



“Where Was I? Where was God?”

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***Eden United Church of Christ
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Genesis 50:15–21 (NRSV)***

Athena Guy Malloy: “Where Was I?”

In my other life, a life without children (hard to believe!), I was an intelligence officer in the United States Army. I served 5 years active duty after being commissioned upon graduation from West Point and another 6 years in the National Guard. 9/11 occurred towards the end of my time in the National Guard, when I was Acting Battalion Commander for the 223rd Military Intelligence Battalion (Linguist). I particularly remember the weekend before 9/11 because we always had our drill weekend on the second weekend of the month, and it was also the first month I had become Acting Battalion Commander.

That weekend, my command staff had to provide a briefing to our higher brigade which consisted of an assessment of our level of preparedness and how we planned to train for our mission. When we completed our briefing, I remember the brigade commander mentioning to me that moving forward, most of our work would be in counter-terrorism. I was surprised, but filed that away and left drill Sunday night relieved that I had survived my first weekend as acting commander.

At that time, I would turn on National Public Radio (NPR) as I was getting ready for work. So on Tuesday morning of September 11, Chris had already left and I had just started my morning routine. I will never forget turning on the radio and wondering why there was nothing coming on the air from NPR. Then the announcer’s voice came on but, instead of the smooth delivery I was so used to every morning, the NPR announcer was at a loss for words. He said that something was happening at the World Trade Center (WTC) and that Morning Edition would continue as soon as they figured out what was going on. Then the phone rang, and it was my other primary news source, my mother. Since she lives in Michigan and is on Eastern time, she is able to call me and my siblings and surprise us with the latest newsflash. I couldn’t even listen to her because what I was hearing wasn’t making any sense, and I ended the call abruptly and told her I had to get ready for work.

On my drive into work, NPR reported the events of the morning, and the pieces were slowly coming together. I remember being at work and going through my emails, and there was a flurry of emails from my fellow soldiers. One officer said that if he were in charge, he would put guards on all our nuclear reactor facilities. I remember the secretarial staff I supervised listening to the radio all day, and talking about how there were missing planes suspected of carrying more terrorists and that military jets were being scrambled to shoot down civilian aircraft. When I

heard about the plane that went down in Pennsylvania, I remember thinking that something happened before it could reach its target. One of my co-workers appeared at my door, surprised that I was at work. I told her that I wasn't really expecting to be called up by the National Guard that day; it just doesn't act that quickly in these situations. I was also thinking, even if they did call up my unit, what would we do? Who was the enemy, and how do you fight them after what they just did?

I went to Costco after work, and it was more crowded than usual that night, with people buying emergency supplies and water. The large screen TVs at the entrance were showing footage of everything that had happened during the day. I watched for a few minutes, and then I just couldn't look at the footage of those towers crumbling to the ground anymore.

We had relatives from the Philippines visiting us that week who were supposed to go on to Chicago, and, of course, they stayed several days longer because the planes were grounded. I remember walking them out to the Bay trail by our house and showing them the eerily empty night skies. We could usually see the traffic patterns for the San Francisco and Oakland airports any time we're on the trail, and there was nothing out there. My mother's oldest brother was embarrassed that they had to stay longer, and I tried to explain to him that there has been no precedent to these tragic events in recent history. Americans had to reach back to Pearl Harbor to find a comparison. When they could finally leave, my uncle left his Swiss army knife because it wouldn't pass the new security measures at the airports once the planes could fly again.

As I mentioned, I wasn't too worried that anything drastic would happen to me or my unit in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The attacks took us so much by surprise that it would take our active duty component a while to gear up for a type of warfare we weren't used to fighting, and only after the active components were utilized would the reserves and National Guard be pulled into the rotation. However, over the next several months, soldiers in my battalion rotated through guard duty on the Golden Gate Bridge, and within a few years, company teams from my battalion would serve in the combat zone. The language mix of the linguists in the army would also change, with more emphasis on Arabic speakers. I had contact with friends and West Point classmates serving tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq, and heard classmates or people I knew from my guard unit being interviewed on NPR, or saw them on the front page of the NYT magazine for their role in the war. On the other hand, I also had friends who pursued their work in non-violence with even more conviction.

Chris and I were already transitioning to the next phase of our lives and wanting to start a family. I knew I was holding the job of acting battalion commander only until another officer with the appropriate rank could finish his training. By Spring of 2002, I was in the Inactive Reserves, although the army did try to deploy me for the current conflict. I received orders calling me to active duty in the mail on Christmas Eve 2002, but I got exempted from serving because Chris and I were already deep into the international adoption process. I appealed to the Army that although I wasn't physically pregnant, for all intents and purposes, I was in a non-deployable status since we were "expecting." So Quinn saved me from being called to duty, because otherwise there was really no good reason I couldn't serve in the active component again.

So for me, 9/11 brings to mind my other life and of a time "before"; before children, before this decades-long war, before the Muslim religion and the Arab culture became important to learn about. And it amazes me that my children have come into the world never knowing the time before you had to take off your shoes at the security checkpoint at the airport.

Elizabeth Jobst: Where Was I?

On the morning of September 11, I was twenty-two years old, in the middle of my first month of teaching Kindergarten in Houston. I was a stranger living in a strange country known as Texas. Just after classes started, Mrs. Gardner, our lead Kindergarten teacher, came into my room and told me the news. Remembering that my hometown is Washington, D.C. she ushered me to the teachers' lounge to watch the TV coverage and gave me time to call my family. I burst into tears after the first pictures flashed across the screen. I spoke briefly to my stepmom who said everyone was alright although my dad was stuck in his office due to road closures.

Then I had to return to my classroom. I couldn't tell my 28 young students what was happening so I tried to maintain a sense of calm as one by one the children were picked up early by their terrified families. Each time my excuse to the rest of the class for the early dismissal was lamer than the first; from "he has a doctor's appointment" to "her brother is sick so her Mom decided to pick everyone up early." After work, I started calling and emailing my friends that I thought might be at risk. But since communication systems were virtually shut down in the New York City and Washington D.C. areas, I didn't have much luck.

I sought comfort that evening in two places; one, an evening worship service with friends, and two, my pen. I'd like to close with a shortened version of the poem that I wrote years ago entitled "b as in bomb."

the day the sky fell in i was teaching letter b

b as in breath

the day the sky fell in an air conditioner broke, no one to fix it

b as in buried

the day the sky fell in we read a story called two eyes that see

shield children from news, family emergency we need sara, sara the line leader

b as in blind

the day the sky fell in we had no line

b as in broken

b as in bravery

the day the sky fell in eight students left at 1 o'clock restlessly resting at tables

too many mosquitoes outside for recess, too much silence inside for sleep

b as in blood

bit my lip to stop tears, mourn words unspoken

the day the sky fell in i was teaching letter b

Stephanie S. Spencer: “Where Was I?”

Where was I on September 11, 2001? I was in Cleveland, which is in the Eastern time zone, just starting work in Wider Church Ministries of the UCC National Offices, around 9:00 a.m., when a colleague’s wife called him to tell him about the first plane hitting the WTC. We went online and were so worried and horrified by what we saw that someone remembered an ancient, little TV in a closet that we pulled out and turned on. We watched the second plane hit the second tower, and we knew this was something that had never happened in the U.S. before. We saw the Pentagon burning in Arlington, and I’m sure I called my parents to make sure they were okay, living only three miles away. After about 45 minutes, we got word that people were gathering in the Amistad Chapel on the ground floor of our building, and we decided to join them. Just before we turned to leave for the elevator, the first tower collapsed. As we sang and prayed, about 20 minutes later, someone brought word that the second tower had collapsed. One of my colleague’s daughters worked on a lower floor of the second tower. She collapsed amid the congregation of our colleagues. (She learned much later that day that her daughter had gotten out of the tower safely.)

I tried to absorb what I was seeing that morning, but I’ve never lived through a war, or a fire, or a terrorist attack. But the images of the collapsed towers and of the burning Pentagon echoed scenes in my mind from my trip to Afghanistan in May 2011. On 9/11, we didn’t know that Al Qaeda was responsible for the attacks, or who Osama bin Laden was, or that he had been living in Afghanistan. But, what I had seen in Afghanistan was the closest thing I had experienced to what I was seeing on TV.

For three days in May 2001 I had attended an international, ecumenical board meeting in Kabul. Walking and driving through streets that hadn’t been paved in 10 years, past buildings where entire walls hung by rebar, I met Afghans who had been living in war for 22 years. All day on 9/11, I thought to myself, “I don’t know what it’s like to live through a random attack that destroys people’s lives, but Afghans do. I wouldn’t know how to comfort people who experienced the attacks in New York and Washington and the horror of the plane crash in Pennsylvania, but Afghans do. I wish that Afghans and Americans could talk to each other, because Afghans would know what it’s like to lose family, friends, and colleagues, and they have been innocent victims of terrorism in their country. They would know what we are going through even before we could tell them what we’d experienced.”

In the hours and days after the attacks, Christians, Muslims and Jews with whom the UCC works around the world sent condolences, wishes for peace, and donations for relief work, including \$150 from the Lesotho Evangelical National Church in Africa. Then on the evening of September 12, when President Bush said that “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them,” I knew that the Afghans I had met in Pakistan and Afghanistan would have to endure more war. Not long after that, in response to Bush’s statements, the Afghan Women’s Network sent this message to U.S. political leaders and the American people:

We share with you the condolence and grief of Afghan Women while America is mourning over the horrific incidence of violence and terror in New York and Washington. We Afghan Women can feel your painful emotions as we have been exposed to similar experiences during more than twenty years of war. Let us pray that such a tragic incident never happens again.

We are also suffering and also hate war and violence, so we know you will agree with us that war and counter violence are not the solution to terror and hatred. The common Afghan, particularly women and children who have been subjected to war, isolation, drought and hunger, would not be able to survive another war... Those Afghans who are living in American are those already hit by war. They love peace and prosperity as you do... Let us pray for a time when all humanity lives in peace and for a world where there is no discrimination of any kind.

If you would like to share your experience of the events of 9/11 with Afghans and others who share a hope for peace and who are working for understanding between Muslims and Christians, please join me this evening at the Centerville Presbyterian Church in Fremont at 7:00 p.m. for a 9-11-11 Tenth Anniversary Interfaith Memorial. There are flyers in the narthex, the church office, and Oliver Hall. Please let me know if you would like to carpool from Eden.

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring: “Where Was God?”

Ten years ago today, I was working in the UCC National Offices for the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries (CHHSM). My colleagues and I had just begun our monthly staff meeting when we got the word from a friend down the hall that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center.

Our Executive Director interrupted the staff meeting and pulled a small TV out of storage, so we could watch the news. Together with Pilgrim Press staff, who also worked on the third floor with us, we watched reruns of the first plane crash into the North Tower. A bit later, we saw a second plane crash into the South Tower. During the next hour, we heard reports that a third plane had crashed into the Pentagon, and that a fourth had crashed in a field outside of Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Before noon, both towers had collapsed, as TV viewers watched helplessly, in horror around the world.

At first, the idea of breaking routine to watch historic news brought back childhood memories of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon; but as the day's events unfolded, I soon realized that we were watching events more akin to the bombing of the Murray Federal Building in Oklahoma City bombing or Pearl Harbor.

UCC workers were invited to assemble in the Amistad Chapel by mid morning. Shortly thereafter, we were ordered by the Mayor to evacuate downtown Cleveland, because the plane that crashed near Shanksville had been headed for San Francisco, and had turned around over Cleveland.

The Mayor's evacuation order necessitated that we provide emergency shelter for out-of-town visitors to the National Offices, since the UCC hotel is also located downtown.

Stephanie and I volunteered to take in a friend from Madison, Wisconsin. An otherwise 20-minute drive took nearly three hours, because the City of Cleveland didn't have a viable evacuation plan.

Five days later, Stephanie and I gathered in the sanctuary at Archwood United Church of Christ—our home church in Cleveland. It was an eerie time. We marveled as the sanctuary filled up with more worshippers than Christmas Eve ushers had counted in over 100 years. The liturgy was in the shape of a memorial service through which we mourned the loss of victims in

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New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania; and we woke up to the realities of terrorism and war that have been all too familiar during the last sixty years in nations such as Afghanistan, Colombia, Egypt, Greece, Iran, Israel, Spain, Jordan, Lebanon, Peru, the Philippines, Uganda, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

My overriding memory of September 16, which was the Sunday that followed September 11, 2001, was of the numerous people who turned to me and asked: "Why did this happen? Why did innocent people suffer? Where was God?"

Each time I was asked these sorts of questions, I repeated themes that I had learned through my education and life experience. I said things like, "We live in a finite world in which human beings have free will. Troubled people sometimes choose to do terrible things. We don't know why God doesn't seem to interrupt these behaviors or their results. Suffering and death are a mystery that we cannot always comprehend this side of heaven."

My replies were never particularly satisfying for those who wanted pat answers and someone to blame for 9/11, and other personal and corporate tragedies.

Ten years of hindsight on 9/11 and the fallout of our nation's "War on Terrorism" have brought me repeatedly back to today's Old Testament reading from Genesis 50, for a way of framing both the cause and effects of September 11, 2001.

The way that the story goes, a famine had threatened the life of Jacob's older sons and their families. So the older sons were forced to go to Egypt in search of foreign aid. There, in Pharaoh's court, they were reunited with their younger brother, Joseph, whom years earlier they had thrown down a well and sold into slavery. Now the tables were turned, and the older brothers found themselves at Joseph's mercy. The question was raised by one to the others, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back?"

The climax of the story comes when Joseph gives his brothers what they need, rather than what they deserve. Joseph preserves their lives by providing them with a safe haven from the famine, and food and drink so that they and their nation survive and eventually thrive.

Whether or not Joseph forgave his brothers is unclear. It seems that he may have left the matter of forgiveness up to God. But it is clear that Joseph gave his brothers what they needed, not what they deserved. He did not "pay them back." Instead, he showed them mercy.

Herein lies the crux of 9/11—payback. Social and political scientists, historians, journalists, and theologians alike have helped us understand that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were not random in the eyes of the terrorists who unleashed them. No, these terrorist attacks were "payback" from the people who saw themselves as victims (or who identified with victims) of injustices that have bred despair and desperation. The terrorists who lashed out at our nation on September 11 acted against people who served in institutions that were (for the terrorists) symbols of economic and political oppression.

The dominant response in the US, in particular, and the West, in general, to 9/11 was similar to the actions that launched the tragedies of September 11. The dominant response was "payback." Rather than addressing the root causes of despair and deprivation that enticed suicide bombers to become terrorists, those in the position of greatest power in the U.S. and the West have presumed that the appropriate response to terrorism was to escalate the violence that created and perpetuates the cycle of payback.

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So in this light, my answer to the question, “Where was God?” is to say simply: God is in those who give their brothers and sisters what they need, rather than what they deserve. God is in every act of grace and mercy that is expressed, regardless of race, creed, class, or national origin. Simply put—God is not in the “payback.” Amen.