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How will they remember in 100 years?

Bill Tammeus | Sep. 7, 2011 A small c catholic

The 10th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks brings even those of us who are members of 9/11 families (my nephew perished on American Flight 11) closer to acknowledging a hard truth.

Some day -- in 90-plus years or so -- no one will be around who lived through that malevolent day.

And: One day the story of 9/11 will dissolve into the maelstrom of history's long, sad parade of violence. For several decades (or even centuries) history books will refer to it, but unless the world ends first, some distant day almost no one will speak of, read about or commemorate this faith-based catastrophe any more. (Ask the average American to recount the early 20th century genocide of the Armenians [1].)

Author David Rieff, in a recent essay in *Harper's Magazine* [2], puts it this way: "What history shows is that even the most monumental achievements and martial accomplishments of human beings are ephemeral."

Beyond that, Rieff suggests that forgetting may not always be a bad thing: "?if our societies were to expend even a fraction of the energy on forgetting that we now do on remembering, and if the option of forgetting were seen as at least as available as the duty of remembrance, then the peace that must come eventually might actually come sooner."

Rieff may be right -- if his idea about forgetting leads to less revenge. But he'd be wrong if it leads, instead, to repeated fatal errors.

However, there are different responsibilities for those of us who were so grievously wounded by the murder of a member of our family.

My own family's first task will be to remember my nephew Karleton [3] and to help his two sons (one born eight months after he died) to know that their father was a wonderful, honest, funny, loving, thoughtful man. In turn, they will tell their children about their missing grandfather and on and on -- until, finally, memories fade and Karleton stories are told less and less.

Our second task will be to remind people of the dangers of toxic forms of religion. We must always and everywhere stand against twisted religion that not just allows but requires its adherents to commit gruesome acts of brutality. Beyond that, we must speak on behalf of healthy religion that is compassionate to its core and allows adherents to wrestle in public with hard questions about faith.

If we fail in either of those tasks we will dishonor the fabulous young man who, now and then, for no reason beyond love, would send me an e-mail that said, simply: "Do you realize how tall and incredibly handsome I am?" And I would laugh and be in love with Karleton all over again.

That said, Rieff is right that remembrance "is always a form of politics." That is, how we choose to frame what we remember is inevitably an act of selection that will emphasize (or ignore) certain things.

So if we cast our 9/11 commemorations as a call for revenge or a renewed commitment to "freedom" (however that's defined) or even a defense of what the old Superman TV show called "truth, justice and The American Way," we are making political choices.

Perhaps it's inevitable that we make such choices. Perhaps nothing we do -- religious rituals included -- can be devoid of political overtones. But at a minimum we should be aware of that and not simply assume that everyone will see commemorations of 9/11 the same way.

For my part, I will be reading one of my 9/11-related essays at a memorial service in Kansas City [4]. Most of the service will be devoted to an orchestra and choral performance of René Clausen's "Memorial." But the words I share will, I hope, be a partial fulfillment of my obligation to remember Karleton and to offer a warning about diseased religion.

That's been my job for 10 years. It will be my job until I'm dead.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters [5]" blog for *The Star*'s Web site and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust* [6]. E-mail him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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