

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Reflections 9/11

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My wife and I, and sometimes I alone, had a weekly habit of a Saturday outing — take a subway to 14th Street, go west and walk along the Hudson River down past the World Trade Center, around the tip of Manhattan, up the East River past the South Street Seaport, up into China Town, then on to the bus or subway to return home. There were many reasons we enjoyed this routine. There were many reasons it was important. It is very difficult to find a certain amount of peace and solitude in New York City, especially if one is walking. The competition for walking space on most major avenues and streets is fierce, and with skyscraper-viewing tourists to contend with, it is all one can do to get to where one is going, let alone contemplate. So, to find a “right” place is to find Mecca. This Saturday route was just that. It was a time for me, prior to preaching or officiating the next day, to get a boost for my spiritual life; to get my sermon in line in my mind, as I do not use notes in preaching. Walking has always enhanced a deeper connection to my spiritual life, especially when walking in a place made beautiful by nature or man. Our Saturday walk did just that. The magnificence of the Hudson River as it flows down to the Upper Bay is unsurpassed; we sometimes saw sailboats of all sizes gliding about. The plantings at Battery Park were some of the best city park greenery that I have ever seen. The displays in spring and summer were gorgeous. And then we would be at the World Trade Center. We would invariably stop in the glass-covered Winter Garden at the Financial Center courtyard, with its giant royal palms, to view the sights. The tourists, the palms, the shows, and having lunch all occupied us for some time. The orchid show in the court and bridge way was always breathtaking. Then we would continue our walk. Past the Holocaust Museum, our eyes were focused on the Great Lady, the Statue of Liberty, centrally perched in the Upper Bay. Here we would see the Staten Island Ferry making its journey back and forth between the tip of Manhattan and Staten Island. We would walk along the East River to the South Street Seaport, with its array of old sailing and lighthouse ships, and its dock with stores and shops that are always chock-full of tourists. Then we would walk on to China Town, with its oriental architecture and the feeling of being in a Chinese city. Then home.

If you noticed, I have used the past tense in the above. That was all prior to September 11, 2001. We have not made that walk since we returned from Cape Cod at the end of September.

I am a Manhattanite born and bred. Except for some time spent in the Army and a couple of years in Queens, my life has been lived in “The City.” Even those in the outer boroughs (Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island) consider Manhattan “The City.” When they say they are going to “The City,” they mean Manhattan. There is a difference about “The City” that is often off-putting to others in the country and the other boroughs. People who live in Manhattan love it. Yet, at times, it seems unbearable. Anytime millions of people crowd into a small space, grating

is bound to occur. The cell phone user who must call someone on the bus using a “cell yell” voice to say that he or she is at such and such a street and will be home in five minutes. The helicopter that must hover above your street at 6:00 AM. The neighbor who is dancing on your ceiling . . . in spite of these things, I love it. However, something has changed for me, and I expect for most of us in “The City” after September 11th. I can’t quite figure out what it is for me, but I believe my reluctance, inability, or whatever it is that prevents me from taking that wonderful walk that was so much a part of my life is at the center of it all.

I was on Cape Cod when I heard of the attack on the World Trade Center. I had just finished nine holes of golf at about 10:00 AM and was headed to my car to return home. My golf partner had gone into the clubhouse before returning to his car and told me that a plane had flown into the Trade Center. At first I thought it was a joke, but he insisted that it was true. I rode home, turned on the TV, and saw the gruesome truth. My feelings and thoughts were a jumble of disbelief, grief and astonishment, along with a myriad of other non-distinguishable things popping in and out of my mind. I did and do feel violated just as one who has their home broken into and partially destroyed. I found that it was not beneficial for me to talk about it. I suppose I needed time for the magnitude of it all to seep into my being. However, I found myself in my walks on the beach for the next week or more repeating Osama bin Laden’s name over and over, as if it were some sort of mantra. There was no hate or anger involved, just a steady repetition. I like to believe it was my way of praying for this person who could commit such a monstrous act. Yet I cannot be sure.

At home several weeks later, my son reminded us that when I had taken him to the World Trade Center some twenty years ago when he was very young, I had told him how the Trade Center was architecturally horrible, and that the top of the Empire State Building was the place to see the city. I expect I still feel the same, but that is not the point. Something happened to me and to countless numbers of others with the destruction of those buildings. What happened to me is minor compared to those who lost loved ones in that disaster. Yet, it is a personal loss that I cannot explain totally or expect ever to come to grips with. A part of my life died, perhaps in a way that seems of little consequence in comparison to others’ losses. Still, a part of my life has stopped and I have not yet found its replacement.

I know that life is, in part, participating in death. When that death occurs “naturally,” it can almost be accepted as a part of life. When it occurs catastrophically, we are numbed beyond comprehension. September 11th was that kind of happening. My spiritual life was damaged dramatically, yet it was not destroyed. In fact, it has grown and deepened. The scar remains; the Spirit guides, consoles, and heals. It is a new beginning.



The Rev. Joseph Zorawick retired in 1996 as rector of Christ and St. Stephen’s in New York City and is currently Priest Associate at the Church of the Epiphany in NYC. Theatre and travel are some favorite hobbies. In the summer at Cape Cod, he gardens and “plays at golf.”