

Teaching, as Healing, at Ground Zero

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We New Yorkers like to think that we're at the center of it all, but when the rest of the world also believes that, too-but with entirely negative connotations-we're shocked and outraged. Luckily, New Yorkers also tend to spring back from adversity with defiance and incredible pluck. How else could the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center have sunk so completely out of sight?

Though Pace University's Civic Center campus is just two blocks from where the Twin Towers stood, we have never thought of ourselves as the epicenter of anything. We are usually a footnote to New York University or Columbia. If I ask a taxi driver to take me to Pace, I have to be careful not to wind up at Pratt in Brooklyn. Our students aren't polled to find out what's happening in education. Indeed, to read the media after September 11, 2001, one might have thought that New York University was the closest school to ground zero, but Pace and the Borough of Manhattan Community College were right there, BMCC to the North and Pace to the East.

And so, it was a great surprise to find ourselves at the center of something so horrific, a tragedy from which none of us will ever recover and from which, I fear, many of us will eventually die. Who knows what it is that we have been inhaling downtown since the world as we knew it changed? Not surprisingly, I have developed asthma this spring.

But my story-and Pace's - isn't just about life near a construction site where the tallest buildings in the city once stood. My experiences would be meaningless if what I learned about teaching, about my love for students, and about the larger role of women's studies in the curriculum didn't have universal applications. Looking back now, I wonder why it was ever possible for me to become distant from students on my large urban campus or to allow teaching ever to become just a job, even though everyone said I was and am very good at what I do.

And so, this essay revisits that horrific day that changed my life forever but gave me an opportunity to reevaluate what it means to be a teacher.

September 11, 2001

Getting dressed for the second class of the semester, I, like millions of other Americans, was riveted by the breaking television story that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. Then another one. In addition to disbelief, shock, anger, and sadness I had another thought: "Oh no, not us, not again!" Pace University's downtown campus, where I have taught English and Women's Studies for twenty-seven years, is just two blocks from where the Towers stood.

Where were my students, colleagues, and the many Pace alums who work in the Trade Center? Some of the dorms were in the hot zone; many students lived on or near West Street in the shadows of the towers. How could I contact them since phone lines and our e-mail system were knocked out?

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Luckily, I had had students fill out a profile sheet that provided me e-mail addresses and home phone numbers. I managed to reach all but one student. They were terrified and shaken, most with tales of being evacuated from the dormitories or classrooms, of huddling in the basement, in classrooms, or in windowless bathrooms while the buildings shook. Others saw the towers implode, watched smoking bodies and body parts tumble from the sky. Singing "Amazing Grace," students ran down seventeen flights of stairs, only to emerge onto streets covered with inches of dust and concrete as well as a confetti of travel itineraries, stock transactions, checks, and memos. One former student, whom I had frequently chewed out for being tardy, proudly e-mailed me that she was late to class that day as well. Four less fortunate Pace students were killed in the disaster. We lost forty alums, a chunk of concrete clobbered one faculty member on his head. Many of us lost friends or relatives, as well.

As the administration, led by President David A. Caputo, valiantly tried to reassure the Pace community, find out who was missing, and get the New York City campus back up and running, I wondered what was the best course to take with my students. I remembered that when I was an undergraduate I had been caught up in the April 1968 Columbia University student uprisings, which shut the campus for at least ten pivotal days before final exams. Several faculty members invited us into their homes to continue with our work. It gave us some continuity and also some assurance that our semester wouldn't be a washout.

Taking a page from history, I suggested that my literature students try to turn off the television for a while and read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In some ways, there couldn't be a more apt literary text - a work that deals with good and evil, creation and destruction, the desire for control over human destiny, the failure to take responsibility for one's acts. If the university were closed more than a week or two, we could meet at my home. Almost every student wrote me a thank you note. One student said that she couldn't read at all; later, she said she was reading an hour every day and was only up to page twenty-seven. I put her in touch with another student in the class who agreed to read with her.

On Wednesday, September 19, Pace finally re-opened two buildings with the help of electric generator trucks. I never wanted to see Lower Manhattan again. In 1993, I had avoided a bombing when a last-minute call canceled an appointment that would have put me in the Trade Center at the moment the explosion occurred. But I had also narrowly survived another tragedy that affected me even more personally. In 1977 I was trapped in a burning building. My cat, jumping up and down on my chest, had awakened me to the blaze that started in my next-door neighbor's apartment. The flames shot through the roof, two stories above the fire. Several hours later, the firemen led the stunned tenants down a smoldering staircase as ash and water cascaded on us. I saved only my dissertation and my cat, but he died shortly afterwards from heart failure.

The events of the past overlapped in an all-too Proustian way with the current catastrophe. Though at first I couldn't name my pain, I shook uncontrollably, was unable to sleep, and suffered from an upset stomach. I had been metaphorically thrown from the horse more than twice. Each time, it was harder to go on with "life as normal" as politicians encouraged us to do in the teeth of such tragedy. I am no hero, only a fragile survivor. How could I hope to be the strong arm around my students when I could not conquer my own terror?

By Thursday, I felt braver. I packed my new standard "teaching accessories" - two small flashlights, a bottle of water, a tiny portable radio, a new cell phone, a respirator mask, and construction goggles. I felt as if I had finally won a Fullbright Fellowship to Beirut. I headed downtown on the A line. As we passed below Fourteenth Street, I broke into a cold sweat. Then the conductor announced that the train wasn't stopping near Pace as promised but would be going nonstop from Canal Street to Brooklyn. I exited at Canal Street, the edge of the "hot zone," and showed the

National Guard my Pace identification. Hopscotching around shut or closely guarded buildings, I meandered toward Pace. It had started to rain, and the dense air smelled like a wet ashtray. I fitted the respirator mask over my nose and mouth, hoisted my umbrella, and trudged onward. I had wondered why footage of the rescue operation showed workers with their protective masks dangling around their necks. Now I knew why. Perspiration poured into my mouth and down my neck. Smoke smouldered from sewer covers and grates; steam rose from the wet pavement as the rain splashed on it-I was walking through Dante's Inferno. By the time I got to school, I was so wet from exertion that my colleagues assumed that I had forgotten my umbrella.

We had electricity, but we were told that the phones might be out for weeks and that the mainframe would work sporadically. As soon as our Web was up and running, a virus knocked it out. The day's instructions were printed on a yellow form; Wednesday's had been blue. Would Friday bring a pink slip? I attended a workshop on how to help students cope. Though we were told that a range of emotions from shock and hysteria to anger were normal, we left without a clue about what to do if a student ran screaming from the room. For the first time in my teaching career, I went home and had a stiff drink.

Despite the failure of the well-intended effort, the presence of my colleagues comforted me. I realized how much I would miss this slightly dysfunctional family were I never to see them again. I hugged my friends and former students, no longer afraid that I would be sued for sexual harassment if I touched anyone.

Talking with my colleagues in the group session and individually, I realized there could not be a single approach to recuperation. I contacted last spring's Creative Nonfiction students and reminded them of their anxiety that they had nothing to write about. Now, I pointed out, for better or worse they had had a front row seat to history. I encouraged them to write about the event in journals or any form they wanted to.

I realized that Women's and Gender Studies classes were in a unique position to help students better comprehend the events around them. Students heard of the Taliban in our Gender, Race and Class courses which discussed the way that women in Afghanistan were forbidden to leave their homes or work in contact with men. Despite the footage of men fleeing Afghanistan for Pakistan, our students knew that most of the refugees in the world are women and children. The Service Learning course that I developed last spring placed students to work in the surrounding communities as volunteers working with the children of battered women, the elderly, with the ill and the homeless. After the class ended, more than half of them continued to work regularly in these programs. "Women are still being battered; the poor are still hungry; the guys you helped out still have AIDS," I wrote the students. "But they will have fewer resources as many Americans donate to the Red Cross instead of to local organizations not connected to the events of September 11th. Therefore, I'm urging you to continue your community participation. The less fortunate in our community need you more than ever." Students quickly contacted me, some offering to escort Arab-American women to and from classes. I had no idea how prescient my message was. By Christmas, the food pantries in the area had about one third of their normal supplies. Everybody Wins! - a reading program for elementary school children - lost 115 of its 150 local volunteers because they had lost nearby jobs or their companies had relocated out of lower Manhattan. In December, I signed up as a reader and began working every Tuesday with a nine-year-old girl.

But as classes resumed at the end of September, I found it hard to shake off the fugue state I was in and turn to the only class I was teaching-a sophomore-level honors literature course of writing about women from the Middle Ages until 1900. Typically, I would approach Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from a feminist perspective and discuss issues like the gender of both Frankenstein and his Creature, the equation of female sexuality with death, and Shelley's ambiguity

toward creation. But I didn't feel that I could go into the class with a Marshall plan for education, nor could I reduce their education to a semester in therapy. I would steer a middle ground. I would have to see what shape the students were in and try to reach for issues that related to the events at large.

On September 29th, the first day of classes, my thirty-minute subway ride was transformed into a two-hour nightmare of rerouted subway lines and an anthrax scare. (All too soon these "police activities"-not reported in the newspapers to make the tourists feel safe-became regular events.) I emerged shaking again onto smoky streets that now had the sharp, rancid odor of death. I gathered my books from my office and started my class. Much to my joy and amazement, almost all of the students were there. They had been debriefed to the bone, and they wanted to get back to work. The largest constituency, students from the former Soviet Union, were used to adversity. I started by giving them a feminist perspective on the events and on the language used to describe the terrorists. No one spoke of "white terrorists" after Timothy McVeigh bombed a building in Oklahoma, nor did they suggest profiling Caucasians with crewcuts in red pickup trucks. I also drew an analogy to the AIDS epidemic: In the mid-1980s, dentists and airlines wanted to refuse service to gay men, Haitians and others suspected of having HIV. But making sure that everyone was safe took precedent over taking away the civil liberties of some. Finally, I was concerned by the genderized portrayal of the events in the media. Watching the fundraising telethon, which billed itself as a "Tribute to Heroes," I noticed that all the individualized stories were about male rescuers. While the New York Fire Department is overwhelmingly white and male, many female doctors, emergency technicians, police officers, and nurses were first responders. I know two female police officers who dug tirelessly in the rubble, one of them looking for her brother. As late as May 2002, one of the officers was still sifting rubble on a conveyor belt in Staten Island in the hopes of finding additional human remains and personal belongings. Some body parts that she picked up-including a decapitated head-made Dr. Frankenstein seem even more an amateur than he was.

Frankenstein ties in neatly to discussions about judging people by their appearance. When Victor's brother William is murdered, Victor concludes that the Creature must be the guilty party. "No sooner did that idea cross my imagination than I became convinced of its truth" (60). People long for clear-cut visions of guilt and innocence. Some of my students disliked my complicated analysis-they longed for a clear-cut villain.

The very discussion of the text drew us back into the world of literature that was meant to be our common bond in the first place. But soon, our roles shifted. I became the strong one-though I hardly felt that way-while many of my students faltered. Miraculously, all of my students eventually returned to class. But as the days passed, some of them sat dazed and speechless, others coughed or slept openly, and two stopped coming to class altogether. Some continued having problems concentrating so we spent more time than usual reading poems and parts of books out loud.

Large-scale disasters provoke us to fight or flee. Women, in particular, have been conditioned to flee rather than fight, and I had only one male student this semester. From time to time, we would interrupt the course work for a "check up" on how everyone was doing. I would remind them of the availability of our crisis counselors, but I also understood that some of the many cultures represented in the class view therapy, however well-intended, with suspicion. When a student was absent for more than one class, I would tell the others the general reason for the absence if I knew it. Ordinarily, I wouldn't comment at all on such matters, but I noticed a quiet panic when a classmate was inexplicably missing. The greatest pain was felt by the dorm students. They rightly pointed out that even if they turned off the television, all they had to do was look out their dorm window at the smouldering ruins of the Trade Center to have it all come back to them. They felt that they could not flee reminders of the catastrophic event-from the foul winds that blew our way to the armed police officers and barricades almost everywhere.

The words “college” and “campus” are almost synonymous, but for urban schools like Pace, our “quad” is a small square of light and trees sandwiched between two towers of classrooms and dorms. New York City is usually a glorious canvas to experiment on, but after September 11th, life near Wall Street was like being pecked to death by pigeons. The Starbucks served only uniformed officers, and then closed altogether until mid-December. The Egyptian street vendors from whose carts I bought breakfast every day were chased from the area for about six weeks. One day I counted fifteen stores in a row that had closed on nearby Nassau Street. How could a university survive when McDonalds had gone under? Across the street from Pace, Mayor Rudolph Guiliani shut City Hall Park - cutting us off from the few stores that remained on the western side of the park. Then when the streets started to reopen, we found ourselves surrounded by gaping tourists who wanted to hug us and hear our stories.

I tried to remind my students of New York’s riches by taking them to the theater to see *Hedda Gabler*, which we read in class. I also rounded up some tickets to *Urinetown*, a play that had no connection to our course or to feminism. It was, however, very funny, and the plot dealt with surviving through a difficult and unusual ordeal. I tried not to mind when a few overslept and didn’t show up even though other students would have enjoyed the thirty-dollar tickets we gave them for free.

Despite my efforts, I was unable to console them about the alienation that they experienced when they tried to socialize beyond the college. When they went to local bars, the guys they met didn’t understand why they were still concerned with “yesterday’s news,” something no longer interesting or important. Why couldn’t they simply “lighten up and have a good time”? I was not surprised that a number of my students asked me to assist them in their attempts to leave Pace. While I applaud students’ desire to study abroad and wish I had had such an opportunity when I was their age, I found myself filling out recommendation forms in record numbers. Other students approached me with essays that they had written in preparation to transfer to other institutions. Some of them had quixotic Ivy League aspirations: One did get into Cornell while another will start at Smith in the fall. Others had more prosaic goals and moved on to local colleges. It pained me to think I was losing our best students, especially those who knew me well enough to ask for recommendations in the first place. Nevertheless, their crisis was not about me, and, though I know some of my colleagues would disagree with me, I believed that my mission as a professor is to help students realize their dreams. In the end I was pleased that other colleges agreed with me that Pace has some incredibly smart students; in the fall, sitting there with a stack of blank recommendation forms, I felt that they were abandoning me. “What about me?” I thought one day. “I want to go to Spain and France, too!” By December, more than three hundred students had left Pace.

I continued to worry more about how these students would perform if they studied elsewhere. Though my colleagues at other institutions complained that their students were more forgetful than usual about appointments and assignments, they didn’t see the same the level of malaise. Since I have been through the same experience, I could not only sympathize but empathize. I wouldn’t claim that I was functioning at my highest level either. Even now, some days the only thing my brain holds is water: I feel as if I’ve dashed through my midlife changes to embrace senior moments.

It’s hard in the midst of such common despair to keep the curriculum running. I revised the course outline so that we all knew where we were at. Had I known that the students would be surrounded by tragedy, I don’t think I would have chosen three texts - *Hedda Gabler*, *The Awakening*, and *Anna Karenina* - in which the protagonist kills herself. I thought of renaming the course “Women on the Edge,” though it would be unclear whether I was referring to the texts or the students. Although the students noticed that our protagonists, like the women in Afghanistan, were enclosed within their homes, ironically, some students expressed a bit of nostalgia for the limited-but seemingly safe--worlds of Edna Pontellier and Hedda Gabler. I knew what they meant: in my spare time I was

soothed by old-fashioned mysteries in which people were murdered one at a time. We made our way through the texts as usual, though I spent more time recapping the plot and repeating some of the salient points of previous day's work. We somehow finished before Christmas, even though my students had to rewrite everything, including in-class essays, which were far below typical honors level.

In a sense, current events became our most salient text. Though nothing excuses the barbarism of the terrorists who destroyed the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon, at least those of us who are older can put the events in the context of Vietnam and other wars. For today's adolescents who have no memory of any war, such events are totally without a frame of reference. Understanding how terrorism operates in the world can only help young adults get through recent horrors.

I reminded the students that as women, they probably all understand terror. We are like Robin Morgan's *Everywoman*, looking over our shoulders as we hurry along:

Suddenly there are footsteps behind her. Heavy, rapid. A man's footsteps. She knows this immediately, just as she knows that she must not look around.... She is afraid. He could be a rapist. He could be a soldier, a harasser, a robber, a killer. He could be none of these. He could be a man in a hurry. He could be a man merely walking at his normal pace. But she fears him. She fears him because he is a man. She has reason to fear....

This moment she shares with every human being who is female.

This is the democratization of fear (23-4).

Morgan is right in that fear is a great equalizer. Interestingly enough, Leon Botstein, the President of Bard College, expressed a similar notion of terrorism as a democratizing force in an address to faculty at Pace during our Convocation on October 7. If terrorism is the great equalizer, then the equation has it that the terrorist attacks on America have been thwarted in a sense because out of the rubble we emerged united as we have never been before. In a sense this belief is true, except that we probably felt that same cohesion after Pearl Harbor was attacked. But a close analysis illustrates that not all people were treated equally in the aftermath of the attacks. The firemen were singled out as especially heroic for going into the World Trade Center as it burned. Yet, commentators refrained from noting that among the photographs of the over three hundred lost, there were no women and only four people of color. Were the fire department more diverse, I have no doubt that others would have been heroic, but not everyone is given an equal opportunity, even for heroism.¹

When attention was turned to taking care of the surviving spouses and children, members of Congress and local charities rushed to exclude partners and children of lesbian and gay male parents. If there was a call to exclude the children of heterosexual domestic partners, I haven't heard it, but perhaps they, too, will have limited benefits because of their choice of lifestyle. But at the end of 2001, complicated charts released by the government indicate that the value of every life is not the same. Single people are worth less than married people; those without children are worth less than traditional families. Those who earned more in life will receive more in death, too (Henriques). Though juries generally weigh a person's value when assessing claims in civil suits, the disparity in the proposed settlement undercuts politicians rhetoric about "unity."² The families of illegal aliens-often working under false names and Social Security numbers - will likely receive nothing. The rush to cut off homosexual families is chilling and appalling because it signals a willingness to ostracize some victims. In fact, the first person to die in the WTC disaster, Father

Mychal Judge, was well-known within the gay male community (and apparently within parts of the Catholic Church) for having gay sensibilities. Yet, he was not named a “gay priest” until he was posthumously “outed” first in the *Advocate* and then in the *New Yorker*. Mark Bingham, one of the men who tackled the hijackers on United Airlines Flight 93, was openly gay, but the widows of two other heroes were paraded on television instead.

The second group that feminist analysis speaks to is the postal workers. It is shameful that the Hart Building, which houses congressional offices, was shut down at the first hint of anthrax as postal workers were told to continue their work at many facilities. While some Congressional office buildings were evacuated for months while the government attempted to remove all traces of anthrax, postal employees continued to work at Morgan Station in New York City, even after successive tests found anthrax on sorting machinery. It should be shocking that one Washington-area postal worker was sent home from a hospital emergency room with Tylenol when he appeared with symptoms of anthrax. But the most distressing fact of all is that the American public hasn't rallied to support the postal workers, hasn't created vast funds to take care of their spouses and children, and hasn't hailed them as heroes for going back into post offices knowing full well that anthrax was found within. And when stories emerged on the news that involve the postal workers, we finally saw many people of color who have sought blue collar civil service jobs because of so-called equal treatment and benefits. And now we have told them-as if they didn't know already-how little they are worth.

Apparently, anthrax is horrible when it shows up in the offices of television anchors and members of Congress, but it is barely newsworthy when family planning clinics receive hundreds of anthrax threats every year. Since September 11th, abortion clinics have had hundreds of anthrax scares. According to the *New York Times*, in October, “about 200 clinics and abortion rights groups were sent Federal Express packages containing a powdery substance and, in some cases, a letter signed by the Army of god indicating that the substance was anthrax.” The article went on to note, “Because there have been so many anthrax threats against abortion clinics in the last three years, abortion rights groups have developed routines for notifying all clinics of the threats that have been received and most are careful to screen their mail” (A24). Yet, not only did the government at first decline to meet with these groups to learn from them about safely handling mail, but it also failed to pursue the many forms of terrorism that abortion clinics face daily, including harassment of workers and patients and the murder of several providers. No national guard troops have been sent to protect the clinics, though their procedures are legal. The Federal Bureau of Investigation hasn't put these anthrax terrorists on their priority list. According to their own logic, whether or not it supports the right to abortion, the government should certainly oppose and hunt down the terrorists who threaten democratic choice. If this is a war in which you are either for terrorism or against it, which side is our government on when it comes to the lives of women and their supporters? Like Afghanistan, our government is harboring and supporting terrorists because it is doing nothing to drive them and their supporters out.

We also discussed the role of women in much of the Islamic world. That a hundred million women have had cliterodectomies and/or infibulation in Africa, the Middle East, Indonesia and even the United States and that more women die from this every month than all who perished in the World Trade Center is of little interest to our government. The government funded the Taliban in May 2001 with over forty million dollars. They imprisoned women in their homes, prohibited education for women, and allowed women to die without proper medical treatment. But so long as the Taliban claimed, however falsely, that they were destroying poppy fields, we were willing to support them, just as we support the oil-rich Saudis despite their corruption and persecution of women and religious minorities. We demand that the world be for us or against us, yet when the Indian Parliament was bombed in December 2001, the US government did everything in its power to

prevent India from pursuing the perpetrators. Terrorism is a daily occurrence in Ireland, Israel and Palestine; people have their arms hacked off in Sierre Leone and other war-torn African nations. Which side are we on?

Like the bodies two blocks from our campus, the world seems to be decomposing right in front of my students' eyes. At nineteen, it's hard for them to think anyone is suffering more than they are. At the same time they are angry with themselves for not being able to get on with their lives, and they are furious with those professors who insensitively try to go on with their lives by cramming fourteen weeks work into ten. Some of them would like to blow up an Afghan city or country to avenge their own suffering; feminism makes life more complicated, not simpler.

By December, I felt one-dimensional, crushed under the weight of my students' grief and the drumbeat of committee meetings. I realized that in taking care of my students I had neglected myself. Generally cheerful and unflappable, I found it difficult to cope with petty annoyances. Finally, I had to let myself feel my own pain, my own fears, my own losses. And I realized that since my students never inquired how I was doing, I was going to have to tell them myself.

Perhaps letting the students know how hard a time I was having was the best thing I could share with them. My pretense of bravery made them feel weaker. My global concerns sounded as if I didn't care about their suffering or my own. Admitting that this struggle to survive was *our* problem, allowed us to go forward together, to understand that sometimes reality dwarfs art in its poignant tragedy. And so, on the last day of class, most of us had lunch together at a pizzeria at the South Street Seaport. This once bustling tourist hub of trendy shops was quiet now, except for the squawking seagulls. We teased each other and drank from each other's glasses like family members. At the end of the meal, the students decided that the dorm students, who had to eat cafeteria food, deserved the leftovers. I saw that we had all bonded in a way that we never could before, that we never would again. I felt sorry for those who would leave a place like Pace.

These students had lost their adolescence and whatever remained of their innocence, but they had finished the semester. The very eagerness of my students to learn, their determination not to allow terrorism to deprive them of an education, their courage in attending class although some of them looked stressed and exhausted reminded me of how much I love teaching these gritty first-generation college students. I felt whole again, and I learned a valuable lesson: I thought I would have to hold them together; instead, they healed my soul.

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Notes

1. According to the *New York Times*, there are only six black female firefighters. They account for .06% of the force (Newman).
2. An explanation of each person's "worth" can be found at www.usdoj.gov/victimcompensation/loss-calc.html.

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