

Remembrance and Tributes for 9/11 The Tenth Anniversary

No event in recent history for the United States so shocked our citizenry or changed some parts of our lives. Our sense of security was shaken, and as quickly as security at airports changed, we came to take procedures such as evacuation and relocation of students and reunification with parents much more seriously. It was a day that is indelibly etched in our shared psyche.

At the decade anniversaries of such events, there are many different attitudes and thoughts about what to do... how much to do... how to frame it. The range of ways of coping and recovering from such events is as varied as there are people! That means that, for some, coping means "moving on" more than "moving through." For others, really integrating the meaning of the event into a meaningful place is about finding that balance of "moving through" and truly processing the event while also maintaining a healthy balance of living in our new normal.

What is critical at times such as these is the importance of each of us realizing that most of those who process more deeply are not at all "more needy," but perhaps ought to be admired in their ability to look the entirety of the event in the eye. They may have a greater ability to look for lessons learned, and to give new meaning to their lives. It may change how they want to treat others or it could bring about a shift in personal values. Those who seem to others to have a greater need for deeper processing may, in many cases, be the stronger among us.

For those who tend to want to keep things a little more on the surface and resist looking back to give meaning at times such as these, others might need to be understanding of their desire not to have major commemorations. Current research in trauma indicates that, for many, maintaining a "forward" focus for many years is what enables some to do deeper processing later. For others, this forward focus is exactly what they need in order to feel a sense of control in the new normal.

For schools, one thing to realize is that, perhaps only high school students would even really vividly remember 9/11 in terms of feeling like it changed their world. Elementary students were born in the post 9/11 world. That would mean that their needs on the anniversary might be quite different. Many staff, however, will have vivid memories of that day, and for any who were in or near New York or Washington DC, those memories are laced with the physical and psychological reaction to the physiological biochemistry of trauma. One didn't have to actually see the towers go down to have the incredible adrenaline rush that is a hallmark of the fight-or-flight response, which then lodges the memory entirely differently in the brain. Surviving those events leaves one vulnerable to flashbacks and nightmares, which means that when the anniversaries come up, those who survived the event may be likely to re-experience aspects of that day or to have a stronger reaction to the anniversary than others. And then there are staff who are entirely new to the area who are watching this with anything from intrigue to disinterest, fascination to surprise.

All this brings us to the recognition that within any given school, there will be people with entirely different thoughts about what should be done, and with varying abilities to understand those whose needs are vastly different. But as a nation, as a culture, as a people, and as a school, this is a day that cannot go by without acknowledgement, respect, reflection; it is one more opportunity to give meaning to 9/11. This is a wonderful opportunity for us to examine

how we might appropriately memorialize or remember those who died and to look within ourselves to see what this means about how we want to live our own lives.

There are many ways of going about this. There will be some schools where some or many staff had very direct exposure to the events of 9/11, whereas new staff may have been living somewhere far from the epicenters, and the students may have been born after the attacks. It would be fine to do something that feels appropriate for the majority, and then have a second, deeper gathering for those who wish to participate. So for starters, try not to narrow your vision and think that you have to come up with the one solution. Consider that there could be several.

At a minimum, it seems appropriate that all schools in the United States would have some kind of assembly or gathering or a pause in the day's routine that allows all to pay tribute to those who were courageous in the midst of that time, those who lost their lives trying to save others, and the innocent victims who were simply at work or in those buildings on that day.

It is critical in our planning to be very careful not to allow any of what is said to be stereotypical regarding those of Middle Eastern ethnicity or the Muslim faith. This might be a time for those of us in the planning of the event to take a moment to reflect on how the Norwegians recently reacted to their own horrific event. Although there is a major difference in the two events from the standpoint of the perpetrator being of Norwegian descent, his central focus was his loathing of allowing immigration of those with dissimilar ethnic heritage to continue coming into the country. Rather than reacting heavily against the religious right wing (of which he was a member), even those students who experienced the unspeakable horror recognized that the answer was greater love and greater democracy, not stereotyping or bigotry.

Always students are more engaged and the event has greater meaning when they can do something. This would be a great day to have a lunch time activity related to this for older students or classroom activities for younger ones. Students could trace their hands on construction paper, cut them out, write a brief hopeful message on them and sign their names, and these could be sent to a class somewhere halfway around the world where you know that there is warfare, famine or struggle. The internet makes reaching out so easy! There are orphanages in war-torn countries, schools being held in alternative spaces because of natural disasters, all kind of options for helping your students take positive action steps upon their reflection of what happens when we allow hate to thrive. Perhaps the following ideas would be helpful in terms of giving you ideas about what you might do. Just reflect on this list and come up with your own ideas that are even better!

- Have a cultural awareness activity that allows students of various backgrounds to teach others about their cultures. This could include sharing about their foods, clothing, traditions and values.
- Choose just a few names of those who died, whether firefighters or victims, and show their pictures on the screen and tell just a few sentences about them to give this a human face.
- Let students create some kind of "teachers are awesome" poster and send it to a school in New York or Washington DC.
- Have students choose a local project for which they could volunteer in memory of those who died on 9/11.

- Let students (with staff supervision) organize an activity or an assembly that pays tribute to people of courage, people whose values help us overcome these kinds of events and those whose philosophies help us recover.
- Think of something fun or wonderful to send a fire station in lower Manhattan.
- Help students come up with a theme about the importance of reaching out and understanding those who are different from ourselves and ask the art teacher to help organize students putting that into a mural, whether actually painted on a wall or created on butcher paper.
- See if there are parents from a variety of cultures who would come in to lead activities representing their heritage.
- Consider investigating all of the ethnic groups represented in your student body and finding the flag that represents each to hang in your library. (I believe that a high school in Teaneck, NJ does this.)
- One elementary school in NYC ordered a butterfly chrysalis in a box for each student. They all hatched such that on 9/11/2002, each student released a butterfly into the sunny NY sky.
- For younger students, giving each student a small bottle of blowing bubbles and as they stand outside to blow them, give them thoughts such as, “When you blow this time, let some of your fear of people who look different than you be blown away.” “When you blow this time, let some of your anger at someone blow away.” “... let yourself imagine how far this bubble could go if it didn’t burst for three days. Who might live there? What might it look like there?” “... fill the bubble with happiness and think of someone in a different country a long way away that might just need a little happiness right now....” And so on.

There is sometimes a temptation to infuse a lot of nationalism or patriotism into such events, but we have many opportunities such as Memorial Day and Veterans Day that are very much about that. We have a much larger opportunity here. Perhaps at this time, we could look at how we can learn to be better ambassadors of peace, how we can be or how we can learn to be more willing advocates for those who are different, how we can begin to help youth see the value of making the “higher choice” in regard to what is good for all rather than being as self-focused as we might tend to be.

We could look at some of the positive lessons learned through surviving this event. We could acknowledge that we get through challenging times by “bundling together.” This is a concept that is illustrated easily for students of any age. Hand one student a single wooden pencil. “Can you break this in your hands?” A student can probably put a knee into the pencil while holding each end and break it. Give another student two. Can they be broken when holding them “bundled together”? And finally hand a student a bundle of pencils. They can’t be broken. The analogy is that many events that could break a single human spirit are survived by all of us “bundling together” and sharing the hardship, the grief, the fear, and much common support.

It was extraordinary to have the opportunity to provide support to schools in both New York and New Jersey in the aftermath of 9/11. There were remarkable efforts on the part of so many to come together toward the common good. Brian Andreas, creator of “StoryPeople,” drew a wonderful image in remembrance of 9/11, titled “Awakening.” It was a beacon of hope in those days, recognizing the light that can come even in the midst of such darkness. The drawing’s inscription reads, “In those days, we finally chose to walk like giants and hold the world in arms grown strong with love, and there may be many things we forget in the days to come, but this will not be one of them.” It is our opportunity to make sure his words remain true.