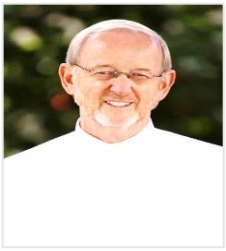
A WORD FROM THE PASTOR



Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
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9/11

Recalling 9/11 and How It Changed the Lives of Three People

All of us remember where we were when we got news of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. I was fixing up my office at Ascension and getting ready to take up my ministry as Pastor here starting September 12th. The following are three stories which appeared in the September issue of St. Anthony Messenger. Their stories are introduced by author in this way.

Everyone has a 9/11 story.

Mine is that I was four months pregnant with my second child; I remember lying on the couch and watching the events unfold. I still can recall the overwhelming feeling that my life was being forever changed.

For this article, I spoke with three people from different professions, locations and perspectives about their 9/11 stories. Dr. James Zogby, head of the Arab American Institute, Kelly Ann Lynch, friend of Father Mychal Judge and founder of Mychal's Message, and Krista Tippett, host of the National Public Radio program On Being, talked with me about their recollections of 9-/11, how it changed their lives, and their perspective on the events 10 years later.

Here are their stories.

Dr. James Zogby: Changed Professionally and Personally

Dr. James Zogby, the head of the Arab American Institute in Washington, D.C., remembers that day vividly. He was sitting at a light in front of the University of the District of Columbia when he heard the news. His car radio wasn't working.

"The woman in the car next to me waved for me to roll down my window," he says. She told him about the plane going into the World Trade Center, and how her father worked there and wasn't able to contact him.

"The light changed, she drove off and I never saw her again," he recalls. "When I got to the office, the second plane had hit."

What followed, though, had an even more profound effect on Zogby. Within hours of the attack, occupants of his building were ordered to evacuate. But Zogby says that he and his staff couldn't leave. There was work to be done.

"There were so many phone calls from around the country from [Arab Americans] concerned about what to do. Already the first threats were coming to them. We got them, too," he recalls.

All this marked the beginning of three profound changes for Zogby—both professionally and personally.

The first change came in the Arab American Institute's work. According to its Web site (aaius.org), the Institute, which was founded in 1985, represents the policy and community interests of Arab Americans throughout the United States, and strives to promote Arab American participation in the U.S. electoral system. Suddenly, though, the organization found itself dealing with an entirely different agenda, says Zogby.

"Dealing with hate crimes, death threats and a range of civil liberties challenges was not our original intent," he says.

The second change came as the result of a White House panel on hate crimes in which Zogby had taken part. He says that, in listening to the other speakers, he decided to fight back against the threats.

"Before I began listening to the different speakers on the panel, when someone would call and threaten my life, or threaten my seven-year-old daughter—who had picked up the phone—I felt guilty, like a rape victim.

"After listening to others on the panel, I resolved that I wouldn't let that ever happen again. If I ever got a threat again, I was going to deal with it. I was going to go to the authorities and not allow myself to become the person who was guilty," he recalls.

Finally, he says, 9/11—and what happened in the days after—also drove home for him "in a very powerful way, the inherent goodness of people."

A couple of days after the attacks, he and his staff were in their office—with police protection—when there was a knock at the door. He looked through the peephole and saw the woman from the office next door. She was holding a plateful of brownies.

"She said, 'I know that your office is afraid and that things are happening. I just wanted you to know that we care about you,'" Zogby recalls. Ten years later, he still gets choked up telling the story.

Zogby reflects that "as gratuitous as the underserved threats were, because we weren't the people who did anything, and we weren't justifying it, the gestures of kindness were also underserved and gratuitous. I mean gratuitous in the Catholic sense of grace. I didn't do anything to deserve the death threats or the brownies."

Bridging the Gap. *Zogby, a Maronite Catholic who is often mistaken for a Muslim because of his Lebanese heritage, says there is a knowledge gap between the two faiths. His search to bridge that gap inspired his book Arab Voices: What They Are Saying to Us, and Why It Matters.*

The book is based on a comprehensive poll conducted by the Arab American Institute. The poll showed that Arabs, and Americans aren't as different as most people believe. (Zogby's brother, John, is the head of the polling company IBOPE Zogby International.)

"The best way to address the problem is by directly meeting and getting to know the other, realizing the other is not the 'other' but very much like you. At the end of the day, direct experience is so important," he says.

When asked about his hope for the future, Dr. Zogby cites the tale of Sisyphus, the king in Greek mythology who was forced to roll a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, repeatedly for eternity. Despite the fact that he can feel like Sisyphus sometimes in his work, with daily setbacks and roadblocks such as "inertia, lethargy or willed ignorance that just doesn't want to change," he is undeterred.

"I don't feel a sense of defeat," he says. "I feel a little bit stronger, a little smarter. I've got a smile as I'm rolling the stone. I know that this is actually going to work out. I feel a part of a process of change and am trying to get some of those stubborn roadblocks out of the way."

Kelly Ann Lynch: Giving Back

On 9/11, Kelly Ann Lynch lost an important part of her life. Father Mychal Judge, O.F.M., the first official fatality at Ground Zero, was a close personal friend and had seen Kelly through a very difficult time in her life.

Kelly's father had been an altar boy for Father Mychal in the 1960's at St. Joseph Church in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

"Father Mychal was there when my dad was growing up, when my parents were married, when we were all born and baptized, when my father lost his father. He was just a constant presence in our lives," says Kelly.

"I remember my mom saying at one time that Mychal Judge was the epitome of Christianity. He was Christ walking on earth for our family. He was the most good, the most loving, the most kind, forgiving person that we knew—in human form."

In 1990, Kelly's daughter Shannon was born with a rare liver disease. Father Mychal was the first person Kelly called. He told her that she needed to give Shannon back to God. As shocking as it sounded, Kelly says, when she did just that, the doors began to open. Eventually, in an experimental surgery in Chicago, part of Kelly's healthy liver was successfully transplanted into her daughter. Today, Shannon is a healthy 21-year-old.

Making Sense of Tragedy. *Fast-forward to September 11, 2001. Kelly was at home in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with her two youngest children. Her older two daughters were at school. She remembers watching the attacks on TV and calling the kids' schools to make sure they were O.K.*

It wasn't until later that day, however, that she found out about Father Mychal's death. Father Mychal, the chaplain for the New York firefighters, was killed by falling debris as he administered last rites to a fallen firefighter.

Kelly says her first reaction when her husband told her the news was, "It couldn't be. How could they have already recovered a body and identified it? It just couldn't be." Her father called the friary on West 31st Street in New York, where Father Mychal lived, and they verified the news.

"It was just devastating," says Kelly. "It was a feeling of emptiness for us—total emptiness and such a loss, such an irreplaceable loss."

Did she ever question, "Why?"

"No, not really," she says. "I remember believing that Father Mychal died doing what he loved. He was seen praying the Rosary moments before he died. And he was with his firemen, which is where he would have wanted to be. I think for him he could have chosen no better choice for himself that day. He would have wanted to go with his firemen and help them and lead them into heaven."

The next few months, she ways, were difficult. But then in January, on the anniversary of Shannon's liver transplant, things began to turn around. Eleven-year-old Shannon suggested that, instead of people giving her gifts on the anniversary, as had been the tradition, they donate socks for the homeless.

Kelly says that opened doors for the family and strengthened their faith. Eventually, the idea grew into the organization Mychal's Message (mychalsmessage.org), that first year, Shannon collected 1,500 pairs of socks. Attached to the socks was a printed card with Father Mychal's prayer:

"Lord, take me where you want me to go;
Let me meet who you want me to meet;
Tell me what you want me to say, and
Keep me out of your way."

Since the organization started, Kelly says the blessings have continued and grown, and she has learned so much.

"I've learned about the homeless; I've learned about what really matters. I've learned to appreciate and love people of all walks of life. I've learned to judge not, because there can be no loving if we are judging. I've learned that everyone has a story, and I've learned to appreciate where people are in life, because everyone got there on their journey. We have to respect people where they are."

In the years since 9/11, in addition to Mychal's Message, Kelly has written the children's book He Said Yes, about Father Mychal. She has also professed, along with her mother, as a member of the secular Franciscan.

To say her life has been changed is an understatement. Most of all, says Kelly, "since Father Mychal's death, I have really tried—and I fail, I'm a sinner—but I have tried just to love and serve because that's all that matters. September 11 changed me, but what transpired after September 11 really changed me most because I feel I've learned so much."

This year on September 11, Kelly and her family will be in New York as they have done every year since 2002. To begin the day, they will distribute "Blessed Bloomers" (new underwear, socks and undershirts) to the homeless on the Breadline at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Manhattan.

"We'll then attend Mass together as a family at St. Francis Church and head to Ground Zero by late morning," says Kelly. After that, citing Father Mychal's prayer, she says, "We'll let the Lord take us where he wants us to go, meet who he wants us to meet."

Krista Tippett: Remembering Forward

Krista Tippett, host of the public radio show On Being (formerly Speaking of Faith), is no stranger to talking about faith.

The show, she says, was born out of her experiences as a journalist and theology student. In the late '90s, Tippett says, she kept hearing the same "few strident voices who were the only religious voices ever invited to speak about religion." Those voices, she says, "had come to kind of define our public imagination about not just who Christians are, but who religious people are, what they say, what they sound like."

But Tippett wanted to explore religion with the same "seriousness and intelligence that public radio gives to politics and the arts and economics."

She took the idea to Minnesota Public Radio, which has a national distribution arm. The idea raised eyebrows, she says, partly because there was no model for this type of show and also because "people really couldn't believe that you could invite religious people to speak from their deepest places and that it wouldn't sound like proselytizing or exclusive or just make people angry."

On 9/11, Tippett was in Washington, D.C., trying to raise what became the first big grant for the show with the Pew Charitable Trust.

Up until that point, she says some of the hesitancy concerning the show was that "a lot of people just didn't know if religion was that important in the world—or if it was important in people's lives, or if they just didn't see it as a private matter."

After 9/11, she says, "there was no question that religion was important in the world and that we had to find ways to talk about it."

But Tippett says that the importance of religion following 9/11 has different layers, such as the attacks being done in the name of religion and the fact that suddenly Americans were introduced to a faith they really knew very little about.

"I had a big learning curve on Islam, and so did a lot of people." Tippett recalls a speech she gave the week before our interview to a group of Muslims from around the world. She told them, "You know, in a perfect world, by 2001, Americans might have known that there's something about this religion of one billion people around the globe and they might have even known that by now this was headed to be the second largest religious group in the United States. But they didn't and 9/11 was a catastrophic introduction."

The third layer, she says, was how we as a nation would respond to the attacks. She recalls hearing stories of people praying together in their workplaces, something previously unheard of.

"When I think about the spiritual effect of 9/11, one thing I feel like we've not yet really delved into is that it was a collective experience of vulnerability in our strongest fortresses. That's very unusual for Americans; not so unusual for people in lots of other places in the world." says Tippett.

Moving Ahead. *The White Queen in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass says, "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." in her 2007 book, Speaking of Faith, Tippett reflects on that phrase.*

In terms of 9/11, for Tippett, it means "remembering for the sake of remembering. What we long for especially with an event like 9/11 is to think about how it changed us, and how we want to move into the future differently because of it."

Tippet recalls how Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J., an outspoken opponent of the death penalty, once told here that anger is a moral response.

"That's true," says Tippett. "The Bible honors, the psalms absolutely honor the messy depths of human response to wrongdoing. We get to be angry, and that's part of who we are. But the question always is: What do you do with your anger? How do you live with it? Do you let it shape who you've become? Those are the hard questions about our response."

That, she says, is where the concept of remembering forward comes in. There's not much that can be done in terms of going back and taking apart decisions for certain military actions. But, says Tippett, "I do think we can continue to take control of how we see people. One of the dangerous things within those military reactions was seeing whole groups of people as related to those terrorists."

This year on 9/11 Tippett will be addressing the anniversary on her show. And while the actual program was not yet determined at this interview time, she says she would like to create some conversation around two key questions: How did this change us? And how do we want to take this experience and decide to let it change us as we move forward?

Have a blessed week,