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Letter to Those Growing Up in a Post-9/11 World

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Letter to Those Growing Up in a Post-9/11 World

Abstract

"Even in times of terror and upheaval, even when we feel the earth shifting under our feet, we serve a Lord who sits enthroned over all."

Posting about lessons learned after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/a-letter-to-those-growing-up-in-a-post-911-world/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

A Letter to Those Growing Up in a Post-9/11 World

 [all in allthings.org/a-letter-to-those-growing-up-in-a-post-911-world/](http://allthings.org/a-letter-to-those-growing-up-in-a-post-911-world/)

September 11, 2016

Donald Roth

Dear Young People,

Every year, I teach a group of students who are one year closer to having been born after 9/11. Already most of you have little to no living memory of the event. Sure, you learned about it in class, and you may have watched movies or documentaries about it, but how could I ever convey to you the experience of turning on the TV in the morning to watch the news (something my family happened to do that morning, purely by chance), hearing that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center? How can I get you to feel the confusion of wondering how such a strange accident could occur only to watch in horror as another plane slammed into the second tower right before your eyes? How can you understand the fear and uncertainty of going to school or work, glued to the television, hearing that another plane had hit the Pentagon, then that another crashed in a field in Pennsylvania, wondering how many more were out there and what might get hit next? For Americans, the world changed on 9/11; I can show you a changed world, but I fear it's impossible to express what it feels like to watch the world change around you on that sort of scale.

So what can I do? Every fall, my upper level criminal justice students and I study a variety of disasters over the course of modern history, and we ask what we can learn from those events that can equip us to better respond to future emergencies. This isn't just a question about preventing the same thing from happening; it's about trying to generalize, to learn how to do better in any situation, especially how we can uphold values like human life and justice when they are tested to their limits. I can't pretend to have worked it out perfectly, and I will refrain from getting lost in minute or technical applications, but, fifteen years on, these are some of the things I think that 9/11 can teach us.

Learning the Wrong Lessons

First, we must learn not to become obsessed with refighting the battle we just lost. If you play video games, you're quite familiar with dying, respawning, and retrying a level where the enemies make all the same moves, and you hone your reactions by remembering what they did before and avoiding it the second time around. Life is sort of like that, except, while we should certainly learn not to fall for the same tricks, we rarely remember to look out for new ones.

In many ways, our reaction to 9/11 was a perfect case of making exactly this mistake. While there is a [mixed record](#) of efforts to prevent new hijackers from boarding an American plane, the real failing was that we became so focused on anticipating the next terrorist attack that we never saw Katrina coming. 9/11 spurred the birth of the Department of Homeland Security, a massive government reshuffle where the definition of "security" meant almost exclusively human threats, and the once-independent Federal Emergency Management Agency was lost in the shuffle. The agency had, at times, previously enjoyed cabinet-level status, but the reorganization in 2003 saw the focus of the agency [almost entirely restricted to terrorism](#) until after Katrina.

Further, our obsession with preventing another 9/11 meant that "terrorism" became a sort of magic wand to conjure up government funding. Beyond a pair of wars fought to root out Al Qaeda where it (allegedly) roosted, 9/11 opened the faucets on federal grants to allow local police forces to purchase paramilitary equipment. In the name of preventing terrorism, the police force protecting the 20,000 residents of Buena Vista County, Iowa, received, among other things, [five grenade launchers and two mine-resistant vehicles](#).

Our obsession with terrorism after 9/11 blinded us to other glaring vulnerabilities, and it spurred us to happily

militarize our nation's police force with seemingly little concern for the secondary effects that such a decision could have. These two shortcomings sowed seeds of a whirlwind we continue to reap up to this day.

Learning Good Lessons from the Past

So what can we do instead? The single biggest (and hardest) lesson we could stand to learn is empathy. Don't confuse this with sympathy, which involves coming to identify with the other, although that has its place. Empathy is learning to listen attentively so that we can begin to see the contours of how another person or group perceives the world.

If we are to learn anything from why an event like 9/11 happened, we must listen carefully to understand not only the strategy of the attackers, but we should come to some appreciation of the contours of the world that makes up the [Salafist jihadi vision of Islam](#). [Bin Laden's Legacy](#), by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, is an excellent example of an attempt to do just that. The book's search for Al Qaeda's own narrative as to its motives in the 9/11 attack surely reveals a desire to destroy America, but rather than seeking military victory, the terrorist group's strategy has been global economic destabilization. They wanted to coax the West into spending itself into oblivion in its obsession with terror, and, looking to U.S. expenditures on the War on Terror, not to mention the political and social upheaval caused by the displacement of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, it's hard to say that the jihadi strategy is failing.

Of course, empathy isn't just about knowing your enemy, it's about hearing your brother and sister as well. The increased militarization of police has only exacerbated the tensions felt between law enforcement and certain communities. We need to learn to listen to the voice of people like [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#), not because we have to uncritically agree with him, and not because it will allow a white male like me to understand what living in America as a black man feels like, but opening our ears may open our eyes to better understand what we don't know and what we can't understand. It may help us feel a sense of the groaning of our brothers and sisters when they feel their world shifting under their feet.

After 9/11, America closed its ears to all but one narrative about why things happened and how the world worked. If we choose to follow a different path, it may take us less time to learn from our mistakes in the future.

Living in the End Times

If this seems a little bleak, it is. We're all driven by some vision of how things should be, some kingdom that we strain towards. Al Qaeda has a vision of an apocalyptic kingdom of true Islam, ISIS sought to establish that kingdom on earth. We live in a time steeped and primed for visions of the end. How many of our popular movies, books, and television shows chronicle life in a world where humanity sits on the brink of destruction? It's hard to find an institution today that isn't imperiled or undergoing significant upheaval. So what are we to do?

[Robert Joustra and Alissa Wilkinson](#) argue that Daniel ought to be the patron saint of these end times. We often forget that God's people once underwent an apocalypse of sorts. The beast of Babylon once came and dragged God's people away to a foreign land. So how did God counsel His people through this terrible judgment? He urged them to seek the welfare of the city in which they found themselves ([Jer. 29:7](#)); though it provoked them to cry out in wonder as to how they could sing the Lord's song in a foreign land ([Ps. 137](#)), the faithful flourished. The story of Daniel is of a group of young men who sought the welfare of their city, even to the highest offices in the land, yet refused to stop singing the Lord's song.

Even in times of terror and upheaval, even when we feel the earth shifting under our feet, we serve a Lord who sits enthroned over all. If we can resist the temptation to be overwhelmed by the flood that can at times wash over us, the temptation to narrow our vision and respond in impulsive anger and frustration, if we can keep our ears open to the song of Creation all around us, we can learn to sing the Lord's song, even in this strange land.