



The Building
Community Institute

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OUR LIVING TRIBUTE TO THOSE WHO DIED

I remember the day our human journey was forced to stop and take notice.

I had not witnessed such a day in my lifetime as 9-11. Prior to the first World Trade Center Tower being struck, we were up and about our business which included getting to work, making money, getting kids off to school, hailing taxis, catching planes, waiting for trains or just walking down the block. We had shared breakfast, wished for breakfast, or had stopped into our favorite corner store for coffee and bagels. We were alive and on our way-and with us were all our thoughts and feelings about self and others. We had ordered a good day. And my day was no different than the millions of other Americans. I had gotten up early, missed breakfast and on my way to the Tulsa International Airport to catch a flight to Charlotte, North Carolina for a meeting at Wachovia Bank. My plans were well laid and my expectations were high. It seemed as if all that I had dreamed was coming together. My career was before me and I had letters of thanks to prove that the future was bright. I never dreamed that another set of 'thoughts' were also in place-thoughts and plans that would force me to take a second look at the gift of life. I had experienced 'life' and all that it entailed-a journey from my native Mississippi Delta to the military and onto college and beyond. Yes, it had been filled with moments of hurt, frustration, joy, pain and great surprises, but it was life. And my being at the airport on 9-11 was just one more piece of that journey-a piece in which I expected to experience both joy and reward.

Those were my plans.

Someone else had other plans that severely altered mine and the life plans of thousands of Americans and their kin. Driving in my car to the airport, I had no idea what had already happened until I entered the terminal. I could feel the lack of energy normally present-men and women on their way to close a deal or make a deal or visit family and friends. I saw people, but I didn't feel their life. I knew something was terribly wrong, but what. And when I made my way to the Delta Ticket Counter, I saw blank stares and tear stained faces. While I was in the parking lot, America had changed.

At that moment I asked the big question. "What's going on?"

I was told and told in a way that spoke to a sense of vulnerability and fear I had not witnessed. I also experienced a sense of 'sharedness' among people I didn't know who in the past, as I would have myself been so focused on my personal plans, would not have taken the time to stop and chat. Why? Because we had somewhere to go and something to do! Now I had nowhere to go and neither did they. I stood numb as the fear and silence knitted strangers together as one. While we were doing what we had always done, our well-planned journey was interrupted. This was not our plan. But it happened. America had been attacked and so had our sense of independence and security. In that somber moment, I dropped my individuality and embraced the gift we all share, life. 'I' suddenly became 'we.' For once in my life, in a quiet and tear-filled airport, I experienced 'us'...9-11 in all its pain gave us a glimpse of promising possibilities...one nation, coming together.

To be that nation should be our living tribute to those who died that day.

- Clifton L. Taulbert