

# commentary

from other pens...

## We're asking schools to explain tragedy

**The Topeka Capital Journal on teachers talking about attacks:**

In recent decades we have asked our schools to do just about everything but wake our kids up in the morning.

Now we're asking our schools to explain the unexplainable.

The bulk of talking to the nation's children about the day of terror this week falls, obviously, on parents. But teachers and school administrators are key adults in our children's lives. And so, talking about the terrorist attacks and their aftermath has become an essential part of school days this week.

There are reports that, in some isolated instances, teachers have avoided discussing the tragedy with their students.

What a terrible mistake that would be.

Kids need to talk this out. They need context. They need reassurance. They need questions answered.

We implore all teachers to make use of their professional skills, the unique proximity they have to our children and the important role they play in our children's lives. Don't pass up the vital educational opportunity that has tragically been placed in our laps.

It appears most teachers have done just that. Many teachers and their students this week gobbled up special editions of The Capital-Journal — some teachers saying they'd never seen their students so engaged in current events.

The instruction needs to be age-appropriate and not overdone, of course. But it must occur.

### The Hutchinson News on sheriff's case:

Tim Chambers might be the only honest man left standing after a hearing last week in a Reno County courtroom.

Sheriff Larry Leslie, Hutchinson attorney Gerald Hertach and his company, MgtGp Inc., which operates the county jail annex, each stand accused of 34 counts of bribery.

Testimony last week during a three-day hearing related to the motion to suppress public documents taken from Leslie's courthouse office. The defense based the motion on the false pretense ... and wasted three days of the court's time.

But the testimony offered during the hearing proved that the good ol' boy network is alive and thriving in Reno County.

Sadly, Hutchinson Police Chief Dick Heitschmidt showed that he's one of the good ol' boys.

Chambers, former Reno County district attorney and now a district court judge, entrusted Heitschmidt with documents that linked Leslie to an alleged kickback scheme that involves Hertach and MgtGp. At the time, Heitschmidt knew that Chambers had requested an inquiry by the Kansas Bureau of Investigation.

So what does the city's chief law enforcement do? He shows the documents to the suspect, Sheriff Leslie.

Chief Heitschmidt knew the documents likely would form the basis of a criminal investigation. Yet he decided — without the knowledge or consent of the KBI or Chambers — to share that information with Leslie...

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## Terrorist attacks made for long, interesting day

We were traveling when terrorists struck the East Coast last week, and while we were never in any danger, it was one of those *interesting* days.

We wound up stuck for much of the day at Ottumwa, in southeast Iowa, a pretty town but a little down at the heels. OK, but I wouldn't put it at the top of my resort list.

We left about midnight Monday night, as soon as the paper was done, to catch Amtrak for Milwaukee. I was due at a board meeting to kick off the National Newspaper Association convention Wednesday morning.

When it works, we travel by rail, finding the train more relaxing than air, and the half-hour drive to McCook infinitely better than the trip to any major airport.

By a little after 1 a.m. Tuesday, we were tucked snugly in our bunks in the forward sleeper, on the way to Chicago and Milwaukee with breakfast and lunch in the diner and a lot of Illinois cornfields to view along the way.

It was not to be.

I called the office and Pat told us about the attack in New York. The car attendant had a radio in her room, and passengers began to gather around it. Then the train stopped by a soybean field, and the conductor said the we would be going into Ottumwa, the next station, to wait.

Until . . . no one knew for sure how long. Amtrak wasn't saying, hadn't decided. All trains were shut



## steve haynes

• along the sappa

down for awhile, freight and passenger, while bridges and track were checked. Reports came in that downtown Chicago was being evacuated, especially the Sears Tower.

So there we sat, the train stationary, passengers wandering around, watching live television feeds in the depot, making phone calls.

Video comes in. The second plane hits the tower. The first tower crumbles. People flee. Images that will be etched in our minds forever.

A call to Washington proved it very likely that our convention would be canceled. The staff had arrived, but only one board member had, and he promptly turned around and drove back to Texas. With the air-lines down, it seemed unlikely that anyone else would get there.

We decided to go home. But how?

There was only one rental car office in town, and they were out of cars until afternoon. We said we'd take whatever came in, and started packing our bags. About that time, Amtrak decided to move our train east, at least to Galesburg, Ill., still more than 150

## Son's kitten jailed for vagrancy

My son's cat got picked up for vagrancy last week. And I just hate those calls from the children that start off, "Mom, I have a problem."

My usual response is, "Only one? You're doing OK."

I got the dreaded problem call on Wednesday afternoon.

I was supposed to be in Milwaukee, but turned back because the conference I was to attend was cancelled. I figured son was pretty lucky to find me at all.

For a change, the call did not involve a plea for money. It seemed Pomeroy, his half-grown kitten, had gotten out of the house, where son, four other guys and a dog live in Lawrence. The cat had been picked up by animal control.

I have never heard of a cat being apprehended for sitting in someone's yard, but then Lawrence is a university town and those places are all a little strange — look at Boulder if you don't believe me.

It seems that there is a law in Lawrence that your cat can only be in *your* yard. It's obvious to me that these people don't deal with cats much.



## cynthia haynes

• open season

Anyway the neighbors, seeing the fearsome feline in their yard, called the cops on the cat and had him put in the clink, stir, lockup, solitary. The kitten was jailed.

Son was calling me because in order to spring said vicious beast, he had to prove that it had had its rabies shot and come up with considerable bail money.

He wasn't asking me to act as his bondsman. He only wanted me to come up with the rabies certificate. Of course, Pomeroy lived in Colorado over the summer. It was in Colorado that he got his first set of shots and his front and rear end re-alignment (declawing and neutering).

But, unbeknownst to son, I had gotten the high

## Tragedy transforms U.S. into small town

As our unspeakable tragedy reverberated through the world, reaching stock markets in Japan and airports in London, it was transforming the United States into a small town.

It feels as though we took hold of the country by its shorelines and borders and pulled it close around us.

Everyone knows somebody who knows somebody who was affected by the terrorist attacks, the way a death in a village touches every door. Tuesday's vast numbers of faceless victims became today's 22-year-old daughter who had been planning to start a new job in San Francisco next week. It became a 38-year-old Little League coach heading back to California after bringing the family's yellow Labrador retriever to their new home in Arlington, Va.

It became Daphne Bowers of Brooklyn, who showed up at a New York hospital with a framed picture of her 28-year-old daughter, Veronique. Two friends supported Bowers as the mother told workers her daughter had been wearing a white jacket and black shirt and had called her from inside the World Trade Center to say the building was on fire.

"The last thing she said was, 'I love you, Mommy, good-bye,'" Bowers told a reporter, weeping.

The television is like the old campfire, as ABC anchor Peter Jennings said Tuesday. We huddle around it in times of distress, listening to the stories of what happened, sharing the latest developments, figuring out what is to be done. The television gathers us to a common place as surely as a campfire or a town square does.



## joan ryan

• commentary

But we're connected today in ways that go beyond television. When somebody asks, "How are you?" they mean it. They want to know because they're going through the same waves of anger and sadness and disbelief. There's an undercurrent of goodwill and appreciation in our conversations today, born, perhaps, of realizing that in an instant our lives can change, that we can lose everything as abruptly and randomly as a bolt of lightning.

That's why the address-book pages and files and calendars fluttering through the Manhattan streets feel as though they are pieces of our own lives. That's why when we hear about the woman searching for her husband's name on a World Trade Center list of the dead, and we hear the pain in her voice when she says, "I can't stand thinking he died without me there holding his hand," we fight back tears. The woman is a stranger, but she's not. We know her. She is you or your sister or your best friend.

Perhaps the country feels so connected today because it has been pulled apart for so long. Clinton's impeachment plunged the country into sharply divided camps. The disputed presidential election deepened the divides. We've been battling each other over our walkout of the racism conference in South Africa and over the tax cut and federal spending.

miles short of Chicago. We bailed out.

We had asked the rental car guy to come get us, but stepping off the train, we could see the office. We hauled our bags over there, got some lunch and settled in to wait. Eventually, a car showed up and we were off . . . to Lincoln, Neb., which was as far as we were allowed to take that car.

Now, if anyone ever says driving across Kansas is boring, tell them to go to Iowa. It all looks the same — green rolling hills, corn fields, more hills, more fields. No hill is taller than the next. There are no views or vistas. I'll take Kansas any day. Iowa seemed endless, but we did eventually get out of the place. We even got some gas, though the panic lines were long in most towns.

In Lincoln, beat and unsure how we would get home, we stopped at a Best Western and got a room. Cynthia went to sleep, but on a whim, I called Amtrak and found out that the westbound Zephyr was running. There were two cut-rate seats to McCook, and we could get back to our car by dawn.

I said yes.

I don't think I've ever slept as well in a Pullman as we did in the coach seats that night. The train was late, with all the delays, but in just a little more than three hours after leaving Lincoln, about 6:30 a.m. Wednesday, we were back on the brick platform at McCook, loading our car and headed home.

And the way things were going last week, home was a pretty good place to be.

country vet to give me a copy of the records for our vet in Kansas. I just knew that the next time that cat needed shots, it would end up on my doorstep. At least, that's what has happened with all of my daughters' cats. The shot certificate was quickly obtained and faxed to the Lawrence police station. That plus \$57.50 got the cat sprung.

Youngest daughter, who also lives in Lawrence, is upset at her brother's neighbors for their unneighborly actions towards his cat.

I can sort of understand that it wouldn't be my fond-dream to live next door to a houseful of college boys, but blowing the whistle on the cat does seem a little low.

She wants to go to the neighbors and give them a lecture on being nice, but I suggested that threatening her brother's roommates with dire consequences if the cat gets loose again might be more effective.

Let's see, what can a 4-foot, 11-inch junior high teacher do to a gang of 6-foot college guys to make them sorry they ever lived.

Oh yeah, that.

New York seemed the most fractured city in our fractured country. It stood as the definition of alienated urban life, the brusque exchanges, the anonymous neighbors, the aloofness that seems to encase New Yorkers like suits of armor. Perhaps it is ironic that it is a tragedy in New York that has suddenly made the country feel as if it could fit into the corner coffee shop.

The people of New York, the firefighters, the Pentagon employees, the passengers and crew of the four commercial jetliners — they were numbers on a television screen on Tuesday. The events themselves were too overwhelming to grasp that first day, much less the personal losses.

But today there aren't thousands of anonymous victims, but a village of people we know. The couple from Maine heading to a son's wedding in Santa Barbara. The father from New Hampshire who wanted to visit his son before classes began at UCLA. ("He did love me more than anything," the son said of his father. "I know that.") The 31-year-old hockey scout who was returning from a visit with his twin brother, an assistant hockey coach at Boston University.

Some say it's a shame it takes something so horrible to make us come together. But isn't that always the way? Families fight over snubs and slights. Communities divide over political disputes. But when tragedy strikes, everyone shows up at the door with a blueberry pie, and we weather the pain together.

Joan Ryan is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle. Send comments to her in care of this newspaper or send her e-mail at [joanryan@sfgate.com](mailto:joanryan@sfgate.com).