

## **Grieving for Ordinary Times**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

In 2002 or 2003, I was set to teach an early morning class on September 11. Shortly before class, a student emailed to ask if I would devote a few minutes of class time to pray for all whose lives were snatched from them at that very time of day in 2001. With a pang of regret that I had not thought to do so before he did, I assured my student that I would – and we did.

The horrors of that anniversary were still freshly raw in our minds. In my hometown of New York, I had worked in the Twin Towers during my teen years. After I moved to Washington, whenever I took the train back to New York, the Towers were the first sign I saw in the distance to tell me I was almost home. New York's skyline without them still startles me after all these years. In a far greater loss, my hometown high school, parish and neighborhood were home to too many who never came home that day.

In my adopted town of Washington, I shared a University family and a parish with those who perished at the Pentagon. I watched colleagues and students anxiously await word from their loved ones on that morning whose sunny glory belied the horror that was unfolding.

At the time, I had no personal link to Pennsylvania – or so it seemed. That last flight was reportedly heading for the Capitol -- a stone's throw from where I work and just above the subway where I was commuting that morning. I have often wondered whether, unknown to me, I owe my own life to those who stopped that deadly act with their heroism in the skies above a quiet field.

Now, 18 years have passed. I am struck by the fact that this year's college freshmen were born the same year as that deadly day and, thus, have no memory of it. Yet, I hope they never see that day as mere history to be studied with the mind but not felt with the heart. As events recede further back in time, it is all too easy to teach the next generation about the dates, facts, details, context, and consequences of events – and to lose sight of the real people at the heart of these events. There is a sacred obligation to make sure that those whose lives ended that morning, and in the aftermath of that morning, are remembered as this new generation learns what happened then.

Those who died that day were living the ordinary times so often taken for granted. The police, firefighters, first responders, chaplains and members of the military were doing what they do each and every day – ready to give up their lives for others. The airline pilots and flight crews were engaged in the awesome responsibilities they have when, around the clock, passengers entrust their lives to them.

The thousands who went to work for the last time that day were parents, seeking to earn a living and return home to the embrace of their children. They were grandparents, working in the last year or two of their careers, anticipating the family times they thought lay ahead. They were young people, the same age as my students, starting their first jobs in the hopes of a bright future. They were those working hard at the top rungs of the ladder of success, and they were those working hard, minimum wage jobs so that their children would not have to do the same. They were newlyweds in the spring of new love, and those who cherished the spouse whose hand they held for decades. They were women carrying their children within them, in eager anticipation of holding newborns in their arms in a few short months or weeks. They were those, perhaps, for whom 2001 was a difficult time in their lives and others for whom 2001 may have seemed to be the best year they had ever known.

Now that the infants of 2001 have become the young adults of 2019, I hope that they will learn about all of these people, about the lives they led, and about the sacred fragility of life. I hope that they will not let the enormity of the loss hide the fact that each of those thousands of people had a unique place in the world that no one else could fill. While some were or became well known in the aftermath of that day, most lived the quiet hopes and dreams of ordinary lives. I hope that history and humanity, together, will keep the next generation aware of all that was lost that day. I hope they will understand that so many among us still mourn their loved ones with a sorrow that is fresh. Most of all, I hope that many, like my student from yesteryear, will pray for those lost that day and for their loved ones left behind whose hearts still grieve for just one more moment of ordinary time.

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