

A Year of Tragedy, of Hope, of Reflection

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As I write this article, the first anniversary of September 11 is approaching. The media and public officials are devoting much attention to this event, as rightfully they should given the magnitude of what transpired on that day and the impact it had and continues to have on our lives. For most of us, reminders exist on a regular basis of the horror that unfolded on 9/11. For the many who lost relatives and friends, the reminders are even more painful and constant. Photos and videotapes of those who died recall past images of happiness, but they also highlight futures bereft of a loved one's presence.

Although it has been almost a year since terrorists attacked the United States, at times it seems much more recent, especially as I continue to reflect on the multitude of thoughts and emotions that the attacks and their aftermath triggered in me. It seems like yesterday that I was writing several articles for my website detailing my reactions to September 11, the loss of one of my brothers to a terrorist attack years ago, the importance of developing and maintaining meaningful connections to significant others in our lives, and the interventions we might use to help our children and ourselves deal with the unfathomable horror of that day.

I emphasized the theme of connections in several of my articles. In one I described my reaction as I watched on television what was occurring at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon while glancing at a photo of my brother who had been killed; I felt intense sadness and began to cry in response both to his loss years ago and to the loss of life that was happening before my eyes. When my wife returned from an errand, I told her about the events that were occurring and of memories of my brother. She proceeded to hug me and to say something so simple and yet so comforting, "I wish I had been here so that you didn't have to cry alone."

I also wrote about the relief of speaking with both of my sons even though they were not in New York or Washington, D.C. and as far as I knew were not in any immediate danger. Yet, it was very important for me to speak with them. I received calls from several friends who know that I travel frequently and who were well aware that the two planes that crashed into the World Trade Center originated in Boston where I live. One

call was especially noteworthy; it was from my very close friend and colleague Sam Goldstein who phoned from Brazil where he was presenting at a conference and he said, "I just wanted to hear your voice." Simple gestures of caring, powerful lifelong memories!

In the months that followed 9/11, I suggested the need for all of us to examine the extent to which our behaviors were in concert with our values and priorities. At my seminars many people asserted that their relationships with their husbands, wives, children, and other loved ones were their most important priorities, but yet they realized they spent limited time in nurturing these relationships, often distracted by the demands of their careers. I emphasized that the kind of self-examination I was recommending should not be reserved for times of crisis but rather should occur on an ongoing basis throughout our lives.

As we are aware, however, it is often in the aftermath of tragedy that we are most likely to engage in self-examination. We also know that for some people the changes they undertake in their lifestyle and their relationships are short-lived; unfortunately, they resort to previous patterns of behavior when the crisis has lost its immediacy and intensity. In contrast, for others the modifications in lifestyle assume greater permanency since they are associated with a renewed commitment to engage in behaviors that reflect one's priorities. It's not always easy to maintain changes in our lifestyle, but we should consider the alternatives if we do not.

During this past year, I have traveled throughout the country and listened to the experiences and sentiments of many people about 9/11. I have also spoken on numerous occasions in New York City and in areas that border New York; in some of these locations the death toll of people who worked at the World Trade Center or who were involved in the rescue effort was staggering. I have talked with people who witnessed the horrors that occurred that day, people who lost relatives and friends, and people who struggled to comfort their children while overwhelmed by their own grief, anger, and anxiety. Although most acknowledged that their world will never be the same, that a sense of safety and security was shattered or at the very least compromised, I was also impressed by the resolve, hope, and resilience evidenced by so many.

The use of the words hope and resilience is not intended to minimize or deny the profound effects of the terrorist attacks but rather to highlight

the increased importance of these concepts, especially in light of the ongoing anxiety that exists about 9/11. You may have seen the results of a recent online survey of youngsters undertaken by the PBS children's series ZOOM. They found that 50% of the more than 2,500 respondents said that they still thought about the tragedy once a week or more, including 19% who said that it was in their mind every day. I did not see the full report so I am not certain if the anxiety was higher for children who lived in New York, Washington, D.C, or another big city or to what extent the anxiety interfered with a child's daily routines. Not surprisingly, another recent poll, undertaken by Knight Ridder and conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, reported an increased level of anxiety among many adults in our country as a consequence of 9/11.

Relatedly, a man who attended one of my recent presentations told me that his work requires him to fly with some regularity. Before he departs on each trip, his nine-year-old son quizzes him about how good the security is at the airports and if the planes are safe. This father observed that his son is just now finding it a little easier to sleep on the days he is away and how he makes certain he calls his son every day to touch base with him when he is out-of-town.

Given the ongoing stress occasioned by September 11, I think it is more imperative than ever to nurture resilient mindsets in ourselves and in the children in our lives. Sam Goldstein and I authored the book "Raising Resilient Children" prior to September 11, but we noted that no one could predict with certainty which children might at some point confront great adversity. We certainly knew that children who were abused or neglected or grew up in poverty or struggled with learning problems were more likely to fall into what we term a high-risk category than their peers who did not face these difficulties. However, as September 11 so painfully reminded us, in just a relatively brief moment a child or an adult could move from a low-risk to high-risk category of stress and adversity.

To secure a basic foundation of resilience, I think that it is essential that we continue to strengthen our connections with others. The importance of these connections was vividly and poignantly highlighted for me with the recent birth of my first grandchild, Maya. As I watched my older son Richard and my daughter-in-law Cybele hold Maya and as I observed their joy, it brought back many fond memories of the times I held Richard when he was an infant. It also reminded me how quickly our children grow into

adults and the importance of savoring every moment of their development since these times cannot be relived.

When I held Maya I was flooded with emotions, instantaneously experiencing a very close attachment with this beautiful infant (an assessment from an unbiased grandfather). I also thought about how much I was anticipating another significant family event, the upcoming marriage of my younger son Doug to Suzanne at the end of September. These are the events that overshadow others. While we must pay attention to our work and our career, we must be diligent in ensuring that our connections to dear friends and loved ones do not fade into the background. If we permit this to happen we will compromise leading a resilient, satisfying lifestyle.

In this regard I was very interested in a column written by Rick Reilly for Sports Illustrated. The article focused on John Elway, the famous quarterback with the greatest number of victories in the history of the National Football League. Elway led his team, the Denver Broncos, to two Super Bowl championships before retiring in 1999. During his playing career, Elway seemed to have everything—fame, glory, a hefty salary, a seemingly happy home life, and successful ventures outside of football.

Reilly wrote, “Since he quit playing lucky number 7 has hit the worst losing streak of his life. Elway’s father died, most of his business ventures flopped, his wife left him and, three weeks ago, his twin sister passed away.”

Elway was noted on the football field for his fourth quarter comebacks. Under his leadership his team could aptly be called a “resilient” team, capable of rebounding from adversity. But Reilly reports that to be resilient in life, Elway realized he had to change. He had to learn to live his life in accord with his values.

Elway observed, “At some point it hits you that this fairy-tale life you’ve been leading is not real.”

Reilly reported that this insight changed Elway. “He’d go to Janet’s (Elway’s wife) rented house and pull weeds in her garden when she wasn’t home. He went to the mall with her. ‘John hadn’t been to a mall in 16 years!’ she says. He sent her roses every week, opened her doors, started

hanging out with the kids. Sometimes you think you have to be a god when all you really need is to be human. Within a month the family was back together under one roof.”

Elway’s comments about the changes he made in his life reinforce the importance of connections and behaving in ways in which one’s personal values and priorities are not forgotten. “I’m trying to do things now that make me content, things that aren’t necessarily about achieving. . . . I want to put my family first from now on. I was driving by Six Flags the other day and it hit me: I’ve never taken my family to the amusement park! So we’re going even if I have to rent it for a day. Or even if I have to tell people, ‘Sorry I can’t sign autographs today, I’m with my family.’ And I remembered something—I happen to love roller coasters.”

In reflecting upon these quotes, I felt that the resiliency displayed by Elway on the playing field was being overshadowed by the resiliency, authenticity, and honesty that were becoming prominent features of his life after football. As Elway discovered, sometimes it takes misfortune and tragedy to jar us into thinking about what is truly important. On the afternoon of September 11, 2001 few, if any, people thought about staying at the office to finish a report or to close a business deal. Most desired one thing, to come home as quickly as possible to be with loved ones, to hug them, hold them tight, and kiss them. Other considerations paled by comparison.

I hope we will all use the anniversary of September 11 not only to remember and honor those who lost their lives, but in addition to reflect upon and examine our values and priorities and to re-commit ourselves to strengthening our connections to those who are most important to us.

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