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A time to honor the dead—and to embrace the living

BY DAVID WHITMAN

Hour upon hour, words simply failed. How could kamikaze jetliners attack both the towering World Trade Center and the mighty Pentagon? Inside the structures, an indescribable nightmare ensued. One minute, men and women were sipping coffee, reading their E-mails. The next, they were engulfed in a cataclysm of fire and falling walls. And the horror kept right on coming, in wave after nauseating wave. No one watching television could see or hear the police officers and firefighters trapped in the labyrinthine stairwells of the Trade Center as they stared up in disbelief when the tower above them began to crumble. Then there were the spouses, parents, and children waiting in dread by the phone, uncertain if loved ones were dead or alive. Mere words and pictures fail utterly to capture the grief of relatives wandering the streets near the crumpled towers with homemade fliers bearing images of their lost ones, begging for help in finding them. And how to describe the emotions of rescue workers plucking fingers, toes, ears from the rubble? None had ever seen anything like it. No one had. Ever.

Despite the inadequacy of language at such a shattering moment, Americans talked and talked, struggling to make sense of the carnage. They jammed phone lines, spoke to neighbors over backyard fences, sent E-mails, gathered around televisions in bars. They organized prayer vigils, grabbed coworkers to commiserate over lunch. In part, they used words to try to make sense of the senseless. Yet people also talked because of an unquenchable impulse to remember, to honor the dead.

Heroic tales. This national wake has been a time for storytelling, for recounting tales of victims that a friend of a friend knew, of lucky survivors, and plucky heroes. The pages that follow tell some of those stories. Many, of course, remain unknown yet. Some, certainly, will never be known. The stories that can be told now range from the heartbreaking to the harrowing—such as the sad saga of Floyd Rasmussen, who stumbled around the Pentagon for hours after the attack, calling to his missing wife, "Here I am—come find me."

When a nation is prosperous and at peace, as America has been for nearly a decade, its heroes are few. Citizens then tend to study the clay feet of leaders, be they Bill Clinton or Newt Gingrich. But a country in duress, as Attorney General John Ashcroft said last week, "calls on us . . . to be at our best." Thankfully, many Americans responded to the terrorist attacks with quiet courage, showing, once more, that ordinary citizens can be heroes. The firefighters and cops who died helping people exit the World Trade Center towers made no such claims for themselves—they were just doing their jobs, one after another had said, just doing their duty. Other heroes, meanwhile, stepped forth to show that how a life is lived can be more important than life itself. Lyzbeth Glick's husband, Jeremy, called on his cellphone to tell her that he and several other passengers were ready to fight the knife-wielding hijackers on United Airlines Flight 93 shortly before it crashed near Shanksville, Pa. "He was a hero for what he did," she told the *New York Times*. "But he was a hero for me because he told me not to be sad and to take care of our [12-week-old] daughter, and he said whatever happened he would be OK with any choices I make."

F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous dictum—"Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy"—may never have been more apt than last week. Fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers alike aired their unbearable anguish and anger, prompting even jaded news anchors to tear up. Thirteen-year-old Cameron Buchanan, whose brother, Brandon Buchanan, age 24, worked on the 104th floor of the World Trade Center's north tower, was among the legion of people overpowered by a sense of loss. Two days after the attack, Cameron called his brother's cellphone, which was still taking messages. "He just wanted to talk to him one last time," says Ronald Buchanan, father of Brandon, Cameron, and their two sisters. "He left a message saying he was his hero, and he wanted to grow up just like him."

The terrorists wanted their thousands of victims to be anonymous statistics. But family members refused to let that happen. Stories tumbled out last week. Playful David Retik, 33, a partner in a Boston-based venture-capital firm, dragged out his inflatable trampoline in Needham, Mass., for block parties. Bookish Rodney Dickens, an 11-year-old honors student raised by a single mom in Washington, D.C., was on his first plane ride—having earned the chance to take a marine biology field

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trip to the Channel Islands off California sponsored by the National Geographic Society. And then there was bighearted Rev. Mychal Judge, who rushed down to the World Trade Center after the attack, only to die when debris fell on him while he was giving a firefighter last rites. Steven Morello Jr., whose father worked on the 93rd floor for Marsh & McLennan, says his dad "wasn't a symbol of destructive capitalism—this was a loving, caring human being who was taking care of his family."

Fleeing a fireball. The survivors and the fatalities of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks weren't separated by much more than a few floors and sheer luck. Floyd Rasmussen worked at the Pentagon, too, just two floors and one corridor away from his wife. Army Lt. Col. Robert Grunewald of Alexandria, Va., who crawled out of the Pentagon after a fireball blasted through the wall of his office, says, "The good Lord was on my side.... When I got out I was happy to be alive.... Now, I just feel disgusted. I am so saddened by the loss of life of my friends."

Those who literally survived the blasts will relive the awful assaults for years, perhaps wondering why they got a second chance. But in the broadest sense, America is now a nation of survivors, even if with a small *s*. The signs of a collective struggle to understand last week's attacks, to do something to help, popped up everywhere. Thousands of people lined up to donate blood and money in cities around the country. Countless New Yorkers showed up to hand out water and food to rescue workers. Others staffed volunteer bucket brigades to remove debris from the demolished buildings. When officials at Washington Hospital Center started to run low on human tissue for burn victims from the Pentagon attack after air traffic was halted, a group of men from a Dallas hospital piled into a car with an ice chest containing human skin and drove overnight to Washington.

Like a hanging, the threat of a terrorist attack, to paraphrase Samuel Johnson, concentrates the mind wonderfully. The mundane concerns about work and family that dog daily life receded last week. Suddenly the squabble with a spouse, the annoyance at a coworker or neighbor, no longer seem to matter. In the face of tragedy, whining about one's lot is downright embarrassing. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that when the World Trade Center towers crumbled, they took America's excessive sense of complacency and entitlement with them. It is hard to imagine that Americans will ever again dismiss the danger of terrorism—or the blessings of living in a prosperous, democratic nation.

The sorting out, though, is far from over—little more than the first wave of shock and sadness has now faded. It may not last, but, for the first time in many years, Americans of all stripes are acting on a collective urge to remain connected. By the millions last week, they bought and hung out flags, lit candles, and left flowers for the dead. And then they prayed to a higher power, in the hope that God could explain why innocent people had to die. ●

With Ben Wildavsky, Mary Brophy Marcus, and Jeff Howe

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