

Reflections of a 9/11 Widow: I Feel a Peacefulness Now

BY ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.



AS A NATION, WE WILL NEVER BE “DONE” MOURNING THE LOSS OF 2,977 LIVES DURING THE ATTACK ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001.

On that Tuesday morning at the World Trade Center in New York, more than 2,700 people died, among them over 2,000 people working at the Twin Towers, the passengers of two planes and more than 400 firefighters, paramedics and police officers. In Washington, D.C., nearly 200 people died at the Pentagon, including the passengers and crew of American Airlines Flight 77. And in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, an additional 44 airline passengers and crew lost their lives in the crash landing. No, we will never be finished grieving the horrific attack that shook our collective sense of security. As with all great losses in our lifetimes, 9/11 changed us forever.

We're still healing. Central to our healing from traumatic events is continuing to talk about them openly and support one another. I reached out to Sheila Martello, whose husband, James Martello, worked on one of the top floors of One World Trade Center, a few floors above the impact zone of the hijacked airplane. In the years after James' death, Sheila developed her passion to help others who are grieving. She attended my grief caregiver trainings and became my student, friend and colleague.

Listen as Sheila teaches us how the 9/11 attack transformed her life.

As the 20th anniversary of the terror attack that devastated your family, your community and our country approaches, what thoughts and feelings are coming up for you?

I was 37, married for only nine years, with two little boys. My husband went to work and never came home. I was away putting towels in our bathroom and answered the phone. “Is that Jimmy’s building?” my friend asked. I had no idea what she was referring to, and then she said, “Hang up right now and turn on the TV.” From there, I watched as the second building to be hit collapsed. I still hung on to hope. Jimmy had had some time to get out. If anyone could, he could, and then minutes later, his building went down. There is where it goes black for me and stays black for a while. So, as I look back, as I do every year,

it can seem like it was only yesterday. I can be right there in the moment and access all those feelings.

Still, I feel a peacefulness now. I look at myself and how I have grown, emotionally and spiritually. I look at how my boys have become amazing young men. I spend a lot of time thinking about the “then” and the “now.” Then, I felt so sad, angry, afraid and insecure. Now, I feel grateful, peaceful, safe and confident.

What helped me to get here? It was September 11, 2001. How could something so horrible be the reason for my growth? The places I was broken are now my places of great strength. Of course, I would flip the switch in a minute and take the path of living the last 20 years in the life I thought I signed up for, but I can't, and I have reconciled myself to that. I choose to live the life that was chosen for me, the life my soul needs to live. The way I look at it is that we have no control over the path that we are given, but we do have control over how we navigate that path. On the 20th anniversary, my heart fills with gratitude for the gift of that understanding.

All of America grieves 9/11, but of course the experience was different for those intimately involved. What would you like to share about the grief of those whose loved ones died that day?

I think something people don't realize is the true impact they had on our lives, whether they lived next door or on another continent. We felt the love and support. We felt a sense of gratitude for all the support we were given and the love that was shown to us. Anywhere I went, as soon as someone found out my husband had died on 9/11, they couldn't do more for me. My hope is that people realize the impact that they can have on any griever's life – that it means so much to receive kindness and compassion. I think the single most important thing to me was the reading of the names. In the beginning, it felt like the Bandaid was being ripped off, but as the years went on, it was such a blessing to have the world remember our loved ones. Everyone deserves to be remembered.

Your sons were young when their father was killed. What is something that especially helped your family as you did, and continue to do, the hard work of grief and mourning?

James was 7 and Thomas was 5. There are a few things that were very helpful: remembering Jimmy, talking about their feelings and being open to “signs.” The boys and I talked a lot about Jimmy and continue to talk about him. We tell stories, we look for people to tell us stories. When I asked James and Thomas this question, they both said that having someone to talk to was the most helpful. They said knowing they could ask me anything and talk to me about anything was always reassuring to them.

We also have opened ourselves up to his presence. We manifest him, we see him in pictures, we see him in James’ face, literally, and in Thomas’ smile. We feel him. We see the number 107 or 1007. That is Jimmy’s birthday, and that number has come up thousands of times over the last 20 years. Thomas won the state championship football game, and the clock stopped at 10:07 for the national anthem. James took the final game-winning face-off of his national championship hockey game at 1:07. The first time I flew by myself, without my boys, the distance between where I was and where I was going was 1,007 miles. Thomas and James’ work IDs are both 107... and on and on. This keeps him present to us and our family and friends.

The boys have grown up knowing that their relationship with their dad, even though it has switched to one of memory, is as strong as ever.

You and other 9/11 family members formed a support group after the tragedy. In what ways was that group a lifeline for you?

Our support group meant so much to me and the other participants. When I was first approached to join the group, I was against it. I felt that the last thing I needed was to share my thoughts and feelings with others. Once I was forced to join, I loved it. It was the only place for me to go where people “got it.” It was a place to feel normal, not different. It was a safe place to share my feelings without judgment. Each Tuesday’s group meeting gave me the strength to get to Friday, and then knowing that the next Tuesday would come so soon after the weekend, I would be okay. I knew I couldn’t mourn by myself. It was bigger than me. I needed help from others, and I found it in my support group.

In 2014, you founded a nonprofit grief support center called Stephy’s Place, in Red Bank, New Jersey. It has been a wonderful resource for grieving people in your community, including support groups bringing together those affected by certain types of loss, such as the death of a spouse or child, or the loss of a loved one to suicide. What has Stephy’s Place provided for those who grieve, and what has it given you?

Stephy’s Place provides a free, safe place for people to grieve the loss of a loved one. At Stephy’s Place, we companion the bereaved. We are people who have grieved helping people who are grieving. Healing in community is very beneficial. Even though grief manifests itself in many different ways, when people are just “sad,” they need the support of others who know how they are feeling and are feeling it, too.

For those who need therapeutic care, we also offer a resource center that will match them with a therapist who fits their needs. Participants of Stephy’s Place constantly remind us of how we are saving their lives, that they don’t know where they would be without us.

Stephy’s Place has helped me define my purpose. When my boys were little, my purpose was to be their mom. As they grew, my need for a new purpose grew as well. My 9/11 support group had been my lifeline, and I wanted to provide that lifeline to others. In my heart I know that if helping hundreds of people a week was the ultimate mission, Jimmy would have agreed to die for that. Stephy’s Place gives me purpose beyond being a mom or wife. It forced me to look at myself and gave me the motivation to complete the good hard work of mourning, seek out several different modalities of self-love and, most importantly, seek out your trainings.

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How has the pandemic affected the grieving people you know and work with, including you and your family?

The pandemic has definitely reminded me of the time right after Jimmy died. We weren’t able to say goodbye. We weren’t able to have traditional wakes and funerals because there were no bodies. The difference is we were able to experience the ever-so-important touch, hug and handholding from others. At Stephy’s Place, people who have lost loved ones to the virus attend loss-specific groups. We also provide a meetup group, where anyone who has lost a loved one to the virus can come and talk about it. I speak to many who have lost loved ones to the virus, and most of them are angry. They just don’t understand how it

happened. They dropped their loved ones off at the emergency room and never saw them again. They were lucky if they had a nurse with enough compassion to set up a FaceTime call before they died.

I think COVID has shined a light on the importance of wakes, funerals and other rituals. I guess we didn't really know how crucial [they] were until they were taken away. We must remember those who died from the coronavirus. They can't be just a number.

Due to the pandemic, Stephy's Place was forced to shut down for a time. The blessing was that we had to go virtual, so now we are reaching so many people who live farther away and would have never been able to attend our groups in person. We plan on opening again in September, and we will keep Zoom as an added option for our groups going forward.

I sometimes talk about the transformative power of grief when it is befriended and well-mourned over time. Has your grief journey transformed you?

I am not the person I was in 2001. For a long while, I thought I was authentically mourning, but it wasn't until I stopped trying to live my old life and started to create a new life that I felt the transformation unfold. There are definitely no rewards for speed. I knew I wanted to provide support to others, but I also knew

I had to truly befriend my own pain first. You once told me, "You can't take anyone further than you have come yourself." That was transformative information.

Is there anything you'd like to say to the funeral directors and staff reading this about the importance of meaningful funerals and other rituals in the healing journeys of those who suffer the death of someone loved?

I would definitely remind them of the importance of what they do. Even when end-of-life rituals aren't done the traditional way, they still help people. In fact, a different way might even turn out to be a better way. Sometimes we need to think outside the box. It's not the ritual per se. It's the purpose it serves, and funeral home staff are the shepherds of the purpose.

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What My Memory Is Left With

BY TODD W. VAN BECK



ON THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 11, I WAS SITTING AT THE DELTA TERMINAL AT LOGAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT IN BOSTON, GETTING READY TO TAKE THE SHUTTLE TO LAGUARDIA.

I was headed to Long Island, where I was to make an evening presentation to the Nassau-Suffolk County Funeral Directors Association. I had worked with this fine group of funeral professionals many times in the past and was looking forward to seeing old friends in our beloved profession again.

It was shortly after 9 a.m. that all the lights in the airport went out. The television monitors shut down and, in quick succession, announcements were being made that Massachusetts Port Authority was closing the airport and everyone was instructed to leave immediately. No one had any idea what had happened, and there were a few mighty grumpy passengers protesting all the way, yet still marching out of the terminal.

I had taken a taxi from my condo in Brookline to

Logan, so I hailed another, and when I jumped in, the expression on the cab driver's face was one of anxiety, shock and fear.

The radio was on, and I caught snippets of a story about an airplane crash in New York City. The cab driver was rambling on about how terrible this was, while I was still having difficulty putting together just what the hell had happened.

Then the cabbie turned around and said, "A plane just collided into the World Trade Center tower."

As I was trying to process this news, I remember thinking that after the Second World War, a plane had crashed into the side of the Empire State Building, but that had happened on a Sunday and only the pilot and a custodian were killed. I guess this is proof positive that even a funeral director can easily experience denial.

The taxi ride continued in silence. By this time, there was no doubt that not only was this a tragedy of the first order but that American history would be rewritten. September 11th was now in the annals of history, right next to December 7, 1941.