

9/11 Plus 10: Transformation and Hope

Ten years past the trauma of 9/11, we asked members of the Trinity community – What have you learned? How have you grown? What are you more aware of, in yourself and in the world? Did the attack change the way you try to make the world better? Did it inspire greater understanding and compassion, to counteract the bigotry and fear that followed?



On September 11, 2001, I was living in the metro Washington, DC area and working in Baltimore. While it is one thing to read about a terrible disaster or watch coverage on TV, it is another to live in proximity to the event's location and to know that you, too, may have been in harm's way. It is worse to know that the disaster is man-made, driven by hatred.

What was I to feel, as a resident of the targeted area, an American, a Christian, an Episcopalian? Would I give in to the natural fear, even hatred, which was a common reaction at the time? Would I give in to racial profiling, to Islam-bashing or even to the unbridled patriotism that set the USA against all comers?

After many discussions with friends, co-workers and at church, I decided that I couldn't give in to the darker impulses. That I had to hold on to the Christian principles that I had been taught since childhood – we are to love one another as we would be loved. That there is a loving God that watches over us and things happen for reasons I will never comprehend. That time is fleeting and that I shouldn't sweat the small stuff. That I should strive not to fear the things I can't control, but to actively do the things I can control – volunteer in my community, get out of my chair and out of my comfort zone and share the gifts I've been given with those that need assistance. That I may not be able to change the world, but I can change the circumstances around me. That family comes first, that some sacrifices aren't really that big a deal, and that everything happens for a reason. That you can change course in mid-stride as long as you keep your eyes on the prize and focus on the big picture.

I can't begin to understand the motivation of people who do evil; many of them obviously think the evil is on the other side. All I can do is to do my bit to make this a better place, to strive to be patient and understanding, slow to judge, and resistant to hate. I hold on to the teaching that seems universal among the major religions – there is a power, a force, God, greater than myself that deserves my respect; and that we should all do unto others as we would have them do unto us. The rest is nuance.

Gary Franklin

Our daughter was 11 that year. It was hard to explain to her. And, well, it was hard to explain. Soon enough, we felt the need for peace, the need to be away from all media. Just for a night or two. This was during the time the government closed U.S. airspace, so we drove to a quiet place along a lake. Like so many families then, we were huddling together for comfort. At the lake, we took long walks. The first night, the sky over the lake was spectacular: clear, endless, inky, littered with stars. While looking up, I saw a shooting star -- and I flinched. There was not supposed to be any air traffic, but even unexpected movement that was celestial caused me to flinch. I have tried ever since not to overreact so much. To everything.

Roberta Durham

On September 11, 2001 and on many occasions since, I have tried to keep a classroom rather than a courtroom outlook – curiosity rather than judgment, openness rather than defensiveness. I can never know all the factors at work around me. I can be open to not-knowing, rest in Mystery, and pray (almost daily), “God, how would you have me be with this?”

Being open allows the possibility to hear and consider God's invitation rather than being bound in a victim mode. (Consider Joseph in the Old Testament, whose deep relationship with God freed him from anger and resentment toward his brothers. He claimed it was God, not them, who sent him to Egypt.) For me, being open and responsive to the

opportunities and invitation to serve is my reply to God and the world. Trying to refrain from carrying fear, judgment and anxiety is summed up best by Trish Herbert, “Let go – or be dragged.” “Worry does not empty tomorrow's sorrow, it empties today of its strength.” (Corrie ten Boom)

Susan Lowrey



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What have I learned about compassion since the events of September 11, 2001?

Science, religion, the universe, the creator and sustainer all shout that we are all interconnected, so do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Said another way, Jesus instructed us to love one another and love God. I think all that we do has to be evaluated against this concept.

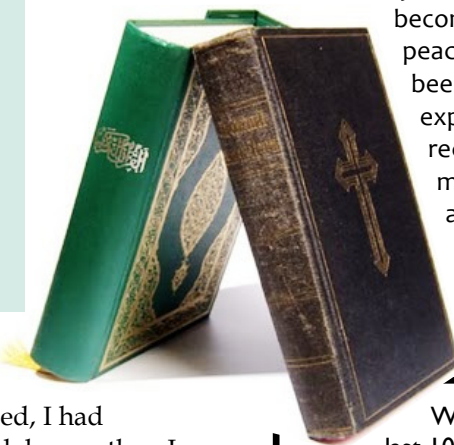
The world has seen great compassion and awful prejudice in the last ten years. Love breeds compassion and fear breeds prejudice. We cannot change the past. I cannot change my past. However, today is a new day; will I live with compassion or prejudice? As a father and grandfather of devout Muslims, I hope we Americans can live without prejudice and with compassion.

Chuck Kiskaddon

In the months after 9/11, I happened to be working with Mona, a devout Muslim graduate student of mine, and had several long conversations with her about the double victimization she and her fellow Muslims experienced after 9/11: First as an American and thus an object of the attacks; but second and more importantly because of the discrimination she personally and other Muslims experienced after 9/11, including constant monitoring of her local mosque by federal agents. As a result, I learned more about Islam and took every opportunity to defend Muslims from unfair treatment and prejudice. She has since completed her PhD and now works at a university in Cairo, where she has

become involved in the largely peaceful revolution that has been happening in Egypt. My experience with Mona recently helped me to work more compassionately with another Islamic PhD student here in Scotland.

Robert Elliott



As the impact of that tragic day unfolded, I had to first examine my own prejudice. It took longer than I want to admit for me to recognize the discrimination that I was practicing in my silence and inaction.

When I became involved in political volunteering, I met people of many faiths, ethnicities and traditions. I saw first-hand the effects of prejudice. I began to more deeply appreciate the abundance of comfort and material security in my own life. I also recognized that I could help to improve lives through legislative change.

Through personal studies and the good fortune of becoming friends with two young Muslim women, I began to understand the beauty of their faith, the similarity of our teachings and traditions.

One of the greatest lessons I have learned is that most often our prejudice comes out of misunderstanding or misinformation. It is difficult work finding common ground, especially when we feel threatened or powerless.

People of faith have the greatest ability to break down this prejudice by looking through the lens of God. When we act out of our faith, each quiet example of compassion, each courageous selfless act toward someone different than ourselves creates a powerful foundation for change.

Cathy Johns

What I've been reminded of in the last 10 years is how similarly ignorance, intolerance, and oppressive systems work regardless of their targets. I've also learned how easy it is to be seduced by what Shane Claiborne calls the "myth of redemptive violence," both as an individual and a nation. It is incredibly difficult and perhaps politically irresponsible for a nation to refuse to seek vengeance when it's been attacked, but then what does it mean to pledge to be "one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all?" In the last 10 years we've declared certain people as *not* of this nation regardless of their citizenship status, we've acted in ways that don't reflect God, and have refused liberty and justice based on religious and ethnic prejudice. It's made me more passionate about the need to include religion and other belief systems in conversations about diversity and inclusion, especially in my sphere of influence in higher education. I am striving to be much more aware of how I, as a Christian having religious privilege, can support religious inclusion and pluralism or can choose to follow "paths of least resistance" (see Allan G. Johnson) that allow exclusion to flourish. Our confession that acknowledges that the "circle of God's love is restored when we see eye to eye" has challenged me to see both myself and others differently.

Dafina Stewart

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What did I learn from September 11th? What struck me most forcibly was that nobody seemed to be asking why there was so much hatred for the United States that people would hijack planes with the purpose of using them as guided missiles to destroy major symbols of American life. Talk seemed to be mainly about revenge, and I pondered this for a long time. The signs had been there over the years – the first attack on the World Trade Center in the 1990s, the bombing of the embassies in Nairobi, the attack on the USS Cole and the pronouncements of Osama Bin Laden all demonstrated a build-up of anger and frustration, but nobody asked why. What was it about American culture that was so distressful to people in the Muslim world?

I realized that, just as the British had before them, the United States had been (and still is) practicing a form of colonialism, economic colonialism rather than taking over countries wholesale, but colonialism nevertheless. Peter and I lived in Tehran in the 1970s and we witnessed this first hand. There were many Americans at that time in Iran. These were not diplomats, intellectuals or scientists but mainly pipeline and refinery workers in the oil industry, there with their families. There was a large Tehran American School and we watched the teenaged TAS students walking in the streets, talking loudly, playing their portable radios and seeming oblivious, not to say disrespectful of the local people going about their business. We found the Iranians to be welcoming and hospitable people, and many of them were enthusiastic about the development that was going on. However, there were also many Iranians who clung to their traditional culture and way of life and must have been shocked by the influx of so many foreigners not making an effort to understand or accommodate to local ways. I wonder how we would feel if, for instance, large numbers of Chinese technicians and engineers arrived to supervise the building of major infrastructure projects and oversee American workers, while setting up their own schools for their children and expecting us to speak Chinese with them and cater to their needs?

So what have I learned from 9/11? I think it has taught us what not to do. It should have been a wake-up call that gave us pause to consider why it happened and what our responsibility for it was. I think the conciliatory note originally struck by President Bush was the way to proceed. I supported going in to Afghanistan, as much to dislodge the Taliban as to look for Osama Bin Laden, but I think now perhaps that was wrong. The war in Iraq was a terrible mistake and I remember with distaste those days when it was seen as unpatriotic to voice any criticism of the administration's policies. If we had left Iraq to its own devices, the Iraqis might now be part of the Arab Spring, uniting to mount their own revolution to overthrow Saddam Hussein instead of the dreadful debacle we have witnessed over the past decade there – the loss of life, widespread destruction and the waste of billions of dollars. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have bankrupted this economy and raised the debt level to unprecedented heights. There are no funds for education, healthcare, infrastructure investments, housing or humanitarian aid. If Osama Bin Laden wanted to destroy the United States' economy, he certainly could be said to have succeeded and we helped him to do it.



For two years we'd planned our dream trip to Italy. It was September 2001, and my husband Fred and I and Lou & John Woellner had just checked into our hotel in Rome. As we unpacked in our rooms, we turned on the television and heard that a commercial airliner had crashed into the

World Trade Center. We yelled, "How horrible!" and "Why would a plane fly that low?" Then they showed live coverage, and we watched with more horror. A second plane appeared, and we thought for a moment that it was from the media, taking photos of the disaster.

Then the second plane hit the buildings and we realized it was a terrorist attack. "Why are we here in Italy?" we thought. All we wanted was to get back to our country and our families and friends. However, we had reservations for the next two weeks, and travel back to the United States was impossible. So our trip went on.

As we visited Rome, Florence and Tuscany we felt so much sympathy and sadness for us from the Italian people. If shop keepers did not speak English, they would point to their T.V.'s and say "very sorry". Signs in many of the shops said "Our sympathy to America". Everywhere we traveled people were so kind, and as horrified as we were. Fortunately our families were able to contact us, and we could share our grief and fear in these transatlantic calls.

We worried about getting back to the U.S. when our trip was over, but after one cancelled flight in Milan, we arrived back in America almost on schedule. We surely appreciated the feeling of people kissing the ground upon arriving "home".

From that tragic time we learned that people all over the world have the same revulsion for terror and the same sadness and sympathy for those affected by tragedy. Ten years later, with so much world division, we pray that those kind and caring people in every land still have a common love of their fellow men, wherever they live.

Ruth Miller

Valerie Garforth