



Never Forget... Never Forgotten

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Tomorrow marks the 20th year since the tragedy of 9/11/01. Many commentators will cite the 20th “anniversary” of 9/11...I associate anniversaries with celebrations, not tragedies.

Engagements, weddings, birthdays – the moments to minutes to memories we cherish and celebrate over and over and over again – vanished inhumanely, tragically, senselessly for the 2,977 mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunts, children, firefighters, police officers, first responders, friends lost that infamous morning in Washington, D.C., Shanksville, Pennsylvania and in lower Manhattan with the collapse of the Twin Towers.

I promise you the families of those taken too soon do not reflect on 9/11 as an anniversary, not when twenty years of foregone anniversaries incite so much pain and suffering.

By the grace of God, I was in Chicago presenting at a home building conference that morning. My office was on Liberty Street in lower Manhattan, just across the block from The World Trade Center. I’d arrived very late to The Windy City the evening before and was awoken by a phone call from my wife early the morning of, frantically asking if I was okay and how and when I’d be getting home. She didn’t realize that I didn’t realize what was happening until I’d received her call and turned on the morning news. We soon appreciated that the answer to her simple question was complicated: all modes of normal transportation – planes, trains, buses – were immediately suspended. Fortunately, two senior members of Toll Brothers finance team secured one of the last rental cars available, and kindly invited me to drive east with them.

The day marked the end of the innocence...the realization that my children and their generation and those of future generations would forever be affected, their lives permanently influenced by the devastation of that morning. The world had seemingly changed in the span of hours, but of course the vitriol, hatred and cultural divide that provoked such inhumanity was simmering for years before the 9/11 boil.

I’d spent many years in the 80’s on the 101st floor of the North Tower while working for Lehman Brothers. The adrenaline rush from the elevators propelling you to the clouds each morning was indescribable, though the ride most assuredly got the heart pumping.

On the Friday before that fateful Tuesday, I had lunch with a very close friend from our days at Lehman. We dined alfresco in the promenade between the Twin Towers, talking about our families, reminiscing some, optimistically dreaming of tomorrow. We had planned a reunion of the Lehman Brothers equity research

department and were discussing final details. He was scheduled to go to the reunion venue after work on 9/11 and leave a deposit. We didn't realize our departing hugs would be our last; he never made it. Like so many, and in his characteristically selfless way, my friend saved the lives of others by prying open a shaft so co-workers could escape.

My late older brother, Al Nejme, was a staunch environmentalist, the captain of two schooners that advocate environmental educational awareness: The Clearwater, founded by the late Pete Seeger, a personal friend of my brother, and which purveys the Hudson River; and The Schooner Adventuress, a National Historic Landmark, which anchors in Puget Sound. Amazing as they are to sail – and I'd highly recommend an afternoon on the water if you happen to be in sailing radius – is the mission they represent. They were – and are – green advocates when most construed green as the midpoint on the ROYGBIV color continuum and would likely chafe at the environmental “consciousness” (some would say greenwashing) found in ESG's cloaked monetization.

Al joined the Tacoma Fire Department (TFD) in Washington at 47, an age when many firefighters were contemplating retirement – and in some cases truly retired (if they'd had enough years of service). When he was formally inducted, his Captain referenced his appointment notwithstanding his age, and a certain awe echoed in her voice as she marveled at Al's age-defying accomplishment. Al was chosen to be among the speakers at the ceremony, and he cited his deep concern for me and others when referencing the morning of 9/11 in his comments. The heroism demonstrated that day by firefighters was among the factors that inspired him to join TFD. While serving at TFD, and many years later, Al passed in the line of duty, selflessly helping others.

Each of us has intensely personal stories of where we were, what we were doing, who we were with, of loved ones lost. We have big problems now, and remedies are made so much more difficult by the level of national divisiveness so pervasive in our great country. Twenty years later, the daily rate of deaths in the U.S. from the COVID virus exceeds the total of deaths among all those senselessly lost on 9/11, and U.S. military deaths in the twenty-year war just ended in Afghanistan.

I remember the post 9/11 spirit of American patriotism vividly, of a United States vehemently United, of a determination to protect each other, to care for each other, to recognize our common interests and to embrace the ties that bind.

Tomorrow marks the 20th year since 9/11.

Celebrate with a simple act of kindness.

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