

Ten Years After 9/11

Ten Years After 9/11: What Are We Remembering?

by Charles Strohmer

Buckle up. The tenth anniversary of 9/11 is upon us, and we are about to be inundated with tributes and memorials from across the political and religious spectrum. The capper will be at Ground Zero on September 11, where a solemn and stately affair with Presidents Obama and Bush and Mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg will be held with families of the victims.

But what will we be remembering? Will it be humble remembering of our days of personal and collective grief, suffering, tears, and loss? Or will it be faux remembering?

The latter, I predict, will be widespread. And why not? Many of our thought leaders, politicians, and well-paid ideologues with powerful commercial interests have gotten very rich by making faux remembering of 9/11 normative in America. With their vested interests, huge and loyal followings, and no end of profit from them, no way they are going to stop trading on 9/11 now. Their towers reach to the sky. Think they are going to unbuild? No way. Too costly.

Instead of humble remembering of 9/11, these voices want us to remember what has followed 9/11, such as the war on terrorism or the ongoing threat from the Taliban and al Qaeda. Or they want us to remember how far we've come. Iraq has become democratic, U.S. troops are being withdrawn from Afghanistan, bin Laden is dead.

Others, the majority, trade on 9/11 by blaming everyone else for America's problems. Never ever man up (ahem, ladies, that includes you) to any onus whatsoever in the sins latent in the collective ills of America. Play the blame game. Personal confession and repentance is forbidden. Hubris is the daily bread.

What, then, are we remembering? Even of the Ground Zero ceremony this year, one wants to ask, Will it be the incense of humble remembering that rises from the rhetoric? Or whiffs of "America first and last in the world"?

I'm sure the families of the victims will humbly remember what the incendiary conduct of nineteen men aboard four aircraft cost them. But here's what's disturbing. America has been in one crisis or another since September 11, 2001, the dark clouds have yet to recede, and we have all seeded these clouds in one way or another. The tenth anniversary of 9/11 offers us a rare opportunity for humble remembering, the kind that just could get the attention of the God who parts clouds and comes down with grace. There's no guarantee that our humble remembering will bring help from above. But it might.

I know what I will be remembering. I was six miles above the Atlantic flying uneventfully from London to Atlanta through piercingly blue heavens, a rare kind of sky that pilots call severe clear. We were diverted to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and it was immediately apparent on the ground that nothing was clear at all. Powerful jet engines traveling five hundred miles carrying hundred of passengers had disappeared with a burr into the Twin Towers and never came out. How do you account for that? We were in the throes of a profound national worldview crisis that no one understood or had answers for. But something more profound also occurred those days. Remember?

Rudely pulled from routine, each of us that day was thrust against our wills as if into some nightmare experience of whitewater kayaking. We were suddenly and unimaginably alone with our thoughts, hurtling down-river, spray flying in our faces, wrestling the paddle to dodge boulders, find the true current, and remain upright. Identifiable shoreline receded and we entered regions unknown. Still the river plunged us along. Wherever each of us finally struck land, no one was sure where the water had hurled them. Where do I, we, go from here?

The thing about rivers is that they leave no footprints. But they do leave a trail, a watery trail. When words were inadequate, when war was imminent, when uniting to "Go shopping" seemed like madness, our tears led us to the rendezvous point that united us from wherever we had landed. This is not to credit the perpetrators of what Kanan Makiya called apocalyptic acts of fury. It is to remember the grace of the suffering God who visits nations in their affliction.

This is what we need to remember?but it has been stolen from us by the peddlers of faux remembering.

Find a way with family or friends to remember the water. Powerful movies like Faith & Doubt at Ground Zero, or 9/11: The Filmmakers' Commemorative Edition, or Stranded Yanks: A Diary Between Friends will create a meditative atmosphere for humble remembering. We may then be able to actually see where our feet of clay have brought us since September 11, 2001, and by what means, and then pray to find wiser ways ahead domestically and internationally.

We suffered, we cried, we received grace, we were united as a people, but then through foolish means we squandered the grace. We confessed that our priorities would change, but then we got back to normal. I know, I know. The mere suggestion today of humble remembering sounds maudlin and cheesy. But maybe that's our problem. We see no reason to cry. Hubris never sees anything wrong with itself, is never willing to bow, always interprets the clouds as the sun.

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