

A Personal Reflection on the Aftermath of Terror

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Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 I wrote a brief, special newsletter to provide the address of a website that included many useful articles for helping children deal with stress and trauma. In this newsletter I will list several other sites that contain material about helping children as well as ourselves cope with the aftermath of the horrors of the terrorist attacks. Then I should like to share some personal feelings and thoughts that have arisen in the past three weeks that I hope will encourage your own reflections following the events of September 11.

Reflections

Since the terrorist attacks I have had the opportunity to speak with hundreds of people at my workshops and presentations, have received countless e-mails, and done many media interviews. I have been asked what to say to children about the attacks and how to deal with our own sadness, anxiety, and anger. All of our conversations quickly center on some aspect of September 11. The events of that day have touched each of us. Magazine and newspaper accounts describe the increased anxiety, sadness, numbness, anger, difficulty concentrating, and loss of security that many Americans as well as people throughout the world have experienced—all perfectly understandable reactions given the magnitude of the terror.

Most mental health authorities concur that for those individuals who did not lose loved ones, who were not witness to or near the attack sites, or who were not beset by significant emotional struggles prior to September 11, the feelings unleashed on that day will soon become less intense. I believe that this process may take longer than we anticipate given the immediacy of television with so many of us watching the events as they were actually unfolding (and seeing these events aired repeatedly) and the extent of the devastation that occurred in New York City as well as at the Pentagon. But I agree that most people will be able to return to a sense of equilibrium. This doesn't mean that things will ever be the same or that a feeling of comfort will ever rise to the level it was prior to the attacks (given the increased security throughout our country, there will be constant reminders of what occurred on September 11); it means that unless there are new

assaults or unforeseen events, most people will be able to assume their regular routines. That is how it should be, not to forget what happened, not to forget those who perished, but to move ahead lest we become paralyzed by fear.

Obviously, for those who have lost a loved one, the pain will continue, never totally disappearing but hopefully becoming less acute with time. I know this from personal experience. As I mentioned in my last newsletter, I lost an older brother to terrorism. Irwin was an officer in the Air Force and the event occurred more than 40 years ago. The plane went down in the Pacific Ocean as a result of an explosive and neither his nor the bodies of his crewmates was ever recovered. For at least several months I harbored the thought that perhaps the crew escaped the crash and were on an island, but eventually I had to accept his death and in the acceptance I could move forward. I can empathize with all of the families of the victims at the World Trade Center who yearn for the remains of their loved ones to be found, bringing some finality to the horror they have experienced.

Several people who read my last newsletter asked if I think of Irwin often. I do. When a terrorist act occurs the thoughts about him are filled with pain. I think of the phone call we received in the middle of the night to inform us he was gone, of the cries of my parents, of my feelings of shock and sadness, of my realization that I would never see or hear him again, of a young life cut so short. But typically when I think of Irwin I recall happy occasions and what a wonderful brother he was. I cherish the memories, memories which were heightened recently when one of my cousins in Canada, Todd, upon receiving my last newsletter, e-mailed me and said that he had a letter written by Irwin. The letter was written to Todd's parents, who are now deceased. Todd said his parents had saved the letter. Todd did not know when Irwin died and when I told him, he could understand why they might have saved this particular letter. It was written just three weeks before his death.

Todd sent me a copy of the letter. It was as if someone had recovered a lost treasure. To be certain, I had mixed feelings when reading it. Irwin described with excitement his new assignment, an upcoming tour of duty in Japan for which he and his wife (he had been married for nine months) were preparing. As I read the letter, I said to my wife, "And to think that just three weeks after he wrote it, he would be gone." I felt

great sadness. Then I read the letter again and Irwin's sense of humor and his zest for life were so apparent. Without wishing to sound trite, I knew that Irwin lived life to the fullest, that he touched all of those around him, that he enriched me.

Until I read Irwin's letter, I struggled with what I wanted to write in this newsletter. I thought of the many questions I have been asked, including how to ease our children's fears, how to lessen our own sadness and anxieties, how to help children deal with the loss of a parent, how to bring a sense of control back in our lives. These are all very important questions and most likely I will address them more specifically in future newsletters. However, after I read Irwin's letter my thoughts gravitated towards one main theme, actually a theme I discussed in two of my website articles earlier this year—the importance of relationships and connections in our lives.

As much as I will remember the horrors of the terrorist attacks, I will remember the comfort of connections. This may seem obvious, but sometimes the obvious deserves to be highlighted so that it can be celebrated and cherished. Just as the attacks elicited thoughts of Irwin's death, his letter reminded me of his life and our relationship. In the darkest moments of September 11 there were also moments of great comfort, which I will never forget. I want to share these in the hope that they will be helpful to you as you reflect upon the actions you take in your daily lives.

I was working at my home office on September 11 and had turned on the news shortly before 9:00 a.m., not knowing that anything out of the ordinary had just occurred. I was greeted with a scene of the World Trade Center and was chilled to view a fire in one of the towers. When the second tower was hit by the second of the two hijacked planes from Boston and we soon recognized this was an act of unfathomable horror, I glanced at family photos in the room, including one of Irwin, and began to cry. I cried for Irwin and I cried for all those lost in the terror. When my wife returned from an errand and I told her what had occurred and she knew I had been crying, she hugged me and said something so simple, yet so profound, "I wish I had been here so that you didn't have to cry alone."

Our older son Richard called to say that Leila, his sister-in-law was okay. I hadn't known that Leila worked in the World Trade Center; she arrived on the site just as the second plane crashed into the tower and was able to escape. Hearing Rich's voice

was very reassuring. Our younger son Doug called a little later. His building had been evacuated in Boston and he was home. It was just a phone call but one that was very important given the terrible circumstances that were unfolding in our country.

I began to receive e-mails from people who upon learning of the Boston link to the hijackings wanted to find out if my family and I were safe. While seeing patients that afternoon, I received both an email and a phone call from a woman in Australia who several years before had arranged for me to speak in her lovely country. I called her back. She was relieved to learn I was not harmed but saddened by the destruction and loss of lives in America. That evening my close friend and colleague Sam Goldstein called from Brazil where he was presenting at a conference and said, "I just wanted to hear your voice."

After I sent out my last newsletter, I was overwhelmed by the number of people who wrote to me, saying they were thinking of me. Two days after the tragedy I spoke in Binghamton, New York before going to Albany, New York; the following week I flew to Baton Rouge and Detroit to give presentations. I was deeply affected by the many people who made a special point at the conferences or in subsequent e-mails to thank me for coming to speak during such a difficult time.

I was very moved by the countless men and women who attempted to save the lives of others, many of whom lost their own lives in the process. Firefighters constantly referred to their missing colleagues as "brothers," working hour after hour to find them as well as the thousands of others lost in the ruins of the World Trade Center. In an interview one rescue worker said that he would continue searching the rubble for as long as it took to find bodies so that the families of the victims might find a small sense of closure in their despair. The CEO of a company that lost 700 of its employees, including his own brother, talked tearfully and poignantly of their all being "family." I was touched once more when I viewed photos sent to me via e-mail of people throughout the world lighting candles for the victims of the terrorist attacks. We are one family.

The significance of our connections with each other was vividly and constantly captured in words and pictures. It is little wonder that several of the most frequent recommendations offered by mental health professionals to deal with the tragedy have to do with being available to our children, speaking with family and friends about our

feelings, and reaching out to help others. The comfort housed in relationships must never be underestimated or taken for granted.

Those who have attended my workshops know that I emphasize the importance of our connections to others, whatever the relationship might be. This importance was magnified as I never imagined it could or would be during the past three weeks. As has been written about before, in the midst of some of our most terrifying times we also discover and call upon a reservoir of our greatest strengths. We observe and perform acts of courage, thoughtfulness, and kindness and we experience a stronger bond with others. As the pain of September 11 slowly diminishes, I hope that we will never forget the importance of this bond. I hope we will continue to cultivate and nourish all of our relationships and reach out to others who are in need. It is this bond that gives meaning to our lives and serves as one of the most precious gifts to our children.

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