

Family Story: Remembering 9/11

Source: MacEntee, Thomas, *Remembering 9/11*, based on personal knowledge of Thomas MacEntee, written by Thomas MacEntee on 11 September 2008 at Chicago, Illinois.

Remembering 9/11

On the morning of September 11th, 2001, I was living in San Francisco out near Ocean Beach in a small, one bedroom apartment where I had lived since 1993. It was a Tuesday and like most weekdays, my habit was to get up at 4:00 am to walk the dog and then catch a bus at 5:00 am to go to the gym, I'm not sure why I slept later than usual that day. All I remember is the phone ringing slightly before 6:00 am Pacific Daylight Time.

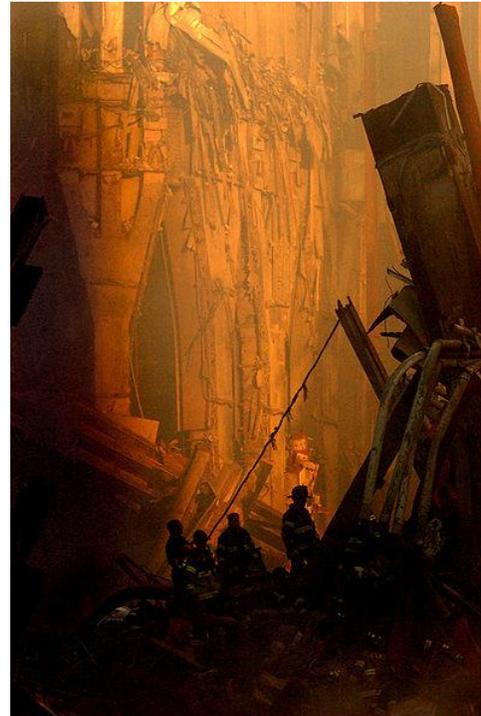
My first thought went to, "Why did I oversleep?" which was quickly replaced with, "Something is wrong." My phone just didn't ring at 6:00 am unless it was my mother who lived in New York.

For years, Mom could never get the time zone thing right and I was used to receiving calls anywhere from 4:00 am onward. And after her early on-set dementia diagnosis in the summer of 2000, phone calls at odd hours of the day and night became commonplace.

As I said "Hello" I could tell that my mother was flustered. First, she was at home and not at work, which concerned me. Second, despite suffering from memory loss, she had the wits enough to simply say "Turn on the television - something is wrong with the World Trade Center in The City." Having grown up only 90 miles northwest of Manhattan, we always called New York City "The City."

Mom said "Call me back," and I quickly hung up and ran to the television. I was still half awake and was not understanding what was going on. I do remember Katie Couric's voice on NBC, or some other female voice, stating that there was something wrong with air traffic control perhaps since a large airliner had just hit one of the towers of the World Trade Center. It was only after having watched the second plane hit the other tower shortly thereafter, live as it happened, did the announcer and I both know that this was no accident.

I sat mesmerized for the next 30 minutes before I put on some sweats and took the dog out for a short walk. My next task was to call George at his home in Oakland. George and I had been dating for about 16 months and we had not yet decided to move into an apartment together. He had been home sick the day before with a severe sinus



infection, so I knew he'd be sleeping. I also hesitated to call since he wasn't known to be entirely coherent in the mornings. But due to the nature of the events, I dialed the phone. As he answered I tried to explain what was going on, and realized I should have followed Mom's example and just kept it simple. There are times when Mom really does know best. Finally, exasperated, I simply said what so many loved ones probably said that morning: "Turn on the television," and I hung up.

The rest of the morning is somewhat of a blur. I do remember calling my boss who lived in the East Bay and basically told him that I would not be coming into the office. He agreed that from a safety perspective, and what with working downtown in San Francisco's Financial District amid large skyscrapers casting permanent shadows along Montgomery Street, being in an office was not the best place to be.

As I sat on the computer reading the news stories about the attack, the phone rang again. It was Mom and I could just feel the sense of confusion in her voice. I thought about what it must be like for someone who did not have all their mental faculties to witness such events and how they could possibly process them.

Did she think she was watching a movie? She probably wasn't the only one who thought that; many of us did as we first turned on the television. Then as I watched the first tower collapse, I said to Mom on the phone, "The building is falling." At which point she started crying and told me she loved me and that I should try to get out of the building if I could. I had to explain to her over the next 10 minutes that it was the building in New York collapsing, not my own apartment building.

Oh if only all the confusion and panic of those events had been so easy to explain in only 10 minutes that day. I do remember, as others have described, the "eeriness" of the streets, the buildings, the towns - big and small - and how things just didn't seem right. There was less traffic on the streets, there wasn't the usual small talk at the grocery store or the dry cleaner, if one could even think about seeking refuge in the mundane world of daily errands.

There was no air traffic. Planes were not crossing over from the Pacific Ocean (which was located only 10 blocks away from my apartment) to land at San Francisco International Airport. And for the next few weeks, once air flights resumed, their usual engine sounds which were usually ignored, seemed amplified at least three times by having witnessed those horrible events and that sad day.

Life did not resume quickly for me or for many others. Dinners out seemed like an extravagance or an indulgence despite the advice of television psychiatrists and counselors about the "need to take care of oneself." Music was not played loudly, jokes were not raucously repeated, kids did not run after each other during recess at St. Thomas' Catholic School across the street. In those few short hours which stretched out along my mental and emotional landscape for what seemed like months, the world had changed and would never be the same.

I too had changed and would never be the same. Mom was going through her own personal terrorist attack, with daily pummelings to her mental capacity and her psyche. Before September 11, 2001, I already knew that she would never be the same. I was just hoping that the world around her would be the same and that I could still protect her from it, as much as an oldest son 3,000 miles away could do.

In those years since, time has passed quickly, but not so quickly that I can't pause and take time to remember what was, what could have been, and what may be, because of those attacks. And as I remember I will do so as I hold my loved ones a bit tighter tonite, cherish the memory more fervently of those no longer with me, and pray not as silently as usual that we all appreciate what we have when we have it, thank those who protect us when we need it, and love those who love us despite the madness of the world around us.

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Key:

- **Mom/Mother:** Jacqueline Austin MacEntee (1941-2015)
- **George:** George Arvanites (1960-), husband of Thomas MacEntee
- **Oakland:** George Arvanites was living in Oakland, California in the Adams Point district, north of San Francisco, from 1998-2004.
- **Boss:** Thomas Traynor, supervisor at Heller Ehrman.
- **East Bay:** Generally considered the area northwest of San Francisco, across the Bay Bridge.

Photo: *Rescue workers conduct search and rescue attempts, descending deep into the rubble of the World Trade Center. September 14, 2001.* Source: [U.S. Navy photo](#) by Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Jim Watson. Public domain.