

Writing the Horror: Using Imagined Personal Narratives to Cope with National and Personal Crises

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At six a.m. on September 11th, 2001,¹ I turned off the alarm clock and crawled out of bed. It was just another Tuesday. Three more days to the weekend. Three more days until I can sleep in. I dressed, had my usual eggs over easy, two crisp slices of bacon, whole wheat toast—buttered of course—I'll start that diet next week—and a cup of my favorite tea, good old Roasted Green Hojika—sinfully sweet and creamora-ed. I graded a paper or two, reviewed my notes for the day's classes, and headed to school. I watched my students gradually trickle into my 8:30 class.

It was just another Tuesday. We all sat safely in our classroom discussing the meaning of life as reflected in the stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of my favorite writers. In New York City planes were flying into twin towers. In Washington, DC, a plane was flying into the Pentagon. A fourth plane was crashing into the Pennsylvania countryside rather than the White House. Innocent people were dying. Ordinary folk were turning out to be heroes—offering up their lives to save the lives of others.

As we sat in our warm, safe classroom worrying about our ordinary lives and feeling immortal, the world was becoming a different place. When

we exited that classroom at 9:45 a.m., it would not be just another Tuesday.

As I approached my office, I noticed a discussion going in the hall near my office door. "Linda, have you heard the news?" a colleague asked. "Two planes just crashed into the twin towers at the World Trade Center. Another has crashed into the Pentagon. It looks like the United States might be under attack."

Definitely not just another Tuesday.

I was in a state of shock. At first I didn't want to believe what I was hearing. "Maybe it's a mistake," I thought to myself. Or maybe it's some kind of joke. It isn't real. It couldn't be. If it was true—I still hadn't decided whether it was true or not—how was I going to deal with this? How safe was I? Was a plane going to fly into this building too? I found myself wondering just how long it would take me to get to the building's exits. I was grateful that I worked in a two-story building rather than a hundred and two story building. I began to envy my colleagues whose offices and classrooms were on the first floor of our building. First order of business: How do I feel about this? Second order of business: How do my students feel about this? And what do I do to help us all get through this.

Not just another Tuesday.

For the past several years I have been experimenting with a writing assignment called the imagined personal narrative in my American literature classes. Students are asked to get into a time machine of the mind and to imaginatively return to a particular moment in American history. They are to describe a moment in time from the perspective of a person living through that historical event. This past fall, I

added September 11, 2001, to the list of moments in time they could revisit.

As we all are aware, the best way to find out how we feel about an event is to write about it. I hoped that writing about the September 11th tragedy would help my students decide how they felt about it and help them deal with the emotions the event had triggered. I hoped this creative writing process would help us discover the lessons September 11th could teach us.

I came up with the imagined personal narrative assignment because I wanted to find a topic students would enjoy writing about. The majority of my students are not English majors. They're accounting, mathematics, golf management, philosophy, history, or marine science majors. They've written those analyses of the symbolism of that T. S. Eliot poem in high school and freshman composition. And they hated it. And their professors hated reading those essays written under duress on topics students found not the least bit interesting. I was tired of reading the mindless meanderings of the uninspired.

I wanted a writing assignment that would interest my students and me. I wanted an assignment that might at least have a chance of inspiring creativity and imagination. Bored writers invariably create boring writing—how well my students had convinced me of that. I wanted an assignment that would inspire papers that I would look forward to reading.

The first time I tried the imagined personal narrative assignment, I was amazed at how vivid some of the papers were. I not only enjoyed reading them, but was moved to tears by some of them. Danny1, an average student who had taken my English 101 and 102 classes and was now enrolled in my

American literature survey, wrote a paper describing the Battle of Gettysburg from the point of view of a Union soldier. When the soldier died terribly at the end of the narrative, there were tears in my eyes. (Usually I cry because the grammar and punctuation is so bad!) Danny had written an inspired paper.

Bob recreated the experiences of an American soldier landing at Omaha Beach on D-Day almost as vividly as Stephen Spielberg did in *Saving Private Ryan*. Unlike *Private Ryan*, Bob's narrator did not survive. Who knows? Maybe Bob'll become a screenwriter someday.

Jimmy, a philosophy major, wrote about a soldier from Rhode Island fighting in the Revolutionary War. As he crawls off into the woods to die, he realizes that a huge chunk of his side has been blown away. He leans against a tree imagining the scene back home when news of his death in battle arrives. The following excerpt is from his paper, which is entitled "Fog of Tiverton":

My mind possesses terrific clarity for now, cleansed by my pain. I wonder if I'd know if it didn't. Curse Colonel Israel. Curse General Sullivan. Curse General Washington. Curse the blessed revolution, George III, the French (whom I now detest as I detest the king himself), and specific soldier-boys in my regiment, whom I suspect to have fought gutlessly alongside my considerable bravery.

The throbbing and burning of my exposed entrails, the numbness in my hand, my hatred for everyone, and my theory of curse and affliction align with a curious fear of eternal torment to bring about the most furious fit of

convulsing and weeping I've ever permitted myself.

Mother will cry like this, I know. She'll yelp and pout until her breath is gone. Father will be strong for her and steal out to mourn in secret. He'll sit on the thick limb of the willow that dangles temptingly over the deepest stretch of the creek that courses through his farm. There will be prayers, and Mother will dust the cabin, unpack the plates, put them away, and be done with the whole thing in an unconscious ritual. Father and the men of the county will drink brandy, permit themselves a smoke each for the occasion, and exaggerate stories about me. My stool will be empty, the wood worn to almost white on the seat. Father will use my skins to train the new pups.

I won't have to harvest. I'll be missed then. Father will feel guilty for resurrecting my memory at harvest. He'll wonder if I died valiantly. He'll convince himself I did. He'll envision me bayoneting a redcoat and turning to deliver another blow as I'm taken down, using my last breath and thought to secure freedom for my brothers and sisters. Fathers across the land will envision their sons as a hundred of history's finest warriors long after our shit-stained britches are scraped from the ditches and our corpses are cursed for the smell by cold paraders.

The thunder is gone. The shells don't burst in the distance. It's been two minutes since I last heard a heel disturb the path, and I'm alone . . . just me, and the rotten tree, and the maggots, and the dirt, and I don't hear anything at all, not

even the mysterious buzz of the fog. If there is a God, will he pull me from this place to die like a man instead of like some rancid animal? I feel nothing now. I must be passing. Not even pain. Nothing. Can I still think clearly? Would I know if I couldn't? My mind is still thinking. My mind is still.

Timmy, a tall, good-looking surfer with long blond hair, used the *in medias res* technique beautifully in a paper in which an old man tells his grandson the story of how he came to America on a slave ship—a vivid recreation of the middle passage. Another outstanding paper. Go figure.

My students were instructed to make sure their narratives were historically accurate, vivid, and believable. Although they were not required to use direct quotations in their narratives, they were required to find, read, and document in a works-consulted list a minimum of two sources. Many of them became so interested in the subjects they were writing about that they listed six or eight sources. Research beyond the call of duty. Go figure.

In writing about the September 11th tragedy, students imagined themselves to be firefighters or policemen, charging up the stairs to assist, hopefully to save those trapped on the burning levels above them.

They imagined themselves to be Todd Beamer. "Let's roll," he said, perhaps leading the charge against the terrorists, willing to die if necessary to prevent the terrorists from achieving their objective—whatever it might have been. Did he know he would not live to raise his sons or to see the birth of his daughter?

They imagined themselves drinking coffee at their desks in the World Trade Center, hearing the sound of the first plane crashing into the side of the building, wondering if it was another bombing, smelling the smoke, rushing to the stairs minus purses and cell phones, terrified and desperate to escape.

One of my favorite responses to the assignment was written by a philosophy major. He imagined himself to be old Satan himself, sitting on park bench near the World Trade Center watching the building bum and collapse, congratulating himself about how well his side is doing in the war on God. Not much of a contest, he thinks. Evil wins the day one more time. What a hilarious joke on those terrorists. They actually thought they were doing the will of Allah. "I've made a career of double-crossing "The Almighty," he brags. "Checkmate, big guy."

Alice, an older student, a grandmother, wrote from the point of view of the mother of one of the terrorists who died on the planes. This excerpt comes from her paper, entitled "A Mother's Awakening":

I woke up with my heart racing; I listened for the shelling, but it was quiet—which was almost as foreboding as the nightly attacks in the distance. As I lay there in the dark, I thought about my life and my fears. I thought about my son living safely in America. A mother's love does not diminish even though her child is away and his life may seem mysterious. I marveled at my husband's snoring, wondered what had caused me to awaken in the middle of the night, and then drifted back into sleep.

Walking to the market the next morning, I tried to remember

what the town had looked like when I was a girl. Sometimes in my dreams I see it as it was, not as it is now—buildings gutted, streets cracked open, fear in children's eyes, old people depressed. As I turned the corner, I started to hear pieces of the story.

America had been attacked, but few details were available. Women from my neighborhood talked in somber tones. We watched sadly and shamefully as a group farther down the street cheered and celebrated.

After dinner that night I could hear the men in the other room talking in low whispers. As their voices grew louder, I realized they were toasting my son's recent achievement and his proposed journey to Allah. I did not want to believe what I was hearing. Years ago I remember my husband telling my son that Allah would love him more if he showed his love in martyrdom. In secrecy the women of the village talk about this belief. We often made plans to tell our children that their fathers were wrong about this, but it seems we were not brave enough to contradict the men. Now I would know the price for my silence. The pain in my womb was unbearable—as though my son were being ripped from my body. The voices in the next room began to fade, and I was whisked into a dark tunnel.

In a few weeks I would have been planning Abdul's return from America. He had been gone for two years. Now I understood why he had gone and why he would not look into my eyes as he left. He would not be coming back.

That night I woke again with a start. I heard bombing in the distance. I wept for my son, Abdul. I wept for the mothers in America. I wept that I had not been braver, that I had not taught my son that all life is precious, and that the men were wrong about Allah. Allah did not want my son to die to prove his love. It was not a holy act that he had done in America.

My heart walks around outside my body—in fear—searching for the answers.

My students wrote from their hearts and produced amazingly moving accounts of the events. In fact, I was so impressed with the high quality and vividness of the papers that I asked some of the students to read their papers to their fellow-students. After we listened to the papers, we talked about the tragedy of September 11th and tried to collectively work through our anger, grief, and fear. Writing and listening to these imagined personal narratives helped us all decide how we felt about the events and learn to deal with our feelings more calmly and intelligently. It was obvious that September 11th had changed all our lives. We learned the lesson so many novelists, short story writers, dramatists, and poets write about: We are fragile—not immortal. Each moment must be treasured, lived to the fullest extent.

I encourage you to inspire the creativity of your students. Inspire them to write their own great literature, not just to analyze and comment on the great creations of others. Given the chance, our students can and will find their own paths, their own truths.

Notes

1 The students' names have been changed to protect their privacy. All

excerpts from their papers are authentic, however, and used with the students' knowledge and permission.