

Twenty-five years ago this morning looked a lot like today here in the northeast. Bright. Blue. A few fluffy clouds floating harmlessly above us. At 8:50am I came through the side door of the rectory at Sacred Heart Church in Lynn, Massachusetts, heading over to church for a 9:00am funeral Mass.

Immediately outside the door on a ladder a workman was on a ladder repairing a parish alarm system. We greeted one another and I remarked how beautiful was the day. He agreed and then added, "Did you hear about the plane hitting the World Trade Center?" I stopped and turned, "No, I hadn't heard. When?" "Just a few minutes ago. Crazy!" It was my turn to agree, then to turn toward the church.

As I walked on I inwardly translated the news I had just heard into a tale of a small private commuter plane taking off from Logan at Boston, losing control, and striking Boston's World Trade Center, just across the harbor from the airport, a long single-story structure. Why did I picture it this way? Perhaps because I had until then lived in a world where, while bad things happened, they were not often the worst possibility that imagination could picture.

Minutes later in the sacristy just before we entered the church to pray for the dead, the funeral director told me what actually had occurred as a jet hit one of the Trade Center towers in Manhattan. I entered the body of the church wondering, and troubled. We had not even proceeded up the middle aisle before the second plane struck the second tower. None of this there in prayer knew it. There in that beautiful and sacred space we offered Christ's Body and Blood for the deceased. She was one of two sisters who had lived all their fairly long lives together just a few blocks from their church. They had seen the Great Depression, known World War II's massive story and the joy of its end. They had wept at the assassination of President Kennedy. They had slept and risen day after day through decades of life. But just one of them had lived to witness something she had never seen before: an attack of scale on the continental United States.

By the time we formed the procession toward the cemetery to lay to rest the one sister who was spared this moment, a third plane had crashed directly into the Pentagon in Washington DC. Not long before I returned from the cemetery and entered the kitchen door of the rectory, Flight 93 plowed into an empty field at Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The south tower of the twins collapsed to the ground. And as I entered the kitchen the

north tower met the same fate. In that room all who worked for the church were gathered around a tiny old TV on top of the refrigerator which I had never seen turned on before. All were engulfed in tears, and speechless.

Those of us who were living then and old enough to understand have our own stories of that moment a quarter century ago. We are telling those stories today. And it well may be that we are weeping again. Most of those who were around that TV in our rectory kitchen have since gone home to the Lord. From that moment, they never again lived in the world we had known as I woke and prepared that morning to head downstairs and to open the door and meet the alarm man. He was fixing an alarm that was malfunctioning. In that, there may be an image for that moment, and perhaps for all the time since.

The next day, September 12th, as many have said, may have been our best in a very long time. There was unity. There was compassion. There was openness. There was in a real sense what Zen teachers have called *shosin*. Beginner's mind. Like a newborn infant seeing a human face for the first time. We were shocked into a massive reset of the value of every person and of every moment.

It didn't last. We turned as nation and world quickly to our usual fallbacks. Violence in response to violence. Self-righteousness in response to self-righteousness. Revenge in response to pain. The end of dialogue, if ever it had existed. For those born on and after September 13, 2001 there has never been a real moment of peace. Through their entire lives, our way of being has leaned to war. And growing from that root, our conversation has leaned more and more to argument. Our political life has leaned to distrust and to naming the opposition (from whatever side) as untrustworthy, unAmerican, enemies. This great nation of ongoing immigration since the Mayflower has moved from a long heritage of mistreating the original Americans to mistreating and dehumanizing all those who look to this land, from across distant mountains and seas, as the land of hope.

The axis of our world shifted on the bright morning of September 11, 2001. From that morning to this anniversary date, we have failed to restore our balance.

The evening of that darkened day we opened the church at Sacred Heart. I do not know how many came. Counting them didn't matter. Welcoming them, embracing them, listening to them, praying with them, calling upon God in desperate faithful song with them. That counted.

At the end of our time together that night, some of us went to the church bell present in the front yard of the rectory as a loving memorial to nearby Saint Jean Baptiste Parish, which had closed its doors. The number of those who had died were unknown at that hour. But we rang the bell for all of them. We tolled the bell there by hand until human hands and arms could do no more. It was the beginning of our mourning, of our crying out to God for those who had died and for those whose hearts were incinerated with agony that evening.

We remember all that on this day. And so much more.

We who still live carry a question on our shoulders. Together we carry it. Who, ultimately, will we be? Have we become an unbreakable and unmovable stone statue, a replica of the anger and destruction that has been born out of 9/11's anger and destruction?

Or can we can still live and move and become something truer? Something made in the image of God who gives life, who heals, who makes to live what was not alive?

Time will not tell. We will.

God have mercy on those who chose violence,
on those whom violence killed,
on those whom violence converted to its pain.
God have mercy on these beloved United States
and on this treasured world.