

Pandora's Box: Reflections on 9/11

Excerpts from Journal Entries in 2001 and 2002

I am still shaking - I understand there are fighter jets patrolling the skies over Texas; much of downtown Houston and Dallas have been evacuated. There's a "suspicious looking trailer or vehicle" being flanked by police cars on the South Loop, which is closed at the moment to regular traffic (what the hell is up with THAT?) and HISD schools closed early. We're a good distance from downtown, but J.J. is still at the Galleria, too close to the Williams Tower for me to feel happy.

I want to go get my babies and hold them close; I'm torn, though - school's in session and life goes on, so maybe the normal routine needs to go on. We were told to leave at our convenience, to be home with our families.

Count me among the royally pissed - in between stunned, appalled, and in shock. Life MUST go on as usual, but even that thought just seems so surreal right now.

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I can't think of a time when I've been eager to see our country go to war. It scares me that I am feeling eager for it now. But if a handful of "criminals" are brought to "justice" in our courts, it will be a pyrrhic victory, at best. Yes, we'll show that we can be merciful (even if they get the death penalty - at least their innocent civilians will be safe), and yet they will thumb their noses at us (already, they are doing so in the streets of Palestine and elsewhere - dancing, celebrating, passing out candy) and feel free to strike again. I have to admit that I would be beyond disappointed if we were to "turn the other cheek."

Our rage, if unsatisfied, will turn inward - against middle-easterners and others living HERE who are just as appalled by the atrocities committed yesterday as the rest of us. I think there's a growing need for vengeance that will only grow more terrible and less discriminating as the days go by.

If someone killed my child, I would want them dead. If anyone tried to stand between me and vengeance, I would want them dead. I think there are a lot of people feeling that way about their families, loved ones, friends in NYC and Washington - as well as for the symbols of our country and our way of life.

I can only hope that whatever actions our government and military take in retaliation, they do swiftly and thoroughly so as to ward off any threat of counterstrikes, but with the absolute certainty that they are attacking the RIGHT targets. I think that those who have protected or given safe harbor to terrorists in the past should have every reason to sleep with one eye open in the coming days and weeks.

I know now how my grandmother used to feel when she'd say, "I've lived too long." I feel sorriest for those who remember - or, most especially, fought in - WWII and prayed they'd never again see anything like it in their lifetimes.

This just breaks my heart.

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I told Katie about how they played "The Star Spangled Banner" at Buckingham Palace during the Changing of the Guard, and she wanted to high-five all of Great Britain. She doesn't fully grasp the significance of recent events - not too many 13 year olds have the historical or political understanding to do so - but she "got it" when I told her about this particular gesture of tribute and condolence. It only took about 2 seconds for it to really sink in. "The Star-Spangled Banner?!" her mouth kind of fell open and she grinned from ear to ear.

In the past, when tragedy has struck and nations have sent condolences, it has felt like "our leaders to their leaders" or "their leaders to our leaders." For the first time, the messages pouring out of Europe, Asia, even the Middle East have felt so personal. I thought I was doing okay - hadn't cried over this in over 24 hours, when the Queen of England did me in by playing the Star-Spangled Banner at the Changing of the Guard. A colleague from the Netherlands called me yesterday morning to express his condolences, but choked up and couldn't speak for nearly a minute. He described the three minutes of silence observed all over Europe, which we were later shown video clips of on the news.

So much good from so much evil. Never in my life have I seen such a surge of patriotism and unity in this country. Never have I seen strangers, almost without exception, eager to reach out and touch one another - even if it's only with a look of sympathy or a touch on the hand. Generations talking together. Whole nations - not just their leaders and spokespersons, but their people - standing side by side in support of one another.

Of course there have been some ugly incidents; I fear they will grow more numerous the longer our terrible collective pain and rage go unavenged. I had a call yesterday from the mother of one of Katie's classmates. When I listened to her message on my answering machine, her voice sounded strained. My first thought was, "Oh, God, what's Katie done?"

As it turned out, what Katie had done was to stand up in defense of Muslims when another boy in her class burst out with a rowdy "Kill 'em all!" during some discussion of this week's events. Apparently, she stood up and told the boy "How DARE you?" then claimed that her father was Muslim. (He's not, but saying he is may actually be safer than saying he's Atheist, here in the buckle of the Bible Belt. I think I need to teach Katie the word "Humanist," as that's just likely to confuse others into silence.)

Like a large number of Americans, my own child - of half Persian descent herself - is ignorant of the distinctions between Muslim, Arab, Iranian, etc. - but at least she understands that all are not to blame for the heinous acts of a few. This woman had called me to tell me how very proud she was of Katie - how Katie had impressed and emboldened her own daughter to speak out against injustice - and, thinking we had ties to the Muslim community here, offered the support of "one flag-waving, patriotic American woman" if they found themselves taking abuse from anyone in the community. I was touched, and almost sorry I hadn't the means or connections to take her up on her offer!

Katie was sort of embarrassed about the whole thing, and said later that the boy is a good friend of hers and a generally nice person who, when called into the Principal's office for a chat, ended up hanging his head and saying, "I feel so STUPID." Of course Katie has now made herself something of an unwitting target, should any of her other classmates feel inclined to find themselves a human punching bag, but she did the right thing, and I'm proud of her for that.

On a more disturbing note, this woman who called me had been at the school when a Muslim woman wearing traditional head covering came to withdraw her son from the school, fearful for his safety. And then Katie told me that someone had taped a picture of Osama bin Laden to a 6th grade Pakistani girl's school desk, and had her in tears. I don't think they know who did it, and I understand that when they find out, that child may end up with more than a gentle reminder that "that's not nice."

Lord, what a world.

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Even the Spaminators are sending out things like pleas for support of NYC firemen and the Red Cross, giving phone numbers for information on those still missing. The few ads I've received this week seem garishly tacky - perhaps even accidental, as if someone forgot to turn off the automatic ad generator and will later say "Oh, God, we didn't mean it..."

No, this isn't just going to go away, and it isn't going to move quickly enough to suit any of us. I didn't vote for Bush, either, but how heartsick and afraid he must be. In a way, I'm glad that he isn't spewing the rhetoric we all want to hear. It would be so easy to sound like the callous war-mongerers the terrorists expect us to be, to respond as they surely would. The eyes and ears of the entire world are on Bush's every move, his every word. Every decision will be recorded in the history books, and I think there are NO perfect, absolutely right answers for him right now. We want our President to be an icon - to stand larger than life on the world stage and to have all the answers and eloquence of a movie hero - when the fact is, he's just a man. He has many men and women providing their advice and aid. I think we have to support him, whatever our disagreements in the past or future. United we stand, divided we fall.

I think our "Knight in Shining Armor" may be named Colin Powell. But it remains to be seen, and I think that in the coming days and weeks, we will see who our Knights are. Right now, my Knights in Shining Armor are the citizens of the world who send their messages of shared grief, support, condolences, and love - who keep our faith in humanity and the future alive

and burning bright. Ultimately the biggest battle comes from within - do we hold onto this moment of patriotism and world-wide unity, cherish and nurture it, keep it alive - or do we let it crumble in despair and anger, in our need to lash out at SOMEONE or SOMETHING?

I'm torn between wanting us to kick butt and kick it NOW, and wanting us to act prudently and slowly so as to assure our allies that what we do and what we ask them to do is the BEST and RIGHT solution. I am so restless I hurt. Last night, I could hardly sleep - even with the TV turned off. I felt as if my skin were a 50-gallon drum, its corrosive insides churning, eating away at raw metal. (I think it must've been a sort of systemic heartburn - I've never felt that sensation before.

I feel ill on a cellular level - I think of all the mundane things I need to take care of, and can't muster up the energy for any of them. I did get laundry done this weekend, but the house is still a mess. I'm thinking of taking a "mental health day" tomorrow, but not sure I'd accomplish as much as if I forced myself to get dressed and go to the office. I feel as if I've been crying for days, but in truth I've hardly shed a tear - and I think maybe what I need is a really GOOD, cathartic cry before I scream. I'd scream, but I'm afraid I would never stop.

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Ironically, the one person in the family who's always been pretty oblivious to the news - me - gets antsy when it's not on. Like I said the other day, it's like watching a snake - horrible, but better than not knowing where the snake IS. (I'm not taking all this well, either. I'm having real trouble with things like the president telling me to go back to work tomorrow - well, I've BEEN going to work throughout the last week, haven't I? - and get back to "normal." Part of me is saying "okay, fine, that makes sense" but another part is screaming "normal? how the hell do you do THAT?")

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I have been pretty depressed over the week's events - remember what I said earlier in the summer about a "sick, cosmic joke"? Seems that's what my life is turning into, though of course it's not. (Guess I really should get back to taking the Wellbutrin regularly - doesn't stop the craving for a cigarette, but it did seem to have some small positive effect on my mood.)

I'm having a little trouble with the concept of "normal" right now. I don't know which is worse - constant flood of horrible images on the news or the orchestrated banality of sitcoms as our president instructs us to get back to living and working our normal lives. Blech. Hand me a machine gun and point me toward bin Laden. I still say that if they sent the mothers of the world to fight, we'd kick butt, wipe their noses, cook 'em dinner, and let 'em eat if - if they could all come to the table and act civilized.

J.J.'s looking better; he even fixed dinner tonight (felt like the first time we'd had a real meal in a week - something other than quick and easy or take-out). He's still sleeping upright in the recliner, though.

"Cast Ashore" is at a standstill, because recent events seem to have given me a terminal case of writer's block. Fiction seems frivolous, and the thought of adding more rhetoric to the growing body of it on the "war on terrorism" just seems like more "blah blah blah"... my mind's churning with eloquent thoughts, but either they've been said and acknowledged, said and ignored, or unsaid and probably for the better.

I just want someone to DO something, the sooner the better. I've never liked "waiting for the other shoe to drop," and right now I feel like those two cartoon vultures - "Patience my ass, I wanna kill something!" Unlike so many who are feeling that way, though, I don't want us to do anything rash or indiscriminate, and I DO care deeply about the innocent people who are likely to be hurt no matter what we do. It breaks my heart to log onto CNN's message boards or chat room and see the IGNORANT, HATE-FILLED rants that go on there.

At the same time, I don't think I can take one more "Why can't we all just get along?" or "Don't you think that US foreign policy is to blame for what's happened?" And this whole "War on Terrorism" thing is starting to look and sound way too much like the "War on Crime" and the "War on Drugs" - dear God, if we can't do any better with this, let lightning strike me now.

I need sleep, but when it comes, it's hardly restful. I go outside for a smoke and risk encephalitis - the mosquitos make me feel like I'm deep in the Amazon or something. Sheesh. You know, there's an analogy - insects are God's creatures, too. And I feel bad every time I Raid some innocent critter to Kingdom Come, but not so bad I'd gladly put up with the ones that bite and spread disease instead. Raid - my weapon in my own backyard "holy war." (There are no "holy" wars - just man's wars. World peace would be a holy thing; it's so much harder to achieve and maintain, and probably as unknowable to humans as the Almighty Himself.)

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Can anyone believe that we should or would just "turn the other cheek"?

I think bin Laden should be named Islam's Public Enemy Number 1, for he has done more to harm the world's understanding and respect for Islam than anyone else - including the Ayatollah Khomeini or Saddam Hussein. Ignorant people are taking their frustrations out on middle-easterners and Muslims of all stripes, but if you consider the source of MOST of the acts of terrorism that have touched us in the past - and you look at last week's horrors - can you blame them, really? Where will it all end?

I am a mother tiger, and my cubs have been wounded. I should count myself lucky that we weren't at "ground zero," as they are calling it. And yet... My 13 year old goes to bed tonight with nightmarish warnings of the threat of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons - and she has convinced herself that we are "all going to die tomorrow." I grieve not only for the people who've died, and who will die, but for the likely death of a comfortable, safe, joyous future for our children. I think that in three days' time, I have given myself a bleeding ulcer. Stress and ibuprofen will do that to you. (Did I tell you were I work? Not the airline industry, but let's just say it was the big news around here on the Tuesday before 9/11.) And I don't even care that my stomach is on fire and feels as if it has knives in it, or that I can't keep anything down for more than 15 minutes - it's better than the pounding, nauseating headache that has lasted over a week now - the pain so bad I'm torn between banging my head against concrete, pounding out my frustrations on the keyboard, or ripping someone's head off over an ignorant, bigoted comment.

If I ruled the world, I would immediately make all hate crimes "acts of terrorism" and prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law. There is no such thing as "holy war." But there is certainly "right" and "wrong." Plenty of it on all sides to go around, so I'm in no mood to tolerate anything that sounds remotely like playing "blame the victim." To my knowledge, the US has never knowingly singled out large gatherings of civilians as targets in any country just to get attention for one of its pet causes.

I've shed surprisingly few tears, yet I feel as though I've been crying non-stop for weeks. All this talk of getting "back to normal" is such a farce - none of this is "normal," nor SHOULD it be.

Did I mention that I've had a really, really BAD year - even before 9/11?

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Funny aside on racism and ignorance - friend of the family, a very nice woman in her 50s? 60s? still sleeps in terror - she lives in Oklahoma, has lived there all her life, and truly believes Indians (er, 'scuse me - Native Americans) are going to come into her house in the dead of night and SCALP her. (Only at the Bingo tables, honey - only at the Bingo tables...)

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A coworker and I almost got into it late last week. She-who-will-remain-namless started in with the "Kill 'em all - flatten 'em to the ground" rhetoric, then started talking in favor of deporting anyone living here who was from the middle east...

I reminded her that I had reason to find that sort of talk repulsive and anti-American (she backtracked a little, but still argued for revoking visas and deporting students or others who were not US citizens). The killer statement was when she questioned whether or not I could really KNOW even my husband of 17 years (incidentally, I've KNOWN him more than half my life - we dated for two years, and more than a year before that, I was dating his roommate). I've known HER for about 6 1/2 years - we've become pretty good friends during that time, but she's always been a bit of a nutbucket.

She knew she'd gone too far. I held back on what I really wanted to say (though I almost blurted out "Just HOW many times did you watch 'Not Without My Daughter'?" - frankly I was just too shocked and hurt (she's met my husband and my children - what a totally idiotic thing to say, and I knew she meant everything she implied). She left, but came back later to apologize. I can be civil, but I can't offer absolution and I can't find it in my heart to socialize with her right now.

Today, she has lurked in the halls, missing no opportunity to ask "Are you okay?" She even asked me to go to lunch. She's not taking the hint. I don't want to be blunt - to hurt her back - but I really can't talk with her about anything but work without feeling strong revulsion. Talk about your evil energy - I don't think SHE is evil, or that I am, but we need to be apart. (This happened the same day Katie stood up for the Muslims in her school, and right about the same time. I can't remember which came first - I think the news about Katie. I may even have mentioned it to her; that may be what started the discussion in the first place.)

This isn't about world events, it's about FAMILY. MINE. This woman just provided sandpaper on which to sharpen Mama Tiger's claws...

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A week or so later...

Yesterday she came into my office and pointedly mentioned that the FBI is seeking native speakers of Arabic and Farsi. She asked outright if my husband had volunteered. (He doesn't speak a word of Arabic, and as for Farsi - well, frankly, it's been so long since he's had a long conversation in Farsi, he might not pass the "proficiency exam." I've seen him have trouble translating the names of various foods between his dad and me. I can't see him NOT trying to

help if asked, but I imagine he feels there are plenty of more qualified translators and interpreters available.)

What BUSINESS is it of hers? I just said "Duly noted," and went back to work. She asked if I wanted to have lunch some time next week. She's not clueless, but that's her problem - she's only got a clue and wants me to spell it out for her.

Grrrrrrrr.

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I think it's better to know what's in someone's mind and heart, even if it hurts. It's safer, for one thing. It's great that our President has made the official stand for tolerance and diversity, but people's feelings will not be swayed by his words now, if their minds and hearts were made up before or during this attack. Those images of the World Trade Center are so much more powerful when it comes to playing on fear and ignorance than anyone's WORDS right now. Can you imagine people who would attack Sikhs, only because their dress resembled that of bin Laden? Do you think such people would even listen to words that didn't confirm their world view or play on their fears? Do you think MLK made a huge dent in the sympathies of the KKK with his "I have a dream" speech? I have real hope only for the very young, or those who are willing to listen but have never been exposed to a world of ideas - a rare bird among adults.

Pandora's box is wide open - but I still have hope.