

Fire(arms) Drill*

The recent spate of campus shootings has brought back thoughts of an incident that occurred while I was visiting schools in Tennessee last year. One school was equipped with a small TV studio that produced live streaming video for their website as well as programs for classrooms. It was wonderful to watch the kids rehearse, patch in weather reports, use cameras and sound equipment. Fantastic!

As a visiting author, I was to be interviewed for a TV program. However, during rehearsal the principal called an emergency “drill.” We knelt along an interior wall with our hands over the backs of our heads. This was much as I remembered doing during tornado drills in my elementary school in Michigan.

This particular drill had been called due to the threatening outburst of a student with special needs. The principal had the school go into a security mode. We were very quiet while we huddled together on the floor as a designated team searched lockers and backpacks. Some twenty minutes later, when we got the “all clear,” we were back on task.

I later learned that this had not been the first time they’d had an “incident.” This made me reflect upon my own school days. Those fire drills, tornado drills, and—in retrospect—inanely optimistic nuclear attack drills (“Duck and cover.”) were integral to my learning how unsafe it was to live in the world. They were a bit of necessary grit scratching the surface of chatty days and sunlit playgrounds.

It seems to me that childhood has always been a dangerous realm. From the hardships of the frontier to the threats of the Cold War, it’s always been hard being a kid. Attesting to this,

today's headlines speak of the ease with which children and troubled adults can pick up weapons and take aim at our kids.

Fortunately, things were under control in Tennessee. As I unclenched my hands and arms, and tried to unfold my frozen knees to rise once more into the innocence of laughter sprouting up around me, I could only think—again—how much I admire and respect the hard work done by the staff of our grade schools.

However simple these classroom drills are, they serve to remind us that the world can be dangerous. When our children are eighteen, or nineteen, they feel like they can live forever—it is part of the joyfulness of coming into adulthood. We shouldn't put a damper on that joy, but we should make sure our children are alert to danger at any age. Our colleges and universities might take away some lessons from the staff of grade schools who know their students well enough to know who is having problems, and how to handle immediate threats. It's not a solution to all the campus shootings, but it is one proven step we know how to take.

(*This article was first published in the online version of Current Magazine, March 2008.)