

A Gift to America after 9/11: A Lesson for Young Learners

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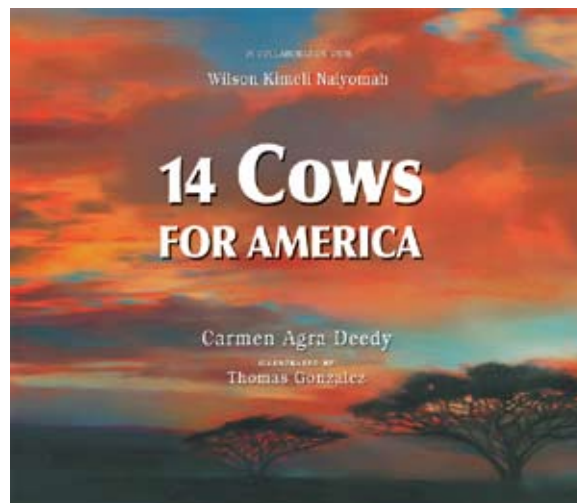
“... there is no nation so powerful it cannot be wounded, nor a people so small they cannot offer mighty comfort.” *14 Cows for America*, p. 30

The tragedy of 9/11 is perhaps the most significant event so far in the 21st century. Ten years later, the vast majority of elementary school students have no personal connection with the original events, yet all live in a world that has been and continues to be affected by 9/11. How can teachers introduce young students to the events of that tragic day?

Within a year or two of 9/11, several books were written by educators to assist teachers and parents to help young children deal with the events. One of the major goals of these books was to present the 9/11 tragedy in a way that allowed children to understand what happened, but did not leave them in a state of fear. This worthy goal is familiar to many elementary teachers who help children deal with tragic situations such as the destruction of property and loss of lives of friends and families.

One such book dealing with 9/11 is *14 Cows for America*, written by Carmen Agra Deedy in collaboration with Wilson Kimeli Naiyomah and illustrated by Thomas Gonzalez.¹ The book tells the story of a gift by the Maasai people of East Africa to the American people after hearing about September 11 from Wilson

Kimeli Naiyomah, a young Maasai man who had won a scholarship to study in the United States. Returning to visit his



Courtesy of Peachtree Publishers

people in Kenya in 2002, Kimeli informs them of the attacks. After a Maasai elder asks, “What can we do for these poor people?” Kimeli offers to donate his only cow to the United States. Adding to his gift, the Maasai offer more cows so that they are eventually able to present 14 cows to the American ambassador to express their sympathy with the American people. The cows remain in Kenya under the special care of a Maasai elder, though the herd continu-

ally expands as new calves are born.

At a time when standards are being stressed as the guidelines for what to teach, our sampling of state standards identified a number of concepts and generalizations needed to understand the issues related to events such as 9/11. Beginning at the kindergarten level are references to learning about honesty, patriotism, peaceful conflict resolution, showing respect for others, and explaining why citizens should volunteer to contribute their time and talents. The social studies curriculum clearly supports the idea that foundational concepts need to be nurtured. Beginning in the lower grades, these culminate in older students having the ability to address more complex learning goals such as researching terrorist groups and their governmental supporters, and examining international cooperation to deal with terrorism. The themes of the national curriculum standards for social studies also provide a useful framework for studying 9/11.²

We believe that a book like *14 Cows for America* can be used to advance standards-based learning in the early grades. Selected as a Notable Social Studies Trade Book in 2010, it offers an introduction both to the events of 9/11 and to the culture of a people thousands of miles away who extended sympathy



Painting by James Cloutier from *14 Cows for America*. (Courtesy of Peachtree Publishers)

to the people of the United States. In this article, we suggest a lesson plan for using the book in class in a way that is grounded in the national social studies standards.

The Maasai People: Their Culture, Values and Traditions

The Maasai people are among the more recognizable peoples of Africa, perhaps because many continue to wear their traditional red robes and because their culture revolves around the care of cattle in free and open pasture land in Kenya and Tanzania. This area is dry and the cattle must be taken to various pastures throughout the year and protected from predators. The social structure of the Maasai remains based on the traditional four levels. Junior and senior warriors are charged with protecting the housing areas and the cattle. The junior and senior elders are the heads of families and make the final

decisions after counseling among themselves and those involved. Traditionally, the children accompany the adults, learning as apprentices the duties of family life. These include the care of cows

riddles and proverbs passed down by their tribe. In modern times, children go to elementary school, but only a few attend high school because of the costs and the need to fulfill their roles in the local communities. Those lucky enough to receive scholarships and advanced education in other nations return home, if not permanently, then to visit and try to improve the basic needs of their people.

According to the Maasai tradition and belief, when God created the Maasai he put them on a cowhide and let the people walk to the earth followed by cows. They were told that they were to live with the cows as the center of their lives. This Maasai belief is taught to each generation. It is described as a pledge between God, the Maasai, and the cows and includes a provision that the Maasai pledged never to give

away the cow. Indeed, the Maasai warriors traditionally guarded the cows not only from wild predators, but also from



Illustration by Thomas Gonzalez. (Courtesy of Peachtree Publishers)

and respect and care for others. With their families, they attend ceremonies and gather to hear stories and learn the

Table 1. Standards Closely Related to Text of *14 Cows for America*

NCSS Standard	Related through <i>14 Cows for America</i>
1 CULTURE	The strong bonds that connect Maasai individuals with their families, communities, and cows; the values of the Maasai people. Learning through the oral and apprentice traditions continue to be important practices of the Maasai.
3 PEOPLE, PLACES AND ENVIRONMENTS	The physical and cultural environment in which the Maasai live; the location of their lands in Kenya and on the African continent.
5 INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS	The relationship between Kimeli and other Maasai; the practice of holding tribal gatherings to formalize agreements and local gatherings to share, learn, and discuss ideas.
9 GLOBAL CONNECTIONS	The international connections that led the Maasai to make their gift of 14 cows to the U.S. after 9/11.
10 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES	The belief of the Maasai that they must do something to assist others who have suffered from injustice is reflected in their gift to the U.S. after 9/11.

other groups of people. When Maasai warriors took cows from other people, they believed that they were bringing them home to the lands of the people who were charged to care for and protect them.

When Kimeli returned to Kenya from school in the United States with plans to give away his cow, he knew that his request was a serious action. He was asking the tribe to act in a way that went against their beliefs, doing what many of his people might think impossible: giving a cow to America. Such an act would sacrifice more than the money value of his cow, for he would be breaking a sacred covenant of his people's tradition. But in the Maasai tradition, he knew the importance given to the values of compassion and justice. Kimeli witnessed the tragic results of 9/11 and the pain and sacrifice of the American people with whom he interacted as a student in the United States. He believed that it would take a great personal sacrifice, such as giving cows away, to provide appropriate comfort to the American people. He also knew that this decision was not his alone to make. He had to return home

and obtain the permission of the tribal elders.

Planning a Lesson Around *14 Cows for America*

The presentation of the story in *14 Cows for America* has two distinct sections necessary for comprehending the book's message. The book begins by introducing the reader to the Maasai people in their unique physical and cultural environments. The second portion of the book illustrates how the Maasai, in their own way, responded when learning about events of 9/11. Two pages following the story are directed to teachers and parents to provide additional information about the Maasai and Kimeli, the book's narrator, and his personal experience with 9/11 and his culture.

Because of the two foci directed to young readers, this book is best considered as two successive lessons. For teachers pressed by time, it is possible to use *14 Cows for America* as the single or predominant instructional resource for the lessons that follow. Appropriate and easily available additional resources are suggested for teachers who may

want to supplement or expand what is presented in the book. While the story has elements that could be connected to all 10 themes of the social studies standards, this two-part lesson focuses on only five.

Table 1 identifies specific information related to each of the five NCSS standards for the lesson presented. The themes of Culture; People, Places, and Environments; and Individuals, Groups, and Institutions provide background information necessary to understand the story. Two other themes, Civic Ideals and Practices and Global Connections, are particularly related to the 9/11 events and the personal responses presented in the book. A just society respects everyone's rights and expresses concern for the feelings of others. The illustration of such values is done in the daily lives of people and learned through life in their culture(s). Believing and acting with the values of justice and compassion are two traits individuals need to practice to become members of civic groups and citizens of the world.

SUGGESTED LESSON PLAN

Time needed: 2-3 days

Materials: Globe, Copy of *14 Cows for America*, Computer and whiteboard if videos are used.

Supplemental materials: See list of suggested resources.

Objectives:

Describe the environment in which the Maasai live.

Identify individual decisions Maasai make concerning their important resources.

Describe the perspectives of justice and compassion found within the Maasai warrior tradition.

Recognize and list the peaceful acts and evidence of empathy demonstrated in *14 Cows for America*.

Differentiate between the meanings of the words empathy and sympathy.

Reflect on how the final words in the book summarize the ceremony between the Maasai people and the American diplomat.

After reading the story, list words that describe the Maasai as individuals and as a people.

Day 1 Procedures:

Build background for reading story.

Begin by showing the students several pictures or a short video of the Maasai and their habitat. Ask students: Where do you think these people live? What seems to be important to these people?

After sharing ideas, use a globe and locate your community on the globe and where the Maasai live in the Great Rift Valley of East Africa. Lay a piece of string or yarn between the two locations to measure the distance on the globe and cut it to length. Hold up the yarn and ask the students to describe the distance and indicate what would be the best way to travel to Kenya.

Preview some of the pictures in the first half of the book and ask the students the following: "Think about the pictures or video we saw earlier. How do these drawings compare with the pictures or video?"

Begin reading the book aloud and examining each of the pictures.

Picture 1: What is the message of this first picture?

What do the shoes tell you about the person walking? Where do you see the village in the picture?

Picture 2: Is the man greeted in the same way as you are greeted when you get home from school? How does he greet the children?

Picture 3: Why do you think the entire tribe comes out to greet him?

Picture 4: What do you see first in these pictures? Who is in the picture? How do you think the Maasai are able to tell one cow from another?

Picture 5: What different things do you see in the picture? (Houses in background, fence behind houses, smiles on faces, animals present, babies being carried.)

Picture 6: How are the facial expressions different on this page than the previous pages? Why do you think a child asked if he had any stories? What do you think is meant by the story "burning a hole in his heart?"

What do you think will be in this story?

Review what they have learned about the Maasai people. Ask: If you met a Maasai person do you think you would become friends? How would you know they were Maasai without asking them?

For homework: Tell students that tonight they should ask their own parents what they think is in a story that "burns a hole in the heart" of a person.

Day 2 Procedures:

Review yesterday's portion of the story and review the characteristics mentioned by students and parents about a story that "burns a hole in the heart." Tell students that today we will learn what happened in that story and how the Maasai responded to the story.

Picture 7: How is this picture different from the pictures we have seen before in the book? What does this tell you about the story being told by Kimeli? What is Kimeli describing when he says "Buildings so tall they touch the sky? Fires so hot they can melt iron? Smoke and dust so thick they can block out the sun?" What does putting a question mark at the end of the sentence mean when it is not a question?

Picture 8: To what group of the tribe do you think the people shown here belong? What is meant by "3000 souls are lost?" What is the difference in meaning given to you by using the word "souls" instead of the word "people"? The last sentence on this page has several powerful words that suggest actions. Ask students to predict the actions suggested by "Fierce," "Provoked," "Suffering," and "Injustice."

Picture 9: Why do you think the picture on this page is of cows? Why do you think there was a long silence when the story was completed? How can a Maasai elder refer to the American peoples as "poor"? Ask students what is inferred in the meaning of the statement by Kimeli, "To the Maasai the cow is life."

Picture 10: What is different about the faces on this page?

Picture 11: Ask students: What makes a diplomat different from just any citizen of a nation?

Pictures 12–14: Show the pictures and read the text. Ask student, "How can you tell that this is a very special day for the Maasai?" "How do you think the American diplomat responded to the ceremony and the gift from the Maasai?"

Picture 15: Tell students to look carefully at the picture and tell you what they see in the eye of the Maasai. Tell students that Kimeli and the Maasai might have thought that 9/11 and the collapse of the towers was a sad thing to have happened and let that be their response, but they did not. What does it tell them about the Maasai people? Ask students to think about the meaning of the final statement and to respond to it by telling what they think it means.

In bringing closure to the discussion portion of the lesson, teachers might conduct one or more of the following activities:

Have students look up the definitions of "sympathy" and "empathy." Ask students how they think these words are reflected in the story of *14 Cows for America*.

Ask students: "Do you have any questions you might want to ask the author or illustrator of the book?" Then listen to the interview website listed in resources.

Ask the students to relate the content of the story as they view the trailer for the book. (See resource list.)

Tell the students that in the U.S. embassy in Kenya there is a special flag that recognizes the gift of the Maasai cows and it will be placed at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York City when the memorial opens (See illustration on pg. 192). Have the students design their own flags to illustrate the gift of the 14 cows. After students share their designs share with them the actual flag that is pictured at the end of the note from Kimeli Naiyomah at the conclusion of the book.

Opportunity for Expansion:

Examining what has happened to the 14 cows might expand this lesson, time permitting. Where do students think would be the best place for the cows to be kept? Where do the students think the cows are? What do you think the United States government has done to officially acknowledge the gift of the 14 cows? Ten years after 9/11 what do they think Kimeli, who was the first to offer his only cow, is doing? (See postscript and resource list for assistance in answering these questions.)

Summary

There is no better way for social studies professionals to set the example of global citizenship for the next generation than to examine the trials and the sacrifices of their fellow citizens during 9/11. The focus should not just be on fear, sorrow, and loss, associated with the terrorist act of 9/11, but on reminding ourselves that shared values demand that all apply their knowledge and ethics when being active citizens. *14 Cows for America*, based on the experiences of a young Maasai's eyewitness account and the empathic response to America's painful experience, provides a good beginning for youth to examine the role of compassion in societies around the world.

A Postscript:

When the gift was presented to a surprised United States diplomat, he was touched and moved to tears. Americans

who learned of the gift through the media responded by sending 40,000 pieces of mail expressing their personal feelings. Many Americans wanted to bring the cows to America, where the generous gift to comfort the American people might be seen. But the United States government, along with the Maasai elders, decided that the cows should not undergo the long transport, and perhaps be put into a zoo-like habitat. Instead it was decided that the cows should be allowed to roam freely and peacefully in the grasslands among the Maasai where they would be happy under supervision of Maasai elders.

The herd can reinforce the lesson of the need for sharing justice and compassion. In 2010, the herd had grown to 35 cows, and, as Kimeli says, it is "an eternal gift that keeps giving." Kimeli has expressed hope that every anniversary of 9/11, when people hear of the 9/11 tragedy, there will also be a recognition

that the Maasai people in a village far across the ocean, shared America's pain and sorrow because they recognized the human commonality of all peoples. 🌍

Endnotes

1. Carmen Agra Deedy, in collaboration with Wilson Kimeli Naiyomah, *14 Cows for America* (Atlanta: Peachtree, 2009). Illustrated by Thomas Gonzalez.
2. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2010).

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14 COWS RESOURCES

In addition to the many images of Maasai that you can find through a search on the Internet, the following articles and videos are directly related to the book *14 Cows for America*:

This website provides an update on Wilson Kimeli Naiyomah and the Maasai area, and explains the peace philosophy: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKeB_LnKb0U.

Several pictures from the book can be viewed by clicking on the word "trailer" in the paragraph below the page header at www.14cowsforamerica.com.

A Teacher's Guide is also available at peachtree-online.com/pdfs/14CowsTG.pdf

Interviews and information about author, illustrator, and collaborator are at www.14cowsforamerica.com/team.html.

View one example of the work of the American African Nuru Foundation started by Kimeli at www.aanurufoundation.org/solar_massai_video.asp.

The original newspaper article read by Carman Agra Deedy that inspired the book can be read at www.nytimes.com/2002/06/03/international/africa/03KENY.html.

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