



Steve Jacobsen: Remembering 9/11, and the Lessons We Lost and Found

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By Steve Jacobsen, Hospice of Santa Barbara

While our shared loss remains 10 years after a horrific national tragedy, in time wisdom will emerge



When I hear the phrase “9/11” I experience it not so much as a thought but something like a 10-year-old electric shock that still carries its charge deep within my bones. As someone working in the hospice profession, I want to reflect on what that charged memory teaches me about life. People who experience personal tragedies may never get over the emptiness and heaviness of what occurred, yet in time, valuable insights can emerge that are worth preserving. So as we come to this 10-year anniversary, I am thinking of it in terms of “lost and found” — what did we lose in the experience of [9/11](#), and what did we find?

Like so many Americans, I remember what I was doing on that morning and can replay it like a documentary movie. I was home waiting for carpet to be installed. I heard on the radio an unusual news bulletin about an airplane crashing into a New York building. I casually turned on the television. In the minutes and hours that followed, we all witnessed the unimaginable sequence of events — the crashing of the second plane, the report of the hijacked [Flight 93](#), a plane crashing into the [Pentagon](#), the collapse of the first Twin Tower and then the second. We saw in real time the fire and smoke; we witnessed the tearing of a hole in the New York skyline; from a primal place within us we recoiled when we realized that the lives of hundreds of innocent people had just ended.

In a few hours, these visual and visceral experiences produced a series of emotional reactions: shock, disbelief, confusion, horror, despair and fear. Our rational minds began to frantically attempt to create some plausible sense of how these deep violations of our world, life and country could be occurring all at the same time. In the hours and days that followed, we were flooded with many more feelings: emptiness and helplessness; anger, outrage and a hunger of revenge; pride in the courage and determination of the rescue workers; and an aching instinct to reach out to the families of those who died.

As we come to the 10-year anniversary of 9/11, we know that its repercussions are still being seen around the world, from the wars we are fighting to the vigilance we encounter at every airport. But apart from these political aftershocks, what are the lessons? What did we as a people lose? And what did we find?

We can begin by remembering some of what we lost.

We lost nearly 3,000 people that day. That included 343 firefighters, 60 police officers and eight private emergency medical technicians and paramedics. The overwhelming majority of casualties were civilians, including nationals of more than 70 countries.

We lost the future contributions of each one of those 3,000 people. They were destined to be parents, spouses, children, citizens and members of the global community. Those futures were erased.

We lost a sense of national invulnerability. We had never seen such a violation of our national security. We had never seen so many civilians killed without warning by a calculating group of determined men who despised our country. While we continue to do all we can to prevent something like this from happening again, there is this lingering thought: If 9/11 could so take by surprise, isn't it conceivable that some other horror could break upon us without warning?

We lost any blind trust that technology alone could protect us from grievous harm. We had by far the most sophisticated defense forces the world has ever seen, with all the latest technology. But the hijackers outwitted those high-tech systems and inflicted great pain on us as a nation.

We lost our innocence. There is a form of moral reasoning in us that would tell us being the most powerful and most admired country in the world will protect us from tragedy. If we believed it before 9/11, it became hard to believe that anymore.

The list of what we lost can continue to grow. But we can also create a list of what we found.

We found as a people the binding experience of grief. What we as a nation experienced together after 9/11 is experienced every day as individual people lose loved ones in sudden and tragic deaths. They lose a unique human being. They lose not only the present day with their loved one but a shared future. They lose any sense of invulnerability to calamity they may have had. If they had trusted that modern medical technology can cure every ill, that, too, can be lost. They also lose innocence.

Yet while they often feel totally isolated and alone, they are in fact stepping into a profoundly shared human experience. In the Jewish faith, a traditional phrase one offers to a bereaved person is: "May God comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." (Some translations include the words "the company of mourners.") The implication is that we are not alone, but are in a "company." None of us want to be part of that "company of mourners." But if we live long enough and love at all, we will find ourselves in that very community of the bereaved. In 9/11, we found the common human bond of sorrow and grief.

We found that there is, beneath all of our differences, a common strength in remembrance. We first saw that as people all over the world gathered in vigils to let America know they acknowledged our loss and sorrow. We saw it as members from both parties of [Congress](#) gathered to sing "God Bless America" on the Capitol steps. Beneath the partisanship emerged what [Abraham Lincoln](#) called the "better angels of our nature,"

affirming that in times of crisis we can come together to affirm the deepest good. We seem to become obsessed with vilifying people we don't agree with, but then tragedy intrudes and our passion seems trite. If only for a few days, we found in the aftermath of unconscionable horror there is something good that can unite us.

We also found the timeless lessons that we should treat each day as a gift, and that what is most important is our relationships. There were a series of messages conveyed that day from people who sensed that death was very near. Those cell phone calls to family members had a common theme: "I love you." In hospice work, we recognize that phrase as one of the most powerful messages we can ever convey to someone else. The healing power of saying "I love you" (like saying "I forgive you," "Please forgive me," "Thank you" and "I'm proud of you") can last a lifetime.

We all plan to live a full life, and the chances of any of us being caught in a nightmare like 9/11 are remote. But still, our lives are limited. We have no guarantee we will have ample time to say the simple and most important words. Tragedies and deaths remind us to not wait to say to others what we want them to hear.

In tragedies, we experience great loss. In the aftermath, we may learn lessons great and small. This wisdom may come at too great a cost — most of the people I have known who have become wiser following a loss would gladly give up that wisdom in exchange for having their loved one back. But the loss remains, and the wisdom, in time, emerges.

9/11 was a horrible national tragedy filled with loss. But in it we can find some lessons that can help us as individuals and as a nation live with a wisdom we did not have before. We are bound together in grief. We share a common goodness. Each day is a gift, and what matters most is the people we love — and telling them so when we have life and breath.

— *Steve Jacobsen is executive director of [Hospice of Santa Barbara](#). Call Hospice of Santa Barbara at 805.563.8820 for a schedule of adult and children's groups, or to make a donation. Connect with [Hospice of Santa Barbara on Facebook](#).*

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