

Grief, Thought, & Appreciation: Re-examining Our Values Amid Terrorism Through *The Giver*

Angela Beumer Johnson, Jeffery W. Kleismit, Antje J. Williams

“Teachable moments” are not always pleasant experiences. Sometimes we are jolted into knowledge or thoughts we might rather avoid. This is the story of a “teachable moment” in a young adult literature class as students processed complex emotions and thoughts surrounding the September 11 terrorist attacks after reading striking parallels in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*.

Before we proceed, we need to express our deepest sympathies to all those affected by the terrorist attacks. Only because *The Giver* has had such an impact on us during these sad times do we share our ideas with you. In no way do we mean to downplay the suffering of others by academizing this event. We share our own thoughts in the hope that they might help others in some small way.

As one student, Sarah, commented (all students, with the exception of co-authors Jeffery and Antje, are referred to by pseudonyms), “In the wake of our recent tragedy I found *The Giver* to have more meaning than just a young adult novel about a make believe land.” One of the strengths of young adult literature is that it helps adolescents deal with complex social issues. Even as adults, reading *The Giver* and writing a free response to the novel helped the class grieve, ponder their values and system of government, consider the costs and benefits of an open and democratic society, and appreciate advantages formerly taken for granted. If one well-crafted young adult novel helped these college students to think critically about current events and their own lives, perhaps other such works would be similarly beneficial to younger readers, those in middle or high school. Themes from the class’s responses may be of interest to parents, students, and teachers addressing recent, and possibly future, news events with young adults in both academic and non-academic settings. Rather than imply that some of the students’ thoughts are right or wrong, we intend to provide a glimpse into the patterns of thought—and the depth of thought—a novel such as *The Giver* encourages.

The first few sentences seemed uncanny, considering the terrorist attacks had occurred exactly one week before our in-class discussion of The Giver: “Squinting toward the sky, he [Jonas, the main character] had seen the sleek jet, almost a blur at its high speed, go past, and a second later heard the blast that followed.”

The first meeting of our young adult literature class was just two days after the attacks. Since no one was ready to get back to “business as usual,” our class of upper-level English majors (most of whom plan to teach middle or high school English) simply introduced ourselves, skimmed the syllabus, and set off for our first reading, *The Giver*. As a professor of young adult literature, Angela always begins the course with *The Giver*. With its powerful writing, themes, and issues, it provides an introduction to the best in young adult literature for students who might have had few (or no) prior experiences with excellent young adult literature. In addition to reading, students were asked to write a response addressing their thoughts and feelings sparked by the book.

The Giver has always spurred thought in Angela’s young adult literature students; however, as Jeffery and Antje recall, they became immediately aware that the book would affect a great response at this particular time. The first few sentences seemed uncanny, considering the terrorist attacks had occurred exactly one week before our in-class discussion of *The Giver*: “Squinting toward the sky, he [Jonas, the main character] had seen the sleek jet, almost a blur at its high speed, go past, and a second later heard the blast that followed” (1). Those early lines from the novel recalled for many of us the tragedy of the hijacked jets being flown over our metropolitan cityscapes. We had all been shocked out of our comfort zones by the reality of terrorism on American soil. Ashely summarized our responses well: “After reading *The Giver*, I began to reflect on my own life.”

The Giver, at a Glance

Jonas, a young boy and the story’s protagonist, does not live in a perfect community, as Lowry initially implies. While the Elders control every aspect of life, and many of the world’s evils—hunger, pain, poverty, and violence—have been eliminated, life within this particular “community” comes at a cost. Jonas’ community is ruled by a system of government

appropriately titled "Sameness," with rules enforcing conformity and order in every detail of life, eliminating change in weather and as many human differences as possible. Carly stated, "[T]he book was horrifying [. . .]. I do realize that they didn't have things like war, [. . .], pain or famine. However, with taking the bad out they didn't leave much good either." There is no individual freedom in the community, and the citizens must live without experiencing color, love, or accounts of history—"the memories of the whole world" (Lowry 77).

Jonas is assigned as the community's next Receiver of Memory, and must take on all of the memories of the world from the elderly Giver (the former Receiver).

As Jonas' assignment allows, he begins to question the community, and he realizes the sacrifice of being the new Receiver. For example, one way the community maintains

order is by *releasing* those who threaten the strength or stability of the group. Jonas finds out that to be *released* is to be *killed*. Gabriel, an infant like a brother to Jonas, is not progressing as well as the community believes he should. In order to save Gabe from release, Jonas defies the rules and flees the community with the child, choosing personal freedom over the community, and leaving them to cope with all the memories he has received. The novel concludes ambiguously, leaving the reader to decide whether the pair survives or perishes outside the community.

Parallel Journeys: Jonas' and Our Own

As we present our class's written responses to *The Giver*, readers may see that the students drew multiple parallels between the fictional world of *The Giver* and the reality of life after September 11, 2001. To organize our musings from the class' responses, we will present our ideas according to Jonas' journey in the novel. First, by receiving memories of times past, Jonas loses innocence and gains experience of atrocities and the forbidden treasures in the world. The students' responses imply that, like the community in *The Giver*, many in the United States were blind to the atrocities occurring on a daily basis outside the country's borders. Experiences of September 11 seemed to wake some students from complacency. Second, because of Jonas' new experiences, he learns to value individuality and freedom of choice. The attacks caused some students, like Jonas, to reflect on components of society. Finally, since Jonas now values individuality and a life full of experiences, he asserts his right to make choices for himself. These choices lead him to seek a free society, as opposed to the Sameness of his community. We, too, are in a crucial time of choice and decision. As Teresa stated, "There are no quick or easy answers to the world's issues, nor can we hide from them." As we present the class's responses, we will demonstrate how one class of readers followed Jonas' journey while contemplating their own.

By writing about her thoughts on The Giver, Jamie notices that not only children but also adults are thrust out of innocence into the experience of senseless, massive tragedy.

Students' grief also shows in their responses as they reflect on the alluring possibilities of a controlled society.

Losing Innocence, Gaining Experience

Jonas and all members of the community are sheltered from most experiences in life. While The Giver does not wish to inflict pain upon Jonas, he knows that in order for Jonas to gain wisdom, he must experience the harsh side of a life unrestricted by Sameness. As Jonas begins to train for his career as Receiver of Memory, The Giver must provide all types of experiences through memories in order for Jonas to learn and grow. Before his training, Jonas is fairly innocent in his protected and seemingly secure world. Although exhilarated by memories transmitted by The Giver of snow and family, memories of war and elephant poaching bring

him experiences of horror and despair. Carol confessed, "My heart ached for Jonas as he discovered the pain of receiving memories, and it hurt even more when he discovered [. . .] that the life he had come to believe in, a life that was predictable and painless, was just an illusion." Jonas, with the experience of the memories, is awakened to a different, more complex world.

Carmen continued with the idea of a rich, yet complex, world. She wrote, "Jonas [. . .] understands the advantages and freedoms of diversity and choice making. This change is seen when Jonas begins to see colors, thus symbolizing his loss of innocence. He no longer lives in a black and white world where everything is the same and choices are made for him. His world becomes colorful and confusing and allows him to experience history, pain, and love."

Ultimately, Jonas comes to "reject the Sameness of his community," as Carmen said. Jeffery commented on the community's erasure of complexities in life, linking it to the reaction of some to September 11. He stated the following:

After the recent terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, I have heard many parents questioning—both publicly and privately—how to discuss the harsh and frightening realities of terrorism, war, and death with

their children. There are many who would rather keep their children preoccupied than to have a tough conversation about life, death, and taking things for granted [. . .] These individuals

remind me of the citizens in Lowry's *The Giver*, and I completely disagree with them. Instead of confronting the great problems of our society, they hide behind a façade of denial and a false sense of security. We must all realize, like Jonas . . . , that these false faces are never going to solve anything. We must confront the "overwhelming task of bearing the memories [our]selves" (Lowry 161). In order to understand and appreciate the goodness of life at its best, we must closely reflect upon and examine the shadow of life at its worst.

According to Jeffery, avoidance and denial of the world's horrors will not exorcise them. With *The Giver* as a catalyst to think about his stance on confrontation or avoidance, Jeffery solidifies his position.

Sarah, also discussing Jonas' new experiences, compared his loss of innocence to the terrorist attacks:

"[Jonas] wanted his childhood again, his scraped knees and ball games" (121). I felt the same way he did when I began to realize the reality of war in my own life. When I was a child I didn't understand the horrors of war and I wasn't scared during the Gulf War crisis. Now that I am older I know more about the way the world works and what going to war is all about. I almost envy those people who are as blind as Jonas' community. People who have no idea what being scared is really about.

Sarah's articulation of her fear and desire for life to return to "normal," before September 11, is poignant. Like Jonas, some students' responses demonstrate a longing for lost innocence—for us, that of a country impenetrable by terrorists.

Jamie also commented on the analogy of childlike innocence:

Even though Jonas is twelve, he has the experience and understanding of a small child. It isn't until after he receives the memories that he is awakened to the full capacity of life. He feels and sees tragedy for the first time, as a child in today's society does watching the World Trade Center being demolished [. . .]. A child today watches their parents, teachers, and entire community mourn for the loss that has taken place [. . .], not fully comprehending what has happened, but still psychologically affected by the aftermath.

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Again, Jamie explicitly commented on the parallels of our current struggles and the world of *The Giver* when she stated,

"[T]he terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City are somewhat comparable to what Jonas [. . .] observes in his community after he is given his special Assignment. Jonas learns, like some young people today are learning, of the inexplicable depth of human capacity. People cannot comprehend the horrific tragedy that took place in our society, just as Jonas cannot bear to witness the wrongful acts of his own people." Jamie also recognizes that adults and children are dealing with new emotions and questions perhaps never pondered. Innocence has been lost, experience gained.

Weighing the Costs and Benefits of Open & Closed Societies

While many students in our young adult literature class commented upon their own feelings of insecurity which eerily connected with *The Giver*, the reading also led some to consider the nature of our system of government. Living in the United States has left many of us privileged enough to take for granted the individuality and differences of people living in an open, democratic society. (While we are empathetically aware that not all people in this country experience the same privileges, the terrorist attacks and reading *The Giver* woke many in our class to the appreciation of the essential values of a democratic society, in spite of the fact that those liberties are not always fully and equally distributed.) The United States—as an open, democratic society—contrasts sharply

with the closed, metaphorically walled society of Jonas' community. (Of course no society, even fictional, is completely closed or open. Jonas' community was "open" through release, though not much of an option. Similarly, even in free, democratic societies, limits exist.) For most students, the costs of Jonas' community, such as a lack of color, music, and true emotion, outweighed the enticement of a "safe" and "secure" closed society. In some small way, perhaps these students found comfort from the terrorist attacks in reading *The Giver*, reconsidering the costs and benefits of the society in which we live.

For some students, thinking about Jonas' world as compared to ours provided them a space to consider the pros and cons of open societies. Erica remarked, "I particularly like novels like this one that challenge our social construct and question our beliefs as a whole yet individually." In other words, people need to consider the governing elements not only of society, but also of the ways we conduct our personal lives. Renee mused, "Maybe the orderliness and comfort of this imaginary world isn't what makes it crazy. It is crazy because it is not our reality." For some, their reading, writing, and thinking reinforced values of an open society, but Erica and Renee used this opportunity to pose questions and entertain the possibility of alternative systems of governance.

Erica and Renee remind us that there are costs to both open and closed societies. Toward the end of the novel, Jonas' and Gabe's lives are far from the material comforts they enjoyed in a controlled society. Antje focused on the hardships of the journey to a freer society:

It feels so unfair that [Jonas] should suffer so and not be re-

warded for it. It seems unfair that Lowry would seduce me into liking Jonas so much only to disappoint me so. It was a betrayal. I am sure the author intended for the reader to be disturbed, to have questions, and to feel sad, to wonder "what was the point?" It was maybe just a little too sad for this week.

In the midst of grieving over an assault to our country by ones who seek more control of the world, the majority of the students, like Antje, expressed frustration at the ambiguous ending. As Antje aptly put it, perhaps the strong affective response to the book *at this particular moment* stirred a need for finality, if not also a need for an uplifting ending.

Students' grief also shows in their responses as they reflect on the alluring possibilities of a controlled society. For instance, Erica noted, "The concept of having a community without any real hardship and pain is temptingly appealing, especially with the great tragedy we as a country have recently endured." Yet later in her response, Erica explained that this society is not one she would really want.

On the other hand, Evelyn remarked that "[Jonas'] world was so well organized and smooth running, all at the expense of human emotions and reactions. It is a cold, sterile world that is shown." Similarly, Teresa stated, "Reading *The Giver* was a little frightening because it seemed at first to be the kind of world that some people would like to achieve

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[. . .]. Jonas' world was safe from terrorists and war." Teresa continued, "It's ironic that in the end, Jonas was escaping his perfect world in exchange for a world where he would experience pain, starvation, and possible death. But he was willing to risk that in order to have love, emotional connection with people, the colors of the world, or to hear music—all the little things that make life in a crazy, sometimes painful world, worth living." For Teresa, Jonas' world is tempting, but it is a mirage. No such world exists in which all of society's ills are remedied—no matter how tightly controlled and limited that society. Carmen agreed, "By vividly expressing inadequacies of the community of Sameness, Lowry makes me sympathize for oppressed and controlled societies in the world and appreciate the opportunity and the freedom I have and often take for granted." While not all students agreed on their opinions of more or less open societies, their debating of the issue is significant.

One massive cost of this tightly controlled society is the concept of release. For instance, twins are not permitted in the community, and Jonas' father has hidden the truth of his job of releasing lower-weight twins. The Giver encourages Jonas to view a videotape of a twin's release, and this experience effects tremendous change in him. The atrocity of the crime as well as his father's lies result in overwhelming feelings of betrayal, anger, and despair. As Jeffery commented, "Jonas' experience of seeing the release of the smaller twin and the realization of his father's lies cannot be far from the experiences many children must have had while watching news reports during the past week [of September 11]." Again, Jeffery alludes to an experience of shattered innocence. The experience of watching his father release the twin is more than Jonas can take.

A Wake-up Call: Valuing Individuality and Difference

Jonas' experiences—particularly those of watching the twin's release and hearing the threat of the infant Gabe's release—lead him to value individual human life even more, and to value differences over the Sameness that confines and rules his community. For Carmen, Sameness was initially appealing, yet ultimately rejected. She responded this way:

While hearing about discrimination, racism, and slavery, I have many times thought of how nice it would be if everyone disregarded differences and appearances and accepted people for who they are. This idea is portrayed in an old anti-racism commercial where everyone wears paper bags over their heads to hide their faces. These people get along because they are blinded from each other's differences. The community in *The Giver* represents this blindness through rules that make everyone the same.

Not only is everyone nearly "the same," but as Scott, Carly, and Brooke noted, they are also "robots" and "drones" who followed rules unconditionally and uncritically. After all, they knew nothing else. The terrorist attacks remind us that as Americans, we have been viewed not as individuals with varying thoughts and lives, but simply as Americans—the enemy of the terrorists. Reading *The Giver* reinforced

to some students that living in a world that denies individuality and difference is certainly dangerous and catastrophic.

Jonas and The Giver were different from their community members; they were individuals with their own thoughts because they were granted the freedom of experience and memory. Our individuality, manifested in our choices—our freedom to make choices—is embodied by Jonas' and The Giver's resolution to attempt to change their world. Carmen commented, "Jonas soon embraces the idea of diversity and escapes the Sameness of his community. Through Jonas' experiences the book shows the importance of freedom. This makes me appreciate living in America where we are granted freedoms by the Constitution and where different cultures are welcomed."

The Power of Choice

Freedom of choice was a powerful theme for some members of the class. For example, Ashley stated, "I value the individuality our country embraces and celebrates because I like being free to make choices and experience new things. Even though experiencing hunger, war, and sickness is a terrible thing, it helps to give us wisdom and courage." Embedded in Ashley's comment are core values of a democratic society: individuality, freedom of thought and speech to

enable critique, freedom to make one's own choices, and through those choices, to gain a multitude of experiences.

Because The Giver and Jonas are the only two in the entire community who are permitted to learn anything, ask anything, and experience anything, they

are the only ones who can appreciate the freedom to make choices. Carmen articulated this point: "Eventually, when given the knowledge of diversity and choices, Jonas becomes frustrated with having no choice: 'If everything's the same, then there aren't any choices! I want to wake up in the morning and *decide* things! A blue tunic, or a red one?' (97)." Other students also commented on the simple pleasures in life that are results of choice-making. For example, Sarah remarked, "Jonas and his adventure take the things in our daily life and make them into the most wonderful choices humans could ever make. In reality, that is just what freedom of choice is all about, and acting on our own choices is something we all take for granted."

Jonas' experiences lead him to value difference and individuality, which encourages—even provokes—him to assert his right to make choices for himself. As Susan put it, ". . . the Sameness [kept] the people in the community trapped in a life they [had] no choice but to like." They were content because they were relatively pain-free, secure, and most importantly, they knew no other way of life and had no other choices.

Jamie connected the book to the terrorist attacks by writing, "Jonas discovers what the world really consists of, and is able to make choices based on that knowledge. Just like a child today who is attempting to grasp the inconceivable events that occurred, he or she is making choices as well: the choice to change or the choice to be changed." Most likely, we are both *changed by* events and actions of others, and actively *change* our lives by making our own choices.

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Jonas and The Giver had once laughed at the potential mistakes which could be made if people made choices for themselves, but as Jamie said, “[p]eople make choices every day and some of them are wrong, but it’s the learning from their mistakes that is beneficial.”

Brad takes a different tack on the nature of our choices:

The first aspect of the book that I feel needs to be discussed is the connection with the nation’s current events. When The Giver tells Jonas about the town’s fear of the jet that passed over the community, and how they asked the old man whether it should be shot down, I could not help but think about last week. The Giver’s response is especially relevant now. “I knew that there had been times in the past—terrible times—when people had destroyed others in haste, in fear, and had brought about their own destruction” (112). In times when the word “retaliation” is muttered by every politician and newscaster, I can’t help but wish for someone [as] respected [. . .] as The Receiver advocating a need to avoid dangerous and hasty decision-making.

Brad’s concern for hasty, possibly irreversible, decisions is legitimate, especially only one week after September 11. War is not a decision to be taken lightly. Reading *The Giver* and writing a response provided a venue for Brad to reflect upon the seriousness of our government’s decision-making.

The ultimate choice—Jonas’ defiance of the lack of choice in his community—is to set out for Elsewhere. Along with The Giver, he chooses a different life for Gabe, for himself, and for everyone else by default, by devising a plan to leave the community. However, Jonas also chooses to set their plan in action earlier than anticipated when he learns that Gabe will be released the next day. His choice to set out on his own, without the stockpile of memories of courage The Giver planned to provide for him, was an assertion of his essential right to make choices for himself, to take action over his own life. Ashley commented, “I was glad when Jonas chose to make the decision to leave their community and take Gabriel with him because he made the decision not to let anyone play God for him.” In *choosing* to make a decision, as Ashley stated, Jonas puts himself at risk in order to save Gabriel’s life, to seek a better life for them both.

Along the same lines, Teresa reminded us of the immense power of choosing to help others: “Although our government has its faults, as American citizens, we are blessed to be able to enjoy freedom and have the opportunity to reach out to others and make their lives a little easier. Even in the face of disaster, it is love and our common humanness that

gets us through the tough times.” Teresa underscored the agency of those “in the face of disaster.” Even then, people have choices in how to react, and acting to help others is one thing that helps people to survive “the tough times.”

To Borrow from Bauer, Hope Was (and is) Here

Reading *The Giver* and reflecting on its issues helped the class make sense of the loss of innocence and the costs and benefits of free societies. It helped students find scraps of hope in the midst of national—indeed, international—despair. As Susan commented, “It seems that the message of this novel is a hopeful one, one that encourages readers to take chances, to feel free to love and even question the environment around them.”

We are not bibliotherapists; however, we have experienced the power of an excellent work of art to help us grieve, think, and appreciate. As Antje questioned, “[I]n learning to love and to choose to accept the pain along with the joy had [Jonas] succeeded regardless of whether he lived or died?” She also remarked, “I found myself emotionally invested in Jonas’ story and hopeful that he would be able to discover his own humanity.” By choosing to risk his life to save Gabe, he seems to have done that. Jeffery also ended his response with a note of appreciation for the impact of this work of art. He stated, “[. . .] *The Giver* has shed new light on the real-world events around me. I am left feeling thankful to be alive and thankful for this work of fiction[. . .].”

The Giver has become a very timely novel. As our society questions Sameness versus diversity, every gathering seems to have some opinionated voice shouting, “We should just send them all back.” Jonas helps us to see that this is the path toward Sameness, away from the freedom and the choice we value. In this way, *The Giver* is a prism through which we can view our society, and be thankful that despite the risks and costs of freedom, we have brilliant colors.

Work Cited

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Angela Beumer Johnson is a faculty member at Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, where she has the pleasure of working with prospective teachers of English including co-authors Jeffery W. Kleismit and Antje J. Williams.