Looking Again for a Beautiful Cloudless Sky

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Like a trickle from a tiny spring, the faces and stories from the thousands and thousands buried under the collapsed World Trade Center still bubble up in the pages of the New York Times. Faces shimmering like light on the surface from this thick black and white press. Profiles of the victims, initially two, three, four pages every day. Then the torrent slowed, eventually one page, perhaps two pages on Sunday.

And each time I would frantically look, holding my breath before diving into this cold, calamitous ocean-like grief and disbelief—“please no”—sometimes not even conscious of the picked up pace of my beating heart and darting eyes. Would I recognize someone I knew?

It happened once in the first few days. The Boston Globe published the list of the passengers on the doomed planes, and there I saw the names of Jim and Mary Trentini, a lovely couple from my deacon parish. Schoolteachers, I think, as I go back almost 25 years; and I remember their daughter, Pam, pretty, athletic, a really nice kid. On that September morning with its beautiful cloudless sky they were off to visit their grandchildren in California carrying luggage for themselves and gifts for those grandchildren. I wonder, was it Pam they were visiting?

I knew two persons. And yet as I ache with grief and disbelief, how much more the pain for so many of you who knew so many individuals and families? Not to even begin to fathom the communities and parishes that lost scores of firefighters and police, of Pentagon workers, or airline attendants where faces shimmer not once on the newspaper page, but every morning at work, or on a walk down the block, or a drive down the street, or the sight of a child who lost mommy or daddy, or the wave of a neighbor who lost wife or husband?

For many of us the stories are depicted in those faces in The New York Times—almost all smiling, like a beautiful cloudless sky. Almost all young, very young, they were starting careers, going to school, building houses, falling in love. How many of those were engaged to be married last fall? How many were expectant fathers whose fatherless children would be born in the next month, three months,
seven months? How many were expectant mothers whose children would be born into eternal light without ever seeing the light of day?

A cloudless sky is blackened with horror unspeakable in thousands and thousands dead in the twinkling of an eye. We watched blue sky and yellow sun turn black cloud and red flame.

Then it was finally over. The stories had ended. The New York Times carried the announcement that the full list of stories is on their web page and that a book would be published in the near future. No more stories—we could move on.

But it wasn’t over. The turn of the morning page nearly a year later and there are those faces again. I thought they were done. I assumed they were done. I wanted them to be done. This is not over, and it will not be over.

How do we process this enormity of grief—not just for them, the immediate victims who lost loved ones—but for ourselves? Be, oh so careful, of projection, the problem is “out there.” We, individually and collectively, but first individually, are grieving and will be grieving for some time. Without attentiveness to our own reality, we will not be able to attend to and minister to those around us, not only in New York, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, but also in Chattanooga, Kansas City, and Seattle.

I remember in the final days of my supervisory training we had a crisis in the summer CPE program where two students left suddenly in a dramatic and emotionally charged atmosphere. We supervisors did all the appropriate interventions; we had an immediate debriefing, several follow-up group sessions, and time for individual process in supervision. Several weeks went by and we felt that we had weathered this storm.

The program director came into a supervisory group process and asked us supervisors how the students were doing with the grief and trauma of the past several weeks. The five of us went around and gave our assessment that things had passed and the issues dealt with. He listened attentively and when we were finished, he offered another view. He observed that all of the students were still acting out and that the grief was far from over. He went around to each of us, named our student and the behaviors that he had observed which brought him to this conclusion. He was right; we thought it was finally over, when in fact the acute trauma may have been dealt with, but people were still in grief and disbelief.

How do we process this enormity of grief as we approach this one-
year mark?

First, we need to work with the realization of the enormity of the September 11 attack on all of us. It parallels, and exceeds, the enormity of the impact of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. If you were old enough at the time you know exactly where you were and what you were doing when you heard the news that darkened our lives so unexpectedly. It was as if we were frozen in a still shot, like the pictures from the motorcade, at 1:57 that November afternoon.

The grief went on for years. A secure and stable early-sixties erupted into a chaotic and unstable late-sixties in the wake of a country whose young and promising leader was gunned down on an earlier beautiful, cloudless day. Not only did we lose a leader, we lost a world.

Not only did we lose so many people in the September 11 terrorist attacks, we too have lost a world.

This catastrophe has affected our every aspect of living: flying in planes, driving over bridges, walking in malls, going up elevators in buildings, going down stairs into subways. How aware are we of the picked-up pace of our beating hearts and darting eyes?

This catastrophe has affected our every aspect of believing: struggling with good and evil, seeing the fragility of the human life, appreciating the gifts around us, especially family and friends, anguishing over gospel values—loving our enemies, welcoming the stranger, protecting the innocent. How aware are we of the picked-up pace of these new challenges to our faith and values?

These dynamics are happening and will continue to happen in every aspect of our lives—in our homes, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods, in our places of worship, even within our professional organizations. How does this underlying anxiety manifest itself in all the interactions in our daily lives? Am I angrier at times? Am I restless? Am I less willing to be engaged? Am I frightened? Does a sadness seep into my being at the most unexpected of times?

Like an oil spill on the water, or garbage washed up on our shore, the pain of September 11 spreads its toxic horror into our beings with little or no consciousness at times. It’s just there. At other times we may be very conscious, such as when hearing the voices of the firefighters echoing a death knell in a stairwell some six months after.

Alongside the enormity of the grief—individual and collective, mine
and ours, the citizen and the country—there beams an enormity of good, or abbreviated in our lexicon, God. This awareness is the second way we can process this grief at this one-year mark.

Imagine, if you will, a powerful twin concept: standing alongside this enormity of grief—the resurgency of God. God is the ground on which we stand—and upon which towers fall and fields are scorched. God is the sky up to which we look—and against which human missiles pass and roaring flames rage. Our faith has God right in the middle. Our faith plants a cross in the ground and hangs a savior in the air. And both reveal a God become so human that we cannot but be divine.

Yes, our God knows the hearts of men and women, and for a year now, the broken, badly broken, hearts of all of us in this country of ours. Just like God has always known the badly broken hearts of women and men from other countries with a different ground and a different cityscape.

The enormity of God has been seen, and will continue to be seen, in the outpouring of love in stories no New York Times could ever run out of telling. And so much of that good—God—comes from the divine hanging between heaven and earth.

All the volunteers at ground zero, all the donations of monies, food, and clothing, all the messages in schoolchildren’s drawings, all the poetry and prayer in workers’ graffiti, all the lyrics and notes in musicians’ songs, all the searching for survivors, all the cleaning and removing of debris and recovering of remains, each has a story and a title sitting in a heart, and when ready, will be spoken and passed on.

That is the resurgency of our God.

So as we continue the long process of this grief, and still at times, disbelief, of evil writ large around us, let us know the resurgency of our God in a faith that is constantly changing the whole picture.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, in his classic work on the adventure of flying, Wind, Sand and Stars, tells of the anxiety and anticipation the night before his first flight as a pilot. He sits down with a veteran pilot who he says “exuded confidence the way a lamp gives off light.” They take out the maps for tomorrow’s journey and the veteran pilot, Guillaumet, begins to give him “a strange lesson in geography.” Instead of pointing out provinces, towns, rivers, and other tips learned from the air, he points out a grove of orange trees, a small farm, and the watchful eyes of the farmer and his wife, the shape of a meadow, the cut and turn of an unseen brook—unknown to the staid marking on
the stretched out maps.

The author concludes, “Little by little, under the lamp, the Spain of my map became a sort of fairyland. The crosses I marked to indicate safety zones and traps were buoys and beacons. I charted the farmer, the thirty sheep, the brook. And, exactly where she stood, I set a buoy to mark the shepherdess forgotten by the geographers.”

Our faith is a strange lesson in geography. When the reports of September 11 are compiled, the histories written, and the accounts given, there will be markings about how this country was routed that day and the changing of the maps henceforth. But that is only one account of history. A second account will be beamed upward, is in fact already shining upward, in endless stories of goodness, or abbreviated in our lexicon, endless stories of God. That account is salvation history.

While anxiety and fear unravel our living and believing in the enormity of our grief, anticipation and hope hold us together in a faith that exudes confidence in the resurgency of our God. □