

Column – 9/11, a quarter of a century later

I once read of a flood where a group of dazed animals were found standing together on a small patch of dry ground. What made this scene odd was that both predators and those upon whom they traditionally prey were standing together.

I have no idea whether this incident actually happened, but it is a good picture of what we saw after 9/11. For the most part, Americans put their differences aside. The bleating of the perverse purveyors of “identity politics” went silent. “United we stand” became the watchword of the day. Like the stranded animals on the patch of dry land, all Americans were in this crisis together.

One American who was overseas at the time of the attack reported that when he was finally able to fly home, found himself in a different country. Walking through the airport, hymns were playing over the loudspeakers. There were far fewer people, and those who were there were speaking in hushed tones.

I had a similar experience. One day before the Sept. 11 attack I took a visiting scholar to the Atlanta airport and walked with him to his gate. People were doing what they customarily do at airports. Harried gate agents were examining tickets and checking in luggage. People were hurrying to catch their flights. In the waiting areas, people were watching through the plate-glass windows as planes landed and took off.

Two weeks later when I arrived at the same airport for a flight to Newark I found, like the man I just told about, myself in a different country. There were soldiers with machine guns throughout the ticketing area. The agents at the counter were extra kind and attentive, thanking passengers for flying. No one was accompanying friends and family members to their gates. Security was at an all-time high.

When I arrived at my departure gate, a group of men working for a surveying company were already there. A black man seeing my clerical collar came and sat down beside me and asked if I was going to

be on the flight to Newark. When I said yes, he said he had been praying for someone like me to be on the flight. He then proceeded to offer me a portion of the sandwich he had bought. As it turned out, we were seatmates.

The following day while walking in Manhattan, I was amazed at how kind everyone was being. It was like being in a small Southern town. People were holding doors for others and talking to strangers.

My most memorable experience was walking into the Cathedral of St. John the Divine unaware a memorial service for the employees of the Windows of the World was in progress. After the first plane entered the North Tower, those on the floors above the point of entry, including those working and eating in this iconic restaurant, were trapped and perished.

It is one thing seeing grieving people on television; it is quite another to be handed a lighted candle and to stand beside them as tears flowed from their eyes. Speakers at this service included Senator

Hillary Clinton and Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Political rhetoric was put aside. There was only concern for the suffering.

What have we learned from 9/11? Apparently not much, as hate is strong and mocks the message of “United we stand.” Might it not be time to put those banners back up and this time really mean and live those words?

KEEP, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy Church with thy perpetual mercy; and, because the frailty of man without thee cannot but fall, keep us ever by thy help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the 15th Sunday after Trinity, Book of Common Prayer)

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