

Searching For Oz: Teaching in the Shadow of 9/11

By Robert A. Smart

In an October 26th item in The Chronicle of Higher Education entitled, “The Changed Classroom, Post September 11th,” author/teacher Sven Birkets (Mount Holyoke) characterized the changed class dynamic this way: “There was a lack of an Oz behind the curtain; there was an interpretive void. A question had been asked that was so overwhelming that no kind of answer could be made—we were still looking for it . . .” Among the many academic testimonials to the dramatic impact of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks that The Chronicle has published since September 11th, this one comes closest to describing my dilemma at Quinnipiac University. All of my students came into class, no absences, on September 12th, and all of them—freshman and seniors—wanted to talk about the events that took place an hour and a half south of our campus. This was everyone’s experience across campus, and my colleagues at other institutions have reported variations on the same grim “teachable moment.”

For one of my classes, however, the questions were more pointed, and went directly to the heart of the class design. In my Historical Essay class, we had been examining the means by which an historian, or any historically minded prose essayist for that matter, uses history to bring sense and perspective to events that are too immediate or which are for the moment incomprehensible. We read the reassuring words of Barbara Tuchman (1981, p.34), that the job of historiography is to provide “insights into the human condition”; to focus on the events and personalities “that matter” in life (1981, p. 54). We talked about the uses of historical analogy, of reading (and writing) biography as history, of the dangers of accepting what the evidence purports to say without digging further to find context. Always, our unquestioned assumption was that history could furnish even the most traumatic events with perspective, context, an Archimedean lever by which to begin the slow and inevitable progress towards understanding. Then came September 11th.

Our second group assignment was supposed to be on the role of film and photographic evidence in the construction of “contemporary histories.” Instead, I came into class with the following assignment:

I had not planned for us to deal with a disaster of such overwhelming dimensions, with loss of life on such a terrifying scale, with an assault on our sense of safety of such profound magnitude. But

. . . perhaps our work, modest as it is, could bring understanding where now there is only shock and disbelief. You will try using the techniques of historiography we’ve discussed in the course thus far to bring some understanding—meaning in the historical sense—to these tragic events. The question you will work with in groups is, “how do we make the news of an event like this into ‘history’?”_Even to call it a “tragedy”(as I did above) is in some ways to begin the work of shaping the destruction and death into an historical form . . . You will locate at least five different sources of information about the events of September 11th—at least two of them not U.S. sources . . .

Once all your sources are gathered, discuss and examine them . . . Decide as a group what you consider to be the most important details, large and small. Then look for the places where more information is needed . . . Now, prepare a group document, 2-3 pages long, which speculates about what the historical significance of these terrible events will be. Consider what Barbara Tuchman says as a starting point:

“The contemporary has no perspective; everything is in the foreground and appears the same size. Little matters loom big, and great matters are sometimes missed because their outlines cannot be seen. Vietnam and Panama are given four-column headlines today, but the historian fifty or a

hundred years hence will put them in a chapter under a general heading we have not yet thought of” (1981, p. 28).

What you are trying to bring to these events is something like perspective . . . Being able to do this will lead you to something that looks like meaning

Perhaps the most important development over the time we worked on this assignment was the subtle shift in our respective roles; I could no more make sense of these events than my students could. In fact, because some of them knew victims or friends of victims personally, they had a point of reference that I lacked. I knew relatively quickly that all my loved ones were safe. In the middle of the first day of the attacks, my son Adam called from Salt Lake City to see whether I was OK, and the importance of his concern really didn't hit me until I worked with the groups in the library. My former sense of safety—which had been insular and unquestioned—disappeared, and like my students and my son, I felt an uneasy and indeterminate kind of fear.

That Friday's work began promptly, and some students had apparently gotten into their groups at the library before the class starting time and were already working on the computers when I arrived. I became useful again, pointing out as I moved from group to group which sources might yield different information than was currently available from the U.S. media. I also talked with the students about what the particular historical analogies which were in circulation among the media (Pearl Harbor and The Battle of London were the most frequently mentioned) could explain and what they couldn't. In group number two, a person was assigned (by the group) to explore The Battle of London on Hyperhistory, while another read contemporary accounts from the Pearl Harbor attack from Historyonline. I got more questions than I usually do, and because I had few answers, the students seemed more willing to offer speculative answers.

On Monday, the groups sat together in class and answered some questions in their journals before presenting the results of their search:

1. If you had not had the benefit of pictures—on television or in newspapers and magazines or on the Web—how differently would you have reacted to the initial news of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C.? Why?
2. Did the pictures—video or still—which you saw about the disaster on Tuesday the 11th and Wednesday the 12th make the story more or less understandable as you sorted through the events of those days?
3. Could the pictures have told the story alone? What would have been missing if you had only the video and still shots over the two days and no text?

Then they presented their material. Nearly every group rejected the Pearl Harbor analogy that newscasters had relied on for the first two to three days of reporting. The suddenness and surprise of the 1941 attack were similar to the Trade Center attacks, but the fact that we were nominally at war in 1941 (albeit as yet undeclared) and the fact that the target was military argued against the viability of the analogy. Groups were split over The Battle of London analogy, with a slight majority quoting the common reporting line that the bombs over London “came with a return address.” I couldn't tell whether the reporters from the groups had any yearning for the clarity of World War II, or whether they found themselves sympathizing with the thousands of Londoners who had to raise themselves from the rubble of their neighborhoods to re-establish some semblance of daily life.

The results? Something very useful, it turns out. We picked the most compelling narratives from the dozens of newscasts and examined them for plotting. Here are some of the notes:

History as Tragedy: “[unnamed Saudi source] America has brought this upon herself—no country can prosper so spectacularly, can extend its power so dramatically, without expecting as

well to become the target of those who have suffered economically and politically in the world.”

History as Comedy: “[Mayor Rudy Guiliani of New York] New Yorkers are emerging from this terrible attack stronger and more capable than they were a few days ago. This will be a different city in some important ways, but now we are all one people, one nation. Today, everyone in America is a New Yorker.”

History as Satire: “[Iranian News Agency] “We all condemn the terrible events in New York City and Washington D.C., but we suggest that they could be the work of only one country—Israel. Only Israel has the means and the opportunity to do something of this scale.”

History as Romance: “[President George W. Bush] America has been tested, and we have been found strong. America is good, and that’s why we will win this war against evil.”

In the reports that were turned in at the end of the exercise, two of the five groups came to an understanding that comprehension begins when the mass of details, pictures and words coming from the media begins to take shape around a plot. In fact, several students who presented began to understand that telling the Trade Center story as tragedy, say, or romance, coalesces the chaos of facts and factoids around something familiar, something that approaches sense. As with any tool like this, plotting the event makes certain aspects of it clearer and more familiar, but it also leaves something hidden, something that can’t completely be accounted for in our familiar dramas. But it was a start, and that—perhaps more than anything else right now—is how history helped all of us make sense of the terrifying sights and sounds emanating from our television sets and radios on that day.

Reference

Tuchman, B. (1981). Practicing history : selected essays. New York : Knopf.