

Red Cross emergency manager remembers 9/11

The following is the transcript of a speech given by American Red Cross emergency manager Peter Teahen – an Iowa native who was summoned to New York City the day the World Trade Center was attacked – on the 2014 anniversary of 9/11 in Goodlettsville, Tennessee.

In the Lewis Carroll novel, “Alice in Wonderland,” the character Alice was asked by the Caterpillar, “Who are you?”

Alice replied rather shyly, “I ... I hardly know, sir, just at present. At least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then.”

Thirteen years ago today, a day that will always be known simply as 9/11, Americans re-discovered the cost of freedom as more than 3000 individuals became part of history – not by choice, but by fate.

From the farm fields near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, where Flight 93 was wrestled to the ground by passengers ... Washington, D.C., where American Flight 77 symbolically pierced the heart of our government ... and to New York City, where American Flight 11 and United Flight 175 assaulted the core of our economy and financial markets, the commencement of war by foreign terrorist on American soil was etched forever in hearts and minds.

Perhaps you, like me, wake up each 9/11 and wonder if they will strike again on this day. Historians suggest that the events of 9/11 will be noted as one of the top four events in the history our country.

What will not be captured in the annals of history are the intense personal stories that provide insight to the depth of that morning of horror and the change it brought about in us.

The names of Operation Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Benghazi, Gitmo, Sharia Law, Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab, and now ISIS are part of our common language. On the news we hear of the beheading of American reporters, the crucifixion of men, and the live burial and brutal atrocities waged against innocent children and women who refuse to surrender their religious beliefs.

Yes, 9/11 was only the beginning of the ever increasing threats and attacks by terrorist groups who show us the poisonous venom of hatred, anger, and madness done in the name of a religion or belief and their promise to kill us in the very cities that we live.

We are disgusted as we watch young radicalized Americans join terrorist groups, and we are in fear of their return to America. We live in a time when at least three terrorist groups are competing to inflict the next catastrophic hit on the United States.

Let us not forget that terrorism is not just a foreign threat; it is also a domestic based threat. We need to only reflect on the bombing of the Murrah building in Oklahoma City, the killings at Fort Hood, the slaughter of school children in Sandy Hook, and the bombing during the Boston Marathon.

Following the events of September 11, I responded to New York City on behalf of the American Red Cross and was attached in a leadership role to the emergency management staff of Mayor Giuliani. With all aircraft grounded across America, a military aircraft was dispatched to fly me to New York. As we flew, I recall the eerie feeling of listening to the aircraft radio and only hearing complete silence from radio frequencies normally full of chatter from aircraft winging their way through the skies; looking out the window at armed fighter jets frequently intercepting our aircraft to ensure we were friend, not foe; flying over Ground Zero and watching as the smoke belled from the scarred earth; and landing at JFK

Airport in the middle of the day only to find a total absence of people and aircraft moving about. It was as though the most frightening horror movie had come true. For me, that was only the beginning of what I can honestly say was the most frightening five weeks of my entire life.

Almost every day I stood in the World Trade Center complex and was awed by the destruction. I watched as responders and dogs sorted through the collapsed buildings and served as a witness to the evilness, hatred, and ugliness of terrorism. I vividly remember the overwhelming sense of loss and my inability to comprehend the fact that I was standing in the midst of what we believed at the time to be more than 5,000 dead.

My personal story of the World Trade Center began for me nearly 25 years ago. Since 1989, I have responded to 47 major disasters throughout the United States, Guam, and Puerto Rico, as well as the horrific genocide in Darfur, the tsunami-hit country of Sri Lanka, and the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti. Many of those disasters required me to face the threat of terrorism as well as the fury of Mother Nature. I have been held at gunpoint by terrorists and have listened to gunfire wondering how many innocents were dying in the surrounding fields. Over these 25 years I have borne witness to almost every known type of disaster, from the ruins of the Oklahoma City bombing to being in the direct path of more than a dozen hurricanes, including in New Orleans the day Katrina made landfall. I have stood among the wreckage of major airplane crashes and have provided medical care to the injured and dying.

Nothing prepared me for the magnitude of the horror, destruction, and the devastation I witnessed at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. And nothing prepared me for the personal transformation from responder to victim upon learning of my exposure to Anthrax in Washington, D.C., prior to my return home.

What I could hold on to during those days was a personal philosophy developed from my experiences – a philosophy that helps me make sense of the complexities of a disaster response by identifying three important parts to every disaster.

The three parts of a disaster include the physical, emotional, and the spiritual.

The physical part of a disaster is witnessed with all of our senses. When you are in the midst of the destruction you see, hear, taste, smell, and feel the devastation. At Ground Zero, I recall the acrid smell of the fires raging in the debris; I inhaled into my lungs the air that was thick with the particles of asbestos, burning plastic, concrete dust, chemicals, and human remains. I remember standing in the debris for five weeks and always being amazed that I never saw a computer, a desk, a chair, or a file cabinet, knowing that thousands had existed prior to the collapse.

The emotional part of a disaster includes the tears, anger, and horror we see etched on the faces of victims and responders.

Here is what stays in my mind's eye and is etched in my memory: As each remains was recovered from the site, I was always moved by the sign of dignity, respect, and compassion that was displayed as the workers would stop working, line up to create a corridor of honor, and stand at attention as the flag-draped remains was carried past the workers to the ambulance.

I remember watching as families came to the Family Assistance Center with pictures of loved ones around their necks, seeking answers, and giving the medical examiner information in hopes of identifying their loved ones.

I remember looking at the thousands of photos and descriptions of loved ones pasted on walls and fences all over New York City, as families held out desperate hope that their missing

loved one would be seen and returned home alive.

I remember standing at Ground Zero in the days prior to the one-year anniversary and being approached by a woman who was crying. On that day, she was at Ground Zero looking for her answers. As she spoke, I heard her story and felt her pain as she recalled how she overslept that morning and missed her train to lower Manhattan.

When she called her office to say she was running late, her coworker said, "Don't come in. Something has happened. We will let you know."

As she stood there with eyes full of tears, she struggled accepting that she was the sole survivor of her office. She repeatedly asked, "Why me?"

Finally, the spiritual part of my philosophy is the part that defines the reason why I continually stay involved with disaster work. The spiritual side of disaster work is not a reflection of a religious belief, but the extremely intense personal experiences one has when working with other individuals during a crisis. The spiritual part of a disaster is that interaction with another human being that is so intense that it reaches down and touches the most inner part of your existence and changes you forever.

Over the years, I have always tried to define disasters NOT by the breadth of destruction but rather by the intense spiritual experiences. These experiences help me as I deploy to disasters as well as help me define who I am as an individual.

As I reflect back 13 years ago I remember the man who stopped me at 4 a.m. and asked that I meet with him and his wife. It had been several days after the attack and neither had slept because every time they closed their eyes they once again became eyewitnesses to bodies falling like raindrops from the sky. As they shared their story with me, I was deeply moved by their anguish and sorrow.

I recall a young firefighter who spoke of standing at the base of the towers with two of his teammates. As a team they were strategically planning a medical triage response when the buildings began to collapse. He spoke of his fear as the debris fell and how the three of them looked at each other before running for their lives. He told me how he became separated from his teammates and how all he could hear was his wife telling him which direction to run to escape death. He recalled that his wife kept telling him not to leave their children orphans and how he ran listening to her as she guided him through the blinding debris. Then he quietly stated that his wife had died nine months prior to September 11.

He is convinced that it was her spiritual presence that guided him to safety that fateful day and eventually back to their children. Six months later I was at his side when he was informed that the remains of his teammates had been identified. Although he still struggles today with why he did not die with his teammates, he finds comfort in the belief that even in her death he knows his wife is always at his side.

I remember the day I called two of my friends in Washington, D.C., who were planning to visit me because they heard the stress in my voice. I told them not to come because a terrorist alert had been posted for the next day and I felt that I was going to die. I told them not to come to New York because I did not want them to die with me.

I remember one friend saying, "That's OK. I am coming anyway."

For me, it served as a reminder that God always ensures we will never be alone as we face personal trials.

I often reflect on the tremendous humanity, dedication, generosity, and patriotism that I witnessed in those following weeks. I saw Americans reach out in so many ways to help others who were suffering. There were ribbons, flowers, Teddy

bears, poems, candles, and groups of people standing on the curb cheering and waving signs as we drove to and from Ground Zero, saying we were their heroes. Little did they realize that they – and our families and friends back home – were the heroes of everyone who worked at Ground Zero. We knew we could not survive the responsibilities we faced during those dark days without their love, support, and prayers.

Let me tell you about my friend Margaret. She was a kind grandmother, a “real lady,” full of energy, wit, compassion, and an incredible desire to serve those touched by disaster. She died this past summer from her exposure at Ground Zero. Thirteen years after the terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center killing innocent people going about their work, the death toll from that attack continues to grow as thousands of emergency workers are becoming ill and dying.

Fires at the site burned for three months, releasing carcinogens and other deadly chemicals into the air, while thousands of tons of pulverized toxic debris lay strewn at the site of the Towers. Doctors say those who spent time at Ground Zero were exposed to “wildly toxic” dust that would be the equivalent of inhaling Drano. Responders are now facing an increased risk of a number of different cancers, including prostate, thyroid, lung, leukemia, multiple myeloma, as well as respiratory problems.

Latest figures show more than 2,500 New York City police officers, firefighters, ambulance staff, and sanitation workers report having a cancer certified as relating to their work following the attack. That figure is twice as many cases of cancer as reported just 12 months prior.

The figures from the U.S. government’s monitoring and treatment program for 9/11 emergency workers, responders, volunteers, and local residents report more than 18,000 people are suffering from illnesses linked to the dust from the attacks on the World Trade Center.

Although it is unclear how many responders have already died after contracting cancer as a result of their work at Ground Zero, U.S. health officials managing the health legacy of the attacks warn of early deaths. Personally, I continue to be closely monitored each year for the physical and emotional toll on my body.

As we all struggled for answers during those frightening days, I soon realized why I was there. I was fortunate to be part of some of the worst hours of America's history. I was fortunate to witness America rise to its finest hour. I witnessed the tremendous effort, humanity, dignity, and courage of Americans as they came together in a manner we had not witnessed in decades.

One of the reasons for being here today is to recall our past, to appreciate the present, and to contemplate our tomorrows.

People have asked me, "What have you learned from the September 11 attack?" This is what I have learned:

- You do NOT have the luxury of saying I don't want to be involved. You are involved.
- You do NOT have the luxury of saying it does not affect me. It does affect you.
- You do NOT have the luxury of saying it won't happen here again. It will happen here, and the horrors of 9/11 will pale in contrast.
- We must learn that a terrorist cannot be defined by their nationality or religion or glamorized in the media. They can only be defined by their evilness, hatred, and lack of regard for life.
- We must learn and remember the past and to stand united against those who threaten our existence.

Our challenge is not to run and hide. We must come together as a community and as a nation to stand strong, to stand prepared, and [to] be ready to defend what we hold so dear.

For most Americans, September 11 did change us physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

As President Bush noted on 9/11, "These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed. Our country is strong. A great people have been moved to defend a great nation."

Like Alice in Wonderland who replied, "At least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then," we may never completely understand the depth of the change that occurred to us since that horrific morning, but we have come to realize that life will never be the same. The security and future of this country, the protection of our families, and the safeguard of our beliefs that we hold so dear rest with each and every one of us.

Today I pray that God will guide, bless, and protect each and every one of us.

I remember the 3,000 who died 13 years ago, the 7,000 soldiers who have paid the ultimate price as they fought the war on terror, and the 1 million soldiers and their families who cope with their combat injuries each day.

As we once again prepare to continue the war against terror, I pray that God will guard our men and women serving in the armed forces, in our embassies and consulates around the world, as well as those who respond to disasters.

And I beseech God to always watch over and bless these United States of America.