

Off the Beaten Patch: Towering Memories That Never Fade

Why honoring September 11 is the honorable thing to do.

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“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

That’s how we end many of our phone calls now.

Before September 11, not so much.

So many things have changed since 9-11 and we reminisce how traveling used to be. Or remember what television was like before the constant crawl of text information. Or the bucolic Lafayette hillside.

Like you, I felt fairly secure with my vocabulary. I was quite happy not learning new words like anthrax, Taliban, Al-Qaeda and not giving a toss who or what Al Jazeera is.

In the months leading up to the attacks, the talk around the water cooler was about the most recent episode of *Fear Factor*. We wondered how realistic *The West Wing* was and debated whether *Ally McBeal* was just too damn thin.

We were reading, *Who Moved my Cheese? – An amazing way to deal with change in your work and your life* and paid to see the movie *Enemy at the Gate*.
Ironic or naïve – you decide.

As New York, the nation and the world usher in the 10-year anniversary of September 11, we can't help but remember where we were and whom we were with when this tragedy unfolded.

As an early riser, I had already eaten breakfast and read the paper when I heard ABC TV's Peter Jennings state that there were unconfirmed reports that a plane crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center.

Surely this was an accident, a small plane terribly off course. But then, like you, I saw another plane, a big, commercial jet, aim and fire into the second tower.

“Oh, my God, what's happening?”

And where is my friend Nancy?

One of my closest friends and college roommates, Nancy had been a flight attendant for 22 years.

I knew as an International Purser for American Airlines she could literally be anywhere in the world and I prayed as I dialed the phone that she wasn't at work that day. Please pick up, please pick up, please pick up -- and she did.

Thank God she wasn't flying that day, but her colleagues were. Among them, two close friends: the captain of AA Flight 11 – the first plane to crash into the World Trade Center; and a flight attendant on AA Flight 77 – the plane that crashed into the Pentagon.

Nancy didn't work *that* September 11, but now she *chooses* to work a flight on every September 11. You see, choosing to work that day is Nancy's way of not only honoring the memory of her dear friends, but *all* the crew members lost who can no longer make that choice.

I will honor this September 11 the same way I have for the last nine. I will hang the flag and will spend most of the day with my friend Paige.

In September 2001, Paige and I were both working at *Diablo* magazine. While we were friendly, we weren't really friends.

By day's end, we were united.

We just stood there in utter horror listening to every co-worker recount what they heard on the car radio on their drive in. There was a TV in our conference room, but no one knew how to work it so we grabbed someone's transistor and huddled together listening, and collectively shaking our heads in disbelief.

There was a moment when Paige and I looked at each other and must have realized the exact same thing. Here we are in the office on a Tuesday morning, surrounded by our co-workers just like the people in the New York or Washington were doing a few hours earlier. Maybe they were sipping their coffee and putting the finishing touch on a proposal or laughing with a few others over the top of their cubicle about a scene from last night's episode of *Everyone Loves Raymond*.

When someone yelled from their desk that one of the towers had just imploded, Paige and I collapsed in each other's arms. The loss of life and the ramifications of what was happening were real. America was under attack and no one was safe. We looked at each other and said, "What are we supposed to do?"

Ten years later, we still don't know.

But what we do know is that we will spend that ominous anniversary together. We will probably go for a walk and talk about 'that morning' and I'm sure we'll watch a special on The History Channel and stare at the screen in disbelief as if seeing the events for the very first time. And this is part of the whole 9-11 tragedy that we keep tripping on – the fact that we saw this tragedy unfold in real time. We've all seen the torn grainy photos of emaciated Nazi prisoners and charred bodies stacked on wooden carts, and watched Zapruder's home movies showing President Kennedy in his motorcade slumping over his pretty wife dressed in pink. We've watched terrified students running out of Columbine High, but we didn't actually witness Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold massacre any students.

9-11 was different.

It was happening in real time and we were watching it in real time. And if that wasn't enough, we kept watching it over and over and over again -- hoping somehow to make sense of it. But jumbo jets intentionally flying into buildings? People being jettisoned out or jumping to their deaths? And just as we thought it couldn't possibly get more horrific, we watched the buildings crumble -- knowing that anyone inside was now gone. It was impossible to watch but impossible not to watch.

Paige and I talk about 9-11 on 9-11 but rarely anytime else. Nancy said that the only time she ever hears any of her airline colleagues talk about September 11 is on September 11. It's not like Nancy, Paige or I don't think about it other times of the year. We just don't talk about it. After all, it's hard for any of us not to think about it every time we board a plane or for Paige who drives on 680 every day and sees the memorial bridge named after Tom Burnett – one of the brave heroes of United Flight 93.

It's hard to believe that it's been 10 years and the feelings and grief that must consume those who lived through it -- or lost family and friends that day -- is unimaginable. They can rebuild Ground Zero but the landscape of New York, as well as the world, has changed forever. 9-11 helped America define itself as a nation. At the same time, Paige, Nancy and I were addressing and assessing our own vulnerability and defining our own values. It caused us to reflect on who we are, what is important to us and to make sure we have our priorities in order.

Which brings us back to saying, "I love you."

If there is a silver lining to be found in 9-11 it was seeing all the American flags flying and the nation standing together as one. It was witnessing the bipartisan singing of *God Bless America* on the steps of the Capitol, employers sincerely appreciating their employees, and random acts of kindness from complete strangers.

And while those Kumbaya moments didn't last, thankfully saying, "I love you" has.