First a muffled crash, not unfamiliar among the sounds of the city; but then a silence seeped in like fog under the doors. Those too far from the World Trade Center to see told the children to keep unpacking their book bags and get ready for reading; those a little closer to the towers quietly asked classes to move away from the windows without exactly knowing why. Then, inexplicably, another crash; and some found themselves running in the streets, asking the children to hold hands, to stay in line. Others moved to basements; parents ran in; and there was no way of knowing who found their young ones and who did not. Nearer the Center, some children saw what they thought were pieces of debris turn into people wearing neckties, flashing past; others saw what they thought were birds on fire. In the black dust and crowds, teachers shepherded their classes across a bridge. High school students, nearest to the falling buildings, took boats and ferries across the river   A confusion of messages, of orders. Empty ambulances; broken glass. Spurts of panic: uncertainty about where family members worked.

In the essays that follow, teachers remember being totally concentrated on protecting the children, saving them, reassuring them. Many took refuge in routine language as if bringing children downstairs or gathering them in corners away from the windows was perfectly normal. But there continued to be experiences of flight and long, trudging walks in the absence of public transportation. Most unsettling was the shattering of habitual supports and frameworks. The sense of invulnerability was suddenly eroded, in part because there was no explanation of what was happening.   For a time there was the gradually expanding term, "terrorist". Meanwhile, photographs of missing men and women appeared on walls, People carried photos of lost relatives. There was emptiness. Some of children's greatest fears seemed realized. The gap widened between what made ordinary sense and the suspicion that nothing would be certain from then on. Little ones caught by television, thought the towers were falling over and over. Some of the children's questions seemed unanswerable. There were many teachers who barred all talk of 9/11 as too upsetting for the young.

Yes, there followed moments when strangers embraced each other on the streets, when people of all kinds tried to think of ways they could help. Children brought poems and food to firehouses. Flags appeared, for want of any better way of showing connectedness. Feelings of solidarity were expressed. In a desire for action, some tried to gather into a community to encourage members to become healers, to take some part in stemming confusion, to help people deal with grief, with abandonment. Self-confident suggestions came down from above telling listeners to return to their normal lives. Then, abruptly, an explanation: Saddam Hussein, dictator, murderer of millions, was blamed. Osama bin Laden taunting, boasting of his part, would be hunted down; and Al Qaeda would be crushed to the ground. Then, for all the lack of evidence that Iraq was threatening us, a "pre-emptive war" was launched.
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Blanketed in silence, we watched the attack called "Shock and Awe", the flames and smoke over the domes and towers black against the sky. Baghdad was presented to us as

an empty city, a kind of movie set. We were shown no pictures of people killed or wounded, of fathers carrying their injured children, desperate for help. How much was our own denial? How easily had we bought the idea that we were battling the "axis of evil", that events must be read in terms of 'either-or'? And how--what--do we teach the children, the adolescents among us? The promises of "conflict resolution" faded when we saw the heart-rending pictures of kidnapped women and men pleading for their lives and heard about the beheadings that followed so often. Were we to understand it in terms of cultural difference only? Were the black-clad men posing behind their victims in any way representative of the Iraqi people, or were they a radical Islamic minority? But then there were the appalling pictures of American soldiers degrading and torturing Iraqi prisoners, pictures of "detainees' in Guantanamo...Was there no idea of the worth of every individual person? Do we know enough to encourage critical questions?   Does one display of brutality justify another?

Then there is the perplexity involved in dealing with what even the children heard as bombast: the claim of "mission accomplished"; the celebrations of the advance of freedom, of democracy. When can we afford to sow seeds of doubt with respect to the nation's leaders? At the present moment, teachers are caught between their own skepticism and the familiar reminders that they should follow their lesson plans, remain within the curriculum frameworks, say nothing to disrupt the desired order in the classroom. Forgotten or ignored too frequently is what happens to the young when irrelevant, 'required' material is imposed.--so-called subject matter unrelated to students' questions or interests.   Today, when the young are exposed to so much, when unanswerable questions abound, conversation between teachers and students is often blocked by teachers' fears of saying what they believe. In the shadows of "No Child Left Behind," with demands of testing and accountability resting heavily on their minds, teachers can rarely pay heed to young people's stories, memories, fears. They are driven. usually against their will, to a compliance with the notion that the young are to be treated as human resources, schooled in response to the nation's technological, economic, and military needs. All this is complicated (for school people as well as others) by the changes brought about by globalization, by deep splits in the culture, by uncertainties regarding immigration and the role we choose to play in the world.

Given the growing opposition to the war and to the machinations that drove the country into it, there is more and more unrest expressed every time an exposure of chicanery or mismanagement comes to light. Yet questions as to whether the war was or is worth the cost and the loss of life, whether we must "stay the course" are somehow stifled. The widening gap between what people actually know about the war and what they are willing to do about it is increasingly difficult to understand. What is occurring is generally felt to be unacceptable, and yet the blanket of silence remains. We need only recall the 2000 dead recently reported, the thousands gravely wounded, the coffins being loaded into trucks on the battlefield, the stunned expressions on the faces of nineteen year old reservists who had never been prepared for what lay ahead for them. And there are the young wives waiting at home, many with young children who have never met their

fathers. Not incidentally (and too seldom noted) tens of thousand Iraqis--men, women, and children-- have died, most of them innocent civilians or the families of civilians.

For all the unease aroused in young people by what they confront on television, in the press, and in what they hear, they still have to be enabled to learn the fundamental literacies. We have probably never known a time when the young were immersed in the same ocean of information (and misinformation) as their elders or when there was such a desperate need to make sense of what was being absorbed. Clearly there are many modes of sense-making; the common-sense mode, the empirical, the religious, the imaginative. There are not only the meanings implicit in the surrounding culture; there are the meanings that develop in children's and adolecents' cultures.   It may be possible to help students transform information into knowledge if teaching were to take place in a context of open questions, questions finding differing kinds of e expression depending on the questioner's age and life situation. There are connections certainly to be sought between the terrible revelations of the hurricanes and the costs of the war.   There is factual knowledge to be attained regarding sea levels and flood control, even as there is factual knowledge to be gathered regarding the voting in Iraq, the constitution, and the interests involved. But the facts alone are insufficient. Imagination must come into play if the young are to reach into a realm of possibility. What would New Orleans be like, what ought it to be like if levees were properly built, if every part of the population were given the chance to live on high ground? What difference would it make in Iraq if the young were familiar with the ways of democracy: critical thinking; participation in problem-solving; the co-existence of divergent points of view? How, in any case, can we open spaces for orthodoxy and still keep open the possibility of a free society?

It is the idea of possibility that remains important. Along with it comes the recognition of incompleteness.   There are always unanswerable questions and, because they are presently unanswerable, the need for new perspectives, freshly minted methods, the persisting overhang of doubt, the unlikelihood of any final proof.   And the ongoing questioning, the vibrancy of dialogue. Adrienne Rich has written that poetry begins in terror and ends with possibility; and that may be true of many art forms. HAMLET begins in darkness and suspicion, in the consciousness of something "rotten." It ends with the dying Hamlet saying to Horatio: "Absent thee from felicity a while, and tell my story." To tell the story is to search for its meaning without ever being sure of the end. It is to imagine what might lie beyond the presently incomprehensible, to keep the tower from falling over and over, to begin building anew.