

Daily Lenten Devotional

Sunday, March 9, 2025

Written by Rev. Fred. Garry

I was in Princeton in 2002. It was June. I spent three weeks on the seminary campus working on my Doctor of Ministry. During the week there were lots of seminars and presentations, but the weekends were free. One Saturday I headed into the city. I wanted to see ground zero.



At this time the area where the tragedy occurred was a wall of fencing where you could spy heavy machinery excavating the remains of the towers. A makeshift viewing platform was constructed so to see down into the pit. I stood in line with the thousands who came every day.

As you inched your way closer to the platform, the other makeshift construction appeared: the long, continuous mound of offerings left to express grief and sorrow. There were flowers, both fresh and long dead. There were candles, lots and lots of candles. Children's drawings and notes tied to the chain-link fence. The bereaved had come and placed the pictures of the ones they lost on 9-11. Some photos were surrounded by mementos and personal items. Yet, what struck me most were the teddy bears and stuffed animals. Mounds and mounds of teddy bears.

Never before or since have I ever encountered so much grief. As a pastor I have walked into many hospital rooms where people are dying and loved ones are bereft. I have visited many homes grieving a loss to discuss and plan a funeral. Yet, never had I ever been so immersed in sorrow. The wall of flowers, cards, pictures, candles, and stuffed animals was overwhelming. Like everyone else who walked the path to the viewing platform, by the time I reached the overlook, I was as void as the excavation. I too had been emptied.

Although the items were collected and catalogued and some then displayed in the museum, nothing really could ever match the impromptu, the spontaneous expression of grief. It was raw and unyielding; there was a pure chaos juxtaposed by a profound clarity. In a few short years the site would have a new tower and two reflecting pools to mirror the foot print of the twin towers. The site would have trees in geometric pattern like a Spanish orangery. The pools would collapse one on to another as they descending to mirror the sense of loss yet be ever in motion, a perpetual baptism.

In the years that followed, I took two lessons from my visit to ground zero. The first was the notion of shrine. Knowing my fascination with all things related to burial and cemeteries, a friend asked me to explain the "roadside shrine." What is it mean to do? First, I said, it is not a shrine; it is a memorial. A shrine is a place where we go for healing because it has the power to do so. The relic, the water, the miraculous event that transpired in a place, according to legend, now holds the power to heal yet again. And a shrine is a place of remembrance to honor the dead, as in ancestors. This too seeks a blessing.

A roadside memorial is a place to grieve, to mark as tragic, to say, in essence, the world was injured here, killed here. A shrine is to bring life; a memorial is to mark its departure. My friend didn't like this answer so I tried to relate what I saw at ground zero. The pictures and candles, the flowers and notes, the teddy bears and children's drawings are the same as what you will find along the high way or at school where there

has been a mass shooting. People create a memorial not a shrine. Shrine would mean that this site brings life, a life is honored here. A memorial is a place where life is lost, where we remember the tragic loss of life as what is owed to them. The fence leading to the platform was an enormous memorial not a shrine.

The other lesson was something that bothered me a great deal from my visit in 2002 but I could never grasp. The teddy bears, the mounds of stuffed animals. I could never grasp, why these? For many years I wondered why would people bring a teddy bear to lay along the fence to mourn those who died on 9-11. This was not a school like the tragedy at Federal Building in Oklahoma City. There the teddy bears could have represented the children who died.

Years later in doing the research for this study I found the answer. The teddy bears are a sign of lost innocence. Knowingly or unknowingly the grief stricken lay these toys as a symbol of their childhood innocence now lost. And this too accounted for the profound grief of children and teens when a tragedy occurs. Theirs is doubly felt. The loss of life and the loss of innocence.

In the cascading pools on the site of former towers the design is meant to allow you to bring your heart as the memento. The vision of the architect was inspired by the Veteran's Memorial for Vietnam in Washington D.C. There as in Manhattan, the names of the lost are the only symbol. On the mall in D.C. the "wall" is meant to represent a gash or wound in the earth. Likewise the pools are meant to convey the mystery of loss and the depth of sorrow, like hole in the heart.

Each time I visit both the wall and the pools I am mindful of how they do not demand anything of the viewer. No image, no god, no hero, no symbol. It is as if let you make the meaning. Whatever your memory and loss, however close or far, personal or anonymous, you are invited to look into the water, to find your reflection in the names; to hear the silence of the gash and hear the water as it falls and find whatever solace may come.