

Terror + 48 Hours: First-Year Students Respond to the Attack on America

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We must learn about the enemy. We must learn about their motives, their training, their beliefs, their support, their daily habits, their associates, their locations. Doing so requires that everyone, worldwide, lose some of their rights to privacy.

- Kristin Sargent, English and mathematics major, ROTC.

Kristin Sargent, senior, was my apprentice teacher in my first-year composition class at Lehigh University in the fall of 2001. As my apprentice she came to all classes, led discussion in some of them, graded some of our daily quizzes, consulted with the students about their papers, and read and commented on all papers the students turned in. The course was English 11, a literature seminar, that met every Tuesday and Thursday at 7:55 AM and ended at 9:10 AM. On the morning of September 11, Kristin and I had just given a little grammar quiz and had discussed a couple of Boccaccio's racy stories in the *Decameron*. I dismissed class with a preview of what was coming up for Thursday. "OK, then," I said, as they looked sleepily at their watches and stuffed their papers into their backpacks, "next time we take up Chaucer. The General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* is kind of slow going, and I have assigned only part of it. But I think you will enjoy the *Shipman's Tale*. It has a tight little plot about a clever wife who sells herself sexually to her husband's best friend. And don't forget, there will be a quiz. See you Thursday."

None of us realized as I droned about that tight little plot that another tight little plot was hatching itself ninety miles to the east of us. One airplane had just hit, and three more were heading horribly toward their deadly destinations.

By Thursday, when we met again, the terrorist attack was old news, but we were all still numb with the horror of it. It didn't feel right even to think about that quiz on the *Shipman's Tale*, so Kristin and I devised a different kind of exercise. We took fifteen minutes at the start of class to talk about the attacks. "Life is a series of stories," I told them. "Do any of you have a story you'd like to tell us about what happened as we left class 48 hours ago?" Silence. "My son was getting a haircut six blocks away from the World Trade Center," I went on. "When he heard the first plane crash, he rushed out and looked up and saw the smoke. Soon dust and papers filled the air. He went into the Goldman Sachs building, up to the eleventh floor where a friend of his worked, and watched the fireball blow out the back of the second World Trade Center building. He thought all of Manhattan was being bombed. He had no idea where the next bomb was going to hit. He ran down and out and joined the exodus running north." I paused, not for effect, but to make my voice come right again. "He's OK, but he is feeling guilty that he did not run the other way to help those fireman who died. Did any of you know anyone in those four planes, or lose anyone on one of those buildings?" Several

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of my students did, or knew people who had lost someone, through there was still hope they were OK. The crews were by then just beginning to sift through the rubble.

“We can’t give you a quiz on Chaucer today,” I said, after the talking had died down. “I don’t care about Chaucer today. You don’t care about Chaucer today. Chaucer doesn’t matter today. But I want you to write. When I get upset sometimes it helps me to write. Today I want you to write about the attack. Exactly two days ago four airplanes were in the air with hundreds of people who would soon be dead, causing the deaths of thousands more. I want you to write something about that, not about the *Shipman’s Tale*.” I passed out a sheet with two topics. “Write for twenty minutes on one of them. Kristin and I will read your essays, but we will not grade them.”

My students set to work. Some of their answers were worth sharing, and the next class period I took a few minutes at the start of class to read them some of their answers. Much later I got their permission to quote them if I ever tried to put together a short essay about their reactions. I said I would use only a sentence or two or three from each essay, that I might make slight corrections in spelling or punctuation, and perhaps a stylistic revision here and there. I said that I would, with their permission, use their names. A few did not want me to quote them, but most of them gave their permission.

A third of my students wrote about the first topic, *Vulnerability*. In giving that topic I was eager to have them think beyond the obvious - that the U.S. was suddenly vulnerable to attacks from enemy nations overseas. We did not even know for sure at that time to what extent the attacks were made by other nations, since all of the perpetrators seemed to be ticket-purchasing passengers on domestic flights. Still, the assumption was that this had to do with the Middle East, and already the name of Osama bin Laden was prominent in the news. Here was the topic, followed by excerpts from some of the students’ responses:

1. VULNERABILITY. We seem suddenly vulnerable to foreign terrorist attacks on the U.S. If you think that the REAL vulnerability is closer to home in this country, what is it? Defend your answer.

The real vulnerability in the U.S. is the growing gap between the rich and the poor, and the success of capitalism. Capitalist nations are often the targets of these acts, not because of their financial success, but because of the way that they take these successes for granted. Chris Czyzewski

We feel unsafe because of the type of attack it was. An attack on what is held with pride by the country is more terrifying than an attack on a building. Marina Chumakov

The real vulnerability of America is the naive thinking of its citizens, our frame of mind. We have to realize that the atrocities and tragedies of the world do not all happen in obscure lands across vast oceans. America must now shed its feelings of invulnerability and realize that every country is open to attack. Devin Oakes

By far the most popular topic was the second one, *Reaction*. At that time, just two days after the attacks, Americans everywhere seemed bent on revenge. We phrased our statement of this topic to encourage students to imagine a different alternative. Despite our instructions to seek “a better response” than immediate military retaliation, some of the students thought that such retaliation was precisely what the attacks called for. Most of them, however, tried to think of a less military response to the attacks, though we could tell that even many of these felt that military action was

had bombed most of the viable targets we could find in Afghanistan, we had ground troops there, we seemed to have all but won the “war,” and we Americans had all taken into our vocabulary strange words like “cell” and “Taliban” and “Al-Qaeda” and “burka” and “jihad.” On that last day we gave, in addition to the usual student course evaluations, a short one on the attacks. We asked two questions, but gave the students only enough room for a sentence or two in response. The overwhelming lesson that my students learned from September 11 was not to take the good life, or life at all, for granted:

A. LESSON LEARNED? What is the most important lesson YOU have learned from the events of September 11?

To respect not only my life, but the lives of my friends and family, because I now realize how beautiful and fragile life truly is. Michael Medvesky

Never to take anything for granted, and to really appreciate my family and friends. Hearing so many horror stories about people who lost brothers, cousins, and parents makes me feel truly lucky and grateful that my family is all safe. Arleigh Waring

No matter how good you might think you are, there is always someone out there who is not going to like you. Devin Oakes

It served as a wake-up call about the fragility of life. It is hard for college students to imagine someone dying, but this brought me back to reality. Marina Chumakov

Live every moment. Life may be over before you thought it would be. Christopher Morgan

The U.S. must learn how important it is to know what is going on in other countries and to think about how we can help them. Lauren Staniunas

That we need to respect other cultures instead of thinking that they are just “some stirred-up Muslims.” Martin Jenkin

For the second question we forced a “Yes, because” or a “No, because” response. Three-quarters of the students felt that events since September 11 proved that military action was appropriate:

B. ACTION JUSTIFIED? Does it seem to you, now that the Taliban has been virtually defeated, that the military action we took in Afghanistan was justified?

Yes, because

They took thousands of innocent lives. We had to show them that there are consequences for such actions. Ali Cummins

We needed to show that harboring terrorists is as grave a sin as actually committing the terrorist attacks. Michael Medvesky

This one we could not turn the other cheek to. Chris Czyzewski

People who were once oppressed now have more freedom. Devin Oakes

What they did to us was horrific, heartless. It was our duty to retaliate. Sheila Clabby

We needed something to bomb and destroy. Otherwise we could only mourn the dead. Vincent Kang

No, because

Terrorism will never be defeated. There will always be more of terrorists. Sarah Waldron

Another group will rise up after our attacks are finished. Martin Jenkins

Some of the Northern Alliance leaders are just as bad as the Taliban about womens' situations. Besides, we did it for revenge; innocent people die over there every day, all for revenge. Katie Schiewetz

So what have Kristin and I found out? We have found out, first, that while many first-year students at least at Lehigh University did not believe initially that it was necessary that we bomb in Afghanistan, more in hindsight thought that military action in Afghanistan was justified. They were profoundly moved by the terrorist attacks. They reacted first in disbelief, then in anger, and then more personally, with a realization that their world had changed and that they no longer felt as secure as they once felt.

As for me, I spent a week questioning why, with the world I knew falling apart, I was bothering to teach Chaucer to students who must have wondered as much as I did what difference a poet dead for six centuries could possibly make in a nation so suddenly vulnerable to attack by people who had never heard of Chaucer. But I have come to think, several months later, that there is perhaps nothing more important than for me to help students like these "sensitive, intelligent, idealistic, little-read, realistic, shaken" to see that Chaucer still matters.

What can be more important for a teacher to do than teach students to deal with injustice and learn from it. I did not have the presence of mind, 48 hours after the attack, to find a lesson for my students in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale* about a businessman who lends to a trusted monk, his best friend, a large sum of money that the friend then secretly uses to purchase a night of sexual pleasure from the businessman's lovely wife. But I think I could find the lesson now. That complacent businessman is so busy with his business affairs that he never questions the motives of those to whom he thinks he is so generous. Have we in America, I might have asked my students, become that genial businessman? Are we, like him, vulnerable to attack as we pursue so eagerly our desire for money? Have we, like him, grown so complacent that we are vulnerable to betrayal by a world we do not take the time to understand?

Postscript

As I make final revisions now, in the fall of 2003, more than two years after 9/11/01 and not long after the U.S. and England attacked Iraq, I find myself wondering what those students are now thinking about American vulnerability and about the justification for military action abroad. It would be hard to gather their reactions. Most of those first-year students are juniors now and several are engaged in study abroad. Lt. Kristin Sargent has long since graduated is now on military assignment in Korea. It would be hard to know, in any case, whether our students were responding to the doings of Osama or to those of Saddam. And besides, the editors told me I had to shorten this essay. I have done so. Reporting a further survey would lengthen it. Sometimes, I guess, we just have to stop. PGB

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