

THEIR OPINIONS

local **view**

9-11 horror united us for a while

BY MICHELE MILES GARDINER

IT was 6:45 in the morning. The sun beamed through my front window. I looked out just in time to see a bluebird land on my trellis of jasmine, and I remembered to go outside to water the vine. I stood on my porch and took in a deep breath of the jasmine's perfume. The sun warmed my skin. Life was good.

I turned on the television.

A commercial airliner pierced a skyscraper and exploded into flames, leaving huge plumes of black smoke and a gaping hole in the building. The bottom of the television screen said, "Plane hits the World Trade Center." I sat down. Another image, from another angle — a plane flew toward the building. Was this an accident? I turned the channel.

The bottom of the screen said, "Pentagon Attacked." People in suits and dresses ran out of the smoking building.

My knees nearly buckled beneath me. I ran to wake my husband. My legs seemed weak and moved too slowly. I burst through the bedroom door.

"Get up now! Something major's going on!"

My husband ran behind me. My daughter heard the noise and joined us on the couch. My knees were shaking from images that were worse than any violent-action movie I'd ever seen. Strangely, the idea that we might be next didn't make me any more afraid than I had already become. My body wasn't capable of being any more terrified. Then, the three of us watched the New York skyline as one of the towers crumbled under a black cloud. It sank below the other buildings. Gone forever.

Later that morning, fooling myself into thinking the day could continue as usual, I went to a large electronics store. The store was empty but for a few shoppers and employees — and eerily quiet. At the back of the store, without sound, large-screen televisions played the horri-

ble images from different angles: A plane flying on an inevitable course exploded; people hung from broken windows above New York City; people jumped; one tower crumbled; another tower followed; dust-covered people with pained expressions walked on the Brooklyn Bridge.

"What am I doing?" I wondered. The world was different. I was trying to act as if life was just like it was the day before. It wasn't.

I woke up the next morning with an emotional hangover, not wanting to face the fact that the horror of the day before really happened. I felt different. Life was different. Everything was different.

The world around me was subdued. The sky was silent. No planes. The roads were emptier. Cars moved slower. People were quiet or soft-spoken. I wondered if I would ever laugh again.

Days later, I went to a bookstore to find something to take my mind off my obsessive worrying. I stood by a shelf of books and read. "Miss, would you like a seat?" a male customer asked. "Miss, can I help you with anything?" asked the woman behind the counter.

People were polite in ways I'd never experienced — helping each other in stores, giving each other the right of way on the roads, making eye contact and smiling as if to say, "I understand." Did they feel as I did?

Those people who died that day, like any of us, got up in the morning and planned on going to bed that night. Those people on the planes were just like me, just like the guy next to me in the grocery-store line, just like the woman holding her baby in the frozen-food aisle.



The people who jumped from buildings put on ties and pantyhose as they had every workday. Maybe some of them argued with spouses or worried about bills. But in the end, these ordinary people didn't have the luxury of taking life for granted. It could have been the person offering me a seat at the bookstore. Or it could have been me. That connection to other people is one thing I wish could have lasted.

I won't forget how parents wrote into newspapers, typed online and spoke on the radio about how they were going to do everything possible to spend more time with their families, because — on that day — the essence of life was condensed into one crystal-clear vision.

And for a beautiful moment, our celebrity-obsessed culture realized the insignificance of fame. People praised the firefighters, the police and the military — and political parties didn't even matter.

But time moved on. And when people eased into normalcy — bickering and honking at other drivers resumed — I stumbled upon a photo I clipped out of a newspaper from those horrific days; it was taken inside one of the World Trade Center tower's narrow stairways as people were heading down to evacuate. The people seemed to be helping each other. A fireman in his 20s with big brown eyes stared straight into the camera lens as he headed in the opposite direction — up the stairs, toward the flames.

That's what I want to remember — us at our best.

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