A Journey into National Grief

Reflections by
Susan Lucarelli

The day began bright, crystal clear, and full of the newness of the year. If you have ever been a teacher, or for that matter a student, you know that the beginning of the year is September with its feelings of wonder, excitement, and uncertainty. What will this class be like, how can I create the mood of excitement for learning with these particular youngsters? What will be the hook that captures their imaginations? They come as individuals. Many are new to the school; all are learning disabled. What does that mean to them? Are they damaged by the label, have they failed to learn so often that they no longer believe it possible? They are almost always emotionally scarred; they have been thought of as stupid, lazy, or deliberately inattentive by other students, other teachers, well meaning but uninformed family members, and, most importantly, by themselves. They have known frequent failure. Perhaps they miscue on the sounds that form words, perhaps they can't remember details in stories, or perhaps their writing is illegible. Whatever their particular story, each child has known repeated failure and suffers as a result.

But I am not easily deterred. All youngsters can learn, and the vast majority wants to. I tend to be pretty direct with students, and I think that the sooner they realize that they may have to do things a little differently to learn, the better. I don't mince words often and usually promise them a good fight if they think that LD means Less Do'en. I know these youngsters to be bright and able—more so than they do. I also know that getting them to believe in themselves is indeed a challenge. And so we began the year, with eager faces, some ready but reluctant learners.

An exciting difference in our year's beginning at Churchill was the acquisition of and total reconstruction of a new school. We had been a very small, private, special education school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Not unlike most private schools in that area, we recessed in Central Park, had every imaginable supply, advantaged and delightful students—even if learning disabled—and the enthusiastic support of a knowledgeable staff and parent body. But we outgrew our surroundings and, in response to the needs of New Yorkers, increased our population to include older students. This meant a new building farther downtown. It was all very exciting. Yes, the neighborhood would be different, and we would miss our frequent romps in the park, but the essence of Churchill would remain the same. We still had twelve students per class with a head teacher and a very qualified assistant teacher. Reading and math groups were homogeneously selected (teacher jargon for groups determined by learning
style and academic level). Often these groups were very small, perhaps four to eight students. Couldn’t any child learn like this? What a delight and privilege for a teacher, and for students as well.

We were three days into the fall term, and our routine proceeded as usual with attendance, the day’s schedule, the weather, and the date . . . September 11, 2001. My students had already learned to put away their lunch boxes, place binders in desks, homework in the box, and pencils at the ready. We were really cooking! Morning worksheets were on the desks, and all were comfortably easing into their tasks. Following routine at this point, so early in the year, was more expected than it would be later when relationships began to bloom. As an experienced teacher, I knew the old adage that you don’t smile until December, but I never really bought it. I enjoy the kids! They are funny and talented and inquisitive and bright. If you miss a beat, they know it. I’ve always thought that the trick is to miss a beat or two and enjoy it with them, which seems to give them the message that none of us is perfect and that’s OK.

At about ten of nine Kristy, the director of the school, called the head teachers unexpectedly to the main lobby. She is a terrific leader but for the past year or so she has been so involved with building a new school that her knowledge of our everyday activities has taken a back seat. So our immediate reaction was, “What in the world does she want?” Each head teacher has an assistant, so the issue of student safety was not the point. It was simply, why in the world would she disturb us now? We all gathered, slowly, but with rather an air of excitement, like—Someone has just donated a million dollars so we can build a swimming pool or whatever, and we need your immediate input. Everyone was buzzing; what could this be? Gradually, though, we all became aware of her mood. This was serious. She was not greeting us with smiles. Perhaps someone was in an automobile accident, or a student had been hurt in some way. We began to speak among ourselves, while waiting for stragglers. A couple of teachers had to be specifically paged, which was annoying. I was feeling particularly alert and a little excited by the uncertainty but impatient to get on with it, whatever it was.

Kristy called for our attention and solemnly announced: “There has been an accident at the World Trade Center. An airplane has flown into the side of the building. It is not known what the circumstances are, but we will keep you informed. Do not alarm the children. There are parents working there. Continue to teach as if nothing has happened. Do not inform the students.” At first this news seemed ridiculous. It was a perfectly beautiful day. What turkey would fly into a building in bright sunshine? It must be one of those small, single-engine jobs that are always having mechanical difficulties or one with a daring but inexperienced pilot who should have continued his day job. We were sent back to our classes with our stern warning and a growing sense of uncertainty. Almost immediately sirens began to blare, not just one here or there but a growing crescendo of alarm. Before we could explain our absence to our classes, a second request to come to the lobby was announced. This time, all the
niceties were removed: “Head teachers to the lobby IMMEDIATELY.” We did not wait. Upon arrival, Kristy informed us that a second plane had hit the second tower, they were 747 passenger planes, and they most certainly were the result of terrorism. She was in communication with the police and would keep us informed. We were to return to class. Could this be possible? Terrorism?! I knew what that meant, but only in the abstract, “somewhere out there” way that we know many things and yet don’t know them at all. What in the world was happening? I thought of the people on the plane . . . surely there were many dead, yet somehow it seemed very distant. As if in a fog, my mind could not grasp it. Was it the unlikelihood of this happening that made it so difficult to understand? Was it the juxtaposition of these sweet children’s faces and so deliberate an act of evil? It made no sense. This can’t happen here, I spoke silently, in protest.

I am not naïve, and I have been through terrorism before. In 1975, the September Seven group blew up the Trans World Airlines terminal at La Guardia airport, just missing my infant daughter and me. Although terrifying, somehow a single bomb just didn’t have the same impact that this potentially did. I was still uncertain of what to believe as sirens wailed past my second floor windows, as if in a blind rage, racing toward the south. OK, OK now I’m getting scared. What do you mean, teach class, pretend nothing is happening? NO WAY! The children were searching my eyes. Though I acknowledged that there had been an accident at the WTC, I continued to speak of everything as all right, as if no injuries were reported! Clearly all evidence was to the contrary. Our school is right around the corner from Bellevue and New York University hospitals. Both are major trauma centers with active and practiced emergency rooms and large numbers of ambulances at the ready. Perhaps in my heightened sense of alertness I magnified the deafening noise coming from the street, but I know my voice was well on its way to scream and I was still not being heard. A blaring announcement on the PA: “All students and staff immediately go to the basement! Bring nothing! Drop everything! Come immediately! The notion that all was well had quickly evaporated, but there was no panic. Students looked to their teachers, and we followed procedure. Single file, immediately leave the room; walk to the right, no running, silence! I dare not speak of my own face; I knew only the faces of others. Eyes wide and darting, muscles tensed and rigid, skin white as paste. There was only the shuffling of hundreds of feet down stairs. There were no illusions now. Something horrible was certainly happening.

This is the communication age. Of course the teachers were carrying their cell phones. A few had dialed early and learned that, indeed, the World Trade Center had been attacked. Many deaths were predicted, and the buildings were in flames. People were jumping out of the upper floors and more planes were believed heading our way. My God! This is war! Where was my husband . . . where was my son? Each had jobs dealing with finance and often went to meetings in or around the WTC. Did I remember what Nick had said this
morning? Did he have a meeting downtown? Where in the world was Johnny? His office was midtown, but many friends were downtown. Had he met anyone for breakfast? Who do we know at the World Trade Center? Our whole town of Manhasset works in finance. What companies are in the Trade Center? Why won’t these phones work!!! A few had heard that husbands or friends were all right, but the general reports were not good, and little information meant terrifying conclusions.

The children were clearly anxious. This usually active group of 320 students needed to be made busy, and fast. Though frightened, the 142 teachers and staff tried gamely to keep the students entertained. I volunteered to run for games. Taking the stairs two at a time, I continued to try the cell phone. While gathering decks of cards, puzzles, and board games I grabbed the class phone, which luckily was connected to an outside line. Finally, I reached Nick. He had reached John, and John had called Elizabeth, our daughter who was in medical school in Philadelphia. My family was accounted for. Now the problem was finding parents of the kids and keeping everyone calm. We had all assembled in the basement cafeteria—a room designed for about 182 people—so the older groups were quickly removed to the halls and business offices that are also housed in the basement. This left the elementary school of well over 200 with students and staff in the cafeteria. Running was out of the question, though many of the boys felt, as they often do, that this was the best solution to all that pent-up anxiety. We divided into groups, started card games, read stories while lined up on the floor, drew pictures with quickly supplied paper and markers, and began watching a video. This was good, but very temporary.

Questions were flying. What has happened? Why are we here? These freshly scrubbed, beautifully clad, and especially sensitive youngsters were no longer buying that nothing was wrong. They needed answers, and so did we! Nothing was coming, and in the void were rumors. The Pentagon has been hit; there were eight more planes in the air heading for New York and Washington; they were going to take out the United Nations building; the Empire State building, the White House and the Capitol. Though I knew my family was safe, I also felt that their safety would be short-lived. With difficulty, but aided by that surge of adrenaline we all feel in emergencies, I focused on the kids, wiping teary eyes, holding hands and hugging, telling funny stories of camping emergencies, while counting noses to make sure that all were accounted for.

Parents had been called at the notice of terrorism, and each was asked to come pick up their child by whatever means possible. School buses were not available to return students to their homes and, although most parents lived and worked in the city, some were from the outer boroughs or Long Island and Westchester. We did not know that all public transportation had been stopped, including subways, trains, and buses, and that the airports were closed. All parents had to walk to Churchill, no matter how far or what obstacles had to be overcome, in order to retrieve their youngsters. In truth, there was no other way.
The first parent to arrive was one of mine; that is, her child was in my class. I saw her at the entrance to the basement and immediately went to her. Fortunately I had gone without her daughter, as she had just run from the twenty-first floor of the south tower. She is a remarkable woman by all standards—well dressed, stylish, lovely blue eyes, and soft spoken. At this moment she was shoeless, shaking violently, and bleeding. I whisked her into a kitchen entrance and held her for what seemed like a long and bitter cry. She spoke of being in an office in the south tower as the windows blew out from the impact of the first plane hitting the north tower. She and other staff immediately ran to the stairs; there was confusion as guards and announcements told everyone to return to their offices: they were safe. In spite of the reassurances, she decided to leave, running down twenty-one flights of stairs. She exited the building just as the second airliner was plowing into the second tower. Bodies and shrapnel were falling from the sky as she dashed toward daylight. Just behind her, fellow workers were running and jumping to avoid stepping on those who had leaped or fallen to their deaths from the north tower. Through sobs, she spoke of running just fast enough to avoid a section of the plane that cascaded down, killing those running behind her. Somehow, she was not quite sure, but she thought perhaps someone had grabbed her and pulled her under a metal canopy just as the huge flaming hunk of metal reached the ground. Then she grew silent, able to sit for a second without shaking. Knowing that I had to get back to the children who had surely seen her come in, I ran to find our psychologist and a wet towel to wash her bleeding leg. I found her anxious daughter and told her that mommy was a little scared but would all right and would like to see her very soon. In the arms of my assistant, she waited. Other parents were by now running through the doors, all scanning the room anxiously for their own children. Many were out of breath, clothes disheveled. Some were shoeless, many covered with a sickening white ash; all looking terrified. This was no longer a mystery; this was a very real horror.

Meryl, our elementary school principal, was attending efficiently to lists of parents and students, checking each head as it entered and every handheld inquisitive liege that left. Other teachers occupied those students remaining, while assuring them that they too would soon be retrieved. With all of this motion, noise, and anxiety, not a single child left the building.

Each parent that entered added his or her own story to the patchwork quilt of information we were gathering. The towers were not only aflame, with hundreds, perhaps thousands, dying from the impact and flames, but we soon learned that the towers had fallen, trapping more in their wake. My God, my God, why? Smoke that we were only vaguely aware of as parents brought the outside in was wafting through the air. Eyes had become reddened and teary as parents grabbed wondering youngsters, bravely escorting them to long, uncertain walks home.

Upon my return to the cafeteria and the tearful reunion of daughter with injured mother, I found one of my youngsters under a lunchroom table, wielding
a large nail file against an imaginary foe. At Churchill, unlike some schools, we do not have metal detectors, do not search lockers, and do have essentially a loyal and trusting relationship among students and staff. Under normal circumstances, this scrimshaw gift would have been examined happily by all during “show and tell,” but returned to the student after school with the suggestion that it remain at home. This good-hearted youngster had no intention of hurting anyone, and, even with these most dramatic circumstances he did not. But on this particular day everything had changed, and his behavior sent up more flares of alarm, if that was possible, so I removed him quickly to a more secluded business office. There we bounced a ball off filing cabinets until he began to feel less frightened and could release his “weapon” of protection. All in a day’s work, I thought, and then, Who am I trying to kid? As my special charge regained composure, I interested him in an office computer and the certainty of a familiar game focused his addled attention. Another staff person soon relieved me, and I felt the desperate need to find out for myself what was happening. With a few seconds respite, I ran to the elevators and quickly ascended to the seventh floor roof playground.

The air was smoky, though not dense, and had a very distinctive smell. Metallic somehow, strong, acrid and foul, so strong that you could smell it for miles and miles. The white ash had descended everywhere, and the sound of sirens continued to pulse through the city streets.

Ironically, I had dressed this day for a wake. A friend’s husband had died of illness the day before, and his wake was to begin that evening.

As I stood on the roof amid ashen playground equipment, knowing full well the devastation before us, I could only silently, tearfully pray. Dear God, help us; be with those tortured souls most certainly in need of your loving care and these innocent children; give us . . . I had no idea what. I had no idea what I or we needed to survive this, to bring sanity, peace, and safety. Maybe just the certainty of God’s presence and courage. Perhaps later I could think of wisdom, understanding, or a plan to bring comfort. For now, I needed the strength to carry on. I returned to the basement and my silent reverie was broken as a wide-eyed, tearful student, having waited more than two hours for a parent, asked hysterically how her mom could possibly come here from Battery Park. It was a good question, actually, for which I had no answer. Battery Park is adjacent to the towers, and it was clearly in imminent danger with their demise. Hugs and assurances continued to help as we settled in for an agonizing wait. Some four hours after our initial call, her distraught mom entered with a pajama-clad baby brother and two dogs in her arms. Exhausted but relieved, she tearfully told of her journey through battered streets, between cars flipped and crushed like pretzels, and ash—ash, paper, and office machinery so numerous she could barely detail it, on her way to Churchill with no hope of returning home. Grief stricken and wide eyed, her anxious daughter listened to the telling while hugging her baby brother with an intensity neither had previously known.
Mom’s spirit and energy renewed, this little family set off. They would make it, somehow.

Initially, as the ordeal began and we realized the horror felt by those around us and the imminent, life-threatening danger that lay ahead of us, I felt a kind of agitation. An agitation, an anxiety started in my stomach and rose to a sense of physical panic. “Fight or flight” was beginning. Just as suddenly as I recognized the symptoms, a calm began to prevail and a plan of action was clear. The mere movement and certain awareness that I was not alone, that I could handle this, brought clear goals. My mind became preoccupied with the required action to support and care for the children and parents in my charge, to do whatever that required. My feelings were somehow “out there”—very distant, perhaps to be dealt with later, but at the time they were a nuisance. Things needed to be done; there was no time for uncertainty, fear, or grief. I had prayed to God, now I must row for shore, and so I did.

By the end of that four- or five-hour period—it was perhaps two or three o’clock (though all of us wore watches, no one knew what time it was)—all our students had begun their walks home in the anxious care of a parent or designated friend. Then it was finally our turn. The teachers and staff could leave on their own uncertain paths to find loved ones. I began my trek uptown and fell in step with the hordes of others—worn, bleary-eyed and ashen—who were making their way to safety. It was a silent march, a very eerie thing in New York City, all usual hustle and bustle quieted to the shuffling of feet heading north and the now occasional siren heading south. Along the way I was struck by an amazing realization that all stores and business established had closed except for restaurants, delicatessens, and churches. Standing outside of each were owners, workers, volunteers, and ministers providing whatever nurturance was needed. I suddenly became aware of how incredibly thirsty I was. I knew I had not eaten since . . . before—time shall always be designated for us as before or after the attack—and I had not had time to stop for a drink. Hands passing out cups of water or juice and prayers were now the most heartening sight I had ever seen. Almost immediately old, crass, cynical New York City had become a small town, and we all so desperately needed that. Your particular faith did not matter, as we stopped every few blocks to pray with a minister, rabbi, or priest. The hushed crowd bowed heads, closed weary eyes, then moved on. It seemed so right, in this horrific exodus, that good and God should be there holding our hands and walking us out.

I arrived at my son’s apartment in midtown and was greeted by my husband and son with long but solemn hugs. Johnny knew some of his friends were there, at Cantor Fitzgerald. He haltingly told me that his friend Ryan was among those at Cantor. Ryan’s brother had called not long before wanting John to join in a search for Ryan. “Johnny, Ryan loved you, he’d want us to find him! Ryan had been John’s roommate in college, his teammate, the UNC lacrosse team captain, and a good friend, but now, well, what could John possibly do? Should he and Brett run down to the inferno that was now the World Trade Center?
How could they? Johnny’s cousin Joe had just made it back from less than a block away from the fallen buildings. He was badly shaken, having run with the crowd away from crashing debris and ash so thick that it was blinding. He told of the incredible devastation so vast, so confusing, and so lethal that a search for one individual would be utterly hopeless. Police lines had formed to exclude all and to assist those remaining in the “kill zone” to safety. The boys tried to sort out the possibilities. Could they get there? Could they help the police? The TV blared, Tell everyone to stay away! No one was to go near; more buildings were in imminent danger of falling. Reluctantly, the young men agreed to wait for the fires to recede before beginning their search. There was nothing they could do. And so we waited, sitting in front of the TV, huddled together for comfort. We watched as building seven collapsed and flames continued to blaze among the fallen, once magnificent towers. I was in total disbelief, perhaps even shock. Though I had listened to the stories of parents, witnessed their injuries, choked on the smoke, smelled that incredible smell of death, I still could not believe what was being replayed before my eyes. Exhaustion was beginning to play at my mind, and inaction allowed me to wonder silently and recall. I had just seen Ryan at a UNC lacrosse picnic, where I sat with his pretty young bride-to-be and his mom. We spoke of our boys growing up and becoming men. He was so delighted with his great job opportunity; he was so full of life and joy; he and his fiancée were so much in love. Ryan was trying to convince John to join him at Cantor and was going to set up an appointment soon. Dear God, what a horrible, horrible tragedy. Who would do this? Why is this happening? What have we done? What will happen next? Although many of the rumors proved false, clearly there was enough damage and imminent danger for war. Dear God, what next!

After several hours, and an announcement that automobiles could finally cross bridges and that trains had started to run, my husband and I bade John a sad farewell and started home. We had to walk back down to Churchill to get the car for our trip home. The streets were silent, the only sound being that of tanks rolling down the middle of streets and the lonely tolling of church bells. No sounds of talking, no sounds of the city’s motion. Most Americans were watching the world “unfold,” we were living it. “Unfold” feels far too gentle. How about topple, crumble, shake, something like that? The military was passing by to safeguard us and although I was glad, part of me was deeply troubled. My mind turned to new worries, and the certain knowledge that our grief had just begun.

Manhasset is a bedroom community of Manhattan, and a good commute to the financial district. It was with dread that I arrived home to begin what would be a long series of telephone calls to locate friends, run down rumors, and come to the certain realization that our small town, and I, personally, had lost many, many friends and neighbors. The shock sent me reeling as name after name became a certain casualty... so many young men, friends of my son... kids my husband and I had coached, kids who had spent as much time in my refrigerator
as their own. Dear God, how could this be happening? I envisioned Matty and John rolling out of Munsey Park Elementary School in full, gleeful wrestle, and this terrific little athlete sliding across the basketball court to save a ball, tapping it to his dashing point guard, John. We watched all of these boys through the teams, the classes, the years of encouragement, the college angst. We had proudly seen them grow and mature as they found partners to share their lives and professions in which they could succeed. They were such fine young men! Speaking to Matty’s mom, she tearfully spoke of him leaving the house this morning in his new blue suit, looking so handsome, so proud of having landed this great job. He had his first sales appointment today. Maybe he left the office early enough, maybe he will call . . . but not yet.

How could this be? God, how could you allow this to happen! It was just too much, and though my head told me that that was a ridiculous, heretical question, my heart raged. How many would we lose? Dear God, what can we do! Name after name was registered among the missing. Some were false alarms as thankful parents learned when unfound sons called home. It was also a false alarm when one name was found on a hospital list and thought to be a friend’s husband. Unfortunately, the name was the same, but not the man . . . father of another of my son’s friends. When would it end? We eventually counted fifty among the missing. This number represented more than our small town had lost in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam combined. In one day, in almost one hour, they were gone. How could we possibly deal with this? But bizarre as it now seems, we had not given up hope. Not Hope in the big sense, but hope in the immediate sense. Maybe, just maybe, someone had survived, caught, perhaps in a hole formed between girders, or unknown on a hospital bed, or, or . . . I don’t know, but maybe! There was nothing, nothing we could do. Yes, we could pray, and pray we did. But could it bring them back, could we turn back time, could this all be a horrible dream or some violent TV show created in the mind of a madman? No, this was real evil! The face of evil had always seemed so distant in this extreme. Of course, there were the evils we all know: greed, arrogance, infidelity perhaps, vanity, disrespect, thoughtlessness. But not murder of the innocent, not on this scale, not our friends. God, I felt so helpless. There had been atrocities before, horrible wars, certainly terrorism. Perhaps with some historical perspective, this can be equated or minimized. But not now, not here!

Sleep, I can’t remember when. Perhaps tonight sleep will come, more a collapse than sleep, but finally morning will arrive.

And so it did, but morning felt odd. Everything seemed fine. The phone was not ringing off the hook, the sky was again as blue as a beautiful sea, the hustle of showering and dressing had begun. Perhaps, just maybe, if I don’t tell anyone, this will end up being just some unexplained night terror. If I go on about my business, I’ll see one of the guys at the station or wave, and I’ll respond to, “Hey, Mamma Luc,” as they hurriedly grab a cup of coffee at Louie’s. Yes! That must be it; it was just an illusion. Thank God! But just as
certainly as I said that, I knew in my heart that yesterday was the horror I had feared. My dusty clothes lay draped over a chair and ashen shoes were strewn near by, evidence of a fatigue too massive for tidiness.

Reflections by
Mary Clark

They say (whoever “They” are) that recovering from a tragedy caused by another human being is much more difficult than recovering from a natural disaster. Somehow, we humans can understand the chaos resulting from floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and tornadoes more easily than the chaos we bring upon each other. I guess that makes some sense. Hurricanes, tidal waves, and tornadoes can all be explained in scientific terms. But how can we understand the neighbor who would cause so much terror and hurt?

The individuals who flew the planes into the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon had been neighbors to some of us. We had sold them cars, rented them rooms, served them meals, taught them to fly, waited on them at ticket counters, and helped them board the planes. The chaos created by their actions causes a deeper hurt in our souls, a darker terror in our minds, an unsettling fear of anything outside of our control.

We each have a story about 9/11. The further away from ground zero you get, the less dramatic the story, but no less important to the person whose life it reveals.

The following are stories resulting from the events of September 11, 2001. They come from Manhasset, a community just outside of New York City. I hope that in reading the effects of these actions of terror, you might gain insight into the depth of pain my friends and neighbors experienced and with which they continue to live.

On the morning of September 12, there were seventy-three cars sitting in the parking lot of our train station. Most of those cars belonged to men and women who would never come home to claim them. A family member would have to find another set of keys, go to the station, find the car, and drive it home. One young wife would go and sit in her husband’s car unable to turn the key. After a while, this car was covered in candles and flags. A month later, her father finally brought the car home.

I stopped my early morning walks in the neighborhood. It seemed that in each block someone’s front steps were covered in candles and small flags. How many dead could there be? These yards had children’s toys and play equipment. Who didn’t come home? Mom or dad? How would the families survive this tragedy? At first there were always extra cars in the driveway. But after a while, immediate families were left to deal with their grief. I quit walking. I could not start my day this way.
It was during the prayer service on Friday, September 14, that I found a way to cope with my feelings. After the service concluded, we stood comparing notes on those we thought might be missing. There were so many rumors. On a board at the back of the sanctuary were note cards. Each card had a name on it; the board was covered. We spoke quietly in small groups.

Who was missing? Who was not accounted for? Had we missed any-one in our calling through the congregational phone book? The questions were numbing. The magnitude of this tragedy was beyond our comprehension. Other than pray, what could we do?

Sue Lucarelli was standing with us for much of this conversation. Sue is a teacher in a private school in Manhattan, and she began to relate the story of her students on the morning of September 11. We listened with tears in our eyes as she told of the terror the children experienced. How would these children cope with that terror in the future?

Sue told of her students’ need to be hugged and to hang on to something. She wanted to take enough teddy bears for each child when she returned to her class Monday. We guaranteed Sue she would have one for every child in her entire school.

Teddy bears. Not just toys, but tangible comfort they could cling to when separated from parents and sitting in the classroom where, for them, this terror began. They had asked for teddy bears while in the school basement, as planes flew into buildings and sirens screamed past their school. It has to do with comfort and security, a transitional object of love.

It made sense. And it gave us something to do. We needed that.

By Saturday afternoon it had dawned on us that more than just Sue’s students and school would need bears. There were a lot of schools in lower Manhattan in which children had experienced similar terror. Sadly, the first tower was hit just as many children were out in the schoolyard, lining up to go into their classrooms. The flight path of the plane was unusual and attracted their attention. Many young children witnessed this event. And many more were standing at windows watching the first tower burn when the second plane hit.

In the next days, how many children would be suffering with the anxiety of leaving mom and dad and going to school? They knew parents rode through tunnels, crossed bridges, and worked in tall buildings. They had classmates whose dads or moms were not coming home. Many classmates. Our parents told of children standing in doorways, preventing dad from leaving for work, demanding that he never go back into the city.

It didn’t take long, and everyone was going to funerals. The churches and funeral homes were backed up. Death became a common part of an elementary school’s life. The children knew this was not a bad storm that had swept through lower Manhattan and knocked down buildings. Bad people did this. People who could have lived right down the street in their city neighborhood. Life was going to be pretty tough on these little ones for a while. They were going to need a
great deal of love and security to get through the next days, weeks, and months. Having something to hang on to would definitely help.

The Friday prayer service had brought it all into focus. We realized our adults would have scars for many years to come. But it was the children we were most concerned for. How would they handle the next few months? The idea of giving them teddy bears made sense.

On Saturday evening, the Ministerial Association of Manhasset planned a candlelight service in the town park. My husband Stuart, as all other pastors, priests, and rabbis, was involved in the service. As we pulled out of our driveway, I was surprised to see what I considered the entire community walking toward the park. We were all quiet—even the littlest children. At the park, people already filled the lawn around the gazebo. The street was shut down to give more room to stand. Candles were lit, songs were sung, prayers were spoken, and then the ministers gave everyone the opportunity to come up to the microphone and offer the name of someone who was missing. For the next twenty-two minutes, the line moved from one person to another. Many named a family member or friend; a few named all of their employees or a husband and his entire company. The last three were young girls, maybe eleven or twelve years old. They hesitated at first, then came up and said,

"My coach . . ."
"My coach...
"My coach and my dad."

Standing shoulder to shoulder with my friends and neighbors, the grief was overwhelming. I was reminded of a story following the Oklahoma City bombing. A canine team had spent many hours climbing through the debris looking for survivors. After their shift was over, the handler showered and got some well-deserved sleep. When he woke up, he realized something was wrong with the dog. Fearing the dog had been hurt, he knelt down and put his hands through the dog’s fur. The dog was covered in blood, human blood. Death had soaked in. Standing there in the park, with the candle wax dripping on my shoes and hearing my neighbors crying softly with each other, I believe I know how the dog felt. Death was soaking in. How would we survive this?

The church was full on Sunday, and the sermon gave us permission to weep. After all, Jesus wept for his lost friend. I know the story was one of hope, too, but I’m not certain we could hear that yet.

On Sunday afternoon I called information in Holland, Michigan, and found the home phone number for Betty Voskuil, the coordinator of Reformed Church World Service. By that evening, she was collecting teddy bears to ship to New York. My email address book has many RCA pastors and members in it; they also received a plea for teddy bears. On the following Wednesday, we delivered the first 650 bears to a school in downtown Manhattan. The school principal would write in her thank you note that the anxiety levels diminished as each child selected a bear to hug.
We had our first suicide that week. A woman who could not resolve this act of terror against her world simply lay down on the railroad track in the middle of town. Unfortunately, she chose a beautiful sunny day when the children were out of school. Too many saw too much.

As the weeks and then months wore on, the bears continued to give the children comfort during times of stress. Each time we thought we could put an end to the project, more schools would call begging for our help. We were always six thousand to ten thousand bears short.

For a school to receive bears, the principal had to make the request. We could not promise delivery. One principal called saying she had heard about our project but had thought her students were doing all right. But the stresses piled up. The school was across the street from a firehouse. Pictures, candles, flowers, and flags greeted the children as they entered the front of the school each day. Thirteen students had lost family members in the trade towers. Then came the anthrax scare—the final straw for her children, many of whose parents worked for the post office. The fear level had reached a new high, and we received another call: How soon could her children have teddy bears for their classrooms?

There are many stories about the teddy bears. But one of the most important stories is how they helped heal our own people at Community Reformed. We are a small church, with a Sunday morning worship attendance of eighty to ninety. By December 21, when we made our last delivery of bears to a school, we had sorted and bagged and delivered 58,000 bears. That does not include the bears that were too well loved to go to a child and had to go to the laundry, or the bears that had batteries and could not go into a classroom, or the bears that had clothes on and could be distracting for the student, or the bears that were really monsters, or funny looking animals, or meant for a young baby. All bears found homes, but we counted only those that met the criteria for classrooms. They had to be new and of a reasonable size to fit into a desk, locker, or backpack.

After sorting, the bears were bagged by ten into clear plastic bags. We discovered early on that police checkpoints required clear bags for viewing the contents. We only delivered in personal vehicles. Crossing bridges and going through tunnels had become difficult for commercial vans and trucks.

During the first ten days of December, the suicides increased. We knew the holidays were going to be rough, so the elders kept in closer touch with everyone. Stuart and I made a point of engaging people in conversation; telling your story can be helpful.

One member asked if we could spend some time with her and her husband. His company had been located in the trade towers. Frank and all his employees had made it out safely, but he had not spoken a word about that day to her. She was worried. We agreed to go to dinner together, and, as we talked over our meal, Stuart and I both prayed that we would have the opportunity to help this couple begin to talk to each other.
Frank opened the door when he spoke of a wonderful painting that had hung in his office. Of course the painting was gone. I asked him what he remembered when he thought of that day. Frank answered, “Shoes.”

“Tell me more, I don’t understand.”

“After the first plane hit, the courtyard between the two buildings was littered with shoes.”

He talked for the next hour, describing what he saw and smelled and remembered seeing. How he had demanded that all of his employees get out of the building NOW, and how that probably had saved their lives. He told of the sound of the window-washing platform screaming past his window. He remembered the smell of jet fuel and the vision of people running. Running so hard they ran out of their shoes. Frank has retired. I wonder how well he sleeps at night.

By January, spousal abuse and road rage were at new levels.

After Easter, across from the school, an abusive husband lost control and murdered his wife as she prepared dinner. Their two children were in the house. He sent them to school on Monday morning. When the authorities came to pick up the children for protective custody, the principal found two extra teddy bears and put them in their arms as they got into the police cars.

When we traveled, it was disappointing to see and hear how the rest of the country had moved on. It was understandable, but we still were flying our flags and dealing with our losses. Just driving to the city and seeing the hole in the sky brought all the feelings back.

And the suicides continue, mostly of young people. I don’t know why. Perhaps they can’t make sense of the evil.

Stuart started spending Thursday evenings at the local pub. The young people who frequented the place were not coming into the church, so he decided to go to them. A few minutes in prayer in the parking lot, and then he would take a seat at the bar for the rest of the evening. It didn’t take long and they started coming to him, telling their stories about dads they will never see again and friends they had spent their whole lives around who had disappeared.

In the spring, an eleven-year-old boy fell off his bike, striking his head on the curb. He died three days later. His entire fifth-grade class came to his funeral. The director of the psychiatric unit at the local hospital had called the day before the funeral to remind us of the depth of grief this elementary school had experienced in the last year. He said he would have his staff on stand-by. We were to carry his beeper number with us before, during, and after the service. The following Sunday, instead of Sunday school, we had grief counseling.

On Monday a young man who had grown up in our congregation committed suicide. Our church and our town reeled. How much more could we take? This young man was sweet and gentle, one of the nice kids who always looked out for his friends. After the graveside service was finished, his friends stayed in the cemetery. They couldn’t leave him. His parents’ grief is beyond words.
The summer has been quiet. The young people spend their weekend out in the Hamptons; school and sports are just getting under way again. But the fear of revisiting September 11 is very real.

As I watch some people, it is as if they are spinning tops. They have created enough momentum to keep their lives spinning, but you can begin to see the wobble as we get closer to 9/11/2002. When they begin to spin out of control, they spin into my dining room or Stuart’s study.

We will dedicate the service Sunday, September 8, to the memory of our nation’s tragedy and offer prayers each day of that week in the sanctuary.

On the evening of the eleventh our town will walk back to the park to light our candles and remember all the names.

“My coach . . .”
“My coach . . .”
“My coach . . . and my dad.”

Keep us in your prayers.