“Finding Hope Amidst Devastation”

By Joanna Naples-Mitchell

The following is a memoir that is in the form of a journal of my experience on September 11th and the months that followed. The memoir is based upon my own writing plus newspaper clippings, photographs I've seen, and other experiences. September 11th was my first experience with war, something that will affect the rest of my life, and the lives of all those around me. Before the terrorist attacks, I had known that the world was plagued with webs of hatred and pain, but I'd thought that, for some reason, my life wouldn't be touched by them. September 11th was the day that my fixed conceptions of the world were shattered.

The "essential question" that I'd be trying to answer for this project is a combination of "How has the nature of global citizenship changed in the wake of September 11?" and "How will the projects that they produce in Citizens Across Borders highlight the values share with other peoples who have also experienced conflict and war?" Since September 11, I've been very confused about hatred, war, hypocrisy, and many other serious concepts, values, and ideas. I have been shocked and confused by both the actions of outsiders and the actions of (still) respected citizens of our country. I have also been shocked by the horrendous conditions faced by others in this war-torn world, conditions that make my problems seem petty. I wonder if tearing apart the lives of thousands of people in foreign lands is justified by the fact that several thousand lives were lost on American soil. I hate what was done on September 11 ("hate" is a word that I do not usually say), but that does not mean I agree with our government's response. In times of war, I'm sure confusion, fear, and shock are felt by witnesses and victims on all sides. To quote someone's anonymous words, "In a war, no one wins."

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"The Twin Towers are collapsing!" The image of that teenage boy, racing into the TV production room, will be implanted in my mind forever. I remember scanning my mind for images
of an environmental disaster, not knowing what to think. The bell was ringing, something was being said over the loud speaker, kids were rushing out of class. My friend and I had just been struggling with getting the video camera back into its case, but the boy’s words silenced us. I saw the TV on in the adjacent room, but I couldn't make out the foggy images on the screen.

"Is he serious?" I asked my friend in awe.

"No..." she proclaimed hesitantly, "he jokes about stuff like that all the time."

I didn't know what to believe. I scanned his face for a sign of mocking, but he spoke before I could detect anything. "No, I'm serious. Come on, look." He pointed toward the TV in the adjacent room.

My friend and I, the only ones remaining in the classroom, followed the boy and our teacher into the other room, as though in a trance. I looked up at the TV, at the swirling balls of orange fire engulfing the two buildings. This had to be a trick, a blur of special effects and computer imagery. Suddenly, I knew nothing. "Where is that? What happened?" was all I could ask.

I heard the words "The Twin Towers, The World Trade Center, The Pentagon." I heard "planes, bombs, terrorism." Anything I knew about any of these words disappeared from my mind. I felt so weak, so lost, so helpless. And this was only the beginning.

I asked, "Was anyone killed; is everyone okay?" I don't know where the ignorance ended and the denial began. The fact that something hadn't already happened, but was in process, gave me the insane burst of adrenaline that made me feel like, "It's not too late; you can still do something.

After staring at the TV for a few more surreal moments, I vaguely remembered hearing an announcement a few minutes ago that mentioned an assembly in the cafeteria. Like robots, we made our way back into the other room. Looking up at the teacher for approval, I bent down to finish putting the camera away. "Don't worry about it," she said solemnly.

Every detail of that day is still implanted in my mind. I remember what I wore, what I ate, what classes I had. I remember that initial burst of fear, probably the worst ever had, not from knowledge of what happened, but from ignorance, not knowing how bad it was, or what was to follow.
The implications of the terrorist attacks on September 11 are still not fully visible. The terrorist attacks sparked hatred, tears, war, more terrorism, and some would say, unity. I'm not sure exactly what I would say. I know that I, for one, barely watched the news before September 11 claimed to know all about world affairs, and to really care about my world, but I never realized how ignorant was. Now I've really started to care about my world, though I still hardly understand it at times. I pay close attention to the news, and I try to be aware of most things that go on.

I'm sure there were many things done to commemorate September 11, but one in particular will always stand out in my mind.

My birthday was ten days after the terrorist attacks, on the 21st of September. I remember that even though a friend gave me a beautiful card and I smiled and laughed throughout the day, I trudged home almost to the point of tears. After suffering through a pep rally at the end of the day and seeing the violent images of the football players wrestling each-other and the cheerleaders shaking their butts, felt extremely disappointed. As I walked straight through a disgusting spider's web, self-pity overwhelmed me. My eyes became leaking spigots.

By that night, my tears had faded, and they were replaced with laughter once more. September 11th was still fresh in my mind, but I tried to block it out for this one night.

I remember watching frivolous Friday night comedies on the WB with my sister to pass the time until dinner was ready. We saw a commercial for something that was scheduled to go on later that night, called A Tribute to Heroes. We didn't think too much of it.

My parents mentioned that same program during dinner, and we turned it on when we were finished. We were able to catch the end of Bruce Springsteen's "My City of Ruin," before the screen was turned over to a famous actor. I soon realized how monumental this benefit concert was. There were people singing in Great Britain, New York, California, all singing to raise money for people all around the world who had lost loved ones only ten days ago. I remember watching my dad pick up the phone and dial the number on the screen, which had the reverse effect of my experiences during the day. For that one night, everything felt right in the world. I felt so warm and safe, so loved and hopeful. I saw so many different faces on the TV screen and my family's faces right in front of me. Seeing all these people come together in a time of such bitter hatred.
was so inspiring. The voices, the music, the harmony, the togetherness, everything, just came together and shaped my first positive memory after September 11th.

I know they did a few other benefit concerts after this, but none seemed to radiate the feelings that this one did. I hope that they keep putting together concerts like this, and other things that unite us as well. Peace movements, teach-ins. My dream after September 11th was for the whole school to come together and all whole hands, and then sing "We Shall Overcome..." I still hope that something like this is possible. Maybe we could put together some sort of combination of a teach-in and a benefit concert, something that would both unite us more and teach us things we thought we knew but still have yet to learn, about our world and ourselves.

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I remember one cold Thursday night in February. It was Valentine's Day. At 1:00 PM, my dad and were the only ones awake. We were in the kitchen, cracking eggs and warming milk to make custard. Once the custard was in the oven, we sat at the counter and talked for a while. My dad turned on the news.

We heard a story about a scientific study that said that adults who get 6 to 7 hours of sleep every night may live for at least six years longer than those who get 8. My dad and I glanced at the clock and laughed.

Soon the carefree light of the news story faded away from the television. As I thought about the story, I felt fear slowly creep into my fingertips. Were there really things we do now that could affect how long we live? I started to feel like I was being supported by the huge, dark, invisible palm of an unfamiliar hand. Whenever I think about death, I get this same dizzy and unstable feeling as if I'm falling through an endless pit of darkness.

My fear left me in a second, once I heard the next words of the newscaster. She was interviewing someone about their thoughts on our government's decision to go to war with Iraq. I saw allies leave us in a matter of seconds. I, myself, became skeptical about our government's
plan. I never agreed with going to war to begin with, hearing stories of all the people we've been killing. But now, this was beyond my reach.

My dad and I talked, watched, and cried together for a while. I felt an unrelenting fear tugging at my heart. I didn't want to go to war, see more people killed, live in even more fear every day. I wanted to witness peace protests, teach-ins, whatever it took. I saw history repeating itself so much I wanted to scream. The September 11 attacks paralleled to Pearl Harbor in more ways than one. We witnessed a deadly attack on US soil that provoked us to go to war. But I saw how easily we could slip into the situation in Vietnam, where our government interfered when they didn't need to and just made things worse. This sparked a huge peace movement and much dissent from the government. stared at the TV in disbelief, wondering when our government would start taking a look at history before they made the same mistakes that past leaders have.

Finally, really felt a deep understanding of why we learn so much history in school. Much of the resentment I had when I was younger about learning history left me at this moment. I had always been told that we learn history so we can learn from past people's mistakes and successes. This way, history won't repeat itself. But even so, it still does.

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The next afternoon, my sister, Katy, and I hung out at our house with our babysitter, Maggie. Maggie feels more like an older sister than a baby-sitter, since we're only eight years apart in age and since we've known her for so long and gotten so close to her.

When dusk started to creep into the pale blue sky, we decided to take a drive to Johnson Park, where we could walk around and see the animals like we had when we were younger.

At the park, we walked around the zoo for a while, then decided to go to the playground. Walking across the parking lot, staring up at the shadowy teal of the sky, we searched for the moon. We found a foggy white glimmer, hidden behind a spattering of clouds. Dark had not comfortably settled into the sky yet, as though it was waiting for us.
As soon as our sneakers touched the woodchips, we ran over to the swings. I remember hoisting myself up onto a stiff blue plastic swing, laughing and sighing with Katy and Maggie. I pumped as hard as I could, as though I was still ten years old. I closed my eyes and felt the wind on my face. I pretended I was flying through the swirling blue of the sky, gazing at the moon and the stars, and felt strangely at peace. For a moment, I forgot all my worries of the previous night, was able to just relax and let go. Soon, darkness fell and we had to leave, but I will look back on that night forever, a night when I was able to forget the problems of the world, the problems of my family, the problems of my life. I knew I would go back to everything in a few hours, so I felt no denial or guilt. I decided that everyone should have a chance to be on a swing in the mysterious blue shadows of dusk, to let go of all of their anger, their fear, their problems, for one night.

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Even though it's only been a couple of months since I typed those last few words, I find myself analyzing them with new-found superiority, if not wisdom. find myself skeptical of my own words, shuddering at the smallest twang of naivety, as though my whole perspective on life has changed with the seasons. Grimacing at an awkward phrasing or a suggestion of false wisdom, I smirk at my own writing. As well as evident growth in my writing style, my mind has also expanded over the past few months. My awareness of and concern for the world has deepened. My values and beliefs have not quavered but simply become more complicated, more intricate, more secure. My self-awareness has also heightened, though I'm not necessarily able to apply it to real life yet. I may be accidentally writing this in an almost condescending matter, paragraphs thick with big words and long-winded sentences, but I know I'm not an authority on life yet, or on many of the issues I'm so passionate about. I've been greeting my past writing and even the writing of others with slight disdain, and I regret my somewhat pretentious voice.

I've experienced tremendous growth over the past year, rooted in experiences long before September 11th. Even as I recognize the event of the terrorist attacks as September
11th, I am puzzled. The day has not changed. On calendars, there will be nothing more to express that horrific date than its standard bold number and white cube. Then again, there are many small-scale events of horror which happen every day and which will be never recognized as anything more than a number on a calendar square.

I've always been passionate about the concept of peace, but I never possessed the time or the ability to understand its tangible implications before September 11th. Now I want peace more than ever and find it hard to accept any suggestion of violence or hatred. Even in the security of my classroom walls, I cringe when a student claims hatred for another person. I'm becoming increasingly sensitive to the pettiest hatred, while my peers seem to be less understanding. This undoubtedly contributes to my adolescent feeling of superiority to some of my peers.

I've decided to write and edit pieces of this story whenever I feel up to it, with hopes of watching my own growth, coping with difficult times in both my family and the world, and strengthening my individuality, my beliefs and values, and my flow of ideas as a writer and person. I hope that like the goal of the Global Citizen project, I will be able to share my perspective with others someday, preventing my voice from fading with these times.

I have learned and truly gained a lot over the course of this year. I've gained a heightened awareness of this world and a passion to make a difference during this difficult time. I've learned a lot about myself, who I am, what my values really are. I've gained an understanding of other perspectives, looking at them not with superiority, awe, scorn, or disgust, but understanding. I have found a desire for peace and equality, not the abstract concept but the tangible possibility that grows as I see new glimpses of the world each day. I want to make a difference in this world, enjoying my life, my journey, without the need for a destination. I have no idea what my future will be like, but I plan to enjoy it and hope to brighten others' futures as well.

September 11th was a devastating day, and I know it will never be forgotten. I hope that the whole world will learn from that horrifying experience. The US saw immense hatred on our, on land as we'd hardly seen before, hatred countless others witness each day. I know that we will find in time that there is something greater, something stronger, that will conquer all hate, a
beautiful concept that will continue to thrive, kept alive by hope and by its own essence. We must look past hatred and try to conquer it with one simple word. Love.
Comments

"This has to be one of the best projects that can truly emotionally change you, make you think and reflect. Your choice of words (which I loved) and the simple pure realistic-ness of this memoir. I loved it, and about 1,000 words, sentences and pictures you painted in my mind will stay with me for a LONG time!"

-- Flora Boros

"After reading this, the first word that comes to mind is "Wow!" But that sounds just a bit too childish, so allow for further elaboration. Obviously, since this is a self-memoir, it is in the voice of a teenager, which in many ways is more powerful than it would be had an adult written it. It gives you an inside look on how one specific teenager responded to the attacks, but more than that it shows the change of one specific teenager through the events of a specific time."

-- Frances Jin

"In this amazing memoir you were able to intertwine hope and love with the devastation and horrors of September 11th while I experienced many of the same skepticisms as you. However, the way you expressed it made me look back on what the world has done, what our country has done, and what I have done in a new light. Your observations and insights combined to make this piece moving and filled with love. It's projects like this that truly say 'We shall overcome.'"

-- Sarah Moore
My Feelings

I was truly inspired to read all of these insightful comments. I had wanted very much to intertwine skepticism, confusion, hope, and love in this memoir, and I am moved that this was what it was read with. I think I truly have changed a lot from the beginning to the end of this memoir, and I'm touched that this was apparent to those who read it, and that it made it more powerful. Looking back on this memoir, I had been unsure if I had really said all I wanted to say, but from these comments, I think I did make my message clear in this piece. Aside from my main goal in writing this, I had also wanted this piece to make an imprint on the mind of the reader, to paint a picture in their mind that would stay with them for a long time, to make them think. I am pleased that I've accomplished this.

I think that I've really learned a lot more about myself in reading these comments, about what things are important to me, and about my own writing and goals. This project was a learning experience, a search for hope and love in a time of confusion and devastation, and I think that these comments have helped me find it.

Personal Biography

Joanna Naples-Mitchell is a freshman at Highland Park High School. Her hobbies include writing poetry, reading, acting, and playing guitar. She has a passion for literature, music, drama, and humanity. At her school, Joanna is involved with the literary magazine, Dead Center, choir, drama club, and Model UN. She is an advocate for nonconformity, human rights, and world peace and hopes to change the world.