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## Fear and Ammunition: Reflections on the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 9/11

In the days following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Americans were told to live without fear. Being afraid meant the terrorists had won. Being fearful was the same as losing. We were instructed to go about our lives as if things were normal. We were asked to go shopping to keep the economy intact. But what did it mean to live without fear? Was it even possible?

For many years, I couldn't talk about 9/11 without welling up. I was not supposed to be in Manhattan that day, but I was. I remember fighter jets patrolling the air space over New York City, the enormous, frightening, rumbling wake from the jets sounding like another building toppling nearby. I had the impulse to duck whenever I heard one overhead. Yet I felt safer on the street with other people than I did alone in my hotel room. I didn't experience the trauma that some endured, still an emotional reaction became lodged inside my central nervous system, a response that was beyond my control. Years later, therapy and EMDR eventually relieved that grief. I don't cry automatically anymore. In the months following 9/11, "Never Forget" was the national mantra. The experience was so consuming it seemed impossible to forget. I kept notes to give shape to my confusion. I needed to meditate on the duality of what it meant to live without fear and to love instead. I didn't realize my notes would become a time capsule. I found them recently and was surprised by how much I'd forgotten. I was surprised by how much was still relevant — how much 9/11 set the stage for what we're experiencing currently in the United States, the division and isolation. Twenty years and one pandemic later, we're still grappling with similar questions we faced in 2001.

That fateful sunny Tuesday, the sky was bright blue, the weather perfect. In the midst of the chaos — with sirens blaring, smoke rising, fighter planes overhead — I felt a strange sense of peace. It came in the form of generosity toward strangers. *A shift is happening*, I remember thinking, and simultaneously contemplating that I had no idea what that meant. I spent the afternoon at Turtle Pond in Central Park alone, surrounded by strangers. All of us quietly mesmerized by the turtles, swimming as they do with those camouflaged helmets they wear. It amazed me how well turtles float despite the weight. I envied them, their ability to hide if they need to under those helmets, under those mini-bomb shelters they carry on their backs.

I watched the turtles for a long time, swimming slow and ungracefully, bumping into each other and veering in random directions. I wondered if the world had changed for them as it had for us, if intuitively they sensed a shift in nature, or if, at the very least, they absorbed a disturbance in the water, a movement that threw them out of balance. Other people, in clusters, joined me at the railing and we watched the patterns in the water. All of us at Turtle Pond were in various states of shock, having absorbed the weight of grief that fell on us that morning.

For months after 9/11, television news outlets aired repeat footage of the day. They shared stories of victims' families and revisited the sadness. Then every year on the anniversary of the attack, there were television specials to remind us of things we promised we'd never forget. Those programs weren't wholly contrived by networks to cash in on people's sympathy. On a deeper level we were trying to return to feelings of compassion and selflessness, to remember how good it felt for a little while to love other people, to love strangers, to be generous. Those feelings of genuine love and connection were stunning — a result of being stunned. They come back to me from time to time, but not as powerfully.

This past May, my partner and I took the train from Baltimore into Manhattan for a day trip after being double-vaccinated in April. We needed a small taste of freedom after staying home for more than a year. It was a beautiful, cloudless day, the sky blue, the weather perfect. We walked through Central Park on the Upper West Side and found a small pier near the Great Lawn where we could gaze into muddy green water. It took me a minute to realize I was standing at the same railing at Turtle Pond. I hadn't been to that spot since 9/11. The turtles were exactly as I remembered them. The dock, with strangers, just as quiet and peaceful. There was unspoken tension in the air, just as there had been on 9/11, though it was different, not as heavy yet more pervasive. We all knew what it was. The fear we've come to live with was hidden behind our masks.

A week after 9/11, I discovered thousands of dollars had been charged to my phone bill on September 10th for calls to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. I had completely forgotten this part of my story. It seemed so ominous at the time, as if I'd unwittingly played a role in the attack, until I learned I was the victim of a standard scam. My calling card number had been stolen when I used it at a payphone at New York's Penn Station (calling cards and pay phones—remember those?). I alerted the F.B.I. with my tip, along with thousands of other people who had scraps of evidence, each of us thinking we might have a clue.

There is always so much we don't know and cannot foresee ahead of time. Monday, September 10th I met my friend Caleb for lunch. At that time, he was the closest thing to a creative genius that I knew. He was young, owned his own business, and had patents pending on his inventions. That afternoon, Caleb walked me through his company's cavernous workspace. There were mannequins and plaster heads and Army helmets and drawings everywhere. Caleb explained to me that his company had been commissioned by the Army to design state-of-the-art combat uniforms for soldiers in the year 2010. Funny to think that 2010 was still a decade into the future. Now it's a decade in the past.

I can say that his tour did not impress me as much as it probably should have. Neither of us knew that in October of 2001, the United States would invade Afghanistan and in August of 2021, after twenty years of fighting, we would leave Afghanistan in chaos. During those years, Caleb's business would become well-known and successful. But my visit with him was the day before 9/11, and tactical gear and the Army had very little to do with me, with my life. The helmets had night vision and were equipped for radio transmissions. They were molded from the crowns of expressionless plaster heads. The crowns were lined up on a shelf, a row of average-sized heads.

There were mini-computers designed for combat and I was amazed by it all while understanding very little of what Caleb said. I was happy to see my friend, but indifferent to the Army paraphernalia.

I had been living in a state of false security. "I hadn't had the right amount of fear." That's what I wrote in my notes back then. Now I wonder: *what is the right amount of fear to live with?* To be human is to live in a state of false security. We may get tactical gear and guns and store food in bunkers and prepare for the worst; we may worry to the point of feeling anxious and depressed, but things never unfold how we expect. Case in point: Immunologists study viral pandemics to prepare for them and mitigate their spread, but who could've predicted the second viral misinformation campaign that reduced the pandemic to a hoax and infected part of the population as quickly and destructively as each new wave of COVID-19?

9/11 was not just an external attack on buildings and people, but a damaging internal attack American's trust and connection to others. Being told by the president to do the things we normally do meant, on some level, that we were being asked to forget. The attacks could've been an invitation to relate to each other differently, to accept our vulnerability, to love each other's broken heartedness. That was my wish. For others, blame, anger, and partisanship took over as soon as the planes crashed. A hostile spirit erupted, a desire to fight. Flags were displayed on every other car and house, on bridges and overpasses and mailboxes, as though patriotism was a form of fearlessness. There was a sign in my neighborhood that read, "Let's Nuke 'Em!" It was painted on a scrap of lumber and nailed to a telephone pole forming a cross. (Not the first time the crucifix was calling for war.) A friend told me she saw a sign on September 13th at the Beachside Seafood Market in Neptune Beach, Florida. It read, "Terrorists Beware. We have Snow Crab legs."

How surreal it was that fearlessness was the goal. It was impossibly demanding that I should be expected to live without fear, as though I had none before. Fear is still being politicized by people who don't want to wear masks or get vaccinated, who want to do what they'd normally do as though the pandemic didn't exist. They showed up in tactical gear with AK-47s at the state houses in Michigan and elsewhere, demanding elected officials reopen schools and businesses. Then they showed up on January 6th at the insurrection because they'd been infected by another virus, the Big Lie that told them the election had been stolen. Where once the fight was directed at terrorists, now we aimed it at each other.

Twenty years ago, the collapse of two towering buildings wiped out my petty concerns about everyone around me. My mind was silent without the usual day-to-day judgments about my family or partner or strangers on the street. For a few strangely cathartic days in September, the judging voice inside me shut up, finally speechless. That brokenhearted silence left room for compassion and universal love. I'm sorry to say the pandemic has not produced the same universal love in me. I have less patience for people who were infected by the second virus, the misinformation virus, the virus that threatens democracy. The difference between a sudden terrorist attack and a prolonged pandemic is not the quality of broken heartedness or even the fear. It is the duration — we are worn down now — and it is the separation, which is physically and politically acute.

In November of 2001, when the anthrax scare happened, I took to the woods of West Virginia to forget about fear by backpacking through the wilderness. I found out too late I wasn't far enough from a military base to avoid the ruckus. While I hiked, the world's worries swooped above me as Air Force planes flew exceptionally low through the mountains on training missions. It felt as if they were patrolling my campsite, and I realized it was impossible to get away. What had happened on that sunny morning in September had repercussions everywhere, even deep in the woods of what was supposed to be my solitude. With each pass, I saw the underbellies of planes, gray and fat winged. If I was familiar with airplanes the way bird watchers study their species, I would've known the make and model of those planes. I would've been able to tell you about the aggressive large birds with unimaginable wingspans and hideous roars that passed overhead. They may've been migrating on their way to somewhere else. It was the migration season, after all, the leaves red, yellow and orange, the field grasses several shades of brown. Everything was a different color, including the air, the sounds, the meanings I was giving them. I remember I heard a single gunshot echo through the mountains, its sound loud and hollow, impossible to trace. I didn't feel threatened, but I imagined what it might've sounded like to a soldier. I pictured myself somewhere else, climbing over hills, weeding my way through brush, loaded down with fear and ammunition. In this scenario, I would heed the sound of gunshots as though I were counting the seconds between lightning and thunder to track the approach of a storm. Not knowing where the gunshot came from, I imagined I might have to duck and run for cover. I might have to crawl on my belly. I might not know if I was moving closer or farther away.

I became addicted to the news to mitigate my fear. I listened to all of it after 9/11 until I couldn't listen anymore. I listened again When Donald Trump was elected. Every day there was loss and despair, countries in conflict: the United States, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, India, Pakistan, Kashmir, Yemen, China, Russia and so on. The combination of countries that didn't like each other *plus* suicide bombers, terrorists, lying politicians and military action *equals* what? Fear and ammunition.

Somewhere I read that the only fear we are born with is the fear of loud noises. Being human means there are fears involving ego to contend with: fear of losing what we have, fear of not getting what we want. We develop and practice all the rest.

As a child, I was afraid of Russia, nuclear war, killer bees, and the end of the world. A friend of mine is afraid of snakes and cancer, in that order. Fear has always been an operable part of my days, though it's more complex and contradictory: fear of failure, fear of success, fear of commitment, fear of abandonment. Fear has a million faces.

After 9/11, Americans hoarded rolls of toilet paper and boxes of powdered milk and cereal in their basements. They stashed money in envelopes just in case. People turned their otherwise paneled family rooms into bunkers. In 2020, we quarantined in our homes and did pretty much the same thing. To live without fear — that's something that only spiritual prophets have been able to pull off.

I'd also forgotten the reason I started writing my notes in the first place. I'd heard someone say in a group discussion that he felt the extreme emotions of 9/11 were produced by the media. I didn't know back then that the media would be under attack now, so rereading that detail makes me realize how our current problems have deep roots. The man who spoke twenty years ago said he didn't think we should get so upset because tragedies like this happened to other people throughout the world, throughout history. I thought then and I still think now that what he said was dangerous. He was disallowing the natural expression of fear, anxiety, confusion and despair to present itself. What do we do with pain if we don't acknowledge it? It doesn't vanish, of that I'm sure. It has to be cleared away at some point, painstakingly picked through, then bulldozed like the mountains of debris tangled from the towers.

Even if we could blink and make pain disappear, I believe we should feel it precisely *because* tragedy has happened to others. It is our common feelings of fear and love that unite us as human beings. My feelings of fear and grief connect me with others, with the rest of the world, with my neighbor down the street whom I don't particularly like because he's a conspiracy theorist.

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that," said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that... the chain reaction of evil — hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars — must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation."

I like to think it's possible that bombs have the potential to disperse love as well as fear. On 9/11, I believe love exploded into us at the same speed and magnitude as those planes. Love is that powerful. It's a force strong enough to make me feel compassion for strangers, potent enough to still me, profound enough to humble me into being kind. Love and fear are related. Somehow my fear triggers love, causes it to come out of hiding, enables me, in part, to love and be loved. On the morning of September 12, 2001 I was stranded in New York City waiting to go home. I went to a deli on the Upper West Side for coffee and a pastry. The place was packed and I was lucky to find a small table next to the wall. I ate my croissant quietly and watched the people around me talking and chewing in various states of disbelief. There was the slow beginning of life again, almost as we'd known it before, and I was confused because it all seemed too normal. But I couldn't say this, couldn't fully articulate anything, not even a simple 'no' when asked if I wanted cream and sugar in my coffee.

I saw a man who was standing with a tray in his hands, his coffee and his pastry, searching the room for an empty table. The deli was milling with people and he was lost with no place to sit. He saw me looking at him, so I moved my tray a half inch toward me. That's all. He saw it and said in nearly a whisper, "Are you sure?" and the only thing I did was this: I barely nodded. He sat down at my table across from me. We didn't greet each other or discuss the bombings and we were alike in that regard, unable to fully speak. We didn't glance at each other except from the side, so I can't tell you much about the man with whom I shared a table except that he was middleweight with gray hair, and that he was hurt and stunned and grateful.

He finished his coffee before me and stood up. “Thank you,” he said. “I really appreciate it.” His voice was on the brink of tears.

“You helped me too,” I wanted to say, but I couldn’t get it out. I barely nodded. He left and I was sad to see him go. He was company for a while, our silence had been compassionate, almost intimate.

That man, that morning, was a cause for gratitude. To share a table with a stranger — perhaps that’s what it means to live without fear.