

## **Personal Reflections about September 11<sup>th</sup>.**

**These remarks were presented by David Kotok at a Vineland community ecumenical memorial service, St. Isidore Parish, 7:00 p.m., September 11, 2002**

September Eleven.

These two words are now a symbol.

9/11 has touched millions of our countrymen in thousands of communities.

Victims, survivors, families, friends, firefighters, police, rescue workers. The list is very long.

Here in Vineland, our town lost Don Adams. Many here were at that memorial service a year ago.

You remember. His family was in such pain and they had such dignity.

May his memory be blessed. We pray for their strength.

That memorial service was repeated a thousand times. In a thousand towns.

This is why 9/11 is so big. And so profound.....

My story is simple.

I am lucky to be alive.

I was attending an economics conference in the World Trade Center. I had checked in on Sunday.

By some stroke of fate, we were in a breakfast meeting on the ground floor of the Marriott Hotel that backed up to the south tower.

The speaker was half way through his speech when the first explosion rocked the room.

The luck to be on the ground floor. Pure luck.

Had our conference been at Windows on the World at the top of the North Tower.

Had we booked there like the Risk Management conference did.

Had that happened, most of us would be dead.....

We were lucky. They were not.

We got out. They did not.

How is it that one dies and the other does not?

It is a profound question.

I've told the story of my escape many times.

The spiritual questions are the unanswered ones.

Why was I so lucky and others were not?

Why did I remain alive? Why did I take one path that led me to escape?

Others took another path and died.

Going up instead of down. Left instead of right. North instead of South.

Sometimes this was the difference between life and death.....

I remember feeling guided. Some force was looking out for me.

Was it Suzy? Was it my father? Something kept me calm and gave me strength to make the right decisions.

I remember standing and looking at the first tower on fire.

I remember looking at the tall buildings in the Wall St. canyons.

I remember thinking about the fact that there are places in those canyons where the sun never shines.

And then, it became clearer for me. These places are shadows.....

I thought, you, David, are looking at the psalmist's metaphor.

This is the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Why did I stay calm and survive. I felt no personal fear.  
There I was. Staring at the work of evil. And not fearing it.

There are some questions we just cannot answer.....

I went back to Ground Zero a few weeks ago.

The rubble is cleared. Liberty St. is open.

There's a second floor walkway bridge across West St. I remember going under the old bridge when I got out last year.

When you look out the windows as you walk across.

You can see the chasm. That big pit of what was the World Trade Center complex.

I retraced my steps.

Out the emergency door of the Tall Ships bar. And onto Liberty Street.

Across West St. And up into the World Financial Center.

I remembered turning around the first time to look at the north tower on fire. I remembered thinking “what could possibly do that?”

The truth was not then known to me. The question should have been “who” and not “what”.....

What America must do about that “who” is the most important question facing our country today.

But that is the subject for a national policy discussion and not for an ecumenical memorial service.

For tonight we must respect the victims and the rescuers.

For tomorrow, we will have to deal with war.

I must confess that I felt impulses of war when I returned to Ground Zero. They came as I stood there and experienced 9/11 all over again.

I guess that is just a natural human feeling.

I remembered seeing the second explosion. I happened to be standing on Liberty St. and looking up at the first tower on fire, when the second plane hit.

I remembered the noise. It was the loudest sound I have ever heard.

I remembered the fireball. It was 20 stories high. I remember counting them.

I remembered the fear of the people. The panic in the scattering crowd. The bewilderment.....

All the images returned to me. They flowed into my head as I stood there. They were vivid. The burning towers are indelibly imprinted in my brain.

So are the jumpers. I saw five.

Five people who chose to jump to certain death rather than be burned alive in that inferno.

And I remembered the bleeding injured man in the blue uniform lying on the street.

And I remembered the hysterical mother with two children. Two small children. I grabbed her and shook her so she would stop screaming and take her babies away to safety.....

Yes, visual images of my Ground Zero history are now etched for life in my brain.

My mind played tricks with me as I looked up and found myself “seeing” an empty space.

“Aren’t the spaces between the notes the strongest in music?” I thought.

Isn’t the pause in a speech the element that gives power to the words.

Isn’t it the silent moment that enables the message to be carried to our ears.

It was really eerie for me.

This huge open space is only filled with air. Yet, it's raw with the power of emptiness.....

I've been thinking about all the TV shows that are filling the airways during this period. All this activity.

Not much quiet.

For me there have been interviews. Some here may have read them or seen them.

And tonight there are those very personal comments at this community memorial service.

What should I say to friends and neighbors exactly one year after? Was it right for me to tell you my personal story again?

What gives me the right to offer reflections?

All I did was be lucky enough to survive when others did not.....

The whole thing is so big.

It is such a profound experience.

It has killed so many. Three thousand innocent souls.

And it impacted millions of people in our country.

Like me, they are changed for the rest of their lives. No, that is not correct. We are all changed for the rest of our lives.

We really don't understand this. Not yet. Perhaps, not for a long while. We need some space. We need to reflect with solitude.

I wish there were some way to speak, with a single long powerful pause.

To use a respectful space. To convey the enormous emptiness.

Just some way to present the message.

And yet, to do it, only, with the silent note that sits between the music on the page.

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