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What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

Like most Americans, on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, when I wasn't online seeking word of loved ones, I sat glued to the TV, our global classroom in times of crisis. Not since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, which I recall in vivid detail as a grief-stricken college student, has our country been as united in seeing national tragedy unfold before our eyes.

Shocked and horrified, I soon found myself thinking of firefighters and police officers, doctors and nurses, who know just what they can do when disasters such as this strike. Most of the rest of us are left, stunned and disoriented, seeking comfort from family and friends, perhaps trying to give blood or disaster relief funds, but feeling helpless and yearning for some more meaningful contribution, some way to begin to make sense of it all.

As a teacher, I could not help but imagine the questions among our young people. Many of the students in the San Diego high school classrooms where I began my career in the 1970s are the children of immigrants, whose families fled nations where the sort of terror we experienced September 11 is a regular part of life, not something that strikes once in a lifetime.

Normally, Arab American young people and others of non-European origin experience all too much distance and distrust from their peers, for whom both language and cultural barriers

loom large. What will their lives be like in the days to come, I wondered.

Then, an old friend across the country sent me email about her son. A popular high school football player, son of two Vietnam War protesters, his first impulse was to join up. While she was dismayed, I was reminded of how quickly adolescent passion can lead to impulsive acts.

As I listened to a psychologist being interviewed by a TV anchor about how to reassure small children that they will be safe on their next family tourism venture or at home, I immediately thought of all the students, their families and teachers who, as a result of tragedies like Columbine, no longer feel safe at school.

If we have learned one thing from these two very disparate sorts of national crises, for most of us outside New York City and Washington DC and the schools rocked by violence, still experienced mostly through the media, it's that if we ever doubted it, innocence cannot shield us from isolated, ignorant, angry individuals

who feel so shunned that they lash out in murderous rage.

Knowing this now, what do we need to teach?

As a lifelong teacher of both adolescents and their teachers, I have made it my mission to strive to find the right balance, of holding my students to high standards and offering them the support they need to learn and to mature. I urge all the teachers whom young people will encounter in the difficult months ahead—in classrooms and carpools, on playing fields and chat rooms—to counter ignorance with information, to distinguish explanations from excuses, to rise to define justice and not sink to demand retaliation.

In the months and years to come, all of America's teachers—from parents and clergy to journalists and political leaders—will struggle to make sense of this day for students. We must do all we can to give young people the facts, tools and critical thinking skills to help them analyze what they have seen and heard. Then we owe it to them and to future generations to share the knowledge of all that it takes to harden the hearts of some people enough to turn them into suicide bombers and killers of thousands of innocent people as well as to turn others into the firefighters and disaster relief workers who knowingly give their lives to save others.

As rescue workers attend to disaster relief, educators of all walks of life will struggle to sort painstakingly through the intellectual rubble from these recent events, fight ignorance with accurate information, distinguish explanations from excuses for inexcusable behavior. Above all, we will have to model behavior for adolescents, who are hyperconscious of hypocrisy and will hold us to a standard of what we say and how we act, whether it's to immigrant students or our political leaders.