

Remember—Do you Recall?
20 years after September 11, 2001
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

Do you remember—do you recall? Twenty years ago, I was standing in the room off of our bedroom, getting ready for work. I remember it was a gorgeous day. I recall that I was incredibly excited. For the first time I was going to start a program year at my church with an actual staff. We had finally grown to a place where I had several staff members and on that Tuesday morning, we were going to gather for the very first time as a staff to plot and plan our future activities.

The phone rang, it was my associate Ashley saying, “I just heard the weirdest thing. A plane hit one of the World Trade towers.”

“Wow. That’s weird. How could that happen?”

And then as we were talking—and Ashley was vaguely looking at her television—as we were wondering---she saw what so many of you saw. She said, “Oh my God. Oh my God. Bonnie, another very, very big plane just hit the other tower. Oh my God. What’s happening?”

Do you remember? Do you recall?

What is your story?

What I’ve found as I began to think about this anniversary and work on these words, what I found is when I begin to read of this day and remember all that was happening then, I experience all over again, a deep, dank, visceral physical fear.

As I remember, as I recall, it wells up from the center of my soul and the pit of my stomach a cold stabbing fear cloaks me.

Thirty minutes later Ashley and I were in a bakery, still under the impression that we would have a staff meeting, when the owner shocked, announced to the five of us in line that a plane had just hit the pentagon. He handed us items from his shelves and sent us on our way.

I cancelled our staff meeting. All my people with children gathered their little ones from school. The South Tower collapsed. Rose, my unmarried, childless seminarian arrived. United Flight 93 crashed into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Coverage of cell phone calls from passengers on the planes began to be reported. It finally clicked in my fear frozen brain that the planes were being used as bombs. Then I watched the North Tower collapse. And it came clear all those people, all those First Responders, dust, dead, gone.

Rose and I, began to plan a worship service of lament for that evening

Do you Remember? Do you Recall?

What friends? What does this all mean now? Where does it leave us as we have spent the last weeks watching a massive evacuation and end of our military presence in Afghanistan?

We see the coffins of the last marines to die, killed by suicide bombers in Kabul—where does this leave us? What has changed?

Some would say, so much has changed, others would say, so very little. Each would be offering a portion of truth.

I wonder how I've changed, how you've changed since that day? Why do I find myself sobbing when I allow myself to remember? Why am I not sobbing on so many more days?

I'll speak for myself and then invite you to remember and recall.

During that time, on that day 20 years ago, and for months after my illusion, my American illusion of safety and control was shattered. After spending years railing against them, I bought a cell phone. Not so I can spend my life staring at a screen, that was to come later, but specifically so that I could call Susan and say goodbye, were I to find myself on a plane commandeered and piloted toward death.

I also explored immigrating to New Zealand: thinking it was a small country with fewer possibilities for terrorist exposure.

I remember now and I recall now just how terrified I was then. My, our actual vulnerability and ultimate mortality came screaming home to me on that day for the very first time in my adult life. On that day, 20 years ago, as the raw images of desperate people filled my living room, I began to comprehend what it means to no longer live with an illusion of control.

This realization came late to me in life. Young people, children across the world in Afghanistan and any place of unrest understand very early that their lives are finite. I am ashamed to say, that I did not know, I did not actually understand that until September 11, 2001.

Do you remember? Do you recall?

Once we understand our common mortality, once we take in the reality of our sure and certain death, I wonder if we can then comprehend our common humanity. That each and every one of us, all of us who live and breathe and have our being, in this fragile world, are made in God's image and likeness. Each of us regardless of where we live, and what we do or do not believe, each of us is a reflection of God. Each of us embodies an essence of holiness. I wonder if I, if we, were able to tolerate our sense of vulnerability and actively seek out each other's innate holiness, I wonder if we might actually begin to bridge the multiple chasms that divide and polarize us as a country and as nations.

I understand that type of sentiment can sound like preacher fluff, but I wonder if we might begin to construct those very bridges by starting with our stories of September 11, 2001?

Where were you?
What do you remember?
What do you recall?

I remember hours after the attacks, a soccer game in Iran where 60,000 spectators observed a minute of silence to honor the victims of 9/11. The mayor of Tehran sent a note of condolence to the Mayor of New York, and hundreds of young Iranians held spontaneous candlelight vigils.

It's hard to even picture that now, but it took place and it was real. Common humanity has happened before.

In our lives now, what if we begin to ask for and we begin to listen and we begin to hear the stories of people from September 11th what if we begin to recover, bit by bit, the bonds of our common humanity?

Might we then begin to hope, might we then begin to heal? Might then be able to transform our communities? Might we then begin to embody the world for which Jesus was crucified and died. The world for which he rose again.

Our Hope is in the Name of Lord.
The maker of Heaven and Earth.
From this time forth and forever more.

Amen.