

Remembering 9/11

A hundred beats

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It was a Tuesday and my phone rang at eight thirty in the morning. A phone ringing at such an ungodly hour can only mean bad news, but I still wasn't prepared for what the voice on the other line was about to tell me. "They've hit the Twin Towers". My heart slowly eased its way into my throat. I had no idea what that meant. It was the start of my second year of college and I was in New York. The school year had begun like any other; trips to the registrars office trying to weasel one's way into the best classes, long queues at the bookstores to pick up the semester's required reading, negotiations with unpleasant floor mates. That was all part of my back to school drill, terror attacks were not. I sat up in bed and listened to my friend on the phone 'a plane smashed into the building, thousands of people are dead'. I didn't have a television to turn on, so I switched on the radio. There was no music playing, no weather reports, just an announcer's shaky voice. Somewhere amidst the confusion I had a thought, a prayer:

Please don't let my country have anything to do with this. My country didn't, as it turned out, but that didn't make a difference to the price we were soon to pay for the 9/11 attacks.

By the time I left for my first class, Political Theory 1, at ten a.m. another plane had rammed itself into the World Trade Center. I didn't have a computer that year either -- I was trying to be an austere college student, not terribly useful in times of disaster -- so I didn't know if my family back in Karachi was aware of what was happening. Thinking it was too early to worry, I picked up my bag and went to class. The auditorium was full, and for a brief moment I imagined that New York was like any other city in the world where buildings collapse and bombs explode. 'This isn't out of the ordinary', said the Karachiite inside me, move on. As I sat on my desk and opened up my notebook, my phone rang -- I did have a phone, thankfully -- it was my mother. I picked up just to tell her I was fine and to inform her of what was going on in New York that Tuesday morning. She already knew. From the timber of her voice, I gathered that she knew more than I did.

'Leave campus', she said. 'Go somewhere else, anywhere'. I shut my notebook and walked out of the classroom towards a friend's house a few blocks away. The screams of the sirens were no louder than on any other New York day, but I didn't walk, I ran. An hour later, our campus was crawling with New York Police Department officers and black swathed SWAT teams were placed on the roofs of our libraries and dormitories, while helicopters circled the skies above campus gates, bracing for a potential attack on the school. I spent the day in front of the television. Phone lines were down and internet connections were sporadic, but every message I received from friends back home was the same. 'Don't tell anyone you're Pakistani. If they ask, say you're Guatemalan/Swedish/Nigerian – anything, but don't say you're Pakistani. People are angry and there are going to be hate crimes, be sensible.'

I left to go back to my dorm around 11p.m. I expected the streets to be empty, deserted and didn't want to walk back to campus alone so I asked my friend to accompany me. But I was wrong. Every restaurant, café and store was full, people spilled out into the streets. No one wanted to be alone that night, New Yorkers wanted to be with each other.

By the next morning the smell of smoke and charred concrete and steel had traveled from Ground Zero to Morningside Heights, where I lived, over 100 blocks away. Classes continued as normal, New Yorkers are nothing if not survivors, and so we made our way back into what we remembered as our normal lives. It was the beginning of a new semester so when I sat down in my first class and a young woman named Amy asked me where I was from, I didn't hesitate. 'Pakistan', I said. She reached out and placed her hand on my arm 'Is your family safe?' She asked. I said they were and asked about hers. She was from Montana and they were fine. 'I'm sorry for what my country is about to do to yours and many others', she said before the professor walked in. Amy was not the exception, she was the norm. Every New Yorker I spoke to about my roots in the immediate days after 9/11 always asked about my family's safety, they knew we were next to Afghanistan and feared what was to come.

This we should know, this we must know. Ordinary Americans never wanted the violent response to 9/11 that their government chose. They never wanted more death and they never wanted millions of people to pay for what one man commanded. I feel utterly confident in saying this. Ordinary Americans hung their heads on October 7, 2001, the day their country invaded Afghanistan, with the same sadness that they felt on September 11, 2001.

Operation Enduring Freedom and the aerial assault on Afghanistan brought no closure to the ghosts of Ground Zero and it gave no solace to the grieving. When we talk of the legacy of the 9/11 attacks and the imperial occupations that took place afterwards, we must remember that governments are not always made up of their people. When angry fundamentalists (including Bush and Bin Laden) condemn an entire people for the actions taken by a few, we must remember that there is a fundamental difference between terrorism and resistance. The means do not justify the end. Osama Bin Laden is not a freedom fighter.

Beheading Margaret Hasan had nothing to do with the struggle for freedom. However unjustly America behaves across the world and however cruelly their armies treat Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, he is not a freedom fighter. His one day of hubris has brought much of our world to their knees and for this we owe him no admiration and we owe him no gratitude. Let us also remember that George W. Bush is answerable for his pre and post emptive madness, let us never forget that the Taliban was not a problem for America -- not until it became convenient -- and that their crimes against women, minorities, and ordinary Afghans were comfortably ignored for four years, let us remember that Osama Bin Laden is not Afghan and that his actions never reflected the will of the Afghan people, let us never forget that Iraq had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks and that the connection made by the Bush White House was built on a foundation of lies, let us remember that it was oil and not revenge that took US troops to Baghdad. If there is to be a legacy left behind by the attacks of 9/11, it must embrace this eulogy of remembrance.