

STRICKEN

On Friday, the eve of the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, I re-read some of what I wrote in The Paduan back then. Allow me to share some of it with you today:

(Remember our church had burned down the preceding Christmas.)

*On Wednesday I said Mass for the children in grades Kindergarten to Third. I had an altar set up outside, over by the tree at the corner of the cemetery. The children brought out their chairs and sat with their teachers and classmates. The theme for the Mass was kindness and mercy. My soul was thrilled with joy to see these little ones singing and gesturing about how God reigns over all. They held their arms up in the air and swayed back and forth as they sang that refrain. When it came time for the Our Father, all the children joined hands with their partners and they prayed the Lord's Prayer slowly and aloud. The day's weather was beautifully sunny and cool and cloudless. The little ones had no idea that they were giving me something, giving something to all the teachers and staff and the parents who were present. Their simple love, their very presence, their little faces, their trust and prayer all served to shore up the shaken foundations of our adult lives.*

*On Tuesday I, like all Americans, had lost something so precious and so dear. My sense of security and safety had been shaken and taken from me forcibly. I shook my head in disbelief as I viewed over and over again the intentional carnage caused by the evil machinations of a few fanatical bigots. I felt waves of anger I had not felt in a long time. I felt the desire to "right the wrong" emerge into my consciousness. I felt a cold inner chill grow in me. I began to feel that we as a nation were somehow justified in doing "whatever it takes" to bring them to their just desserts.*

*But I have thought some more since then and I have prayed some more since then and other thoughts and feelings have emerged from within me. Justice is one thing and we are called to pursue it. Retribution and revenge are other things and they contradict our faith. We are not called to pursue them. Why is it that the injured party has to be the one to show restraint and act not only courageously but rightfully? Because that is how God is. Because that is the face of God shown us in the person of Jesus. Because integrity and justice and courage bring life, and getting even and causing more death and destruction and pain never does. The answer for us is not creating more widows and widowers and orphans on the other side of the planet, any more than their "answer" was creating such in America. We are called to take the moral high road here because that is what we have learned from the Lord. Perhaps the little ones can lead us in this arena where our emotions run so high and our fears so deep. At the very least we can just get down on our knees more and just pray.*

And then I read this in Peggy Noonan's column:

And what we lived through. How chic, hard shouldered New York was suddenly awash in religious imagery—prayer cards and pictures of saints, candles and statues—and no one resented it, everyone was generous, many joined in. We experienced 9/11 as a spiritual event. We saw an old-fashioned kind of masculinity come back. We looked for meaning. We grieved the firemen. Three hundred forty-three of them entered history that day when they went up the stairs in their 70 pounds of gear, and tried to impose order on chaos. We knew: Those outer borough boys were not part of the story but the heart of the story. We'll never get over them. We don't want to. So many of them, as you can hear

in their last phone calls, and in their faces in recent documentaries, understood they were on a suicide mission. But they stayed and wouldn't leave. Because they were firemen.

We talked about everyone who added that day to the sum total of human glory. For all the horrors and blunders that surrounded 9/11 and would follow it, there was always that, and always would be.

There was Welles Crowther. Remember him? A young guy, 24, just starting out, worked as a junior associate at an investment bank on the 104th floor of the south tower. He always carried in his back pocket a red bandanna, and they teased him. WHAT ARE YOU, A FARMER? He'd laugh and show bravado: WITH THIS BANDANA I'M GONNA CHANGE THE WORLD. And that day as the world exploded he did. He led people to safety, carried them down to lower floors. He kept going back for more. To protect himself from the smoke he put the bandanna over his face. He never came home from the towers that day or the day after, his parents were anguished, hoping against hope. Then one day, three days in, his mother was at her desk at home in Nyack, N.Y. Suddenly she felt a presence behind her. She didn't look, didn't move. She knew it was Welles. She knew he was saying goodbye. She said: "Thank you." She knew now he was dead. Months of mourning, no word on how he'd died. And one day, Memorial Day weekend 2002, the New York Times had a story about the last minutes in the towers, and they mentioned survivors who spoke of a man in a red bandanna who'd saved them. And Welles's mother thought she knew who that was. She got a picture of her son to the survivors and they said yes, that was the man who saved me. Some time later they found his remains, near the command post the firemen had set up in the South Tower. When his family opened his apartment they found an unfinished application to become a New York City fireman.

Just a few days before 9/11, on Labor Day weekend, Welles, visiting his parents, was unusually subdued. He told his mother he had a feeling he was going to be part of something big, had a role to play in it or a job to do. Isn't it funny how the mind works, how it knows things it does not know?

"Courage comes from love," was my summation in 2016. "There's a big unseen current of love that hums through the world and some plug into it more than others, more deeply and surely." It fills them with courage. It makes everything possible.

Isaiah the prophet says "I gave my back to those who beat me, who plucked my beard, who slapped my face and spit on me. But I, I set my face like flint. There was no disgrace. I endured the blows. God is my help."

Jesus of Nazareth hears Peter proclaim him to be the Messiah, the One who will save the world. Jesus replies to Peter and the Twelve by saying that "The Son of Man must suffer greatly, be rejected, be

killed. And then on the third day, rise. Whoever wishes to follow me must pick up his cross and follow me.” That’s the kind of Messiah I am. And the kind of Messiah the world needs.

My friends, as I sat in the Rectory on Friday afternoon I wept deeply. I felt stricken in my heart—as a nation. We have all been stricken a lot. And then recently, the covid—and then tornadoes. It just felt like too much. But then a question arose from within me: Could it ever be that instead of us hearing these words as an individual person, we can hear them as a citizen of a country? And the country takes on the persona? The country is cast in the role of suffering servant—for the good of the many?

And if so then is it not time for us as citizens of this great country, blessed by God, and full of really good people and yes, stricken as we are and have been, to set our faces like flint and endure the blows, and be rejected but hold the course and remain steadfast and true and believe that we have something here entrusted to us by God himself not just for us but for the whole world? It is true. Each of us has to step up. Each of us has a part. “And whoever will lose his life in this—will save it.” There is so much more going on that we realize. Our Eucharistic Lord is still with us. Let us look to the little ones in our midst. They need us—and we need them.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.