

# *The Service on the Green*

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## **A Commemoration of September 11th**

Years ago, the poet Theodore Roethke wrote: "In a dark time, the eye begins to see." Last year, amid some of the most beautiful days fall can bring, we watched some of the darkest hours play themselves out. A blue sky and crisp air were the backdrop for horror and loss that was, for many of us, unparalleled in our lifetimes.

In the weeks that followed, we each lived a lifetime. We saw all that was terrifying and beautiful pass before our eyes. We saw unprecedented cruelty and spontaneous generosity, cowardice and stark courage. We were overwhelmed by waves of anger and wellsprings of thanksgiving. This was an event for which nothing could have prepared us. The kind it can take a lifetime to leave behind.

And so we have struggled to make sense of what happened to us.

There are some who would say that God gives us trials to face, so that we may learn wisdom and compassion; that God gives horror its day so that we may grow wise and strong. I can see where that might offer solace, but I don't agree. I don't believe in God as some cruel gift-giver who wraps meaning in pain. I do believe, however, in a God who walks with us as we seek to find the remains of hope and the embers of wisdom in the ashes of loss. And this we have done.

In dark times, indeed, sometimes the eye begins to see.

What we found or came to see more clearly in the days since September 11th, 2001, is as varied as we ourselves are. Some of us found in the ashes a reminder of the importance of family; for others, the ordeal brought a sharp awakening to their own vulnerability; and for still others, what was salvaged was the simple determination to go on.

There were some things, however, I think we all found in the ash and debris.

For one, I think we found in the rubble the difference between heroes and celebrities. We were reminded of a long-forgotten truth -- that heroes are not necessarily larger than life. That they can be like the man I saw driving an old, battered truck with Kentucky plates, headed toward the Holland Tunnel, his truck full of bottled water and a worn but determined look on his face. Everywhere we saw everyday people doing what they could for an embattled city or nation. Everywhere we saw people like this man and like you and me, doing what we could to make a difference.

Perhaps we did so because of something else we found in this rubble. In the tragic loss of lives, we saw a stark reminder of two of life's immutable truths: namely, the reality of birth and death, and the uncertainty of what lies in between. We were reminded of the fragility of life and the need, therefore, to make each precious day matter. We were reminded that the choices we make matter, and many of us found in that a renewed commitment to live a life worth dying for.

I think many of us found in the ashes of September 11th the treasure of community. We gathered in places like this, in our homes, or our houses of worship; we gathered in record numbers wherever we could, in makeshift chapels in the park or by the office water cooler. And we did so just to be together. We did so because we realized we needed to be together. We needed one another. If we were to grieve, we needed one another. In our struggle to make sense of what was happening to us, we needed one another. We needed one another if we were to find the courage to move on and reclaim our faith in this world. Moreover, having seen the worst that humanity could do, we needed to be in the company of good men and women who were also striving to answer fear with courage and to respond to hate with generous and loving hearts. If we were to heal, we needed one another.

Of course, no era in human history has been without a chapter in which people have confronted the reality of moral evil. For all our capacity for good, we human beings have a shadow side that can destroy all that we have created. And so we have faced the same question that has been faced by countless others before us: whether we will be broken by evil or ennoble ourselves in the face of it.

By returning vengeance for vengeance, shedding blood as our enemy has done, we make ourselves like him, and in so doing, lay a posthumous victory at his feet. However, if we are able to hold true to what we believe and value -- if we instill mercy in our justice, protect our beloved liberties rather than surrender them, resurrect goodness where we can -- then we will have made it through this crucible with dignity and soul intact. This is the challenge we still face.

Like all of you, I still feel a great deal of confusion and a deep despair about what happened last year on this day. But I am also feeling an obligation to take from the rubble of these days something worth saving. What I have found are some treasures of the heart and a clarity of purpose that I will not forget, though I would gladly trade all of it for an average day one September 11th ago.

What I have found so far is the determination to be good. A reminder that there are everyday heroes who stand in the wings ready to heal the world, and that we can count ourselves among them. And a recommitment to be part of a community, one that lives a faith in a world of good even and especially in the face of destruction, cruelty and ignorance.

The poet Adrienne Rich wrote:

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
So much has been destroyed.  
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.*

God bless us all. May healing and wholeness be ours. Amen.