

Ten Years After 9/11
By Jeff Neuman-Lee
September 2011

I was at a meeting of Brethren pastors when the news came that the Twin Towers had been hit. Kathy came running in, she was greatly distressed, she shared the news she'd heard over the radio. It was at Camp Pine Lake in Iowa; there was a television which we rolled in. One of the Towers was burning. Dale Brown was our speaker. He has been a great leading advocate for non-violence in the Church of the Brethren. He circled us up led us in prayer, then we all prayed individually and the meeting broke up early.

I listened on the radio in the car ride home, about two and a half hours. I was glad not to be sitting glued to the television. I knew what that can do to me and most everyone in a crisis. When the earthquake hit us in San Francisco in 1989 we all watched and watched and the emotional impact of the event sank into our guts. People didn't sleep well for weeks. Some were depressed for months. Much of it, I came to believe, came from a collective emotional cry, which was amplified by watching television. I wasn't going to sit in front of the TV to see this thing, I would go for walks and pray.

And, as it turns out, this event was far worse than that Loma Prieta quake. It was ghastly: people burning alive, or jumping from high above the street to meet a different fate; almost three thousand dead. Coordinated attacks on three icons of America, one of them thwarted by air travelers who then gave their lives. It was a horror. It was terror and it worked, we were terrorized.

I did enjoy the three days of no air travel. I lived in the country then and it was beautiful to look up at the wide sky and see it like I had never seen it before, clear of planes and contrails. Even then I thought of how there would be these few days when all that airline pollution would not be emitted into the atmosphere. And I thought that being forced into a new situation might help us to reflect on our life together here in America, and, perhaps, to make some changes.

But it was hard to avoid the sweep of emotion through everyone and everything. I felt it more than I was able to stay centered in God. I was dismayed, and then I had to preach. In that first sermon I didn't say anything very memorable to myself except this quote from Isaiah: *"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"* One of my friends who could be honest with me told me that I hadn't given her the sermon that she needed that day. But I didn't know what to say. All I could feel was that our American reaction would be very bad.

We Americans instituted more and more restrictions against ourselves. We tightened security in airports. And we went to war with Afghanistan. It was hard to imagine otherwise; I understood the Afghan war, I didn't like it, but it seemed limited and a police action sort of thing. We also began to fear anyone who looked Arab or Muslim. If we had an ideal country, one really devoted to the way of Jesus, I knew we would make other decisions toward real healing in the world. For God's sake, we could have donated \$50 billion to cure aids in Africa as a memorial to those who had died and as a gesture of peace. But I knew that we Americans really don't follow Jesus. I stayed quiet.

And then we started the war with a people who had not attacked us, a people who did not have the means to attack us, the people of Iraq. I could not speak, I could not bring myself to rise against the force of the spirit of people in those days. It was wrong. We had other options for getting rid of Hussein and his sons. But we started a war with all sorts of naïve predictions of quick success. Only children would make such assumptions and only cynically manipulative leaders would tell them and only a people so illiterate in history would buy them. We could have done something else, if we really had to do anything at all. We think about the cost of that war in terms of our own dead and wounded, the many who come home maimed in either body or mind or both. We don't remember as well the financial costs we refused to bear which are estimated to be as much as three trillion dollars. We rarely, if ever,

talk about the tens of thousands if not over one hundred thousand innocent Iraqis dead. And the thousands of Iraqi wounded and the infrastructure destroyed. At one time five million Iraqis were refugees from the war we started, one of the great refugee catastrophes of our time.

Another cost in all this was a loss in the ability to talk with each other. War does that to nations. The vote for war might be close, but after we go to war all that is put behind us and we are supposed to lose our brains and go together. In America it is generally true that if you as a legislator vote against war, it is a vote which will cost you your seat, that's the kind of people we are. However, we never really did share the sacrifice of this war. For most of us it was war on the cheap. Expensive for the soldiers, time to continue the party at home by adding to the debt.

What really got to me was the response of the church, both my local church and the church at large. It had been so taken over by right wing radio that it had no effective Christ-like response. In our Brethren congregation some were against war, but refused to push their agenda by talking about it. They wanted to win others over by the example of their deeds. The others were fine with good, local deeds, as long as they did not raise larger issues of Christian political morality. And I was no good as a leader. I had not had experience of a crisis like this, I was unprepared and like a deer staring into headlights, I was frozen.

It is then that I started to write a book. I had to figure out for myself a way of saying the Good News of Jesus Christ that was clear, that was Biblical, and that was real. A people who claim Jesus as their savior would have done something different.

Other, family stuff was happening. Lori graduated from high school and went off to college. My dad died. Mark graduated and went off to college. We left Iowa and came to Denver to live.

It is ten years later. I am working to finish a second edition of the book. Having gone through it with some friends and having found some other authors who help me to feel like I was really on track with much of what I was writing, I have more confidence to really push it and to see that it is read.

But I am also less in the church world. On the morning of September 11, 2001, before Kathy came into the room, I had been in a world with its own language of love, a world where it seemed that we worked for community together. I was immersed in that world and only knew what else was going on in other's lives from that good, safe church place. Then the spirit of revenge settled upon us and it was clear that our little enclave did not represent Jesus except that we took care of each other. And then we lost the ability to talk about what was important to us. Now that I'm in Denver and partly work on new church development, I spend a lot of time with just folks. I am not so ensconced in the safety of the church. I have a far less hopeful view of people, I feel that I see us better for who we are. I also have a deeper sense of what real faith is, moving ahead, sticking it through even though you can't see how it can possibly work. And we will have a lot of work to do.

As the world gets more crowded, as we emit more greenhouse gases, as we struggle for rare earth metals and for water and for simple food, and millions and millions of people, especially poor people, struggle, perhaps perish, 9/11 will come to seem like a tantrum. The richest, most powerful nation in the world was terrorized, and in its poverty of spirit, returned in kind.