

FINDING SANCTUARY WITHIN GRIEF: A 9-11 REFLECTIVE

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Like millions of people in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, I experienced what is called “vicarious psychological trauma.” All my unresolved wounds from sixteen years of domestic terrorism as a child by an alcoholic father were re-activated by the familiar fear for lack of safety and peace in an armed world. The collapsing of the twin towers symbolized two distinct turning points in my life: my loss of innocence as a child, and my loss of naiveté as an adult. Unfortunately, my new trauma plunged me into the depths of eight months of depression that almost cost me my family and a twenty-year marriage.

As an adult of the new millennium, I sought sanctuary from the world in similar ways as my post-World War II childhood: sitting in reflection for hours in my room in a specific chair; listening to inspiring music; finding solace in simple activity like reading, writing, or playing my guitar; praying and meditating; and, being in nature.

However, my current grief and depression allowed me to become a student of terrorism, curious about how others find refuge from it. To my shock, the media only used the term “sanctuary” to describe the asylum given Bin Laden by his kind in his flight from the allied military front. A gross misuse of a beautiful word meant to describe a very special place – a Sanctus sanctorum – of refuge, safety, comfort, and peace! This misappropriation was made starker in light of the fact that millions of U.S. citizens, in their fear for safety, sought a renewed haven in religion (church attendance skyrocketed), family intimacy (new marriages, pregnancy, and counseling dramatically increased), home security, and community. Nevertheless, my dismay deepened when the people who most needed sanctuary from war and abuse — the Afghani women, children, elders, and other innocent citizens — were only given the depraved term “collateral damage.”

I know another form of collateral damage from war: soldiers and enraged men who take the war into their homes. Spousal abuse exploded after Viet Nam and the Gulf War. The recent spousal homicides at Fort Bragg are being linked to soldier’s stress. And of course, my father relived WW II everyday (as I am sure many veterans did) through his alcoholic rages.

As I coped with my personal depression after 9-11, I rediscovered the solace of walking. I saw details and heard sounds of everyday life in a new way. I caught serendipitous activities of human and animal life. I observed both the subtle and stark changes of nature over the seasons. I rediscovered the simple connecting with neighbors and neighborhood. I felt my aging body flex and limber up. I watched my breath fall into the rhythm of my step, my step into the inward chanting of a hopeful prayer. I watched my thoughts, judgments, opinions, desires, and emotions rattle for attention in my mind. I invited my deceased father and all tyrants to walk with me on one side, and on the other all those great and humble figures who have fought for the dignity of life and the human spirit. Walking, in short, gave me a new sense of compassion for life.

I believe the greatest human needs today are for a sense of safety/security, comfort, and peace — sanctuary within our homes, our land and gardens, our communities, and our dignity. We need to know we can find daily refuge amidst a troubled world. To put it into practice is simple:

- Show respect, reverence, and compassion for life without judgment
- Live more simply so that the less fortunate may simply live

- Give a kind, loving, and caring thought, word, or deed everyday for your family, a friend or stranger, an animal, and nature
- Identify a place in your home, yard, and community that gives you solace and regenerates your spirit, and spend time there
- Create time everyday for reflection, prayer, meditation, spiritual practice/study
- Study and walk your grief/loss to discover its good

Above all, do not ignore your grief. Fortunately, my childhood trauma led to my life work as a wellness practitioner: helping others create a sense of sanctuary in their daily lives. Invite your human woundedness for a walk and find the good within it. You might discover a deeper state of daily sanctuary for your soul: a place in your heart to love and forgive, and a place in your mind for peace.

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C. Forrest McDowell is a best-selling author (*The Sanctuary Garden*), speaker, and musician who co-stewards Cortesia Sanctuary in Eugene's south hills, and is director of the Cortesia Sanctuary Project. The public is invited to a free Good Grief Walk at the gardens and woods of Cortesia Sanctuary, Sunday, September 8, from 1-5pm. Details and pre-registration: www.cortesia.org or call 343-9544.