

**September 11 (\*\*)**

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By Alfie Kohn

Some events seem momentous when they occur but gradually fade from consciousness, overtaken by fresh headlines and the distractions of daily life. Only once in a great while does something happen that will be taught by future historians. Just such an incident occurred on September 11. The deadly attacks on New York and Washington have left us groping for support, for words, for a way to make meaning and recover our balance.

Almost 30 years ago, my father suffered a serious heart attack at the age of 42. I remember how he smiled up at me weakly from his hospital bed and made a joke that wasn't a joke. "I guess I'm not as immortal as I thought I was," he murmured. This fall we have all suffered an attack that has stolen from us, individually and collectively, our sense of invincibility. Our airplanes can be turned into missiles. Our skyline can be altered. We can't be sure that our children are safe. It is unimaginable to me that people could patiently plan such carnage, could wake up each morning, eat breakfast, and spend the day preparing to destroy thousands of innocent lives along with their own. But while the particulars seem unfathomable, the attack itself had a context and perhaps a motive that are perfectly comprehensible – and especially important for educators to grasp.

The historical record suggests that the United States has no problem with terrorism as long as its victims don't live here or look like most of us. In the last couple of decades alone, we have bombed Libya, invaded Grenada, attacked Panama, and shelled Lebanon – killing civilians in each instance. We created and funded an army of terrorists to overthrow the elected government of Nicaragua, and when the World Court ruled that we must stop, we simply rejected the court's authority. We engineered coups in Iran, Zaire, Guatemala, and Chile (the last of which coincidentally also took place on September 11).

In 1991, we killed more than 100,000 men, women, and children in Iraq, deliberately wiping out electricity and water supplies with the result that tens of thousands of civilians died from malnutrition and disease. We continue to vigorously defend (and subsidize) Israel's brutal treatment of Palestinians, which has been condemned by human rights organizations and virtually every other nation on the planet. We have aided vile tyrants, including some who later turned against us: Manuel Noriega, Saddam Hussein, and, yes, Osama bin Laden (when his opposition to the Soviets served our purposes). We are not the only nation that has done such things, but we are the most powerful and therefore arguably the most dangerous. To be sure, these are delicate issues to raise at such a time, yet it is vital that we summon the courage to face them – if only to understand how our country is seen by others and to be prepared for questions that our students may ask. Some people remember all too clearly how many innocents we killed in Iraq; some see all too vividly how much suffering takes place in Israel's occupied territory. The prospect of further bloodshed, as grief turns to cries for vengeance, demands that we look hard at reality, no matter how unpleasant or inconvenient.

Does that reality justify an act of terrorism against us? No. Our history may help to explain, but decidedly does not excuse, the taking of innocent lives. Nothing could. By the same token, though, the September attack does not justify a retaliatory war launched by *our* government that takes innocent lives abroad. Early polls showed overwhelming American support for revenge, even for killing civilians in Muslim countries. If this seems understandable given what has just happened, then the same must be said about the animosity of our attackers, some of whom may have suffered personally from U.S.-sponsored violence. Understandable in both cases – and excusable in neither.

And so we come to our role as educators. There are excellent resources for helping students to reflect deeply about these specific issues, such as the website [www.teachingforchange.org/September11](http://www.teachingforchange.org/September11). But our broader obligation is to address what the writer Martin Amis recently described as Americans' chronic "deficit of empathy for the sufferings of people far away." Schools should help children locate themselves in widening circles of care that extend beyond self, beyond country, to all humanity. Likewise, education must be about developing the skills and disposition to question the official story, to view with skepticism the stark us-against-them (or us good, them bad) portrait of the world and the accompanying dehumanization of others that helps to explain that empathy deficit. Students should also be able to recognize dark historical parallels in President Bush's rhetoric, and to notice what is *not* being said or shown on the news.

One detail of the tragedy carries a striking pedagogical relevance. Official announcements in the south tower of the World Trade Center repeatedly instructed everyone in the building to stay put, which posed an agonizing choice: follow the official directive or disobey and evacuate. Here we find a fresh reason to ask whether we are teaching students to think for themselves or simply to do what they're told.

Ultimately, though, the standard by which to measure our schools is the extent to which the next generation comes to understand – and fully embrace – this simple truth: The life of someone who lives in Kabul or Baghdad is worth no less than the life of someone in New York or from our neighborhood.

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