**Teaching 9/11**

It was a typical Tuesday morning at school in 2001. Kids mulling around in the hallways. Teachers chat amicably while parents duck in and out of classrooms, dropping off forgotten homework, lunches, and kid stuff. Kids hugging moms and dads. "Have a great day!" "I'm proud of you." "Don't forget, you have ball practice after school." "Don't give Mr. C too hard of a time in class today, son." "I love you." Little did we know that our lives would be forever altered by the end of the school day.

In 2001, schools were much more open. We didn't have fences, electronic gates, or guards in the hallway. Parents stopped by the office often and frequently visited classrooms. The kids were greeted with hugs and encouragement. Minor transgressions of the code of conduct were mostly ignored. "Let kids be kids. There is plenty of time for them to grow up." Following rules is essential. But relationships are more so.

In 2001, computers were limited to four per classroom. The internet was like our students – growing, learning, and trying to figure out its future. We used overhead projectors and high-tech television sets with VCRs built into them. Cable news was CNN and a couple of local stations. On special days, like the day before a school holiday or fun Friday, we played video cassettes on the television we checked out from the school’s library. Only the teachers had cell phones; most of us never had them turned on during the day. Social media did not exist in 2001. We had phones in the rooms, and the school secretary routed the call to us if a parent wanted to talk with us. Recess lasted an hour, and every kid participated in kickball. Sometimes, teachers joined in the fun. Me, I was 'all-time pitcher!' Being an all-time pitcher meant you didn't pick sides or get to kick. You rolled the ball for both teams.

Our school was located about three miles from a military base. Nearly two-thirds of my students had parents serving in the military. They lived in the apartments across or close to the school. In the mornings, my job was parking lot duty. I loved it even though on days when the weather wasn't great. The corner I stood on was where the walkers and bike riders came by. Most of the time, a family member walked their children to school. Many wore military uniforms, and I got to know the parents by first name. On some days, one military parent would bring me coffee. Sometimes, a military spouse would ask if I could check in with their child, even if they weren't in my class. Without telling me, I understood that one or both parents were being deployed. The rest of my kids came from mostly poor neighborhoods around the school.

Nostalgia is never good. History should be remembered outside of how one feels or emotional attachment. Nostalgia clouds judgment. Changes how you remember. Obscures objectivity. Objectivity is a teacher's best friend. Being objective allows you to teach the truth, accurate and factual, and the critical lessons of history. Tragic events are no exception.

You may wonder why I relate all of this to you. What does it have to do with teaching 9 /11? Many of you who read this may have children born long after 2001. Many of you would have been students in 2001. Some readers will have military parents or have served in the military. There are veterans and spouses of veterans. There will be first responders and police officers. Possibly, you know someone who was there in 2001. This blog will be read by thousands who will recall that awful day – September 11, 2001. And this is the first lesson on how to teach children about this day. Share with them where you were and what you were doing. Tell them how you learned about what happened that day. The problem with history is that the significance of certain events fades as years pass. We commemorate days without enshrining the essential lessons. I teach my students that each of us is a form of 'living history.' We can't change history, but we can share its lessons.

Every classroom in the U.S. is taught about Pearl Harbor. December 7, 1941, was a day like the more recent 2001 day. The attack on Pearl Harbor unleashed astonishing consequences reverberating across the world. Context is important, and children can be taught to compare historical events objectively.

America had no intention of getting into the war. Europe was a long way from the American shores. The Japanese military did not believe that to be true. The military command devised a plan to eliminate the U.S. naval capability strategically. If successful, Japan thought the U.S. would be incapable of entering the war or, at least, so severely damaged it would take years for recovery. Hirohito greatly miscalculated American ingenuity and resolve.

A military strategy is not ideological. It is designed to maximize the advantage of one military over another. A sovereign nation conducted the attack on Pearl Harbor as a military strategy. Terrorist ideologues coordinated 9/11. They hailed from four countries but claimed allegiance only to the terrorist organization they belonged to. There was no military strategy or objective. Only the worst kind of people or governments target civilians. Wars are tragic, horrific events. 9 – 11 was not a war in the conventional sense. It was a war on ideas—liberty versus tyranny and good versus evil.

Therein lies the lesson. Like Pearl Harbor, 9/11 united Americans and reminded us that freedom is precious. For all of the faults and divisions in America, we can unite when threatened. We will champion freedom, liberty, and human rights regardless of the personal costs. We are not a society of idealogues who callously and without regard for human life attack defenseless, innocent, unsuspecting people to make a political point.

We are a people of compassion. A people striving to do better than the previous generation. A people with faults but trying to fix them. Your students need to hear this. They need to believe this. They need to live this.

It's easy to show the CNN videos of planes crashing into the towers of the World Trade Center and think you are teaching 9/11. We live in a world where dramatic video is manufactured so much that it's not shocking. Planes crashing is the event. The lesson is the story of what happened afterward and what was happening during. Within moments of the crash, first responders were arriving at the scene. Average people working in the tower, like Rick Rescorla, went into action within seconds of the plane crashing into the South Tower. Who was Rescorla?

Rescorla was a Vietnam Veteran. He was the safety officer in the tower. Rescorla had practiced what to do in an emergency for several years. He had worked in the North Tower some years earlier, bombed by terrorists in 1993. Rescorla led the evacuation of the building, and his military experience helped him to keep calm when things got bad. This time, it would take more than his experience and calm demeanor. He would have to summon incredible valor to do what he was trained to do and what his duty required.

Rescorla safely escorted more than 2,700 people from the burning and collapsing building using a bullhorn. Survivors reported that he sang songs in the stairwell to keep everyone calm as they exited the building. These were the same songs he sang in Vietnam to keep soldiers under his command calm during battle. But rescuing 2,700 people was not enough. Rescorla was last seen on the tenth floor. You see, he went back one more time to make sure everyone he could find would go home that day.

Rescorla was last seen on the 10th floor, walking up the smoke-filled stairs toward the flaming inferno. Rescorla would not go home to his family. He gave his life so that others– many strangers he never knew – would go home to be with their families that day. Your students need to hear that the DNA of Americans is putting others first. The greatest honor is of service to others, not self.

While there are literally hundreds of stories like that of Rick Rescorla, one stands out. Todd Beamer was a salesman on Flight 93. A little after 9:00, Beamer's flight was taken over by hijackers. Passengers on the plane began getting phone messages about the plane crash into the towers of the World Trade Center. They knew something was happening on what was normally a routine trip for most passengers. Beamer places a call from the plane. He was patched through to his wife and described what was happening on the plane with the FBI listening in. The terrorists had murdered one passenger. With the plane veering off course and the knowledge that America was under attack, Beamer decided to act.

Joined by several passengers, Beamer's plan was to take back control of the plane from the terrorists. The voice data recorder recorded what happened next in the cockpit. After reciting the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalms, Beamer asked, "Is everyone ready? **Let's roll!**" The passengers began their assault on the cockpit and took back control of the wayward plane. At some time during the flight, the aircraft was forced to crash in an empty field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. All the passengers lost their lives. Later, it was discovered that the plane's intended target was the White House. Beamer and the courage of the passengers protected the single greatest beacon of freedom in the world.

Beamer's wife, Lisa, would later write a book, "Let's Roll! Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage" to describe what happened. Audio tapes of the flight are in the National Archives. Students should hear them and read excerpts from the book. They are potent reminders of how ordinary people become superhuman and how one person's courage can ignite the courage of others to do something extraordinary.

How should 9/11 be taught? Teach the story of sacrifice. 9/11 launched an unprecedented time of unity and national resolve to rid the world of evil. Teach 9/11 from a personal perspective. Shortly after the attack, my school went from more than 900 students to less than 500. Nearly all the military families were transferred to other bases. The military families I got to know on my duty corner were gone. Moms and dads went to battle on our behalf. The enemy mistakenly thought bringing down a building would cause a nation to implode. They didn’t understand the history of Pearl Harbor. It didn't. That is the lesson of 9 /11.