

9/11, BLOOD, AND THE MOSQUE

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In this narrative, the author reflects on the opportunity he had within his community to share cross-culturally and gain healing in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. For him, the experience was both instructive and powerful.

On September 11, 2001, I was sitting in a faculty meeting, approximately a ninety minute drive from Manhattan. A colleague who had left the meeting temporarily returned and announced that the World Trade Center Towers had been hit by airliners and had collapsed. My immediate reaction was one of denial and dissociation, feeling that not only could this not be true, but that I couldn't actually be experiencing this.

After a few minutes of feeling stunned, coupled with the disbelief that we continued the meeting, I left the meeting, went to the snack bar to see a television, and began to phone my daughter who lives in New York City and works in theater, at that point not far north of the World Trade Center. Her line was busy. I tried to call my wife. Her line was busy. Repeated tries of both numbers always got the same result. Were cell phone towers out of commission, or simply overloaded? Were my wife and daughter on the phone with each other? I had no way to know which, if any, of these possibilities was correct; I only knew I was greatly concerned and felt totally out of contact and unsure of what to do.

Ultimately, I was able to get through to my wife. In fact, she had been on the phone with our daughter whom she had awakened. It appeared our daughter did not have to be in the theater that day. As she and my wife spoke, she turned on the television to see what was happening – no picture. She didn't have cable and was at the mercy of signals from

transmission towers – towers that had been on top of the World Trade Center. Early on in their conversation, it clicked with our daughter that her boyfriend, who also works in theater, had gotten up early and taken the subway to work, also not far above the World Trade Center. She began to call his cell phone – no contact. After several hours of panic and repeated calls, she finally got a return call from him. He had been trapped in the subway under the river, midway between his Queens-to-Manhattan commute. He was safe, but shaken. He said he'd be home later, but not on the first couple of runs of the subway. He'd wait to make sure it was working safely before getting back on.

After hearing from my wife that our daughter was safe but that she was unsure of her boyfriend's status, I decided it was time to head for home, a two-hour drive. Knowing that my wife's brother would be concerned and that I would pass near his house on my way home, I decided to stop in and update him. After a short visit with him I continued home.

When I arrived home and checked in with my wife and sons, I felt immediately compelled to get out the American flag and hang it on its mount on a front porch post. I had been in the military during the Viet Nam era and felt a normal sense of patriotism, nothing more than the typical American, but had a need to hang the flag at that moment. It has hung in that place every day since. As did

many other Americans, my wife and I suddenly had flags in our car windows as well.

Within a few weeks of the tragedy, my wife had reason to be in Manhattan. She made a visit to Ground Zero with our daughter, signed one of the many banners hanging on the perimeter fences, and felt overwhelming emotion. She bought some items from street vendors that served to commemorate the tragedy, provide a small amount of financial support to the various funds that had been established, and showed support for those who died in the tragedy, especially those who died trying to save others. When she came home, she presented me with an FDNY baseball cap. The gift was appreciated, but it was only later that its full import finally dawned on me. Many years earlier while a Ph.D. student in New Jersey, I had the opportunity to work for the City of New York one summer. Each day I took the train from New Jersey to Grand Central Station, took a subway to the Grand Concourse in the South Bronx, and then walked to Roberto Clemente Middle School. I was part of a program the city had put in place to evaluate firefighters' suitability for promotion to the officer ranks. In the approximately twenty intervening years, I certainly forgot the names of all of the firefighters I interviewed and evaluated that summer, but the sense of connection I felt was powerfully reinforced by that simple gift. Just the possibility that some of those firefighters were involved in this tragedy and could have lost their lives caused a powerful response. What must it have been like for the loved ones of those who died?

Some weeks later my brother-in-law, my older son, and I also were able to get to Manhattan. We too made the Ground Zero pilgrimage with my daughter. It felt necessary to make that visit, to be in that space, and to feel that emotion. For me it was reminiscent of my visit to the Viet Nam War Memorial some years earlier. As part of my military duty, I made casualty notifications to loved ones of

Air Force personnel listed as killed, captured, or missing in Viet Nam. Years of memories of those families, as well as uncertainty as to the final status of some of those men, flooded me; but being in that space helped settle some of the feelings. I had some of that same sense at Ground Zero.

I felt a need to do something. I wasn't sure what that could be. At least I could discuss the tragedy with students in my classes, some of whom had lost someone in the World Trade Center. Along with some friends (a social worker and a psychiatrist), my wife and I volunteered to provide short-term counseling to workers at Ground Zero but were ultimately not called. I decided that as small a gesture as it might be, I'd donate blood. For many years I was a regular donor, having received my three-gallon pin for my last donation. For one reason or another, I hadn't donated in several years. I began to search for a blood drive in my home area or in one of the areas where I typically travel in Pennsylvania. For the next couple of weeks nothing came up that coincided with my schedule, and calls to the Red Cross told me that they were booked solid. Some days later I found a notice in my local small town newspaper for a blood drive that weekend, only ten minutes from my house.

The blood drive I was privileged to be part of was held in the local mosque. Although I live in a wonderful culturally diverse community, I had never given any thought to the possibility of there even being a mosque in the area. I knew where numerous churches, of many faiths, were. There's a very large Catholic church within walking distance of my house. I know the location of several synagogues in my area. Why had I never thought about or noticed a mosque? My lack of awareness is probably typical for the people in my community, but that didn't make it more acceptable for me.

As I drove to the mosque, I thought about why I had never seen it before. It was on a

side street in a part of town that I drive through but don't generally have occasion to stop in. What's more, the mosque seemed not to have originally been built for that purpose, but apparently took over an existing, somewhat nondescript building that wouldn't be recognized as being a mosque unless you happened to see the sign on its side. As I drove, I also thought about the symbolism of attending this particular blood drive. It was especially important for me to support a blood drive sponsored by the Muslim community.

I know that the perpetrators of the attacks on the World Trade Center were Muslim. I had faith that the great majority of Muslims, both in the United States and around the world, were not supportive of that action, that religious intolerance, as well as bigotry generally, thrives in the United States and elsewhere, and that American flags were prominently displayed in businesses in my area, including those owned by Muslims. Therefore, I felt a need to connect with some segment of the Muslim population in my own community, even if only on the most basic of levels. As I parked my car and walked into the mosque I had some misguided concern over how I might be received. Upon entering, I saw racks for shoes and placed mine there in deference to the place and the culture I was entering. From appearances, virtually all of the non-Red Cross people in the mosque were Muslim and had removed their shoes. The Red Cross personnel still had shoes on. Given my familiarity with the paperwork and process of blood donation, I paid little attention to those issues. Given my interest in human behavior and cultures, I paid significant attention to those issues.

It appeared that the great majority of the donors that day were Muslims, many of whom spoke no, or only broken, English. Unfortunately, it appeared the Red Cross workers had not been well prepared to deal with the religious, cultural, or language differences. I give full credit to the workers, both

paid and volunteer, but did observe some behaviors that can only be described as, at least, uninformed, or, at worst, stereotypically 'ugly American.' When language issues arose, some of the workers spoke louder and slower. Some asked me the significance of the building we were in, and why many, including me, had removed our shoes. There was some obvious frustration on part of the workers that can probably be attributed to the combined facts that they were trying to bridge a language barrier and at the same time were dealing with many first time donors who had no knowledge of the process. I certainly did not see evidence of any obvious judgments being made about the donors as people, only ignorance of their religion, language, and culture.

As I had the obligatory orange juice, pretzels, and donuts after getting up from my donor table, several people, obviously connected to the mosque, came by to thank me for contributing to their blood drive. One relatively younger man, who appeared to be paid special deference by many of the others and who seemed to be in charge, also stopped by to thank me. I told him I was pleased to donate and that I felt special significance at being able to donate at this time in a mosque. He seemed to understand, simply nodding acknowledgement and not asking any questions. We spoke about the large turnout, larger than I expected to see in my community, especially among an almost exclusively Muslim population, and larger than even he had hoped for. He informed me that once the blood drive was scheduled, a call was put out to all of the mosques in the region. Many of the donors that day came from significant distances in eastern Pennsylvania, and some came from as far away as Trenton, New Jersey. The response surpassed all expectations.

I was pleased that I had found a convenient blood drive. I was more pleased that it was in my own community. My greatest pleasure came from the education I experienced

that day. I've had the opportunity to experience many cultures around the world, and I have learned something from each. In my own community, in this particular time, I learned that the Muslim population was larger than I was aware of, even though many live in my own neighborhood; I learned I still harbored some misguided apprehension at stepping outside my own culture, even in my own backyard; and I learned that within a given geographic community differing cultural communities can come together to support each other. I only wish more of my cultural community had come together with the Muslim community that day. I hope the Red Cross workers learned some things as well.



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