

Losing trust

By [Katherine Willis Pershey](#)

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My sister Marie was reading the weekly e-mail update from her daughter's kindergarten teacher. Amid reminders about library day and an upcoming popsicle party, Mrs. R. noted that the class had visited a presentation by the fifth graders about 9/11 and the bin Laden compound. In an attached photo, my niece's kindergarten class stands smiling for the camera in front of a painted mural of the twin towers engulfed in flames.

In a second photo, the class is watching a scene on the elementary school stage. Fifth graders dressed in fatigues stand beneath an American flag, with their play guns all pointed at the same target: a child dressed as Osama bin Laden. He is slumped on the ground, his forehead streaked with fake blood.

My sister feels sick. She's been answering questions, questions that she wasn't prepared to answer for a daughter who wasn't prepared to know--not yet, and not this way. "She can't unlearn this," my sister lamented. "She can't unsee this."

I read my sister's e-mail and saw the photos just before leaving for church on Sunday. It was the day before Memorial Day, and themes of remembrance and honor were woven into the liturgy. We sang "[This is my Song](#)," that remarkable patriotic poem that remembers that skies are

blue in other countries too. During the children's sermon, our seminary intern invited the veterans present to stand so that the children could lead the congregation in thanking them for their service. We prayed for peace in every nation.

As I closed my eyes to pray, I thought of the heartbreaking images of my niece juxtaposed against painted and playacted violence. She is fine, of course. My sister and her husband are finding the words to comfort her, and the fact that she is too young to understand serves as a shield against the enormity of the events depicted.

But my sister has lost trust in the school--a critical institution in her daughter's life, and one that can't be easily avoided. I can't imagine the grief I would experience if my church--the institution most central to my daughter's life--trespassed against inviolable boundaries.

I included in my prayer intercessions a class of kindergarteners in a small town in Pennsylvania and their fifth-grade friends. Then I gave thanks to God for the safety of the sanctuary.