—Don Graves

I admire you for the time you take to listen. You are in a privileged position to hear these voices—so loud, contradictory, yet filled with passion as only teens can explode. When they know you listen with genuine respect, they speak at length.

Since September 11th you have moved into a new time dimension. Your focus is much more on the present. You have moved toward greater depth as the curriculum has slowed to allow more space for students who must test the edges of their own thinking.

Instinctively you know that discussions and writing will require more time as you give more attention to characters. “Yes, but what did Lincoln want here? He had some choices to make and why did he head in this direction? Tell me about some tough choices you have had to make in the last three months.” You are aware that perhaps you have sprinted through curriculum in the past, but now you have slowed because you see a quality of engagement you haven’t seen before.

I admire you for the ways in which you have allowed your students to do more writing. Instinctively, you know that in times of turmoil and ter-

ror, students need to test the edges of their thinking; they really don’t know what they think until they see what they say. You have walked with them through their drafts toward a clarity that is surprising to each of you. But this is slow going. Moving to depth is always slow going and some aspects of curriculum have to be sacrificed. You’ve made the right decision to move to greater depth. Ironically, it is usually in the deeper experiences that more curriculum elements are combined. What you used to teach separately suddenly comes together. Of course, you already knew that and are rejoicing in its rediscovery.

I am impressed by the way in which you have emphasized the conditions for effective literacy. That takes courage because you are the chief condition in the classroom. Your students know how passionately you engage with your texts; when you read the first four lines of Marge Piercy’s poem “To Be of Use” from her book *The Art of Blessing the Day*, they knew right where you stood:

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.

You write with them, chat about texts as one reader/writer to another. Yes, it takes courage to put it on the line.

I admire the changes you have made since September 11th. Suddenly, you saw what was trivial and a waste of time. Your language has changed. You used to say, “Some day you will need this.” Instead, the present tense has more meaning. You say, “You need this now.” And they agree.

I wish you much courage and energy for this important journey.

Sincerely,
Don Graves

Dear Teachers,

Much has been made—quite rightly—of the heroism of the firefighters, police officers, and other rescue workers in New York City after the tragedies of September 11. It strikes me that there has also been a quieter heroism going on across the country: by teachers rescuing their students’

sense of hope and trust and optimism in the face of events that terrified the teachers as well. I got a small taste of the difficulty of your jobs that fateful Tuesday when I had to explain to my own children why anyone would deliberately crash planes full of innocent people into buildings that were also full of innocent people. But my children are fortunately still young enough to believe, unquestioningly, “Mommy and Daddy will keep you safe.” And I could take refuge in my faith and my children’s faith; I could tell them, “I think we should pray.”

Teachers—public school teachers—presumably couldn’t do that. So they were on their own, standing in front of classrooms, explaining life and death, good and evil, innocence and guilt, fear and courage.

But when I think about it, I realize that teachers do that all the time. Every time you expose your students to literature, you introduce them to new ways to view all those abstract issues. You give them a language to express their deepest fears and dreams. You ask them questions that make them think. Do we want a world like *1984*? If Anne Frank could still believe in the goodness of humankind, why can’t we?

One of my neighbors is a little boy who is wild and rude and misbehaving and desperately craving adult attention. He likes to hang out at my house. In the aftermath of September 11, my husband and I were having one of those, “What’s the meaning of our lives?” conversations. And my husband, only half-joking, suggested that maybe our purpose on this earth had nothing to do with our careers or our family or our volunteer work. “Maybe the true reason we’re here is to try to make sure that our favorite neighbor doesn’t grow up to be a terrorist,” he said.

And that is, in one sense, what all of you do all the time, sometimes with children who are even more troubled and troubling. You teach your students to choose creativity instead of destruction, understanding instead of hatred, truth instead of evil lies.

I thank you for all of that,
Margaret Peterson Haddix

Dear Teachers,

In September, the nights turn crisp, the days dance with bees. In September, the flowers, those valiant ones still blooming, wear riotous red, yowzer yellow. In September, the maple outside my bedroom window, the first visual gift of my day, given freely each morning after the sun burns through the fog, declares itself ahead of the fashion trend with its early and enthusiastic fall wardrobe.

In September, raucous birds and manic insects celebrate the boundless blue of a cloudless afternoon. In September, the monarch flaunts its orange. And in September, in schools across the nation, classes resume and last year’s children return a little older, a little wiser than they were the September before.

This September, however, was unlike any most of us have ever experienced. This September our children aged too fast, got a face full, a heart full, a soul full of experience. And you were the ones to reach out to them, to steady them as they teetered on the fast track to maturity, even as you yourselves privately reeled.

How can we as a nation thank you for gathering our children into your arms and into your hearts and providing them with a cushion of compassion upon which to lay their troubled heads? I sat at my desk and stared at my computer screen unable to squeeze words out of the numbness, out of the despair that enveloped me. Yet you took a direct hit from every direction: first your personal shock upon hearing the news, then the concern for your own family and friends, the shock of your students, and the distress of their families, and you remained standing. For many of you, there was not even a moment to find your balance, to regain your equilibrium. You were on the front line of this storm, and you sheltered our children, kept them safe, and gave them room and a compassionate ear, as many of them came face to face for the first time with immediate grief, with an awakening of life’s fragility.

If Anne Frank could still believe in the goodness of humankind, why can’t we?

—Margaret Peterson Haddix

In September, you pass out your class sets of books, books you believe will help open your students to broader thought, greater substance, give them opportunities to grow as individuals through the literature you instinctively know is right for their cocky innocence, their willing hunger, their challenging intelligence. You did not know when you labored over your September plans that this September would bring a tidal wave of sorrow

This September our children aged too fast, got a face full, a heart full, a soul full of experience. And you were the ones to reach out to them.

—Karen Hesse washing over your classrooms. But your profession is truly about giving your students the skills they need to stay afloat despite adversity, to think even as the wave is breaking over their heads, to keep their focus and to pay honor to their hearts. You have helped the students you had last year to confront the unbearable challenge of this year and find the courage and wisdom to weather even this impossible storm. And you have made it possible for your students this year to grieve and hope and grow in spite of the destruction.

For the sacrifices you have made, for the comfort you have given, for the ache you have endured, for the next generation you have aided through this terrible lesson in grief, for the many moments of this past September when you kept your own grip in order to lift up your students and save them from drowning, I thank you from the depths of my soul.

With gratitude and profound respect,
Karen Hesse

Dear Teachers,

Today I write to you, not as a writer, but as a mother of a ninth grader. I want to say thank you. Thank you for the outstanding way you presented our nation's tragedy to your students. While we wondered how we'd explain the devastation to our children, you stood in America's classrooms, facing the problem head-on.

Thank you for reaching beyond your job description and thinking of our children as yours.

You were the first to listen to their worries and offer comfort even when you were filled with confusion and doubts. You commended those students that expressed compassion, but also recognized the voice of sarcasm as the voice of fear.

Thank you for your calm presence during the storm. Our children may never tell you, but your reassurance helped them sleep that night. You made our jobs as parents easier.

Thank you for your wisdom. You knew when to reopen the books just as you knew when to close them. For you understood that great literature does more than entertain. You knew a good story could be a refuge and a powerful example of survival.

Most of all, thank you for your courage. You proved that heroes don't only exist on the pages of books, but also stand in front of classrooms.

Gratefully yours,
Kimberly Willis Holt

Dear Teachers,

I left the classroom 11 years ago when my daughter, Emma, was born, so I no longer face a group of young people looking to the teacher for answers and advice. Instead, I face a sixth-grade daughter who looks to me for help in making sense of the murderous acts of September 11. What do I tell her? I tell her how the horror has affected me.

Whenever I see the replay of the jetliners knifing into the twin towers at the World Trade Center, my heart breaks. Whenever I see the sickening sight of the towers sliding into rubble, one after the other, my heart sinks in despair. Whenever I recall how the third jetliner circled above the White House before slicing into the Pentagon, my heart swells with outrage. Whenever I read stories of children who lost parents, parents who lost sons and daughters, friends who lost friends, my heart wants to get even. "That's kind of the way I feel," she tells me.

And yet, through it all, I tell Emma, we cannot be blinded. By heartbreak or rage or despair or sadness. Because when we are blinded—whether it be by hatred, greed, love, religion, revenge, patriotism—we lose our way as individuals

and as a people. Examples in literature abound. Ahab and Lady Macbeth were blinded. So were many of the townspeople in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. And, of course, the extremists who incinerated thousands of innocent people on a Tuesday we will forever remember.

When we are blinded, we see Christian but not Muslim. We see straight but not gay. We see rich but not poor. We see man but not woman. We see, in short, only ourselves. As Shakespeare said, "Blind they are, and keep themselves enclosed." We forget what Buddhists call "interbeing," the realization that all sentient beings are connected in a most fundamental way.

Now is a time for us to encourage kids to tell their stories of this tragedy. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Jewish Chasidism, always answered his followers' questions with a story. One day, a man asked him why he always did that. He said, "I answer your questions with stories because salvation lies in remembrance." By telling a story our kids can begin to give some sort of meaning to the suffering we all see and to the heartbreak we all feel. By telling a story we slowly feel less like victims. We somehow begin to get back control that we have lost. As Richard Stone said in *The Healing Art of Storytelling*, "by the simple act of description . . . even acute suffering can be redeemed."

The job of a classroom teacher, never easy, is most difficult in times of turmoil and confusion. The same can be said of parenting. But now is the time for us to help kids see. A time to let kids tell their stories. A time to listen to them. Things will never be the same. But, as slowly as life itself, will come healing.

Be well,
Paul B. Janeczko

Dear Teachers,

One of my most vivid memories of World War II was when France fell. Our high school French teacher, Mademoiselle Dimond, talked with us instead of instructing us that morning. She told us about her home outside Paris, and she asked us to talk about our homes, things we loved that were

there, and we were suddenly so comforted in our realization that she felt deeply about life. We shouted "Vive La France!" before we left to go to the next class, as though we were shouting for the safety of everyone's country, and everyone's home.

Yes, dear teachers, it has always been you who have had the heart to show it is as human to hurt as it is to laugh. I can remember the first time a teacher ever cried while sharing a poem about a woman walking through the fields in gloves, "missing so much and so much." I ran to the library after class to copy this poem by Frances Cornford into my diary. I had never seen a grown-up so vulnerable, courageously giving the students something lovely and lyrical.

My mail tells me that some of the books I've written have been put into the right hands by sensitive teachers. Some frightened teenager worrying over being gay thanked me for *Deliver Us from Evie*, saying her seventh-grade teacher had suggested it would

help her get through confused feelings, and it had. All of us have received mail like that.

I sometimes find time to slip away at conventions so that I can hear one of you book-talk. As the old song goes: nobody does it better. A few times you have come to me to thank me for always answering letters kids send. I stop you in mid-sentence: no, it's you who need to be thanked. It's you who inspire young readers. It's you who taught *The Chocolate War*, *Annie on My Mind*, *Arilla Sun Down*, *The Move Makes the Man* and so many others. It's you who understood the power of young adult literature, praised it, defended it, asked kids their opinions of it, and sometimes simply shared your pleasure in it. Now you will stand in front of young people who have seen the greatest horror of their lives, on TV: not just what happened to those two towers on a sunny day in September, but what happened to adults, out-of-control, and powerless, all of it in our America.

**When we are blinded, we see
Christian but not Muslim.**

We see straight but not gay.

**We see rich but not poor. We
see man but not woman. We
see, in short, only ourselves.**

—Paul B. Janeczko

And thank God it was in the fall, when school is in session, and they have you to go to. You'll know what to do, even though it's not written down for you any place, and even though you have felt the same punch of fear and sadness we all have. You will handle it because you know our kids, and you know your job, and you know that when something happens that's way beyond your job, you'll take care of it. You have heart and strength, our trust, and our gratitude. And our thanks, all of you.

With love,
M. E. Kerr

Dear Teachers,

Our world has shattered, and although we are all now in the process of trying to put ourselves back to work and go on, I keep thinking of you teachers who have, I believe, the most difficult task of all: putting the world back together for children. You must take in information and then, in what I can only think of as some sort of alchemy, make the incomprehensible comprehensible for children. I have been a storyteller for nearly all of my life and I know that many of you have brought



my books into your classrooms. But I ask you now to tell other stories—true stories of the fire fighters who were terribly frightened but in spite of all did their job, of the brave dogs and their handlers that sought out possible survivors, of the mayor who risked his own life and spoke to the people of New York in such direct and simple language—such good language—that I turned to my husband and asked was Rudy Giuliani ever a schoolteacher?

Teachers, you are heroes and deserve to stand shoulder to shoulder with every rescue worker in New York City. You bring truth and comfort to children. Thank you for being with America's children this week and for keeping them safe.

Love,
Kathryn Lasky

Dear Teachers,

As I watched the events of September 11 take place before my eyes on TV, I was at first numb. Initially, great pain induces this numbness; it is how we manage to survive, to gather our residual energy, so that we can plan our response.

That is what we are doing now, as a nation. We are gathering our energy. We are planning our response. And this is so very difficult, because we do not know exactly what will yet be demanded of us, what horrors and difficult decisions we will have to face.

Characters in novels are filled with conflict, dilemma, and choices. That is the essence of drama. It is also the essence of real life. Every generation and every person is presented not only with a life mission, but with a moment when he or she must decide whether and how to fulfill that mission. It is at such a moment that we now stand, all of us together, Americans and people who love freedom.

I have thought continually about the children in this land, and about their teachers, who in time of crisis come together, the one seeking answers, the other trying to provide wisdom. And it is a dual role. Sometimes the student is the wise one. Sometimes the teacher seeks answers. Mostly I have hoped in my heart that teachers and students, parents and children, all who love and care for each

other will draw very close at this time, to learn from each other, to gain and give comfort. It takes a lot of listening to overcome fear and replace it with a sense of purpose.

What shall be our purpose at this time? Every novel also asks this ultimate question: Why are we here? What is the meaning of the story? What is the challenge of this moment?

This moment's challenge is no different from the quest that has both divided and united humankind from the beginning: it is to make the world a better place, to abolish hatred and rancor, to build up our people and our cities, to make the land flourish and yield abundant harvest, to find cures for illness, to make death bearable, and as individuals, to live noble lives, with integrity, with heart.

What is heart? It is the opposite of the quick fix, the instant gratification, the "Me" centered universe. Heart means patient listening, eternal giving, restraint and pause, looking to the ultimate relevance of what we do. Each small act of ours seems so insignificant. Combined, they can spell either grandeur or degradation. And this is what teachers and students do together day by day, performing and reinforcing small acts. It matters what is proclaimed on the classroom bulletin board. It matters what teachers and students say in discussion groups. It matters how we treat the child who is sometimes too silent or too loud, too distant or too pushy. The lift of an eyebrow, the curl of lip can speak volumes of disdain, leading to rejection and ultimately persecution. And whom do we persecute? Someone who is different. It worries me that children of Arab descent may find themselves now to be targets of hatred and revenge. We who have ourselves been singled out in this way know the terror and the ache that goes with acts of hatred, the helpless feeling. Why *me*? What have I done?

Our greatest resource at a time of crisis—indeed at any time—is kindness. In these past days we have seen kindness spread abroad on a scale even greater than the destruction that initiated it. A smile at the right moment can be a great act of kindness. Waiting in line, resisting a certain re-

mark, holding back criticism, offering help—all these are acts of great kindness. There is the kindness of withholding judgement, of seeing the world from the other fellow's eyes, and of doing one small extra chore that was not required. Kindness is providing a clean bed, a good meal, a warm sweater. Kindness is a word—thank you. I love you. Please.

Some of my best friends, my most important role models, are teachers. I still remember my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Stevens, who hugged me and didn't mind my "silly" questions, realizing that English was still a new language for me. I remember my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Paulus, who taught us psalms from the Bible. I remember my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Minnock, who let me be her helper after school and inspired me to become a teacher. I remember my sixth-grade teacher, Miss Swank, who, when I committed an unkind act, gave me a poem to memorize instead of a reprimand. And I remember that poem still. I remember a seventh-grade teacher who allowed for flexibility in the assignment of an essay, and when she saw my poem, read it aloud to the class. That was one of those small moments that held vast potential, for I realized not only my ability, but also the approval it might bring. All these teachers had two things in common: they were kind, but they were also demanding. They were good teachers.

A good teacher seems to have time enough for every child, and to know what each one needs. That boy needs a "high five." Another kid wants a hug. A third seeks acknowledgment for having improved. A good teacher knows how to convey huge meanings in a single glance, a word, or a gesture. A good teacher seeks the purpose and the potential in what has happened before, and in what is happening now. A good teacher sees to it that we do not miss the meaning or waste the potential of critical events, like those we are living today.

God bless America's teachers. God bless the children. God bless us all.

Sonia Levitin

It matters how we treat the child who is sometimes too silent or too loud, too distant or too pushy. —Sonia Levitin

Dear Teachers,

In the aftermath of tragedy, I have read about movie productions halted and books-in-progress abandoned because their plots, once deemed simple “thriller” and “action,” suddenly were ominously too true, too close to home.

I am uneasily aware that a book of mine published last year, *Gathering Blue*, is set in a world that has turned savage and primitive after the collapse of organized civilization. In this world—where there are no longer books—the people hear their entire history chanted in a ritual called “the Ruin Song” once each year.

—Lois Lowry

One tiny section of the lengthy song invokes the talismanic repetition of what seem meaningless words:

Bogo tabal
Timore toron
Totoo now gone

“. . . it tells the name of lost places,” a character explains. Young readers, those who enjoy puzzling out such things, find hidden in the strange words the names of contemporary cities. Bogota. Baltimore. Toronto. *Lost places. Now gone.*

It seemed, when I wrote it, a fantasy. On September 11th, watching the towers crumble and collapse, fantasy receded and became real. My own words seemed eerily prophetic and I winced at the thought of young people realizing that the streets and buildings and schools and playgrounds of their childhood can disappear in an instant of horror.

I wanted to shield them. *Don't read this book. Don't look at the TV. Cover your eyes.*

Odd, to have those thoughts during Banned Books Week.

But then I remembered teachers. I remembered Miss Louise Heckman's measured voice and her firm arm across my shoulders in 1944. She was my fourth-grade teacher when my father was on an island in the Pacific and the huge headlines in our small-town newspaper scared me. She didn't

tell me to cover my eyes. She told me to read. And she told me what to read, and how to talk about it, and where to find comfort in words.

I remember other teachers, too, over the years: their names, their voices, their compassion, their presence. Most of them are gone, now. But I see their counterparts in the schools of today and I can hear in my mind, now, the voices in classrooms across the country: clear, resolute, reassuring.

As our country tries now to shape a future free of fear, the courage and wisdom to guide, reassure, and educate children will be front-line attributes. Those who do this work will, as always, be as underpaid as foot soldiers and firefighters but perhaps the world will wake up now and begin to value them more.

At the conclusion of *Gathering Blue*, it is a child—a young girl—who holds in her hands the power and determination to change a world brutalized by evil. I think today's children will have that same power. I think it will have been given to them, largely, by teachers.

Bless you all,
Lois Lowry

Dear Teachers,

The events that took place last week are unthinkable. It is hard to know what to say to anybody about them. What do you say to your sister who has lost her friend? What do you say to a five-year-old whose father went to a meeting in the morning and never came home? What do you say to your three-year-old nephew who is now afraid to let his parents out of sight for fear they won't come home either? And if you're a teacher, whether you work in Manhattan or miles away, what do you say to your students?

I have lived the last week in an odd limbo, reminded very much of the days following the death of President Kennedy. School was closed forever, it seemed, and we spent those days watching events unfold on television, watching our nation mourn. What a relief it was when school finally reopened and I returned to my third-grade classroom, and to wonderful Miss Kushel. Miss

Kushel who read aloud to us every day, read Pearl Buck's *The Big Wave*, read to us from the newspaper. I stepped back into her room and felt safe again.

What Miss Kushel brought to my classmates and me then was a sense of familiarity and normalcy. And through reading and books and newspapers she opened the world to us. She brought other cultures and beliefs and religions and conflicts into our classroom in New Jersey. And she taught us to be questioners, thinkers, discerning readers.

That was 1962. Now it is 2001, and I am grateful to think that thousands of other Miss Kushels are out there, helping their students to face new challenges with security and wisdom.

Yours,
Ann Martin

Dear Teachers,

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, the unthinkable happened. Our freedom was attacked. We Americans watched helplessly as terrorists struck without warning, without mercy, and without meaning, murdering innocent men, women, and children. An army of rescue workers rushed to the WTC, the Pentagon, and a Pennsylvania countryside and commenced to do their jobs with courage and determination. Then, to all our horror, the WTC towers collapsed, killing hundreds more—perhaps thousands—many of them firefighters and police officers. In the aftermath, we honored the fallen and praised those who continued the difficult task of recovery, but we want to thank you, America's teachers, who were—and continue to be—important members of the nation's rescue team.

Our children are the silent victims of this tragedy as well, and they'll need long-term love and care to heal properly. Ideally parents and/or other caregivers should be responsible for providing opportunities for their children to discuss their feelings, and teachers support the parents. But since some children spend more time with their teachers than they do their parents, more often than not, the task of sorting out fear, anger, and grief rests on the shoulders of educators—that classroom teacher, caring principal, and understand-

ing counselor. In other times of national crisis, we have called upon you to help our children cope, and you've always been there. You were with our children on September 11. Thank you. But we also know that this crisis is unprecedented. And perhaps you'll need help with your and your own family's anxiety. Indeed, you and your colleagues have difficult work ahead. We want this letter, then, to be a reminder that you are not alone.

We believe that teachers and writers are partners in the education process. Our common goal is to provide young readers with the skills to read and the books worth reading. Therefore, we pledge to you that we will do all we can to continue writing nonfiction books that provide accurate information from which young readers can gather facts and formulate healthy ideas, make good decisions, and learn to solve problems effectively. To be thinkers!

As children's picture book writers, we also promise that we will support your work by continuing to create images with words that build confidence, honor life, and uplift the human spirit. And finally we make a commitment to you that we will fight all forms of terrorism with the mightiest weapon of all—the pen.

There is so much we want to say, but there is not enough time or space. But we leave you with this thought. Terrorists are often faceless, nameless phantoms that strike and hide in caves or under white robes, in rogue states or the hills and alleys of the United States. But intolerance is the bread upon which all terrorists feed. The best way to defeat them is to starve them.

You have our sincere gratitude for your service to the nation's children.

Respectfully yours,
Patricia C. and Fredrick L. McKissack

Terrorists are often faceless, nameless phantoms that strike and hide in caves or under white robes, in rogue states or the hills and alleys of the United States. But intolerance is the bread upon which all terrorists feed.

—Patricia and Fredrick McKissack

Dear Teachers,

Thank you for listening to your students before and after September 11th. I know if I had walked by classrooms from kindergarten to twelfth grade that afternoon, the next day, and all the days since, and peered through the glass windows in classroom doors, I'd have seen teachers standing in front of

When the world most needed it, your classrooms became a quiet room in which students and teachers celebrated diversity and made respect contagious.

—Don Murray

sitting in a chair in a circle leaning forward to be sure and understand what the quiet student who rarely spoke was saying.

As your students spoke to each other they crossed ethnic, religious, gender, political barriers. Not knowing what to think or feel, but invited to express themselves in speech or writing, the students found themselves saying what many of them could not say at home, would not admit to each other on the street corner or at the mall, might never say to minister, priest, mullah, rabbi. They spoke openly in this safe place, your classroom.

When the world most needed it, your classrooms became a quiet room in which students and teachers celebrated diversity and made respect contagious. Doubt was encouraged, fear allowed, honesty admired, contradiction examined, logic constructed. As the teachers listened to the fears and hopes of the students, the students listened to each other with similar respect.

When people listen to us, we learn how to respect them and ourselves. We find that we can identify and solve problems, break silence, find questions for answers, discover patterns of meaning we had never before seen. In doing this, your students—and you—learned that you have the resources within the classroom and within each individual in the classroom, to survive in a world we cannot predict.

Thank you,
Don Murray

Dear Teachers,

Over the years, I have kept in touch with one of the first teachers who encouraged me to do something with my writing—a high school speech teacher, Catherine Wood of Joliet (Illinois) Township High School. She was a beautiful woman, and students often speculated as to why she never married. The last time I saw her in her eighties, she mentioned that at the time she entered the profession, teachers were not allowed to marry. She decided then that teaching was the most important thing in the world to her, and devoted her life to it. I find myself thinking of her in the aftermath of the assault on America of September 11, 2001, realizing that teachers, along with parents, are being called on to give more of themselves in the way of support than they may feel capable of doing.

Telling a child that his teacher and principal and city are going to keep him safe will not help. Students are not stupid. When they hear about the horror at Columbine High School, when they see planes crash into buildings in New York City and into one of the supposedly most secure buildings in the world, the Pentagon, they know that their own safety cannot be guaranteed. False reassurance frightens them even more. They may wonder what else we are keeping from them. Better, perhaps, to say that his teacher and principal and city are doing all they can to make it very unlikely that such a thing will ever happen again. And that is better because that is what each of you did this past week, as you stood on playgrounds, in cafeterias, in classrooms, in parking lots during drop-off and pick-up duty. You assured them that we're all working to make this world a safer place.

If ever there was a time that literature can play a role in a child's acceptance of the world as it is, it is now. Dickens' "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" was never more relevant. How important for our young people to know that they are not alone, they are not the first, they are not the only. One of the most difficult things to deal with in living their lives and planning for the future is the uncertainty of what will happen.

During the bubonic plague of the Middle Ages, people fled the cities for the countryside,

not knowing where the disease was coming from or how it was spread. In the 1940s, the threat of nuclear war brought “duck and cover” drills and backyard bomb shelters.

In trying to help my own sons through a difficult time in the eighties, when nuclear war seemed a real possibility, I wrote the three books of my York Trilogy—*Shadows on the Wall*, *Faces in the Water*, *Footprints at the Window*. In this trilogy, fifteen-year-old Dan Roberts rails against the discovery that Huntington’s disease is in his family and he may carry the gene. “How did you go about arranging your life with something hanging over you all the time? How did you make yourself cram through four years of college—six, even—knowing that when you finally finished and got a job, you might have only ten good years left?” he wonders. Many of our fifteen-year-olds find themselves wondering a similar question right now.

Through books that have provided reassurance and inspiration for past generations, our young people will discover that others have faced similar dilemmas. Through you, their teachers, they will learn that others have lived through crises and have made meaningful lives for themselves. As I say in the last line of the epilogue, “. . . very few things in life are certain. But the courageous ones, the daring, are the people who live with hope.”

Thank you again for being who you are, and where you are, when our students need you most.

Sincerely,
Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Dear Friends,

After the tragedies of last week, words fail us—but we cannot stop using them. We talk endlessly about what has happened, yet cannot make sense of it. And I wonder what I can say in this space to offer solace or extract meaning from something so senseless.

For the past week we have watched firefighters and policemen at “ground zero,” working beyond the point of endurance to rescue, and now to recover, bodies in the rubble. In poignant interviews

they speak of lost partners, breaking down as words fail them.

It occurs to me that teachers are on an emotional ground zero as well. In the case of Shelley Harwayne and her teachers in South Manhattan, this was literally the case. In one school near the Trade Center, a young child ran into his school shouting, “Teacher, teacher, the birds are on fire.” But, as we know, these weren’t birds; they were humans, on fire, jumping to their deaths. It will be the job of teachers to listen to these fears and explain the unexplainable.

Even with the less publicized daily human tragedies—death of a family member, divorce, severe loneliness and depression—teachers listen and comfort, creating what is for many children the most stable space they know. In the mania for standards, and test scores, this psychological work is hardly reckoned.

The numbness and grief we all feel will subside, the American flags will be put away. A kind of normal life will return. At that point we will need to ask about educational lessons we might draw from what has happened. And while it may be too early to think clearly, I want to offer a possibility.

We all need a better understanding of the Arab world, its history, religious beliefs, its diversity, and its view of our own country. Nothing can ever excuse, or maybe even explain, the motives of the terrorists. But for so many of us, our knowledge of this huge and crucial part of the world, once the “cradle of civilization,” later the center of classical scholarship, does not go beyond a few demeaning visual stereotypes—unshaven, rock-throwing men; women hidden in black. The scholar, Edward Said, has shown how consistently Western scholars have relied on stereotypes and caricatures—a process he calls “orientalism”—that work to justify a sense of Western superiority.

Tolerance is important, and President Bush’s trip to a Washington mosque is an important step. But tolerance without any historical or cultural understanding will not be enough to dislodge these stereotypes. And unless we do, we will always be surprised that our actions in the world—which we

see as completely virtuous—are not always seen that way by others. To take on another's perspective is to learn something about ourselves.

And such learning is healing as well. I like the advice that Merlin gives to the despondent young Arthur in *The Once and Future King*:

The best thing for being sad is to learn something. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind cannot exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.

Learning is the thing for us all.

Sincerely,
Tom Newkirk

Dear Teachers,

On September 11, and throughout the days that followed the terrorists' attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon, you kept our country's children in your calm and steady hands. As a mother, a grandmother, and an author/friend of children from primary age through young adult, I thank you with all my heart.

Those were terrifying days. It was hard to believe what we were hearing and seeing through our television sets, and—perhaps even more unsettling—none of us knew what would happen next. In some Houston schools, the children were not told what had happened, and classes were conducted as usual; in others, parents rushed to get their children, and scheduled lessons became impossible to teach. But in every case, on September 11, and during the days that followed, all of you teachers helped the children in your classes express their thoughts and control their fears. There is so much to thank you for, and there are special teachers, close to me, whose wise decisions I'll always remember.

My gratitude to Amy Ailer, the art teacher for the lower grades at Grace, my granddaughter Katie's school. She helped the children to transpose their feelings into art, discussed the paintings with them, then displayed the art in the hallways. One picture was particularly moving. A fourth-grade girl drew a picture of herself stand-

ing on top of the world. Half of the world was on fire, but rising through the fire was a large United States flag. The girl in the picture faced the flag, holding out to it pieces of a broken heart.

A special thanks to Shirley Lyons and the teachers at F. M. Black Middle School in Houston, who paired their classes in front of the school's television sets, watching with their students, and periodically turning off the sound to allow a history teacher to explain what was taking place. These teachers helped the students gain a better understanding of democracy and gave them greater confidence in the strength of the United States. Some of the young people spoke of formerly taking things for granted, then suddenly having a new awareness of what was really important in life. They were encouraged not only to discuss their feelings, but also to write a newspaper, sharing their experiences and viewpoints with other students; and they were encouraged to read the history and literature of our country to broaden their own knowledge.

My great appreciation to all of you who treated your students' sense of loss with tender understanding and their fears with reassuring hugs; to you whose immediate response was to encourage the young people in your care to think of others and their needs; and to you who helped sponsor the tremendous number of letters and cards of gratitude written by your students to New York City's heroes: the police and firemen, and their families.

We know that in order to stop the terrorists' attacks both in the United States and in other countries, we will have to take action. We do not know where we will be the most vulnerable or where further destruction to this country might take place. However, we have complete confidence that no matter what the future holds, you—our children's teachers—will continue to do your very best for them.

Thank you for your courage, your calm good sense, and your generous spirit. I pray that God will bless America, and I pray that God will bless each and every one of you.

Gratefully,
Joan Lowery Nixon

Dear Teachers,

Oh, we need you now. We always needed you, but at this tremulous moment in history, the need for expressiveness feels urgent as breathing.

What words will console and connect us? How may we encourage students to describe their realities, finding words that extend and probe? Shaping experience into language is a great comfort, even if issues remain unsolved. Focusing on images helps keep our fears tangible, human-sized.

Use poetry, the most intimate genre. Find sections of poems (thousands exist, from all cultures and times) that feel appropriate to this moment. Share them. You don't have to explain them. Just insert them into your curriculum, inviting response from your classes. Encourage them to write their own. This will be therapeutic for all.

Difficult as it may feel, I beg you to share poems from the Middle East with your students, to help counteract the dehumanizing "enemy" impressions that may be hard for them to resolve for a while. Remind them that many peaceful people in the Middle East are very scared now, too.

On Sept. 13, I wrote "Words to Sit In, like Chairs," (see text below) which was broadcast on the public radio program, "To the Best of Our Knowledge." My healing through words began. I share this with you now for when I think of healing, I turn to words, but many children, when they think of healing, will turn to you. Please encourage them to write freely and regularly, whether they are writing worries or hopes or mysteries—just help them keep their channels open. As you encourage them to find their own healing, may you also feel your own words unfolding, keeping you strengthened and calm.

I was with teenagers at the wonderful Holland Hall School in Tulsa when the planes flew into the buildings. We were talking about words as ways to imagine one another's experience, but suddenly it became a day on which we wished for no imaginations. A boy had just thanked me for a poem about Jerusalem that enabled him to consider the Palestinian side of the story. I said, "Please I beg you, if Arabs are involved in this new tragedy (as they were already saying on TV), re-

member there are millions of Arabs who would never do such a thing."

"Of course," he said soberly. "I know that. This is Oklahoma." Then he said, "I hate to ask this so soon after it happened, but do you think you will write about it?"

"It would not be my choice of topic," I said, feeling sick, my head spinning, "but as writers, we are always exploring what happens, what comes next, turning it over, finding words to sit in like chairs, even in terrible scenery, so maybe I will have to write about it, maybe we all will. Because words shape the strange sorrows we are living in, help us connect. Write, talk, think . . . it will be part of our history now."

Then I rode a 10-hour bus to Austin to see my brilliant graduate writing students who had the saddest faces I have ever encountered, and we sat around a table to talk about words, with bigger words in the air by then—Revenge, Retaliate, Win—Lose, that didn't make us feel any better. I thought how it might have been helpful, as kids, to have games where everyone came up Losers, to prepare us for the world. I thought how many precious details had been lost in how many lives, how many families wounded. A mother said her daughters won't be able to grasp it, but nobody can grasp it. How hard everything will be.

I thought how selfish fanatics are, devastating innocent people and beautiful cities, but also their culture's own reputation. How many people have to live in the shadow of what they did? Do they think about that?



The Persian restaurant and the Pakistani auto shop were sabotaged today in Texas. Poor guys, they aren't even Arabs. What will it be like for those who are, who never hurt anybody, who hate hurting and who know what it feels like?

I turned to the poets who give us nourishing words—William Stafford, “There’s a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn’t change.” Can we hang on to it? A thread of subtleties. Words like kind, fold, river. Someone said I could even like gentility again. A thread of close looking, that gazes beneath headlines and fast talk. A thread of larger understanding, which is hard to hold on to now. What makes people so mad at our country to begin with? What could we do better?

“Dear Teachers.” Printed by permission of the author, Naomi Shihab Nye, 2001. A portion of this piece aired on NPR’s “To the Best of Our Knowledge.”

Love,
Naomi Shihab Nye

Dear Teachers,

All week I’ve been thinking about heroes. For a number of years now, our culture has glorified the lives of celebrities—those who are most visible in our media, those who hoard fame and power. The lives of so-called ordinary people who attend

For years now, I’ve been noting the heroics of the teachers I’ve met in the schools I’ve visited around the country—teachers who tirelessly inspire and guide young people to become good and decent citizens.

—Mary Pope Osborne

to their daily tasks with quiet faith, integrity, and courage is hardly ever “news.” This past, horrible week, though, such people leapt onto the front pages of the world. Collectively, we heard over and over again about the heroics of those in the World Trade Towers who tried to help their co-workers escape the buildings; the police and fire fighters who rushed up the stairs to guide others down; the emergency crews who worked around the clock, looking for the missing; the people who overwhelmed the terrorists on the plane that went down in Pennsylvania; the doomed employees who sent last loving messages to their family members; the ministers and counselors who spent the week helping the grieving and confused. The heroic acts of these people

have been making my heart ache, with love, joy, and sorrow. The truth is: We are always surrounded by heroes.

For years now, I’ve been noting the heroics of the teachers I’ve met in the schools I’ve visited around the country—teachers who tirelessly inspire and guide young people to become good and decent citizens. I’ve also received hundreds of letters from teachers that reveal their great efforts to help reluctant readers love literature. While never seeking credit for themselves, they celebrate their children’s progress with uninhibited joy. Teachers stand shoulder to shoulder with the ranks of heroes I’ve read about this last week. My growing band of heroes sets a standard of behavior that I will probably never be able to meet myself, but that I can at least aspire to. They give me hope that no acts of terror can ever defeat our country.

My thanks,
Mary Pope Osborne

Dear Teachers,

There has always been horror for children . . . It is the saddest and perhaps most consistent aspect of history. Children are, always, the victims. It is because they have so little advocacy available to them, because they are so receptive to the wildness of life, because they are so, so new, because they are so wonderfully innocent. They always bear the brunt of disaster, of calamity, of war, of horror. . . .

And now this.

The planes hit the buildings and the field and at first it is like a movie, like a video game, like a toy they see and play with every day until, finally, it sinks in and they know these are real planes and real buildings and real people and once more they are faced with it, once more the children are the true casualties.

It would, I think, be nice to be able to make the clock run backwards, make the planes come out of the buildings and the ground and the bricks go back up and the people return to their homes and their families so that all of it was gone. . . .

That being impossible, there is, perhaps, still an answer to what we can do to help them, help

the children. There has to be something more for them, something that lasts, something from life and books and teachers that goes beyond the horror, that takes them back to joy and compassion and truth and beauty and love and soul.

It is there, this beauty. It has always been there, this honest truth of joy. We must help them to find it, not just now, not just next week or month or year. Always.

We must help the children always.

It is, finally, all we are.

Gary Paulsen

Dear Teachers,

As Americans, we recently experienced a terrible reminder of what ignorance can produce, when combined with religious fanaticism and hatred. All the more reason to teach our children and to teach them well. We must teach them to read and to think, because a people who cannot read widely, and who cannot think for themselves, will soon forget what it means to be free, and inevitably be led into despotism.

For more than two hundred years, in good times and bad, the people of this nation have struggled to embrace and celebrate the idea of freedom. The freedom to be who we are in all our diversity. We are a people of all skin colors, ethnicities, and religions, fighting to overcome our own fears and prejudices, and shedding blood if necessary to help people of other nations find the voice that we call democracy.

In 1776 we invented the idea of self-government, by and for the people. Our beliefs have been tested in many wars, and in our own internal struggle to make freedom and equality a daily reality for our own people. The fight continues.

Now, in this dark hour, when the forces of ignorance and hatred oppose us and all we stand for, we must ask our children to see that the light of freedom is never extinguished. We must remind our children that freedom is more than the symbols of our imperfect democracy. Freedom exists in the heart and mind, and it can only exist if our minds remain open to the notion, the very pre-

vious notion, that we are a nation of individuals, each with a right to think and pray and live as we please.

If our children learn to read for themselves, and think for themselves, we have nothing to fear.

Yours truly,
Rodman Philbrick

Dear Teachers,

As I write this letter based on a lifetime of gratitude, the drumbeats of war sound across the land. I have no crystal ball, I can't see where this country will be by the time you read this, but I am so thankful for the teachers of this nation who will continue to take the time to nurture our children, listen, give comfort, and encourage them to stop and think.

"The unexamined life," said Socrates, "is not worth living."

Recently, we've been forced to examine not only our own lives, values, and motives, but those of others around the world. And it is our teachers who are leading the way.

Today I spoke to a young high school English teacher who uses Socratic Seminars to engage students in creative discussions. As the classroom debate on U.S. military action caught fire, he held up a hand to ask them a simple question. "For many years students across America have worn wrist bands bearing the initials 'W.W.J.D.' I want you to step into the shoes of our leaders right now and consider the same question. What would Jesus do?"

Stunned silence, at first. Squirming, looking around. Clearly many were shocked he would pose such a query in a public school. But at the end of the period, everyone left his classroom thinking—and *rethinking*—while pondering tonight's homework: Find Mark Twain's "The War Prayer" on

The planes hit the buildings and the field and at first it is like a movie, like a video game, like a toy they see and play with every day until, finally, it sinks in and they know these are real planes and real buildings and real people. —Gary Paulsen

the Internet and be prepared to discuss it tomorrow. Thank you, Mr. Wing, American hero.

Later, on the radio, I hear high school seniors in several Boston schools debate the options our country faces. "We need to fight them," says one girl. "We can't just sit here and do nothing and let them think we're weak."

"Easy for you to say," a boy counters, "you won't get drafted."

And I travel back in time to the Vietnam era, to Mr. Pumphrey in English class, who encouraged me to write stories, poetry, and songs. I recall how deflated I was by his skeptical reaction to my senior term paper on the symbiotic relationship between world religions and fear of the unknown.

"If religion's purpose," he said, "is to offer security by teaching us how to love one another and resolve conflicts, why is our predominantly Christian nation in the middle of a war?"

He never knew it, but that question haunted me well into my adult life. Recently, I dedicated three years of travel and research to writing two novels that delved into the underlying reasons for anger, conflict, and religious animosity toward those who are different. My findings? In times of intense conflict, people tend to set aside their fundamental spiritual beliefs to accommodate their anger and pride, and underneath it all, their fear.

Thank you, Mr. Pumphrey. You are my hero.

I commend all of today's teachers who must deal with far greater professional demands than ever before. I commend you for your patience in an impatient world, for promoting critical thinking skills, and for making your students laugh, moan, and know they are loved.

But I'm most thankful for the time you take to stop and think of the very question that will shape the future of some uncertain, conscientious, goof-ball kid who dreams of becoming a writer.

He'll never forget.

With love,
John H. Ritter

(Married thirty years to an English teacher)

Dear Teachers,

For demonstrating to students a passion for language, I thank you.

For protecting students' right to read all kinds of literature, I thank you.

For devoting parts of summers to your own writing, reading, and growth, I thank you.

For writing letters to newspapers about taxes for education, teachers' rights, and school issues, I thank you.

For spending time at home grading papers, writing responses, reading novels, poetry, magazines, and professional journals, I thank you.

For speaking at school board meetings in advocacy of students, beleaguered colleagues, invaluable programs, and the rethinking of misguided policies, I thank you.

For your critical turn of mind that you bring to bear on each new idea, method, and mandate, I thank you.

For teaching student teachers everything you know, for supporting their tentative ideas, and for letting them stub their toes on their own, then reflecting with them and wishing them Godspeed, I thank you.

For questioning your own teaching methods, exploring the unfamiliar, placing yourselves in the shoes of another, I thank you.

For holding fast to your standards and for revising your standards because context tells you to do so, I thank you.

For reading student writing and sighing in admiration and for reading student writing and bearing down to go to work, I thank you.

For listening to students and learning something that changes the way you teach, I thank you.

For helping colleagues, for using your voice to promote all voices in your classroom, for being a teacher who writes, I thank you.

And for being with America's children on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, to listen and explain, to grieve and move forward, I can't thank you enough.

Tom Romano

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Dear Teachers,

I am only able to speak at schools a few times a month. I am not one of the valiant, like you, who goes into the classroom every school day. I was scheduled to speak at a K–12 school two days after the World Trade Center tragedy. Like many people that work at home, I had been listening to the television nonstop for several days. As I drove to the school, still caught up in the devastation of the tragedy, I thought, “I really don’t want to do this today.”

It happened to be Picture Day at the school. You can imagine how the children looked, all smiles and gleaming. (During one of my assemblies, a young boy pulled a comb out of his slacks pocket every few minutes to swipe at his slicked-down hair.) The older students were equally dressed-up, and for some reason, this made them seem even more innocent. They asked questions about my books but more often asked questions about “the attack.” The older group acted aloof, but their eyes betrayed them. They searched for reassurance, answers, and the promise of a happy ending. What could I tell them? That everything would be all right? I didn’t know. That we’re all in this together and that we—the adults—would try to be there for them, no matter what happens? Yes, hopefully.

Hopefully. There has been much discussion lately about the lack of hope in various books for young adults. Thank you for those of you who continue to present and encourage a variety of YA literature, even those books without theatrical happy endings where the character withstands, instead of conquers. Shocking or sad circumstances sometimes occur in books, and in life. Young adult literature often provokes the reader to be appalled and indignant but it also resonates that life goes on, sometimes without resolution, and sometimes without knowing what will happen next. I am heartened by those of you who allow students to experience the breadth of YA literature with a variety of “ever afters.” Characters in young adult literature often endure and nothing more. Sometimes, as in real life, the ability to simply go on is the happy ending.

I see you, dear teacher, endure. I know that you too often teach without an ounce of student/teacher resolution. I know you persevere even though you don’t know what will happen next. It must sometimes feel like a Herculean task to educate our future citizens. I was so heartened after that school visit on Picture Day. The students’ sincere attempts at looking their best made me smile. They might have been afraid about events in the news but they weren’t despondent. Their faces were full of promise. It gave me a reason to be optimistic and reminded me of something simple—that our children and young adults need us. Not so we can provide “happy endings” at every turn. They need us to sustain and nurture resilience as we live together through all the “middles.”

With affection and admiration,
Pam Muñoz Ryan

Now, as always, but more so than ever, the future of the world sits in your classroom, listening, watching, and learning.

—John Scieszka

Dear Teachers,

Thank goodness for teachers.
Now, as always, but more so than ever—thank goodness for teachers.
Your lessons are exactly what this world needs.
Teach us to express ourselves,
Teach us to respect the thoughts and feelings of others.
Teach us to be fair.
Teach us to share.
Teach us stories and fables and history and ideas.
Teach us to think before we act.
Teach us that our actions have consequences.
Teach us.
Now, as always, but more so than ever, the future of the world sits in your classroom, listening, watching, and learning.
Thank goodness for teachers.

Your Biggest Fan,
Jon Scieszka

Dear Teachers,

On 9/11/01, I was awakened by the phone at a little after 9 a.m.—I'm not an early riser—the stricken voice of a friend telling me to turn on the TV. Most of us saw the same surreally appalling footage—though after the implosion of the first tower we went out onto Sixth Avenue and actually watched the second one slouch into a charcoal cloud of devastation a couple of miles to the south. People stood agog in the street, dumbfounded, eyes filled with tears.

Now, a week later, the tears haven't abated, and we are still dumbfounded. New Yorkers feel wounded and violated in countless personal ways—but so, I've found, do my friends and family all over America, and in foreign countries as well.

**Thank goodness you're there
to comfort and reassure them,
to let them know that no
horror, no matter how great,
can kill the human spirit—
that even though words may
seem feeble at such times,
they're anything but.**

—Tor Seidler

and eight-year-old twin boys of a friend of mine who went to work on Tuesday morning, to Aon Corporation on the 105th floor of one of the towers, and never returned home. What could I say to the boys, who only half understood that they'd lost their father—and in the most horrific and barbaric and senseless way imaginable? All I could do was give them a couple of my books, and hold their hands, and resolve to take them to a Yankees game in a week or two.

What can you say to your students? I don't know. But thank goodness you're there to comfort and reassure them, to let them know that no horror, no matter how great, can kill the human spirit—that even though words may seem feeble at such times, they're anything but. How wonderful that you are there to encourage them to formulate their thoughts about this disaster! For only by so doing can we keep our outrage and anger and feelings of powerlessness from festering in-

side us. And that you're there to temper cries for knee-jerk vengeance they might have absorbed extra-curricularly.

And most of all that you're there to encourage them to read. As Blake said, you can see a world in a grain of sand; and all good literature celebrates the human spirit.

With gratitude,
Tor Seidler

Dear Teachers,

At some time in our lives, all writers wonder why we're writing. What is the point of living inside our heads, dreaming up tales, holing up indoors to scribble on pads, type on computers? Years ago in a moment of depression, I asked my husband this question. His answer was: "If there's anything the whole world will always need, it's stories."

In this time of devastation, the world needs not only stories, not only writers to tell these stories, but people to carry the stories around the globe. We rightly honor firemen, policemen, doctors, nurses, medics who have tried so hard to rescue lives. Teachers are rescue workers, too—bringing our stories and their own wisdom, comfort, and reason in an unreasonable world to some of the people who need these things the most: children. I know this very well because though I am now a writer, I was once a high school teacher. I know how hard a job it is. Those people who continue to teach will always have my great admiration, most especially now. My deepest thanks to all of you.

Marilyn Singer

Dear Teachers,

To Mrs. Hunt,
my kindergarten teacher,
who taught me the pleasure
of making up fairy tales in my mind
to go with the classical music
she played each day during nap time,
I say thank you.

To Mrs. Sables,
my third grade teacher,
who respected my creativity so much
that she let me spend the whole day
working on my raindrop story,
that time I was so inspired,
I say thank you.

To Miss Slotnick,
my seventh grade English teacher,
who taught me
that solace and salvation
can be found
in the pages of a diary,
I say thank you.

To Myra Cohn Livingston,
the teacher I waited for
all my life,
who taught me
the infinite joy
of writing poetry,
I say thank you.

And to all of you,
who are out there every day,
teaching children to love
the written word,
I say thank you, thank you, thank you,
for giving them
this magnificent gift.

With deepest admiration and appreciation,
Sonya Sones

Dear Teachers,

I want to share something I learned last Friday night when I became a tiny link in a small human chain on the street behind the Red Cross headquarters in New York City. The curbs were jammed with trucks that had to be unloaded, their cargos of water, food, and medical supplies either stored temporarily on the sidewalk, or transferred to emergency vehicles bound for firehouses, triage centers, or ground zero itself.

Hour after hour we passed box after box, case

after case, bag after bag. When a chain wasn't long enough to reach its goal, someone would call out for "hands" and instantly the chain would be augmented with new volunteers—people in Red Cross vests, kids in black tee shirts, business folks in suits.

Meanwhile, up the street outside an empty firehouse, a group of mourners held a candlelight vigil beside a huge mound of flowers piled in the firehouse, where once a fire engine had been parked. One could only wonder what had become of that fire truck, and of the men and women who rode in it.

I learned that the human chain I had joined was a microscopic version of a much greater chain that links all of us in this country, and, indeed, all peace-loving people throughout the world. I also learned that if we are to survive this tragedy, we must all stand on line and pass boxes from hand to hand—boxes of hope, of generosity, of determination, of spirit, and of sacrifice.

But this is something you in the teaching profession already know. You joined the human chain long before this unspeakable tragedy. You were already linked together by the common goal of education, by the chain of enlightenment as well as the chain of generosity that prompts you to reach into your own pockets to provide the supplies your schools cannot afford, the chain of determination that inspires you to make sure every child can read, write, and add, and the chain of sacrifice that causes you to put in all the extra hours and forego better paying jobs for the sake of educating the next generation.

Now, in the wake of this tragedy, which links us all, we need you more than ever. We need you to provide support, understanding, and reassurance for our children. And not only small children. I am the father of a high school senior and a freshman and they are both frightened of future terrorist acts, of chemical and biological attacks,

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—Todd Strasser

and possibly even all-out war. We need you to teach tolerance for the vast majority of innocent Arab-Americans who have come to this country for a better life just as all of our ancestors did. We need you to teach patience for the longer, slower lines we will all have to stand on to go where we need to go.

Anyone who has seen the pictures of ground zero knows that this cleanup will take months, and rebuilding will take years. New buildings need to be erected, broken families need to be healed, and shattered confidence needs to be restored. Where will young people find the examples of how this can and will be done? In your classrooms, in the examples you set, and in the literature you assign.

The bright new flags we fly today will fade and become tattered, but the vast and mighty human chain of goodness must continue. This is something teachers know about. And now we need you to show us how.

With heartfelt appreciation and thanks,
Todd Strasser

“Dear Teachers.” Copyright © 2001 Todd Strasser.

Dear Teachers,

As we started back to school this September, we had no idea of the challenges we all would soon be facing. We’ve always thought of teaching as a “noble” profession because teachers are responsible for the lives and futures of others every day. Never was this more evident than during the week of September 11, 2001 when the world was catastrophically changed forever for many children, young people, and adults. Across the country, Americans phoned family and friends to check that they were safe and unharmed. Parents were terrified, afraid for their children, most of whom were at school. Teachers, though also afraid for their own families, responded immediately to protect and shelter those in their care. Schools went into “lock-down” mode and teachers began preparing children to handle what was certain to change their feelings of personal safety, security, and trust in their fellow citizens of the world.

Like most of you, we were at work, doing what we do—teaching—when word reached us. Immediate feelings of horror and disbelief blended almost at once with wondering how to best handle this for our students. Because we work at a university with a large education department, we began getting phone calls from teachers asking for advice about book titles to use in classes, books that would help students deal with what had happened and help students and teachers begin to sort out their feelings. Teachers recognized the power of words in a time when the actions of a few defied explanation. Teachers looked to poetry, short stories, and novels to help students work through the events of that horrific day and give them an opportunity to think beyond the immediate responses of outrage, fear, and hate. Teachers took time to read novels and picture books that would help students search deeper and think more critically about the questions that confront responsible world citizens: How to be tolerant in an intolerant world; how to understand a world filled with misunderstanding; how to trust others in a world of violence perpetrated in the name of religion and politics.



Teachers knew that the best way was to read the words of others who had hope for the future, who celebrate the human spirit, with its frailty as well as its strength and goodness—words filled with hope, with beauty, with respect, and with reverence for a precious world, still filled with both beauty and pain. While television programmers interviewed political experts, reported terrorist attacks and planned retributions, and replayed scenes of planes crashing and towers collapsing, teachers worked to calm the heightened anxiety with constructive activities that emphasized compassion and community. They organized school-based fund-raising and provided time for students to write encouraging notes to comfort those who are suffering or who are injured in hospitals and to thank the firefighters, police, and countless others who put their lives in peril to help strangers, who were, in a sense, their brothers and sisters.

From tragedy, heroes emerged, yet the unsung heroes will be the teachers, whose responsibilities will continue long after the visible evidence of this tragedy is cleared and the scars of hurt and mistrust remain. When the healing occurs in this country, it will be because teachers continued to teach students to think, to reflect, to use words as tools to rebuild and bring reason to their world. As parents and now grandparents, we say “thank you” to those teachers who helped mold our two children into sensitive and responsible world citizens and in whose hands we give our two precious grandchildren to teach them that the power of words is always more lasting than the power of the sword.

For all that you do,
Kathleen and James Strickland

Dear Teachers,

As a novelist, words are the tools I use in my trade. No one needs to convince me of their capacity to bring about change; I witness their power to create and destroy worlds each day. Words can transform “snake” to “snake charmer,” “she loves you” to “she loves you not.” I have faith that words can begin discussions, open minds, maybe even

lead to agreement. They will continue to be my weapon of choice, not because I am a novelist, but because they are the most effective and powerful tools for change I know.

But the words I worry about most after the tragedy of September 11 are “us” and “them.” “Us” with its cozy and familiar curves; “them” with its digraph and lumpy ‘m.’ I worry that people will place these words in different sentences, will pretend they are different, when in reality they are both born from the same languages, going back hundreds, even thousands of years.

We need to find the similarities between “us” and “them” to decipher their deeper meaning. There will always be differences and paradoxes in language; we need to study and embrace the changes, not try to force one word into something it’s not. The dictionary is full of hundreds of thousands of words for a reason: they’re all needed, all have something specific to say. Let’s not limit ourselves to a few.

The world is full of interesting language choices. The word “war” can even be found in the phrase “world peace.” It’s our choice as to which words we use.

My best,
Janet Tashjian

Dear Teachers

The screen saver on my computer shows three firemen placing the American Flag in the rubble of the Twin Towers in New York. This is a powerful image, and I find myself—one who writes novels for middle grade and young adult readers—without appropriate words to describe the events of the past few days.

It has been a week since I sat, horrified and weeping, my five daughters gathered around me, watching the worst thing I have ever witnessed. This is the worst thing my children have ever seen. Perhaps the worst thing that many people have ever seen.

It was hard for us to sleep that Tuesday night. We had watched the news for fourteen hours. Images burned in my brain. I worried about my

husband in San Antonio, Texas, about my father in Washington, D.C., and about my friends in New York.

My girls and I talked late into the night. “Why?” they asked me. “I don’t know.” “How could anyone?” “I don’t know.” “What did Americans do to deserve this?” “Nothing. Nothing.”

At last, we slept. All of us in one room. I never slept fully. My three-year-old tossed and turned. All of us awoke, afraid, concerned, and hoping that maybe, the day before had been a terrible dream. We have found ourselves jarred from our routine. Television has become our focal point. Are there more survivors? How is the country faring? Will there be a war? We watch as individuals plead for their missing friends and relatives. We cry with them.

My girls watch me. Will Mom cry during this interview? Will Dad (returned home safely) continue to look so worried? Will this happen in

Some of you will teach children whose parents have been lost in this tragedy, some of you will teach students who have lost friends, all of you will reach people who have watched the world change before their eyes.

—Carol Lynch Williams

America again? They remember the pictures, the events that have changed our good Country. We pray, all of us, alone and as a family, for comfort to those who mourn, for ourselves, and for peace in our world.

I think past my little family, out into the world where children go to school every day and I look at the job I feel is one of the hardest and has now become even more hard: That of our country’s teachers. Now our teachers get an opportunity to work with children who are running the gamut with their feelings: fear, loss, pain. Emotions run high. You, Teacher, get to be a comforter now, while dealing with your own pain.

Thank you for standing up in this difficult time. I believe that every American will be touched in some way by the events of Tuesday, September 11, 2001. We will all remember what we were doing when we found out about these terrorist

attacks. We will not forget the planes, the explosions, the loss of life.

Some of you will teach children whose parents have been lost in this tragedy, some of you will teach students who have lost friends, all of you will reach people who have watched the world change before their eyes. There has been a transformation in us all. You will have the opportunity to offer hope and peace in a turbulent world.

May God bless you as you move forward in this most awesome capacity.

Most sincerely,
Carol Lynch Williams

Dear Teachers,

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001 I called my sister at the elementary school where she teaches and asked her if she had heard about the two planes crashing into the towers of The World Trade Center. She told me that she hadn’t heard anything, so I gave her as much information as I could and hung up the phone. Two hours later I was watching a replay of the North Tower of the center collapsing when she called me back for more information. I gave her the sad news about both towers now being nothing more than rubble and told her that thousands of innocent lives had probably been lost. We both agreed that it was shocking and devastating news. She left the phone in search of a television, and I returned to my bedroom, where I had spent the morning viewing the horrible incident on my old twelve-inch tube. As I plopped down at the foot of my bed, I wondered what my sister would tell the inquisitive second graders that she spent seven hours out of each day educating, mentoring, and mothering.

My mind drifted back to my grade school days. I remembered growing up in Houston, Texas, a place where a simple afternoon rain shower could suddenly give rise to a dangerous storm filled with deadly twisters. To keep us safe, the schools held afternoon Tornado Drills that usually occurred during our free art period. While we students sat giggling and drawing lopsided pictures of purple houses, green puppies, and blue stick-figure chil-

dren with balloon heads, two bells would ring informing us that something wicked was coming our way. Immediately we children would drop whatever we were working on, scramble over to the farthest windowless wall, press our faces against it, and lock our hands behind our heads. I remembered how scary and confusing those drills were, and that our teacher would only kneel down beside us at the wall after she was certain we were all in the correct position.

“It’s going to be OK, you guys,” she would say to us in a calm, reassuring voice as she eased into her spot right in the middle of our group. “Everything is fine. The school just does these kinds of things to make sure that nobody here gets hurt. I’m right here. This is going to be over real soon.”

I think that there is no job on this earth more important than being a teacher. Through teachers you get writers, doctors, carpenters, engineers, and presidents. You understand children’s worries and fears, and help them to make sense of a world that sometimes even adults can’t comprehend.

With sincere thanks,
Lori Aurelia Williams

Dear Teachers,

Here in New York City where I’ve lived most my life, every hour seems to uncover another layer of the recent tragedy’s devastation—from the hundreds of stray animals left homeless to the walls plastered with signs of missing loved ones to the people weeping in the streets—we are as lost as children in all of this.

But this morning, as I was walking my dog, I came across a bumper sticker that read “If You Can Read This . . . Thank a Teacher.” And in that moment, what I was filled with was hope so deep, it made me smile.

As we scramble to raise money for the families of firemen and elevator operators and policemen we’ve lost, I want to take a moment to remember the teachers I’ve had and what they each taught me. In a time like this I remember my first lesson, from Mrs. Coffey in Kindergarten who said “Let’s be like the wind always. A gentle force that

helps move the world to a better place.”

And in first grade, Mrs. Feidler who said “Milk, Jacqueline. M-I-L-K. It’s an easy word. You’ll learn how to spell it. Take it one letter at a time.”

And in second grade, when Mrs. Brody heard me whispering my first curse word, turned to me, her face filled with shock and hurt—“But you have such *better* language you can use!”

I want to remember Mrs. Moskowitz with her beautifully mod seventies outfits and Mrs. Hershenhaus who promised me my genius would come one day if I stayed patient and read a lot, and Mrs. Vivo who smiled slyly when she introduced herself as a feminist—something I didn’t understand but knew if Ms. Vivo was one I wanted to be one too—and Mrs. Eisenstein who taught us the lyrics of “Moonshadow” by Cat Stevens—a song I sing now as the world feels like it’s falling apart.

Last week my goddaughter came home from her kindergarten class more excited than I’d seen her in a long time. “We got to make the Twin Towers again!” she said. “Our teacher said we could do them any way we wanted. I made them out of blocks and she didn’t let anybody knock it down either!”

Thank you teachers everywhere—for being like the wind, for soft hands and easy smiles, for your constance and foresight.

Thank you for helping us to remember poetry and songs and spelling words and most of all, that the future of the world is in our hands.

Jacqueline Woodson

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Dear Teachers,

Not so long ago, I was one of you. Lesson plans, new approaches, grading papers, endless dreams about reaching students who seemed so

I think that there is no job on this earth more important than being a teacher. Through teachers you get writers, doctors, carpenters, engineers, and presidents.

—Lori Aurelia Williams

out of reach—I found teaching to be an odd clash of exhaustion and exhilaration. And if not for the students, I'd say that it was also, by and large, thankless. Parents are busy creatures, often too caught up in the manic scheduling of their lives to notice the efforts you've put into infusing their children with knowledge and compassion, with structure and skills. And very often the children themselves—especially after elementary school—

But as you go through your day, know that, although you may not always see the tangible results of your labors, you are the rudder in many a child's journey.

—Wendelin Van Draanen

focus more on what they're going through than on how much their teachers are giving of themselves. So teachers learn to rely largely on the intrinsic rewards they receive from teaching, as the extrinsic ones are not what make it “worthwhile.” Yet some-

times it's nice—even *necessary*—to know you're appreciated. To be told how important you are. To be reminded what a big difference you make to our children, to our society.

I'm no longer in the classroom, but my children are. And I can tell you as a parent that teachers make a *huge* difference in a child's life. Children rely on their teachers. They trust their teachers. They admire their teachers. And every year, it's the same—they can't stand the thought of leaving one, only to discover the following year that they love the new one(s) just as well. And as a parent, I, too, rely on you, trust you, admire you for giving so much of yourselves to help children become the best they can be.

During this time when our sense of security has been so badly shaken, it seems likely that the emotional burden on you will increase. Kids will turn to you even more for guidance and understanding. For insight and stability. It's an awesome burden added to an already heavy load. But as you go through your day, know that, although you may not always see the tangible results of your labors, you are the rudder in many a child's journey. You keep them safe in stormy waters, and guide them through rough passages in their lives. So keep the

spirit. From sea to shining sea, the families of this country need you!

Sincerely yours,
Wendelin Van Draanen

Dear Teachers,

Available in printed issue only.

From sanctuary, to the Teachers,

My very immense gratitude to you in these days when you've had to meet the children and let them see that you are afraid. I don't suppose there was any other way since, as Mencken has told us, the kids can "see through sham with a sharp and terrible eye." When I try to imagine what the children see, I find my thoughts travel back to Staten Island during World War II and my teacher, Miss Stillwell. It was a duration when there were nightly air raid drills with shrieking sirens, when my sister Betty and I would extinguish every speck of light and go down to our cellar. There we hid under mattresses and held our gas masks ready. There were books of stamps for rationed food. Our policeman father had left us, and our mother worked days as a welder in a Mariner's Harbor shipyard and evenings as a hat check girl at the Tavern-on-the-Green in New Dorp.

I remember being very frightened. Often. There were reports of German U-boats spotted in the narrows between our Island and Brooklyn, and in the waters off Bayonne. We could no longer go to West Brighton and the Richter's restaurant on "the hill" for pot roast. The family was said to be all Hitler's spies and often seen at their windows using binoculars. At school we learned where to stand if the bombing began, and how to evacuate the building if it should begin to burn or collapse.

And in the middle of this waiting battlefield, five days a week I could count on Miss Stillwell

being there in her classroom. She had a high-pitched, emotional voice. She was animated and ardent and bouncy and game. I believed she was in her fifties, and sometimes I would be fascinated by the wrinkles on her neck. I thought how good she looked in her shiny, flower-covered dresses and the cobalt blue ceramic earrings she'd made in her kiln. She let us thread several dozen unclassified cocoons and hang them on the classroom windows. One night they all hatched and, when we arrived back in the classroom in the morning, it was dark with the windows covered by thousands of new-born praying mantises.

I remember we often asked Miss Stillwell if she were afraid, too, and she'd say yes, and we'd talk about all of our fears for awhile. Not very long. Soon Miss Stillwell would be pulling out a book and reading us snippets of *Gulliver's Travels* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or a jungle tale about Frank Buck bringin' 'em back alive. I remember her letting me be part of the team that drew Mt. Vernon on an entire blackboard in lush, pastel chalks. In my memory, she was always vital to everyone of us, praising, showing us, hovering, delighting in us. We were intoxicated by her fragrance, a mixture of delicate gardenia and faint, fresh apple. She was a safe harbor at a time of chaos.

And now here we are in a much more immediate dragon time, and, like Miss Stillwell, you are in classrooms healing yourselves and the children. How can I express my gratitude to you for letting them sense the importance you place on books and the skill to read them? And even more vital and to the point, how can I thank you for letting them watch and feel you rediscover your own personal strength in the words you've written in your hearts?

I wish you good fortune in your efforts, for you are as important in creating that peaceful world as diplomats and our armed forces.

—Laurence Yep

Paul Zindel