

Finding Purpose in Tragedy

**A short essay written by
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When I first watched on television the planes purposefully flying into the World Trade Center buildings, I knew that September 11, 2001 would be the most profound and sadly historic day of my life. When I saw the towers crumble to the ground, I knew instantly that I had just watched thousands of people die. It was just as clear that my world had changed in an instant, and that I would need to prepare myself to help change it for the better.

For reasons not fully understood, I had to watch the shocking images over and over again. The same spell seemed to have power over everybody around me. My first reaction, like everybody else, was one of disbelief. It just wasn't possible, and I was waiting to hear another, less heartbreaking explanation of the looping video replays. To this day, I still have the fantasy in which I wake up on September 10th, and having been given this terrible vision, I warn the FBI and they stop the terrorists. I know I am not the only one who has daydreamed this wishful flight of the imagination.

I was in Arizona, far from any threat. But as an American, no, as a human being, I feel a sense of guilt for not having suffered like the others. I could give blood, donate money, or display the flag, but I continue to feel it isn't enough – no matter how hard I try.

I am moved by the improvised memorials that I see on the television - the anonymous donations of flowers and candles. I will never forget the wall of home computer generated fliers featuring the missing family members and friends. Throngs of people stop, look, and show their reverence. One young lady was randomly chosen from the crowd by a live network television camera and asked about her thoughts. She said that she didn't know the people, but everybody looked so happy in his or her picture. She then broke into tears and couldn't speak. To me she represented what all Americans were feeling.

I watched with joyous wonderment when a miracle unfolded. The mourning for the victims of the attack moved from within the U.S. borders to the millions of people from around the world, as they joined together to show their sorrow, as we are all members of the human race. I thank each and every one of you. This was not just an attack on the United States, but on people of all nationalities and religions. That is why the whole world felt the same shock and horror. As a personal example, my retired parents are in Qingdao, China, teaching conversational English to more than 250 university students. After the terrorist attacks, my parents were inundated with flowers and cards of condolence. This is just one of the reasons why they have fallen in love with those beautiful young Chinese kids in the six short weeks they have been there.

I want to hear every story, and feel every loss, of the found and missing victims. I want to know of their hopes and dreams, their plans for the future, who they loved, and who loved them. I want to hold all of those children who have lost a parent, to try to bring them some comfort. I pray for the family members. Their collective grief is beyond the comprehension of the human heart.

The many people looking for the missing stated that their loved one is tough, and if anyone could make it out, he or she could. Americans think they are tough. New Yorkers believe they invented toughness. But nobody, nobody in the whole world is tougher than 110 stories of steel and concrete. It was absolutely catastrophic. Thousands that are not just dead, but thousands whose remains will never be recovered. Some in the World Trade Centers, and few passengers on the airplanes, had the chance to say goodbye, and their final 'I love you's'. Many did not. But in the silent moments, we feel the desires of their hearts, their longings for a tender farewell. We want to say to them we hear you, and love and miss you too. We look forward to that sweet and joyous reunion with you, beyond this veil of tears.

We salute and pay tribute to every firefighter and police officer involved on that awful day, and the many days that have followed. We are inspired by their concern for others, beyond their own wellbeing. We are grateful for their devotion to the job of public safety and security. The deep and unshakable bond of brotherly love that they share one with another strengthens us. We champion the uncompromising honor that they live, and die by. Many voted in the presidential election of 1992 that character didn't matter. These men and women are heroic examples that character does, and will always matter. Do we need anything else to truly learn this lesson?

We hear unanimously from the people who visit Ground Zero that the pictures on television do not allow us to fully comprehend the immensity of the destruction. I try to use my mind's eye to visualize the vastness of the devastation and despair. Everybody should have the experience of walking through that consecrated site, to understand both the enormity of the evil that exists in the world, and the test that we face to overcome it.

I find solace in the faces of the schoolchildren as they try to understand the world the adults have made for them. They draw and color flags, write letters to strangers who have become their heroes, sign oversized cards, and sing patriotic songs. They look to grown ups for answers, and the reassurance that they are safe. But they are the ones who give us life's most precious gift – that of unconditional love. And to be worthy of that love, we must face this adversity with a newfound courage, and a willingness to humble ourselves and cast off our personal weaknesses.

On this day, the day that we shall never forget, many experienced moments of unspeakable horror. For some reason, I feel that I need to touch the outer surface of that horror myself. I don't know why. It might be required so that I can proceed with my previously mentioned preparation. Strong men have wept uncontrollably as they told of bodies falling from the sky, and the people badly burned. The carnage to human life and property was gigantic enough, even if the towers hadn't fallen. How can I ease their pain? How can I possibly empathize with the nightmarish images they must carry with them.

People want to understand how someone could hate this much. They feel that if we would just teach them organic gardening, then our genuine efforts of caring would soften their hearts. Most people refuse to accept the frightening fact that hate like this exists in the world. Hate - passed from one generation to the next, century after century. Hate - without any human feeling or remorse. Hate - devoid of any logic. Hate - beyond any rehabilitation. A hate - not from any Christian, Hebrew, or Muslim God. They are in fact, the same God. But a hate that must be defeated at all costs.

Why did this have to happen? We are told about the terrorist who was stopped at the Canadian border with explosives in his car in December, 1999. His plan was to ignite the bomb at the airport in Los Angeles, California. Nobody knew about him. The FBI was not following him. The border officer just looked into his eyes and felt something was wrong. But with nineteen hijackers on four separate airplanes, and at least two years of planning and training in America, no such providence would be presented on September 11th. The explanation for this will forever elude us.

The survivors ask why they were spared. Why did they make it and the person next to them die? The World Trade Center tenant and business Cantor Fitzgerald lost more than 700 of their 1,000 employees. Their CEO appeared on television was completely devastated. Can you imagine? At the same time, another World Trade Center tenant, brokerage firm Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, lost only 6 of their 3,700 total employees. If you have to ask – no, life is not fair. Each day after the attack every survivor seeks the purpose for his or her deliverance. All of us should be seeking the purpose in our lives without the scare of a brush with death. We should be contemplating this issue instead of avoiding the subject by spending our time on 21st century meaningless activities like extreme sports, computer hacking, or those inane reality television programs, just to name a few. Yes, this contemplation brings the threat of having to change our lives, and reassess our values.

We know of those who have found their purpose. President George W. Bush, in his historic speech to the joint session of Congress, spoke of his unwavering resolve to rid the world of this evil. Mayor Guiliani of New York City has a mission to rebuild his city, and provide inspiration to his stunned citizens. Prime Minister Tony Blair gave a remarkable speech in front of the British Parliament, declaring total support. Americans know, without any doubt, that the British will stand with us, as our closest and most trusted friends in the world. Those average but valiant men and women on United flight 93 were blessed, however difficult to understand, with a clear vision of their purpose.

To honor the living and the dead heroes, we must change our lives. What a travesty it would be if we didn't. We sing God Bless America. We call upon God to heal America. But our most important prayer, and one of the purposes of God, is to make us better brothers and sisters to each other. This we do, one member of the human family at a time.

Because of the attacks, we have experienced immeasurable terror and sorrow. But following the attacks, we are discovering the greatest love, devotion, caring, sacrifice, and patriotism within each of us. I cry during every story I read or watch on television - either because of the sadness, or because of the stirring examples of the highest in us. One important principle of living is that there is opposition in all things. Although some will fight in vain to reject this truth, we cannot know happiness without misery. We cannot appreciate health without sickness. Our souls are

attracted to the light because we know the emptiness of darkness. We've seen the worst of human nature, and the best of human nature. The ecstasy of success does not come until we have embraced the struggle.

My Grandfather, who was very near and dear to me, and who passed away several years ago, wrote a fictional novel about the life of a family. He illustrated their challenges and triumphs, and how their family members in Heaven, both those who had past on, and those waiting for their turn on Earth, were cheering them on. With a still small voice, they would encourage those on Earth to make the right decisions – decisions with eternal consequences. Grandpa wrote one passage that seemed to want to stand alone. Many of my family members have this quote framed and displayed with love in their homes. He wrote -

“The one great purpose of life is that we may find joy through our own achievements. This happens only if there exists some resistance to the efforts made. There must be problems to solve, work to accomplish, no matter what condition exists. So important is this principle of joy through achievement that the Lord allows grief and hardship to occur within all of us. Men and Women then test themselves – strengthen themselves. Many rise to great heights and ennoble themselves.” – Frank R. Jensen (1904-1983)

It is at times like these, when we are tested, that we grow and become stronger - personally, as a nation, and as the human race. From the piles of rubble we can rise to great heights and ennoble ourselves – and those around us.

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