

Sustaining the Soul that Serves: Healing from Within

Linda Lantieri with Madhavi Nambiar

Those who work with children of trauma need to nurture their own well-being. The authors describe Project Renewal, a program involving 2000 New York teachers who have worked with survivors of 9/11.

"In that instant I felt like I understood what it means to be a teacher, because I could run no faster than this little kindergarten girl could run."

—Public School 234 Teacher, New York City

On the morning of September 11, 2001, children and teachers in the area now known as Ground Zero ran for their lives through a cloud of debris as the second tower of the World Trade Center came down around them. At the elementary school closest to this area, over 600 children were in attendance at Public School 234 that day and all of them escaped physical harm. The rubble has since been cleared, and much of life has returned to business as usual. Many even find the memory of that day growing distant. Yet, some of us choose not to close over our wounds, but instead, dare to probe them more deeply in order to heal from within.

I have been a New Yorker my entire life and an educator for more than three decades. During that time, I have been a health educator, classroom teacher, a director of a middle school in East Harlem, and co-founder of one of the largest school-based violence prevention programs in our country – the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program. Little did I realize when I answered a call from within myself to help out in the aftermath of this disaster that I was embarking

on a journey that would completely alter the direction of my life's work. This new direction would help to sustain the soul that serves.

In the weeks following 9/11, the world stood stunned as we witnessed the special challenges foisted onto New Yorkers and the heroic deeds of everyday people, rescue workers, and others drawn to the area to help. While little was said in the media about that day's impact on our city's schools, my visits to many of those schools revealed first-hand the heartbreak and disillusionment of New York's children and educators. Countless educators were transformed overnight into grief counselors, comforters, and crisis intervention experts for their students. Yet these very same people were struggling to cope with their own sense of helplessness and feelings of despair, without any personal support.

Teachers, counselors, and administrators are often unaware of the human consequence of facing the reality of adversity. When we empathetically engage with others' trauma and open our hearts to hear someone else's story of devastation, we, as the helper, can experience what is called "vicarious traumatization"—an occupational hazard that is an inescapable effect of trauma work (Saakvitne, 1996). Mental health professionals are also calling this phenomenon "compassion fatigue"—a response in those who are exposed to the traumatic experiences of those they help.

Emergency procedures on planes everywhere stipulate that we are to secure our own oxygen masks before helping those around us. Using that as a basis, I started to ask myself, how can teachers and administrators, in the event of an emergency, secure their own oxygen mask before they help those they are serving? Are they even aware of the concept of “vicarious traumatization” or “compassion fatigue”? As I visited school after school in and surrounding Ground Zero, I witnessed many educators failing to put on their own mask first. The need was so great, that they were running out of the very oxygen they needed to help those they were serving. I wondered how I could help these special people entrusted with our children’s hearts, minds, and souls to replenish their inner strength and revive their spirits and sense of purpose.

Research has clearly confirmed that prolonged psychological stress leads to burnout, which in turn leads to a wide range of physical disorders. Unfortunately, burnout is sometimes seen in our society as a status symbol, proof that we are capable of overwhelming workloads. These educators needed help in gaining control over their circumstances, strengthening their inner resources, and supporting one another in contexts where they would be able to formally debrief their experiences. I wanted to protect educators from the possibility of what author Wayne Muller (1999) describes in his book, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, as “doing good badly.” I asked myself, “Who is taking care of the caregivers? Where would they get the time and space to renew, rejuvenate, and rekindle their own spirits and resiliency?”

Through a series of synchronistic events, resources began to come our way to create a program for sustaining and nurturing those who serve in our schools. Members from The September 11th Fund approached me first in March 2002 to discuss ways in which recovery efforts could be directed more specifically to teachers in and around Ground Zero. Until then, school personnel had been trained only to recognize signs of trauma and understand the impact on those they were serving. They were provided with preliminary tools to address the needs of their students in the areas of grief counseling, trauma education, and crisis intervention. However, these same educators were not necessarily caring for their own selves in the process. To address this need, The September 11th Fund provided a generous seed grant for Project

Renewal, which started as an initiative of Educators for Social Responsibility. In the early spring of 2002, Project Renewal began in response to the need for educators in the schools surrounding Ground Zero to integrate their experiences of that day and to explore the role they needed to play in their own and their students’ recovery process.

What emerged changed the direction of Project Renewal’s focus. We started to realize that the work we were doing in the aftermath of September 11th was work that needed to be done prior to such a crisis. We could no longer afford to wait for another disaster to take care of ourselves in this way. The restorative work was significant and had broader implications to the fields of education and adult resiliency. No longer could we continue to simply offer emotional, material, or psychological support to educators. From here on in we were committed to welcoming and nurturing their very souls.

In the fall of 2002, we began our search for a location that would host retreats to meet the needs of educators for rest and renewal. In the course of this search, we arrived at Stony Point Center, one of three national retreat centers owned and operated by the Presbyterian Church USA and located an hour from New York City. The Center’s unmatched hospitality and the mounting excitement we all felt about the



Students from the High School for Leadership and Public Service (the high school closest to Ground Zero) with their principal Ada Rosario Dolch and Linda Lantieri, director of Project Renewal. Photo taken by Pam Hasegawa. Used with permission.

work of Project Renewal coalesced into our first retreat, held over a weekend in mid-December 2002.

The retreat was everything we had hoped it would be. A group of twenty educators who were previously strangers gathered and, through the course of the retreat, formed a network of support for each other. To date, over 2,000 school personnel have benefited from Project Renewal's efforts. One participant, Sheryll Ambersley, a teacher from the High School of Leadership and Public Service (the high school closest to Ground Zero) described her involvement with Project Renewal in these words:

I learned more about myself in that weekend than what I had known my entire life. For the first time in my life, I saw qualities within me that others had always observed, but I was unaware of. I felt comfortable enough to open myself up to a room of total strangers and left knowing that I had gained a new family. I was able to let go and be free. This was truly one of the best experiences of my life, and I will treasure it always.

The restorative weekends offer a unique opportunity for personal reflection and professional development. They have been made possible through an exciting and creative partnership between the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance of The Presbyterian Church (USA) and Project Renewal.

What We Do and How We Do It

The factors that make individuals resilient and able to take positive action in the face of adversity can be categorized into three areas: support provided by others, strength from within ourselves, and skills in interpersonal relationships and problem-solving. Hence the specific goals of Project Renewal are to strengthen the ability of school personnel to thrive when faced with unprecedented circumstances and build their capacity to do long-term healing and recovery work and community building.

Besides facilitating day-long and weekend renewal retreats, Project Renewal provides client-centered technical assistance and advanced training to school personnel in crisis intervention and trauma recovery. We conduct after-school workshops for nurturing the emotional and spiritual dimensions of their recovery by offering strategies in stress management, self-care, and inner reflection. We also train

school staff to build safe, caring, and respectful classrooms and school communities and learn how to interrupt the increased bias that has emerged out of the reality of 9/11.

Through these experiences, Project Renewal helps educators explore and integrate holistic practices and skills that can renew and sustain them as they cope with these uncertain times. This work draws on a range of cross-cultural traditions that help participants explore and integrate practices that are aimed at:

- Gaining awareness of the many personal and professional forces that contribute to stress and how it impacts on their health and performance.
- Learning relaxation techniques and self-care tools to incorporate into their daily lives.
- Deepening their understanding and strengthening skills in bias awareness and international understanding.
- Exploring reflective approaches to experiencing and expressing grief, pain, and anxiety in themselves and others.
- Reconnecting with their own sense of deeper meaning and purpose that led them into education in the first place.
- Discussing classroom strategies that nurture children's and their own inner lives.



The World Trade Center Children's Mural Project

Through this variety of offerings, educators are equipped with the knowledge and skills to increase their own resiliency, as well as learning how to minimize the damaging impact of trauma work and increase the positive effects of helping others.

Project Renewal has had transformative effects as exemplified in our evaluations, the majority of which have been extremely positive. Almost all of over 2,000 educators who have been to Project Renewal offerings have reinforced the notion that educators need and deserve to be replenished on a regular basis in order to keep their hope alive.

Sheryll Ambersley reflects:

Since the retreat, I am taking time to breathe and allow my mind, body, and spirit to become in tune with each other. I'm learning how to relax and enjoying every minute of it. I have incorporated the meditation piece into my Peer Leadership Class where students are learning to be youth counselors in their school and community. Having them meditate for ten minutes before we start working has made a difference in their attitude and I love it.

Lessons We Have Learned

What we are learning from this work is that long-term responses to recovery need to focus and develop people's capacity to heal themselves. We must go beyond what the medical model offers. If we approach the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as solely pathological, rather than as a reasonable response to a set of extreme events, we then look to interventions offered only by the medical model, which includes mainly mental health services. However, the mental health problems that plague over 200,000 children and the adults who serve them require more than mental services alone.¹ An effective response to this magnitude of need necessitates helping people develop their inner resources for resilience, which includes reflective practice that connects one to his or her inner life. A preventative approach is needed. And in the healing and helping process, we need to remember that as we reach out to the most vulnerable, we cannot forget to sustain the soul that serves.

Ada Rosario Dolch, principal of the High School for Leadership and Public Service, was able to attend

one of our retreats. She is a friend and colleague who lives these words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." On September 11, 2001, Ada had to do the unthinkable—lead her students to safety as they streamed out of the school building, knowing at the same time that her sister was at work on the 105th floor of Tower One.

As she led her students through the sights and sounds of popping, cracking, and screaming, a large cloud of smoke encompassed them, turning black in an instant. At that moment she prayed, "God, please take care of my sister. I can't. I must take care of my students. You promised You would never leave or forsake me. I need to know what to do. I need to know now." Her sister and approximately 700 other employees of Cantor Fitzgerald perished on that September morning while Ada led every one of her staff and students to safety. On the first night of the last Project Renewal retreat, she tearfully recounted her struggle and her soul's journey. At our closing, she shared words I will remember forever: "I am not alone. I don't have to be. I don't have to walk alone. There is an awakening inside of me to reach out and allow others to touch me as I seek a 'deeper' walk in the journey of life."



Linda Lantieri, Director of Project Renewal and Madhavi Nambiar, Program Associate. Photo taken by Pam Hasegawa. Used with permission.

That “deeper” walk is now the work of Project Renewal as it continues to evolve and change, touched indelibly by each soul served. Our goal over the next year is to expand Project Renewal to serve educators in other parts of the country and equip them to continue this work so that as we help others and give, we learn to take time to replenish ourselves. In July 2004, Project Renewal became a project of the Tides Center, and we will continue to connect with those committed to the deeper issues of integrating mind and spirit with compassionate action and service in the world of education.



The Art of Recovery – The mural of student’s artistic response to the events of September 11, 2001, from the High School for Leadership and Public Service and Working Playground Inc. Photo taken by Pam Hasegawa. Used with permission.

Linda Lantieri has over 35 years of experience in education as a teacher, administrator, university professor, and an internationally known expert in social and emotional learning, intergroup relations and conflict resolution. Currently, she serves as the Director of Project Renewal and the Founding Director of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), which is an initiative of Educators for Social Responsibility. She is also the Director of the New York Satellite Office of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) whose central offices are at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Linda is co-author of *Waging Peace in Our Schools* (Beacon Press, 1996) and editor of *Schools With Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers* (Beacon Press, 2001). Both authors may be contacted at: Project Renewal, 40 Exchange Place, Suite 1111, New York, NY 10005; 212/509-0022, ext. 226; fax: 212/509-1095; website: www.esrnational.org; email: llantieri@worldnet.att.net

As the daughter of an Indian career diplomat, *Madhavi Nambiar* has lived and studied in several parts of the world including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China, Malaysia, and Algeria. She has witnessed first-hand both shocking violence as well as creative ways of resolving conflict and building resiliency. Madhavi was a special education teacher at Hampshire Educational Collaborative, an alternative high school in Massachusetts which serves at-risk youth. Currently, she serves as the Program Associate for Project Renewal. She has been part of the planning, design, and implementation of Project Renewal since its inception.

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NOTES

- ¹ The number of children is based on a research project commissioned by the New York City Department of Education.