

Reflections on Homeschooling after September 11

from Susan Richman

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Well, I doubt any of us had Afghanistan and terrorism listed in our objectives for this school yearâ€” but that all changed for most of us after September 11th. If you are like our family, you spent that day glued to the TV or radio news, and followed up with day after day of reading aloud from news magazines and checking out news websites, and more TV news. Our kids all know more about Afghanistan than most of us ever did before. And some plans we had for the year got laid aside, at least for a while.

This will really be one of those days that everyone will ask about in years to come. Just as we may ask our parents what they were doing when they heard the news about Pearl Harbor, our kids will be asked where they were on September 11, 2001. It might be a good idea to ask your kids to write up something about this now, before the details fade, just to have to share with others in the future.

Most of us found it was impossible to just say, "Oh, the World Trade Center towers just collapsed, the Pentagon was smashed into ... well, back to algebra!" We had to take time. Eventually many of us found that getting back to 'regular' homeschooling work was actually a help in dealing with the crisis -- it was the 'normal life' we were being urged to get on with, and it kept us from depression in some ways. One mother of a student in my online AP US History course shared that it was really a blessing for her daughter to have some normal parameters in her life, including the routine of my class to keep up with -- it was a break from constantly dwelling on the news.

But even when we all got back to our studies, things were a bit different -- and so they should be.

Biology study for Hannah kept on -- but I found her a book on how microbes 'rule the world' that had a chapter about Anthrax. Bacteria was no longer just a topic in a chapter, but something we all needed to know more about in order to understand what was happening in the world. We read up on the history of biological weapons over time, and read up on all the people involved in combating this threat.

My students in my online Advanced Placement US History course needed to talk about their reactions -- and our discussion board took off like never before, as students debated and worried and wondered and shared their grief and shock, and their thoughts on what should or might happen next. Students shared a full range of views also -- from those who were for instant military retaliation to those who still hoped for a peaceful approach. It helped them see the whole situation more clearly to talk with one another, and to write out their impressions and reactions.

One of the monthly assignments for my AP course is called History in the News. Students must find a current news article (hopefully found on the Internet, so a link can be shared with everyone in the class) that relates in some way to any past events in our nation's history.

The students have to analyze the article and evaluate how it helped them gain perspective they might not have had before. This is usually a fairly short assignment -- a minimum of 250 words will pass. It just happened that the first of these History in the News assignments was due the week right after 9/11. Knowing that everyone really, really needed to continue discussing and thinking about these very difficult questions they'd been raising, I encouraged all the students to find articles that related this current shocking round of terrorism to other similar events in our past. They found articles related to Pearl Harbor, to the Barbary pirates, to the siege of Washington DC during the War of 1812, to the Japanese internment camps, to the explosion of the Maine that sparked the Spanish American War, and more and more. It was an astonishing way for them to learn about history, through the lens of this present crisis -- and all of them wrote impassioned essays that went far beyond my minimum requirements. No one stopped at just 250 words.

The next month, as events moved on and another History in the News assignment came up, many found articles related to earlier biological warfare attempts (including attempts to spread smallpox during the colonial era and the Revolutionary War), and articles relating the current war plans in Afghanistan to Vietnam or Korea or World War II, and articles comparing the new outburst of outward patriotism to each of these earlier wars. Suddenly these students were really seeing firsthand why history is never just 'old news'. Older events resonate with new crises, and help us gain strength to face what may be coming next, as well as giving us needed cautions so that we might avoid or at least be aware of some possible problems. My students will soon be writing about the Alien and Sedition Acts from John Adams' term as president -- and I'm sure some will see the eerie similarity to some of the new laws just passed that will allow for quicker investigations of suspected terrorists who are aliens. Maybe they'll feel a wave of understanding of the Federalists' attempt to halt the importation of the French Revolution to our nation, something most students just don't grasp. These kids are learning to actively compare and contrast, and see meanings in whole new ways that they probably would never have seen before 9/11. Before that, history might have seemed a bit dry or merely antiquated. Suddenly it's relevant and coming right into current discussions about what we should do.

After President Bush asked all public, private, and home schools to invite a veteran to speak to students during Veterans Awareness Week, I decided to require each of my AP students to do an interview of a veteran. It was already a part of the course syllabus that the students were required to complete and write up three history interviews during the year, of anyone who was older and could share about some aspect of history that they'd seen firsthand. In the past this has been many students' favorite part of the course -- they've learned about the Depression from grandmothers and great uncles, about immigration from Russian gymnastics coaches, about labor union activity from grandparents who worked at Hershey when it was being unionized, about life on the homefront in WWII from relatives who were kids collecting scrap metal and learning to live without much sugar, about the Civil Rights movement from parents who had been in high schools during race riots, and so much more. And many have in the past chosen to talk with veterans. For the month of November this assignment is focused specifically on veterans. I am grateful that last year many of my students chose to interview people who'd served in various wars -- I could share those interviews with this year's students to give them a feel for the possibilities that this assignment. I wouldn't have thought of requiring all students to interview a veteran before 9/11.

Even my Writing Club was affected by these events, and again in ways that have been actually been positive. Our first meeting of the year was set for just two days after 9/11, and it felt like the assignment I'd give them for the next meeting had to in some way reflect something that we'd learned from the catastrophe or that we realized we needed to learn. I have a full age range of students in the group, and writing specifically about 9/11 might not have been appropriate for the younger kids. So I asked everyone to write about kindness -- something that we all saw so much of in the wake of the attacks, as people rushed to give blood and money and time and caring to help the thousands of victims. The Writing Club kids were to think of either a time when they were kind to someone else, or when someone was kind to them, perhaps in a surprise turn of events or at a time of real need. The resulting stories were really touching -- you can read several of them in this issue's BackPack children's writing section. And in some small way I hope this focus helped these kids realize one of the real lessons from these events.

A week before 9/11 Hannah had traveled with Howard and me by jet out to Sacramento, California, to attend her aunt's wedding, a really joyous event. I remember talking with Hannah briefly as we zipped through the metal detectors leading into the airport, that back in the 1980's it really took a long time to get through airport security, as that was a time when there were quite a number of hijackings going on, usually involving Arab terrorists. She was very aware of all the terrorist events that had taken place in Israel over the past year, and we talked about how airplane hijackings just didn't seem to be the 'mode' of terrorist attack any longer. People merely went through the forms of security, and everything now moved swiftly and with no delay. I mentioned how probably today no one would stand for waiting and searching or more thorough checks -- everyone was in such a hurry. We could check our bags in at the curb, whisk through the checkpoints, and get right onto our planes.

What a world of difference now. And no one is complaining about the delay, even when waiting to go through the checkpoints takes several hours. Our kids have had their eyes opened to some real evil in the world, and with the ways our government is seeking to make sure it does not happen again. I look out our diningroom window and see our large American flag waving -- and pick up the latest news magazine for reading aloud to Hannah at lunch.