What I Have Learned Since 9/11

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By Orlando Rodriguez

This reflection was offered on September 10th, 2004 at Fordham University, Rose Hill Campus, at the service commemorating Fordham alumni victims of the September 11th, 2001 tragedies.

One year ago, three months ago, I would not have been able to stand before you to talk about my son Greg's death on September 11th, 2001. I am glad I can now and I thank many of you for all the support you gave me that makes this possible.

I am a professor. I teach criminology, so I teach about the causes of violence. Like many criminologists, I don't believe in the death penalty, but our job as teachers is not to convince you of that, but to give you the intellectual tools by which you can make your own ethical judgments. But I don't come here as a professor, ready to analyze the social causes of violence. I come here to speak you as a member of our community.

Greg Rodriguez was 32 when he died, while working on the 103rd floor of Tower 1. Many of you may recognize his brothers in his life. Ambitious, uncleared, hard-working, a good brother to his sister, a good husband, a good son. He had been married for a year - his second marriage - when he died. Although his first marriage dissolved, Greg loved the product of that marriage, his new 13-year-old son. He kept a deep bond with him, a bond from which my wife and I immensely benefited.

Greg had everything going for him - a loving wife, a promising career, plans for having children. He enjoyed his work, scuba diving, rock and salsa, cooking gourmet meals. He made friends easily, yet kept his old friends, some of these friendships going back to elementary school.

I have learned that I can think of Greg's killers without anger boiling inside me.

If one thinks of the phrase "innocent victim," he was the perfect example. He disliked violence and saw through the posturing, self-hated and unhappiness that is the background to violence. So his death, like those of so many others, seemed the result of crazy, distorted thinking, and therefore unthinkable, hurting even more.

A bleak picture. Yet I can tell you that much good has resulted from his death. I would gladly trade off all this good for having him back; but, in the impossibility of that trade, I want to tell you how I have learned this simple lesson:

I have learned that it is possible to live two lives an outside life where you are and back ok — teaching, running a department, joking with colleagues, and a companion life of turbulence, where you bust over your losses. Over time you come to manage your two lives, so that you can be sad but not unhappy, enjoy life but within in a reservoir of darkness.

How is this possible? How can you live two contradictory lives without becoming
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whom I was able to comfort. I have learned that just as I have joined the suffering of others, we as a people have common bonds with victims in other lands — civilian and military. There are many Greg Rodrigueses all over this world: Palestinian and Israeli, Irish Catholic and Protestant, Russian and Chechen, Spanish and Basque, and yes, Iraqi and Afghan civilians who have died through our government’s actions. I have learned to equate their suffering with Greg’s.

I have learned that I can think about Greg’s killers without anger boiling inside me. His killers were five or six young men (Greg looked a lot like a few of them). Men who were so angry, so blinded by beautiful-sounding dreams about a better world coming for their people, that other human beings — the passengers on that plane, Greg and his co-workers — meant nothing to them, were less than human. I have been often tempted to think that these young men themselves became inhuman by what they felt and did. But I’m glad to say that I see them as human beings, as human as you, I, my son, deserving of what they themselves destroyed — life.

I have learned that we left a mad century of mutual violence, and as we continue this madness in our current century, peace-making becomes less and less of a utopian pipe-dream and more and more of a logical necessity — the only way in which we can prevent increasing mutual violence and our mutual destruction.

I have learned that my belief in the possibility of peace, is not just intellectual, that it has been tested by personal tragedy, and it is still intense, valid, life-giving.

Oriolbo Rodrigues is chair of the department of sociology and anthropology at Fordham University.