

# Science is Service

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Like it did for so many others on the East Coast of the United States, my day of Sept. 11, 2001 dawned clear and bright. Later, the day would grow warm, but the morning air held the crisp promise of autumn. The streets of the neighborhood around the Bethesda hotel hosting the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism-sponsored conference seemed peaceful and safe in the early light. The sunshine matched the conference's optimistic mood. We were a multidisciplinary group of scientists brainstorming ways advanced neuroscientific tools could help identify risk factors for alcoholism.

We had just settled into our breakout discussion when the staff member handling meeting logistics gave us the news. Planes had hit the towers of the World Trade Center. The Pentagon was on fire. We sat there stunned and confused. It was almost impossible to process the information. Had something gone completely crazy? Slowly, it hit us: The United States was under a terrorist assault. More news, a plane had crashed in Pennsylvania. We reconvened in the main meeting room, bewildered. Those of us with family and friends in the areas affected frantically dialed our cell phones. Mine finally rang back. My brother, whose office was in the World Financial Center, was safe. The abstract discourse of an academic meeting unraveled. We, whose lives are dedicated to making sense of things, stood numbed. Could we ever make sense of the horror we watched on the hotel lobby television?

In the hours and days that followed I did what most of the world did: obsessively watch the news. The inability to travel home meant I was suspended in time, taken out of the normal rhythm of my days. But even if I had been home, could any attempt to resume normalcy have succeeded against the numbness? I dreaded what I knew was coming. I dreaded the moments when victims who had lost their lives became names, and faces, and stories--when they became sons, daughters, husbands, wives, children, and friends. Still I watched.

I was surprised to find how deeply I reacted to the loss of the New York firefighters and police officers. It was hearing the names and realizing that even though I did not know them, I did *know* them. They are, like me, the children of New York's working-class neighborhoods. They are, like me, the children of cops, fireman, transit, and construction workers. Changing opportunities in our generation meant that some of us followed in the footsteps of our fathers while others went to college and became physicians, scientists, lawyers, and, of course, stockbrokers.

Regardless of these different paths, we remain connected by strong bonds forged from our shared childhood. I wept for them and their families. But it was from their service and their sacrifices that I found a way out of my despair. The faces of the rescue workers, and their voices--those classic New York voices--broke through the numbness and brought the tears. They so eloquently expressed why they would continue to search for survivors, refusing to yield hope. The terrorists who hate our culture as something shallow and material had failed to recognize the spirit of the cops, firefighters, rescue workers, nurses, chaplains, and the many, many others who dedicate themselves to the service of others.

Several days after the day of horror, I left the Washington area in a rental car. Driving across the eastern half of the United States, I listened to a cornucopia of local radio programs. Callers everywhere asked the same question: "What can I do?" Short-term, the answers dealt with the obvious needs: donate, give blood, volunteer. But there is a long-term component of this question that asks how each of us will live in a world we see as fundamentally altered by the Sept. 11 tragedies. Many of us are carefully evaluating what is important to us and whether we are living consistently with our values. As we consider when we will travel again, and for what reasons, many of us in the academic world have been asking ourselves, just how important is what I do?

In partial answer to my colleagues asking this question I offer that there has rarely been a greater time for scientists to rededicate themselves to those ideals that first led them to become scientists. We need scientists committed to the search for knowledge and the responsible application of knowledge in the service of humankind. This tragedy has made us aware of how much we do not know, and need to know, about communication technology, about how to handle biological threats, about the complex psychology of human behavior. There is so much we can do and so much we can contribute. We need to feed the hungry, educate the poor, and heal the

sick. We need to find new, effective ways of eliminating the conditions that seed social and political instability--poverty, hopelessness, ignorance, and despair. We need new materials and engineering approaches that provide security against disasters, natural and manmade. Think of what could be accomplished if, with a renewed sense of public service, our national security agencies, international relief efforts, and our diplomatic corps could harness the creative energy now focused on manufacturing computer viruses and video games.

In conversations with friends I have heard the suggestion that one thing we, as individuals trained in and committed to analytical thought, can do immediately is speak out when we hear sloppy logic and weak thinking expressed on important matters. But first, we need some self-examination. Scientists must resist the disturbing use of self-serving "lobbyist speak" to drive public support for increased funding. Our fellow citizens will support scientific research because they understand that it is only through the continued acquisition of knowledge that we progress. Scientists should carefully avoid confusing the search for scientific truth with seeking support for political ideology. Scientists must honor our responsibility to speak precisely and honestly. A colleague at Yale University said it best. Trying to come to grips with the magnitude of the assault he sent me these words:

"... no matter how devastating today's events were, ultimately, like before, they [the terrorists] will fail. They cannot destroy the ideals the United States is based upon. Only we can. And in the tiny microcosm we [scientists] inhabit we can strive to maintain Academic ideals, through fighting for scientific objectivity and fairness in the face of careerism, respecting the rights of other investigators to live a productive and rewarding life, accepting our responsibilities as mentors and models for our students, and keeping our workplaces collegial and collaborative."

What he suggests may seem, in the face of such momentous tragedy, small things. But as we go forward in this new world, we'll find that the small things matter. Values and fairness matter. Service to others matters. The search for truth and knowledge matters. Science matters.

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