A Day of Mourning

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Originally written for the Rolfe High School alumni web site.
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I don't carry patriotism on my sleeve. I even winced last night when Kimberly, the 10-year-old daughter of a close friend here in Gilbert told me that everyone was supposed to wear red, white, and blue colors to school today. She wondered why I winced. I knew I should be careful in responding and replied that perhaps some people would chose to wear a T-shirt with the slogan, "Pray for world peace." After all, the last time I saw Kimberly, she had a T-shirt that said, "I broke the rules today and prayed in school," so my suggestion did not seem inconsistent with her values or those of her mother who was in the room with us.

It was interesting, in fact eerie, a few moments later, while her mom was finishing sewing alterations on a pair of slacks, that Kimberly and I spontaneously began singing the national anthem. And it was in a soft manner, more as though the song was a hymn of tenderness than about bombs bursting in air. She and I each looked at each other, then at her mom, as we tried to recall all the words. We managed to make it all the way through the song, albeit with some hesitation and getting off key.

I was reminded of a front page news photo years ago of an airliner that had lost much of its fuselage due to an explosion in mid-air with a full load of passengers aboard. What was impressive was the report of how everyone spontaneously joined in singing the hymn "Amazing Grace."

I am not a morning person. In fact, most people who know me know I am a late riser. As I puttered around the apartment and ate my whole grain porridge, I was at a loss as to what I should focus on for the day. Actually, I haven't been very motivated all week, and some of that may have to do with the heat, humidity, and high ragweed count we have been facing. But some of my lack of energy and focus is a result of the weight of the news of the attack on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon on Tuesday of this week. I'm hesitant to admit that those events haven't hit me as viscerally as they have hit some people. My thinking has been more caught in a concern about a quickness on the part of some official agencies and citizens to be vindictive. However, the past two nights, fear and worry about the future have crept through my filters, making sleep harder to come by than usual.

Various thoughts wafted about my fuzzy mind. This was to be a day of national mourning with commemorative events to be held in the Ames area and around the country. I had already missed the candlelight vigil held Tuesday night at the Unitarian Fellowship in Ames and had hardly a clue as to when and where events were being held locally today. And besides, I wondered if I really wanted to go to something such as a mass rally on central campus at Iowa State. For sure, I would go to church on Sunday—something I had skipped quite frequently during the summer months. I believe that being part of "community" is essential and that church and other faith groups are an important avenue for people to feel connected.

After finishing breakfast, I walked two blocks to the Post Office. Along First Street—a residential street lined with walnut trees and that is the epitome of small town life—I saw several flags waving in the cool breeze.

One was at the large, white house where Al and Elaine and their family live. Al had been a missionary in Indonesia until the political climate there forced him to return to the States in 1993. Elaine is a pediatrics nurse at MacFarland Clinic in Ames. Prior to today, I had never seen a flag flying at their home. I walked past the green, ranch style home where Fred and Linda live. He's about my age, is on the city council with me, and farms for the university—giving him the advantage of getting to be a farmer but not having to worry about the grain market. Instead he gets a salary. Linda is an administrator at Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames. A flag was also flying at their home. It was at half mast on a simple, white flag pole planted in the front lawn. As I walked further, there were other flags at half mast at the Gilbert Fire Department and the Post Office. Seeing a flag at half mast has always had a somber effect on me. Events come to my mind, including the assassination of John F. Kennedy when I was a freshman at Iowa State.

I picked up my mail at the Post Office, then did some brief business at City Hall, then walked back along the tree-lined street. In the distance, where the street came to a dead end, I could see the back side of the Gilbert middle school and high school where the buses were parked beside the bus barns. I wondered if the school was holding commemorative activities or perhaps engaged in as normal a routine as possible. My mind shifted back to a conversation I had recently had where a phrase I had learned in seminary as well as a chant had come to my mind.

The phrase is, "Don't let someone else's suffering rob you of experiencing your own suffering." In the days I was in seminary, many students and faculty members were involved in social activism focused on everything from apartheid in South Africa, to the U.S. military involvement in Nicaragua, to the homeless and poor and to worldwide hunger. It was either a faculty member or guest lecturer who had introduced the phrase. What he meant was that it is easy to get emotionally charged and focused on the pain that other people are suffering and repress the suffering in our own lives and neglect to find ways to deal with our own issues and to nurture ourselves.

My heart is heavy for many reasons this week.

The reports of emergency room work in New York City remind me of letters I have gotten recently from Bruce Beckord (RHS Class of 1961) who is an emergency room physician. He's actually based in Boulder, Colorado, but serves a variety of hospitals in the western states. Occasionally Bruce has sent e-mail memos entitled "0300 in ER." I can not fathom how a person can work in the kind of environment Bruce describes. But my point for referring to his letters is that every day, people are involved in headline and non-headline trauma. And often, there is little that Bruce or his staff can do for the people either medically or logistically. Sometimes there are no emergency rooms available for a patient at either his hospital or other facilities.

A friend and I went on a photo excursion yesterday to the farmstead where she had grown up and the family home place farm where her mother had lived. Soon she may be taking a writing job in the Chicago area with the Church of the Brethren and is awaiting word regarding her candidacy for the position. She currently works two jobs—one at a home for disabled persons and the other a freelance copy editor for technical departments at Iowa State. She says she would like to remain in Iowa, but if she remains here, she will have to take on a third job in order not to thrive but simply "to squat."

The farms we visited were like so many around the Rolfe area—vastly different than when they thrived with activity in past decades.

Janis and I talked about the attacks on New York and Washington and how people would be quick to retaliate rather than understand that the best form of national defense is to share power and resources more equitably in the world.

Janis and I also talked at length about rural and small town life and how the agricultural economy is in really bad shape. It's hard for some people to realize how bad things are because the tragedy of the farm scene doesn't have the kind of visual impact for television like airliners hitting the Trade Towers and the subsequent collapse of those icons of American prosperity.

We went to the McCallsburg cemetery where Janis feels a close attachment. She asked if I had anything to stand on so she could get a better view for photographing the place. I remembered that my friends Mark and Connie live on a farm near McCallsburg and suggested going to their place to see if they had a step ladder we could borrow. Mark and Connie are both active in the Practical Farmers of Iowa organization, and Mark once served in Haiti for the Mennonite mission program. (He is quick to point out that mission work is not the same as missionary work—i.e. no proselytizing).

We found Mark in his machine shed listening to NPR and preparing his combine for harvest. He was most willing to loan us a step ladder. He also took time to talk with Janis and me about the attacks on Tuesday and about the farm economy. Again, there was a concurrence of thought that vengeance, hate, and domination of the world are not the right attitudes. And again, there was a discussion of the rural economy. I said that my income for the last farm year was pretty good but that 40 percent of my net income had come from government subsidies. I asked Mark how the federal government's budget shortage and the events of this week would effect the farm economy.

He responded that he knew many farmers who said they weren't going to survive financially even with government assistance.

I never thought the kind of life that I knew growing up in Iowa would be jeopardized. I always thought there would be family farms, even if I hadn't figured out how to be part of the scheme of things personally. I always thought farming would be valued and farmers treated fairly. I never thought this way of life would be endangered by exploitative and alien forces, including governmental policy, which care little about rural values. However, had I studied history closer

or looked beyond my family's prosperity and myth system, I would have been aware that many of these issues have confronted farmers throughout the history of the Midwest. Now the picture is critical and nearly impossible to ignore.

That which I call the ‘rural Iowa culture’ is really quite young, about 150 years old. It's hard to think that in such a short time our heritage has barely been planted and risen up, only to fade away or become something very different than our ancestors envisioned.

I am reminded that a friend from Rolfe recently wrote an e-mail saying, "Pocahontas County is dying. There is little new economic development occurring, and the businesses that remain are barely surviving. Each year a few close and no new ones take their place. We are forced to leave the area to shop."

A heaviness has also settled on me after Janis and I paid a surprise visit to an older couple in Colo. I had originally met Don and Rosie Grant in the early 1990s when I interviewed him for my documentary project about the road I grew up on. (The farm where Don grew up is one of those places along the road I grew up on that is now cleared and covered with row crops each year—corn and soy beans.) Janis had met the couple when she frequented the small cafes in the Colo area. During that time, Don and Rosie kept insisting that Janis should look me up because our work of documenting our rural heritage was so similar. Janis followed their advice, and that’s how we became friends; however, the four of us had never gotten together at the same time.

Don graduated from Rolfe in 1936 and had run around with my dad. In fact, Don tells a story about Dad coming to the Grant farm on a Sunday afternoon to string an antenna for Don’s ham radio station. One of the grandest things about my road project has been getting to meet fine people and hear their stories. Don and Rosie have been terrific, not only in letting me record lots of their stories and loaning me some great old photos of the Grant farm, but in making me feel at home when I moved back to Iowa. Rosie has always been a great Catholic and advised me to pray to Anthony, the saint of travel, for help in finding an apartment when I moved back to Iowa in 1993.

Don was an industrial engineering faculty member and advisor at Iowa State and Rosie was an eighth grade English teacher in Ames. Everyone that I know who knows Don and Rosie has great respect for the couple. Both are thoughtful yet have a great sense of humor. They tend to have liberal thoughts and have an admirable tolerance and compassion for people. I’ve known for a number of years that Rosie is dealing with Parkinson’s Disease. I also knew that Don was getting thinner and thinner the past few times I visited him.

Janis and I have spoken often about the sense of being called to the kind of work we do in documenting our rural heritage and how we often don’t know where it will lead us. Neither of us had thought of visiting Don and Rosie yesterday until we were driving past Colo. The clouds had gotten too gray for doing photography, and a light rain had begun to fall. It wasn’t time for lunch, and we were in no hurry to be anywhere, so it seemed most appropriate to stop by and see the Grants.

It was as if the Spirit had led us to Don and Rosie's house. Their daughter, Ellen from Tennessee, greeted us at the door. Something seemed vastly different, and I realized when I saw him that Don was not the same man I knew when I first met him some 10 years ago. He was dressed for the day and sitting in his easy chair. He conversed some with us but was frail and quiet.

We had not only a good visit, but a very special one. Don has cancer and has decided not to fight it with chemotherapy or radiation. Our conversation had its moments of tenderness, sobriety, and humor—of hugs, tears, and smiles—even some chuckles.

Rosie wanted to show us the gift she had received for her 80th birthday last March from "Old Dad" (a term she uses endearingly for Don). Ellen brought in a small, antique, shining white, porcelain music box shaped like an old-fashioned Victrola record player and played it for us. The five of us smiled when we heard the tune, "Let me call you sweetheart."

Rosie and Don are a pair of lovebirds. But the love isn't that of young love such as the times they were dating at Iowa State and visited Don's folks and necked in the hammock on the farm. Or when Don was a radar cadet at Yale University and he and Rosie ate at the restaurant in New Haven where Glenn Miller dined. Or when the couple danced at the Friday night cadet dances where Miller and his band performed. Or when they were married in 1944 at the Catholic chapel on the Yale campus the day after Don was commissioned before being shipped out to Florida and later to Europe as part of the Air Corp's Pathfinder Division.

This day, the love was mature and pervasive, touching each heart in the room, enveloping us in a sacred circle. We were silent, and the air stood still. The sound was as pure as the ring of a bell in a Tibetan meditation hall, and the music—speaking a language of its own—said everything that needed to be said. It enabled us to feel both the intense sorrow and the beauty of the day. Even though none of us used the word "good-bye," it seems that was what our encounter was about.

Not only did Don run around with my dad when they were kids, but Don's parents, Cap and Addie Grant, were friends of my grandparents, John and DeElda Gunderson. They all belonged to a couples club called the Country Jakes, but being good Methodists, they couldn't play anything that resembled poker so they used a special deck of cards to play a game called Somerset. Don refers to his dad as a "dirt farmer" and his mother as a master gardener and cook. When she went to town in the Model T, she always took a basket of fresh vegetables, if they were in season, or jars of canned goods to people in need.

The loss of Don will not only be the loss of a friend I have known for a decade but will be the loss of one of my father's friends, and represents the loss that so many of us have had of ancestors who settled our small towns and rural areas.

My heart is usually heavy at this time of year because October is the anniversary of my grandfather John's death in 1956. I was 11 at the time and recall someone coming to the door of my sixth-grade classroom and telling me I was supposed to go to Superintendent Mortensen's

office. The room was a place I associated with discipline for misbehaved students. But when I arrived, my siblings and mother were there, and she told us that Grandpa had died. Years later, I would piece together the events. He had a stroke the previous afternoon and was rushed from his farm to the hospital in Ft. Dodge where he died. I could probably write a long essay just about him, but for now, suffice it to say, I never got a chance to say good-bye to Grandpa.

He and I were very close, and I understand some of the reasons for our closeness. For instance, we were each the third of six children in our respective families, and when he was born, there were three children under the age of four, and when I was born there were three children under the age of three. And we both loved horses. And I could visit him and Grandma at the home place farm and be treated much differently—almost as an only child—than I was in my own large family. But there is also a mystery as to why we felt so close. Unfortunately, I hardly grieved his passing until I was in my forties. I keep thinking that I will get past the grief, but I often wonder how long it will take.

I am also reminded of a friend in California who has come up against the prison system. It seems the justice system has gone amuck and there is little recourse for fair treatment. When I asked my good friend Kamala, whose husband who had been sentenced to eight years in state prison, if she knew what his address would be, she said that authorities had taken him from the Napa prison a week earlier and that she had no idea where her husband was. Kamala is a fine, calm woman who has nary a hurtful bone or thought in her system. When I said that it seemed unfair to take a person away with no announcement of his whereabouts for over a week and suggested the situation sounded somewhat like the police state of Nazi Germany, Kamala surprised me by agreeing with my analysis, and said it was getting to seem like that more and more.

I am also reminded of the stress of a friend who is working in a hostile environment. She said that Tuesday night she cried a lot but felt guilty because her tears weren't for the people suffering in New York or Washington but were for her own pain and sense of helplessness.

And I am reminded of what a therapist said this week about the need to reflect on the ways in which we personally terrorize our own beings and to find ways of nurturing ourselves.

My primary concern all week in relation to the attack on New York and Washington is the hurry for some people to be vindictive. Yes, the events that happened are an atrocity of a magnitude that has never happened within the United States. And yes, justice must be done. But to turn pain and anger into hatred and be quick to project that hatred and subsequence violence on other people or nations means that we also become terrorists. It is one thing to seek justice, but as William Sloan Coffin, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York, said during the years I was in seminary, we must be careful in our fervor to seek justice in order that we not become damned good haters.

The chant that came to mind today is based on a passage in Psalms. The words go like this:

> The Lord is my strength
> The Lord is my strength
> The Lord is my strength and my salvation
> Whom shall I fear
> Whom shall I fear
> The Lord is my strength and my salvation.

I learned the chant in a liturgical dance workshop, where the room full of participants recited the words in the style of a cantor, but moving spontaneously and singing the phrases through various emotional levels. We experienced what was so often true for the writer of Psalms—we began with lamentations and ended with expressions of joy. It wasn't that we forced the feelings, but by being true to our own sorrow and other pain, we were able to emerge with an energy and motivation for life.

The chant established a cadence for my steps as I walked back along First Street. Then in the distance, I heard drum sounds coming from the high school. I wondered if the school was holding an outdoor memorial service with a performance by the band or if the band was practicing for an upcoming football game. It was hard to tell, but the drum sounds then became the cadence for my steps.

I am also reminded of something we learned in our seminary introduction to the Old Testament. It has to do with the way many people from the United States interpret scripture and claim that God is on Uncle Sam's side. The lesson was that in Old Testament times, Israel was a third-rate nation. Its turf was a passageway for powerful countries who had little value for the land except as a place to cross for international trade and warfare. We were told that in determining the essence of a scriptural passage in preparation for a sermon (a process called "exegesis"), we need to think of currently under-developed countries whose modern day situations parallel Israel's plight during the era represented in Hebrew scripture.

How often does a speech by our national leaders end with the words, "God bless America?" Yes, we want to be blessed and made whole. So do other countries, and it is good to remember that the message of the Old Testament seems more intended to provide strength to struggling countries than to all-powerful ones. That's why I think it is well to pray for world peace.

I am also reminded of the yin and yang of life—that there is always light and darkness in the world.

How often do we know of an octogenarian who dies about the same day that a new child is born into a family? Don and Rosie's son John and his wife are about to have their first child.

How often is an exquisite work of art with long-lasting impact created during a time of intense duress?

During the Thirty Years' War in the 1600s, Martin Rinkart wrote the hymn "Now Thank We All Our God." As the web site, "cyberhymnal.org" reports, Rinkart was a Lutheran minister in Eilenburg, Saxony, and saw a steady stream of refugees pour through its gates. The Swedish army surrounded the city. Famine and plague were rampant. Homes were destroyed. There was a tremendous strain on pastors who conducted dozens of funerals daily. Finally the pastors, too, succumbed, and Rinkart was the only one left—doing 50 funerals a day. When the Swedes demanded a huge ransom, Rinkart left the safety of the walls to plead for mercy. The Swedish commander, impressed by the pastor's faith and courage, lowered his demands. Soon afterward, the Thirty Years' War ended, and Rinkart wrote this hymn for a grand celebration service.

> "Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
> Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
> Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
> With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.
>
> O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
> With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
> And keep us still in grace, and guide us when perplexed;
> And free us from all ills, in this world and the next."

The Fall season of death and dying and letting go is also the time of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur—the Jewish day of atonement and new year—important days for reflection and taking stock of what is important.

Working with prairie reconstruction in the past few years and learning about plant life helps me understand the season. Often I have walked the railroad right-of-way near Rolfe harvesting prairie seed. Touch is one of the keys to knowing if the seed is ready for harvest. If the seed head comes off the stem with an easy tug of the hand, then it is mature and ready to leave the plant. Prior to working with prairie, I had always viewed the process of the seed falling from the plant as a sad event. But now I realize that the parent plant has provided the seed with everything it needs for new life. I am not enough of a botanist to know all the elements, but certainly there would be the genetic makeup and protective devices the seed needs to survive a harsh winter—or perhaps even several years in the ground—before emerging into new life. If the Biblical writers would have resided in the context of tall grass prairie rather than in the Middle East, they probably would have used the prairie for their many parables. The illustration of the plant letting go of its seed provides great fodder for a parable about death and new life being two sides of the same coin.

I got back to my apartment, still restless and wondering what to do with the day. Then I got out my digital camcorder which can take still shots and went back to Al and Elaine's home and photographed their flag. It did seem a day to be patriotic first and be slow to preach sermons or otherwise act righteously and not admit that the events of the week were troubling me.

As I photographed the flag, I heard bells tolling from the Evangelical Free Church across town. And when I got back to my apartment and turned on my radio shortly after noon, I heard the

concluding hymn from the prayer service at the National Cathedral coming live via National Public Radio. The people were singing The Battle Hymn of the Republic that commentator Neal Conan described as an "anthem of determination." It seems that "determination" is a much better mindset than one of "vengeance" or "hatred."

In President Bush's address at the National Cathedral, he said, "Our responsibility to history is already clear: To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."

I agree that we have a responsibility to history, but I do not believe it is possible to rid the world of evil. Evil is part of life, and I am nervous when people use the term "evil" too easily or point to other people as being "evil." That's probably one reason the Presbyterian committee that reviewed my candidacy for ministry was uneasy with my theology.

It seems important to realize that we are not isolated from evil nor above committing evil.

What about some of the acts of our own government? How do we respond when someone else calls us evil? It has happened.

Also, it seems that an attempt to "rid the world of evil"—even if an attainable goal—would require evil on our part.

Following the hymn, a pastor delivered a traditional benediction which included the phrase, "Render unto no one evil for evil." That is my prayer, even though I am not very good at following its content.

The color guard and President Bush and Laura Bush left while other people remained standing. Then the bells of the National Cathedral rang, and Neal reflected about the sound of those bells on a day that was otherwise one of "supernatural quiet around the city."

The ringing resounds in our small towns and cities. It resounds across the airwaves and in the air in general. It resounds in our hearts and resonates with the human spirit. It tolls not only for you and me but for all who are heavy hearted and hope for justice and a renewal of life.

Perhaps I am more patriotic than I sometimes think. I am not wearing red, white, and blue colors, nor do I own a flag. However, let this reflection be the symbol of patriotism I hoist in commemoration of the events and thoughts of this week. And let it be an acknowledgment of the yin and yang of life and a desire to do a healthier job of living with both dimensions.

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