

Difficult Days and Difficult Texts

Stories will save us, if anything will. Several teachers told me, the day after the planes hit the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and that empty field in Pennsylvania, that in the midst of all their stunned and silent students, some had laughed.

Most had been immobilized by the images on the screen, but the teachers were troubled by those few who were not. How were they to account for what seemed so inadequate a response to a tragedy? It might, of course, have been a nervous reaction to something incomprehensible, but they didn't think so—they thought that those students simply didn't know how to read the images and absorb the information the television was bringing them.

That Tuesday's news *did* present us all with a difficult task. Many of us had never seen anything like it. I've had only two phone calls in my life like the one that morning of the 11th. I'd just walked into my office after class on the 11th when the phone rang. The caller asked, "Are you near a television?" and I said that I could find one. He told me to turn it on, and I asked, "What channel?" "It doesn't matter," he said, and I knew that something terrible had happened.

I'd had a similar call the morning the *Challenger* blew up. And on that morning, I spent the rest of the day watching television. That time, I watched the shuttle exploding over and over again with a sense of inadequacy similar to what I felt on this recent Tuesday. Like other teachers, however, I had a link to the shuttle, since Christa

McAuliffe, one of us, was flying on it. That link helped me read the news that day, helped make it real. I didn't know her any better than I knew any of the others on the shuttle, but that she was a teacher, and that I knew her name, somehow made the other astronauts more real, too, and changed the event for me, transforming a distant explosion into the dying of people I could picture.

Late in the afternoon, as the names and pictures of the others on the ship began to appear in the broadcasts, I gradually came to realize that I knew someone else who had been on the *Challenger*. McAuliffe I knew of, but Ron McNair I actually knew—we had sparred together much of one summer, driven from Duke to Virginia Polytechnic for a karate tournament, and then gone our separate ways and lost touch. I had watched him die a hundred times before I learned that he was there. When I realized that he had been on that shuttle, the explosion was brought still closer, transformed once again into the dying, not just of real people, but of someone I'd known.

I didn't have that kind of link to the disasters in New York and Washington. I didn't have the face and name of an old friend to make the event real, to invest it with the feeling of loss. It was easier for me to read the news of the *Challenger* because I had those ties. The accounts of the tragedies on September 11 made heavier demands. To meet them, even partially, I had to supply the links that McAuliffe and McNair had been for me 15 years ago; I had to somehow imagine the people and the pain and the loss, and it was hard to do. So I can sympathize with those students in our classes—the text made demands on them that were not easy to meet.

It's difficult to read a text so extraordinarily different from almost everything else we've encountered. To find anything comparable to what we were seeing that morning we had to reach back to the *Challenger*, or beyond that to Pearl Harbor. None of our students could readily pull either of those unhappy days to mind. But other than those events, what experience did we have through which to make sense of Tuesday morning?

We had movies, of course, whose special effects have grown more and more impressive, but the catastrophes there evoke a smile and a chuckle of appreciation for the accomplishments of the stunt men and the directors. There was little horror, after all, in watching the top of the Empire State Building come crashing down in *Armageddon*, or in watching the fireball roll through the White House and all of Washington, D.C. in *Independence Day*. We even laughed at the plight of the poor pilot in *ConAir*, crash-landing his plane on Las Vegas Boulevard in the middle of the casinos. Nobody was really hurt; the stunt men all walked away; the buildings and people would still be there when we left the theater. We had waited in line for an hour just to see such sights as these. And so we were pleased by them, entertained by them, and we waited impatiently for the DVD to go on sale so that we could enjoy them again without standing in line.

All of our students had seen these movies and a hundred others like them. They had learned how to read those images and they brought that experience to bear on September 11's news. Most of them knew immediately that this was different and began to struggle with the accounts, trying to understand what they were seeing and hearing, but a few couldn't adjust, and they watched the planes hit the World Trade Center just as they had watched the comets hit the Empire State Building, fascinated and entertained. The clips that captured the crashes were, we'd all admit, impressive shots. The low-angle tape of the impact on the South Tower, with the man in the foreground leaping back and looking up just afterwards, could have been a scene from a movie. No one who saw it will forget how the building seemed to absorb the

plane for a silent moment before erupting in flame and smoke and debris. So perhaps we can forgive those few giggling students their failure to acknowledge that hundreds of people died in that instant and that thousands more were condemned to die within the next hours.

An event like Tuesday's does make terrible demands upon us. It requires us to be sophisticated readers. Few of us had the misfortune to have direct access to the events, themselves—we have only the representations of the events in pictures and words, and we have to read those texts and do more than simply decode them. All of our students knew, of course, how to decode what they were seeing and hearing. If we'd given them a quiz after an hour of CNN, they'd all have been able to tell us what buildings were hit, what kinds of planes hit them, which airlines were involved, who was thought to be responsible, and so on. They could have described graphically the visual images that were played over and over again for them on the television. That sort of reading they could handle. They had conquered the basics. . . .

But that Tuesday's news called for much more than the simple basics of decoding. The reading we all had to do that morning required us to make choices about how we would read and what stance we would take, to respond to what the text offered us and evoked in us, to imagine and empa-



thize, and to evaluate and act. It was a great deal more than just answering a few recall questions.

From Reaction to Reflection

Our students needed, first of all, to have learned that one of the responsibilities of the reader is to take into consideration the nature of the text and decide how it might be read. The news on September 11 was so graphically compelling that it took an act of will to remind ourselves this was news and not a movie. We had never seen anything like this outside the theater, but despite the superficial similarities, this was not a Spielberg blockbuster, and we could not view it the same way. Our students, who had seen so many movies, so many fictional disasters, had to tell themselves that for the first time in their lives, the people plummeting down from the tops of the towers were *not* going to land in air bags and walk away, that the buildings collapsing on thousands of people were not computer-generated images. These texts—the film clips and commentary—made new demands, required a different stance, and though we watched the buildings fall in mute fascination, we could not allow ourselves to be entertained.

A moment's reflection would tell anyone that fascination was a shamefully inadequate response, but many of us felt that in those early hours on the eleventh, our responses, whatever they may have been, were inadequate. We felt shock, sorrow, anger, sympathy, fear, and pain, but none of it seemed quite sufficient to do justice to what would become over 5000 deaths. Articulating and dealing with those responses was a crucial step in reading the events of the day, and the need to do it was obvious everywhere. People in offices gathered quickly so that they could talk and try to sort out their feelings and thoughts. Family members who were separated called one another so that they could think together about the news. Classes gathered around television sets to listen, watch, and talk, because articulating and exploring their responses was obviously so much more important at the moment than long division or pronoun reference. We wanted to know what had happened,

but even more compelling was our desire to figure out what we felt and thought, what we would have to say and do, in the aftermath of the day's happenings.

Many of us responded intemperately but understandably at first. On Tuesday afternoon one of us muttered, as he watched the accounts, "Losing Afghanistan from the face of the earth would be a small price to pay if we could eliminate the people who did this." A day later, he would moderate his response somewhat, though he had to struggle to keep his desire for revenge in check. He was able to articulate his initial response, hold it up for examination, decide that it suggested a dangerous and reprehensible course of action, realize that it implied the killing of perhaps millions of innocents, and begin to search for alternatives. It is to enable such thinking that we teach our students to respond and reflect on their responses, that we insist that they do far more than decode texts, extract information, and pass quizzes.

Sadly, some of the public figures who spoke out soon after the attacks revealed the danger in the inability to examine responses. Some called for hasty, massive, indiscriminate retaliation against "them" and failed to realize that what was an expression of justifiable anger had taken the unfortunate shape of a policy statement. They called for retaliation without knowing where to direct it, what it would cost us in lives, and what innocent people would be sacrificed. As a cry of outrage, it was understandable, even laudable; as policy, it was something else entirely. Another public figure witlessly allied himself with the terrorists, justifying their murder of thousands as god's vengeance upon the U.S. for tolerating people he didn't approve of. None of these public figures had learned the importance of articulating and reflecting upon their responses, and using them to think about what they were seeing and hearing. Many of our students, however, students like those who have thought and written sensitively in these pages, have begun to respect the demands made upon them by the texts they face in their classes, and those they face in the world beyond their schools.

From Image to Empathy

Part of responding, of course, is imagining and empathizing. Perhaps much of our difficulty with the morning's news that day was that we hadn't bothered to imagine the deaths in *Armageddon* and *Independence Day*. To do so would have distracted us from the action and would have been off the point. Those movies were about excitement, and their crashes, explosions, and disasters were there for entertainment—they were adventure, not tragedy. But on Tuesday those deaths *were* the point.

Reading the shot of the plane hitting the World Trade Center had to be different from reading the scene of the meteorite hitting the buildings in *Armageddon*. To read the accounts of the attacks, our students had to place themselves and their parents in the plane or in the buildings and had to conjure up in their imaginations some tiny fraction of the terror and pain and loss. They had to see themselves standing on a ledge 100 stories up, choosing between the fire and the long fall. Later, they would have to imagine the thousands, families and friends, who lost people they loved in the attacks. To do less would be to leave the event unread. A reader who settled for the basics, for remembering some of the details, would have at best a feeble grasp on the morning's disaster. It would have been just a film clip of an airplane crash, all of its significance and human tragedy lost.

That is not to suggest, of course, that we think of an event like September 11's as a "teachable moment"—to do so would be to trivialize it. Rather, it is to suggest that all of our teaching is in some ways preparation for such events. We teach our students to read stories in part to prepare them to read such events as these. We teach them to consider their responses so that they won't be trapped by their own impulses and reflexes; we teach them to imagine so that they can achieve some grasp on lives and happenings distant from them; we teach them to write so that they capture their thinking, re-examine it, and present it to oth-

ers in the hope of responsibly influencing them.

It's in the literature class, where teachers offer stories and poems and encourage their students to respond and think and speak and write, that we learn what we need to know about reading. Our students won't learn it taking quizzes or preparing for them, or by collecting points and prizes for numbers of books read, but by engaging stories and poems that touch them, reading them in the company of other students and committed teachers who will help them make connections, explore responses, raise and answer questions.

Part of the problem with understanding Tuesday morning was that we had an event, but we didn't yet have a story. All we had at that point was an image, a happening. It will be the stories of people on the planes and in the buildings, people like us, like our students, that transform the images of that Tuesday from a Hollywood spectacular back into the real horror that it was. The stories of those who died and those who survived, those who vanished and those who were left behind, will give faces and names to people who might otherwise remain mere numbers. And it will be the stories of the oppressed people of Afghanistan that make them real for us, too, reminding us that they are victims of the same sort of insanity that struck at us. It's the stories that bind us together, if we can read them. It will be the stories that tell us what really happened that day, not to planes and buildings, but to people. Without those stories, and without the ability to read them responsively and responsibly, feeling at least some of the pain and the loss, our students will remain separate, distant, unconnected, vulnerable. If we learn to read them, we may learn to watch the news on difficult days and think responsibly about what we see and hear and be better able to read not only the texts, but our very lives.

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