

Reflections in a Time of Crisis

SOCIAL EDUCATION 65(7), pp. 398-404
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Debating War and Peace in Washington Square Park

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CLASS E23.2047

NEW YORKERS HAVE NEVER BEEN A SHY LOT. And during the days and weeks that followed the World Trade Center (WTC) disaster, their expressiveness was put on display in makeshift memorials and democracy walls in several of Manhattan's parks, most notably Union Square and Washington Square Park. Here, the relatives and friends of victims posted flyers with the names and photos of their missing loved ones as they hoped against hope that those missing would be found somewhere other than beneath the rubble of the Trade Center. Along with these heartbreaking flyers and candles lit in mourning were thousands of comments that anonymous New Yorkers penned on pieces of canvas, cardboard, paper, and even flags as they tried to make sense of what seemed a senseless act of terror.

As we in New York University's social studies program began to recover from our shock over this tragedy, we sought ways to document this crucial historical moment and to bring its discordant lessons and messages into our classrooms. We gathered and transcribed the comments that were left and posted adjacent to the arch at nearby Washington Square Park, an arch that has traditionally memorialized America's first president, but temporarily became a memorial to those killed on September 11. From this park in Greenwich Village, we used to be able to see the twin towers of the World Trade Center off in the distance to the south. Now, when looking southward from here, we see only smoke and a skyline sadly diminished.

Anger and sadness were the emotions most commonly aired in the handwritten messages at the arch, and these were expressed often through patriotic and religious symbols and phrases. American flags and biblical quotations abounded. At Washington Square, expressions of hatred and intolerance were few but still visible, as this crisis, like almost all war crises in American history, stirred ultra-nationalistic passions. Yet, strikingly, although the media have stressed that Americans spoke with one voice in responding to the attack on America, and

although Congress seemed to echo this by granting President Bush a virtual blank check for war, the New Yorkers who wrote in Washington Square were not united in support of a military response to the crisis. Rather than unity, we found among the postings and murals debate after debate on the military option. Some opposed the use of force as a destructive act of vengeance that would yield a continuous and ever-bloody cycle of violence, whereas others argued that only a strong show of force would deter further terrorist attacks on American shores. These two sides argued silently and often politely on canvas and paper, with antiwar and prowar comments penned side by side, correcting and challenging one another.

At first glance, the frequency with which antiwar ideas were expressed at Washington Square seems surprising. After all, the national mood in the wake of the destruction of the WTC was, according to a CBS-*New York Times* poll, decidedly hawkish, with 92 percent of Americans favoring military retaliation. The strength of sentiment for peace at Washington Square is even more startling when we recall that this park is situated within eye- and earshot of ground zero—many who live nearby saw and heard the hijacked jets, the ambulances, and the fire trucks as they headed to the towers. Most inhaled the smoke (or wore masks to avoid it) and thus had already been living in a war zone (below 14th Street was in fact called a “frozen zone” in the aftermath of September 11, where civilian traffic was temporarily banned).

But one must also remember that the park is in Greenwich Village, a distinctively liberal and historically bohemian section of New York City. The park is surrounded by New York University, whose students, like those on other campuses, are by-and-large idealistic about preserving world peace and worry about being called to war. But it may be an oversimplification to suggest that all the peace sentiments on these posters were a unique product of Greenwich Village. Washington Square Park rests at the foot of Fifth Avenue and draws not only New Yorkers from other parts of the city, but also visitors from across America and the globe.

At a time when much of America geared up for war, and uniformity and flag-waving prevailed nationally, in this part of lower Manhattan existed something of the political richness and diversity of New York and the larger world. The Washington Square writings offer a valuable primary source for gauging the thoughts and emotions of at least some New Yorkers and visitors to the city in the wake of the worst terrorist attack in American history. They are a testament to democracy, showing that even in the face of terror and destruction,



In order to provide continuing resources on the events of September 11, 2001, several articles which had been scheduled for publication in this issue of *Social Education* have been rescheduled for publication in later issues.

As a companion to these special focus articles, our website features lists of classroom tips and other resources at www.socialstudies.org/resources.

New Yorkers did not fall silent, but instead rose up, exercised their First Amendment rights, and invited everyone to do the same, arguing with one another about the most sensitive issues of war and peace.

Beyond war and peace, the writers also commented on the attack's aftermath locally and nationally. Many took pride in the way New Yorkers rallied to help one another. And they took comfort, too, in the way that Americans from coast to coast supported their wounded city. Such comments seem to suggest that a nation engaged for years in private pursuit of wealth had finally rediscovered its sense of community and civic obligation; the real heroes of the posters and murals, after all, are the blue collar fire fighters, emergency medical workers, and police who risked, and in all too many cases lost, their lives saving others.

The Washington Square writings reflect a concern about civil liberties, racial equality, and tolerance, which stand as a challenge to Americans to maintain their commitments to equal protection of the laws to all citizens during this crisis. At a time when individual bigots have engaged in racist attacks against Arabs, Muslims, or people who “look” Middle Eastern, these New York writings remind us of the dangers of such prejudice, especially in wartime. They rebuke the few nativists whose writings appeared at Washington Square and attest that a nation's claims to battle for human rights and democracy abroad cannot be taken seriously unless it repudiates bigotry and stands for those rights and democracy at home.

Here is a sampling of the comments written and posted around the arch at Washington Square Park in the days immediately following the destruction of the World Trade Center.



DIANA TURK

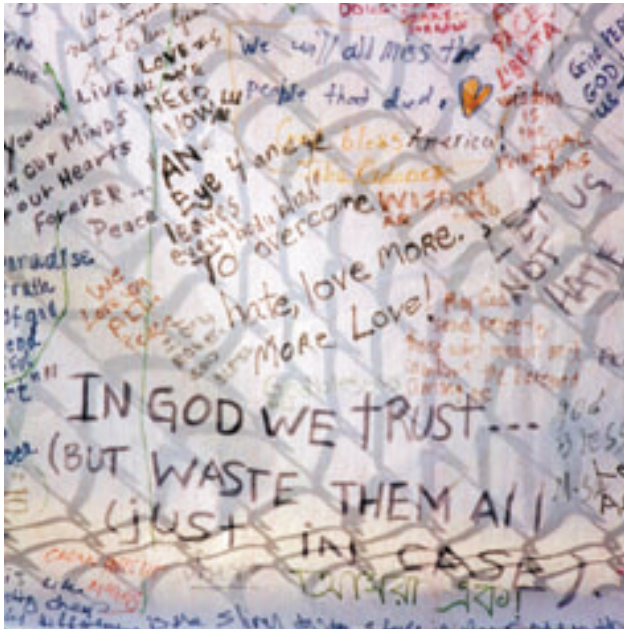
Following the comments are suggestions about ways to use this primary source in social studies classes. Although the immediate sense of urgency to discuss the World Trade Center tragedy in classrooms may diminish in time, the Washington Square writings will long be relevant to social studies classes as they explore such topics as citizenship, civil liberty, prejudice, nationalism, immigration, terrorism, violence, and war.

To make the comments easier to use, we have inserted numbers in front of each writing. The writings that were posted to refute or modify other comments are grouped under the same number as the writing to which they responded, followed by a letter (1a, 1b, 1c, etc.).



DIANA TURK

1. There cannot be peace if we allow those terrorists to exist in this world. If we have to go to war to eliminate them, so be it! I love peace, but I don't want to live in peace as those terrorists' subject. Sometimes you have to go to war to win peace! And we will win this war! World Trade Center will rise again from the ashes, and will be taller and stronger! Val and Pete, those who killed you will not go unpunished!!
2. Let us rise above this act of violence. Do not let the actions of men consumed by hate turn our nation once again to violence. We must try to meet this violence & conquer it with our understanding, our peace, our freedom, our love.
- 3a. Look what they did to my city, look what they did to my people. I hate them.
- 3b. Have some comfort. Cause it's coming to them.
4. Who let in all these illegal alien terrorists? 5-7 million illegal aliens? Note the silence on this.



- 5a. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those around us.
- 5b. Love conquers all.
- 5c. Osama must die.
- 6. This ain't another Vietnam pals. Nam was a real catch 22, i.e. damned if we do damned if we don't. Read more about the Battle of Britain and how the English (eventually all of the Allies) stood up to the Nazis (and all of the axis) during London's finest hour.
- 7. Let us not become the evil we deplore. We cannot buy security with blood.
- 8a. Do not let the blood of the innocents be used cynically for yet more subjugation [sic.] of the Middle East and the innocents there. No pentagon presidency.
- 8b. Within miles of our victims as people write this and we are told the nation is united. We should mourn for our loss and not weep over those who caused it. There is no justice and resolution with immediate peace, but rather prolonged terror. God bless the firemen and police that lost their lives.
- 9. Talk of peace is inappropriate. The people who organized Tuesdays attack do not want anything from us. Rather they want to destroy our country and who we are. What would their [sic.] be to negotiate? Unfortunately, sometimes war is the only answer as it is the only language understood by our enemies. They are our enemies.
- 10. I have seen humanity in NYC and it is truly beautiful. Thank you.

- 11. "True Islam bleeds with you"--Proud American Muslim
- 12. "In God we trust (but waste them all just in case)."
- 13. Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of western civilization?
Gandhi: I think it would be a good idea.
- 14. Anyone can use a gun. Who has the courage to use compassion, forgiveness? RIP WTC from 152 W.D.C. and we declare war.
- 15a. Revenge will never bring peace. We must learn how to end hate.
- 15b. Revenge in this case will save thousands. No! Millions of lives!
- 16a. All you need is love, love is all you need. God bless the fallen.
- 16b. Love alone will not work--feeding all people of the world and sharing the wealth will. Terrorism's breeding ground is inequality and religious fundamentalism.
- 16c. If we use only love to fight terror thousands more innocent Americans will die at the hands of these murderers.
- 17. What would Jesus do?
- 18a. No Jesus. No Peace. Know Jesus & Know Peace.
- 18b. I know you mean well but this is not unlike the mentality that cause so much pain and loss. There is no one way and as Americans we must accept that.
- 19. Let us not become the evil that we deplore. Let my enemy be my teacher so I may learn from him. Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom--Jefferson
- 20a. "Forgive them father for they know not what they do" - Jesus
- 20b. Yes they do!!!





- 21a. A life for a life.
 21b. This is why this whole thing happened. Violence begets violence begets violence begets violence.
22. Neither knee jerk patriotism nor wimpy new age pabulum satisfy me. We need an effective world government with global democracy & universal rights enforced.
- 23a. Nuke them.
 23b. No! Justice!
 23c. They will do it again and again. Only talk will save people.
- 24a. Islam is not the enemy. War is not the answer. Let's work to end the cycle. Pass it on.
 24b. But don't let them get away with it, however.
- 25a. Osama must die!
 25b. An eye for an eye creates blindness.
26. We must remember that we are bound together as a people not by brute force, or ethnic homogeneity or geographic compactness. We are bound together by a common faith that ours is a nation which is trying to assure to all its citizens the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If that faith is shattered, we will have lost what no weapons and no armies can ever secure for us.—Edward Kennedy. May all the fallen be forever in our hearts.
27. USA LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT
28. How can you Peace [or better "Appease"] nicks be such idealistic idiots?
29. The Germans who did nothing to prevent the murder of 11 million people in the camps breathed the same as you and smelled the same as you. Will you do the same as they did? Nothing? The Germans have learned their lessons and are members of the free world.
30. I pledge allegiance to the Human race, and to the Love for which it stands.
 One world, under god, indivisible, with Liberty, Justice and Unity for all.
31. We are not classified as Americans, or Arabs, or Muslims. we are all Human Beings, unified as one. Our mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives are gone. Let us not take away the loved ones of this simply out of revenge.
32. Although a dark cloud lurks above on a clear day—Humanity will stand. As long as our stars and stripes continue to fly we will hold onto hope. We won't let it die.
33. On 9-11-01 god was asleep.
- 34a. We must come together and not tear each other down. War is not the answer and it will only bring more hurt.
 34b. Fundamentalists show no mercy. We should not either.
35. Our buildings may crumble. But our spirits will never!
36. Fall down 6 times, Get up 7.
37. This week 61 years ago, London was bombed. My heart goes out to all New Yorkers. We survived "The Battle of Britain" and you will survive this awful tragedy.
38. I never realized how much America meant to me.
39. Revenge=Counter Revenge. Learn from Ireland. Revenge can go on and on. After 25 years we talked to our enemy



and only then did we see them as ordinary humans, since then we've had 5 yrs of peace and learned how good it is. It is truly beautiful in contrast to death and hate. We must listen and learn to see why this is going on. Peace.

40. It is easy for America to be strong, but harder to be just. In seeking justice let us set a standard to which the wise and honest can repair. *[Note that the words "let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair" are George Washington's and appear on the memorial arch in Washington Square Park, so here the old and new memorials in the park have been interwoven.]*
41. Fear not to anger but to hate. God bless the innocents who lost their lives and God bless the ones left behind.
42. If acts such as this are not the will of Allah then we pray Muslims all over the world will unite also to seek the cowards who use their religion as a shield.
43. I love this place so much which is why this hurts so much which is why you will not be forgotten.
44. Draw the blood of all terrorists
45. I forever love my country and didn't know it until now.
46. Not an act against Americans. But an act against humanity.
47. Justice . . . then Peace!
48. Crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.
49. Please help us find a way out of the circle of violence.
50. Let there be peace after we blow them away.
51. I have never seen a world war. I don't want to. Don't let them perish in vain, but be smart America.
- 52a. Those who are against sending bombs to our enemies are doomed only to receive them.
- 52b. Our Grief is not a cry for war!

Teaching with the Washington Square Writings

1. Have your students do a free-writing exercise on where they were and what their first thoughts were after they learned about the terrorist attacks in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, on September 11th.
2. The students should then read through all of the statements from the Washington Square memorial and choose the two that they found the most thought-provoking (to ensure multiple perspectives, you may want to encourage students to select statements that challenge or contradict one another—so that if they select a cluster of contradictory statements, for example, 52(a) and 52(b), they should analyze both of them). On separate pieces of paper, have them answer the following questions:
 - ▶ What main point does the statement convey? Summarize the statement or argument.
 - ▶ Who might have written such a statement? How would you characterize the person?
 - ▶ What attitudes or opinions does the statement reflect? Underline the words or images that led you to these assumptions.
 - ▶ Explain why you agree or disagree with the statement.
3. Have the students come together in groups of four, so that each group has eight statements in front of it. In these groups, ask students to do the following:
 - ▶ Discuss why they picked the statements that they did. Explain to their fellow group members their views on the opinions and beliefs.
 - ▶ Take all of the statements together and place them into meaningful categories (for example, patriotic, religious, etc.). What statements belong together?
 - ▶ Analyze each category of statements and then consider all of them in dialogue together. What overall concerns or questions—about America, about war, about human nature—do these statements collectively address?
 - ▶ Pretend they are reporters interviewing the authors of the statements. What questions might they ask them? What answers do they expect to receive? How would they explain the significance of the Washington Square writings to their readers?
 - ▶ Look at the statements as historians might. What historical experiences or belief systems might have led people to write the statements? Place these responses into historical context by comparing them to the ways that



Americans have reacted in previous wars or foreign policy crises in U.S. history. Historical comparisons that might be useful include the public responses to the Gulf of Tonkin incident in the early stages of America's involvement in Vietnam, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and Woodrow Wilson's Declaration of War in 1917. How in each case did Americans mobilize for war? Why was there so much national unity? What impact did these mobilizations have on civil liberty and dissent? In what respect do these previous war crises resemble and differ from that of September 11, 2001?

4. Have all class members come back together and discuss their findings, especially with regard to last three items of number 3.
5. Have the students return to their earlier free writing and consider how they might revise their initial reactions in light of what they have learned from the ways others responded to the crisis. How have these statements complicated or challenged their earlier beliefs?
6. For homework, have students decide what they will write on a mural that will be displayed in New York City. Before the students write, they should reflect on both the historical comparisons (see number 3) and read at least one short article on U.S. foreign policy toward the Islamic states. Their writings should reflect historical reasoning and thought about relevant evidence rather than just their emotional responses to the Washington Square writings and the crisis.

Have the students choose a visual image that will help convey their sentiments and beliefs. They should write a one-page description and analysis of the statement that they plan to write on the mural, exploring what are they going to say and why they are saying it—justifying their arguments and explaining the policy implications of their beliefs.

7. As a culminating project, the class can create a mural with statements and visual images that reflects its individual and collective views. Students should be encouraged to argue with one another on the mural—as the original authors did—and to express opinions that complicate and challenge one another's views. To have the mural displayed in New York, send the completed mural to NYU Social Studies Program, Department of Teaching and Learning, 239 Greene Street, New York, NY 10003.

Postscript

As part Mayor Giuliani's effort to return New York City to "normal," the memorials to the World Trade Center victims were removed from Washington Square and Union Square Park at the end of September. The posters, signs, flags, and other items have, however, been preserved by the New York City Parks Department and will be placed in an archive. 📌

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