

## ANNIVERSARY OF SEPTEMBER THE 11<sup>TH</sup>

“Where were you when you first heard about September the 11<sup>th</sup>?” As with the assassination of President Kennedy, or the first human landing on the moon, we will never forget where we were when we first learned about the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. We are remembering where we were more intensely the closer the anniversary of that day is upon us. The searing images of planes crashing into the tall structures, and their implosion, are recrystallising into sharp reminiscences, helped by the intensifying reruns of the day by the media.

I remember waking on September 11<sup>th</sup>, slowly assembling my brain cells for the day, responding with incomprehension to the seven o’clock news. They were either wrong, or the world had suddenly fallen from under me. The human dimension struck me when my daughter, who had visited the World Trade Centre a number of times the previous month, said how upset she was thinking of the office workers she had seen there.

She told me that they were mainly young, some white, some black, some intense, some bored, some munching their lunches, some punching their computers. I looked at my daughter. The people she described were like her, but they were dead. We cried. I had experienced the Holocaust as a child. Now I felt sorrow for my children’s loss of innocence.

The last year has also been one of survival. The fears of further terrorist attacks, of widespread dissemination of anthrax, fears of widespread religious wars and collapse back into the dark ages, have not materialized into reality. Perhaps America’s avenging swipe at its perpetrators helped. In any case, people have been recovering as they do after disasters generally.

Kathleen Regan, CEO of the Green Cross Foundation whose team of thirty-eight professionals had looked after the mental health needs of the cleaners and window cleaner survivors at the World Trade Centre, has been monitoring their progress over the last year. She told me a few weeks ago, “At first people were ‘nesting’, families were staying together, marriages were advanced. New York is expecting confirmation of an increased birth rate. Many people came to be concerned with everyday matters, including compensation pay outs.”

We also had returned to our normal lives, slowly started to fly again, and we in Melbourne have stopped reassuring ourselves that the Rialto was still intact.

Yet in these days, as our memories of September 11<sup>th</sup> are intensifying, the distress is returning too. One young woman said, “I have started to have nightmares again, like after September 11<sup>th</sup>. Last night I dreamt that a plane was crashing into a city building, and waves of rubble were coming toward me. As I ran, I realised that I left my mobile behind and I could not contact my mother. Then I woke up.” A Sydney woman living in the flight path of descending planes told me that she had increased checking the noise level and height of planes again. A man told me, “I wouldn’t fly in a plane on Sept 11<sup>th</sup> if you paid me.”

That the distress is actually not over is clearly recognized in New York. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August the New York Times reported that the Red Cross and the September 11<sup>th</sup> Fund launched an unprecedented \$US 90 million psychotherapy treatment program for September 11<sup>th</sup> survivors. These organizations recognise that emotional problems, grief, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse may continue for long times after disasters, or may first manifest only

after months, or even years after the event. That the program is launched at the anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup> indicates awareness that anniversaries are powerful times for symptoms to intensify return or to emerge.

Personally, I have long been aware of the power of anniversaries. I have seen many patients 'come to grief' at such times. For instance, a woman had a car accident on the anniversary of her sister's death in a car accident. A man developed the same symptoms as his father had before he died on the anniversary of his father's death.

Anniversaries are powerful symbolic points, at which different frameworks of time intersect. On the one hand, time returns as if in a cycle. On the other hand, time has moved on, in a trajectory. In other words, at anniversaries one vividly remembers the past event in the present, looking to the future. The conjunction of times gives opportunities to make meanings and move forward with greater wisdom. Making meanings is intense at all levels at the moment.

Both terrorists and the terrorized intuitively understand the enhanced effect of acts carried out at anniversaries. For instance, were terrorists to strike again on September 11<sup>th</sup>, we could not put the last September 11<sup>th</sup> into history, as it would compound with the new event. Such an act would reinforce the cyclical or eternal view of terrorism, at the expense of the trajectory view of moving on.

This is why we are apprehensive about the coming anniversary, fearful that we may be tied to the past, and that the future would be more of the same. That is a prevalent view currently in Israel, where acts of terrorism have continuously recurred.

The fear of recurrence at the anniversary is enhanced by graphic and continued media coverage. There is a danger that we may spin into the past (be retraumatized), even without a recurrence of actual terrorism.

There are certain things we can do to protect ourselves and our children from this threat, and to use the anniversary to our advantage.

First, we should limit television viewing to within each person's comfort zone. Remember that this may involve shorter spans for children. Newspaper coverage is more manageable, as it does not slip vivid images past us, and allows us to absorb information at our own pace.

Second, we should see our general intensified responses such as anxiety and grief as normal. It is best to express and share them in the family.

Third, the anniversary is an opportunity to sort out unresolved issues from a year ago. For instance, children who felt insecure when they saw their parents shocked and helpless, might now understand that their states were temporary and that in spite of them, parents were not uncaring or incapable to provide security.

Fourth, those overwhelmed by emotion and sleeplessness for say, more than two weeks should seek help, without a sense of shame.

Lastly, we can utilise the anniversary like a memorial service. We remember the poignancy of the deaths and the loss of certainty, while at the same time we celebrate our survival. The remaining uncertainty should motivate us and our leaders to apply with wisdom the lessons learned from September 11<sup>th</sup>. In particular, we must ensure that cycles of violence do not occur; rather, that we move along a trajectory of peace.

We should remember that anniversaries, though powerful, are semi-abstract constructs. It is conceivable that terrorists may exploit them, and attempt to strike later, when one's guard is down. So do not heave a sigh of relief until say, October 12<sup>th</sup>.

*Paul Valent is a writer and past president of the Australasian Society for Traumatic Stress Studies*

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