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The Duty of the Living

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The duty of the living

Sometimes I think that Sept. 11 is the longest day in American history. What do we make of such a day? We are more comfortable reflecting on moments past.

Sept. 11 lingers. Its sun arcs slowly across the sky, casting distorted shadows upon the earth. We long for this day to end. Then we might see a clearer pattern among the stars.

I woke up to Sept. 11. It was 5:45 a.m. in Los Angeles when the first plane flew into the World Trade Center. It was 6:03 a.m. Pacific time when the second plane hit. Many knew in an instant that the world had changed. At 6:50 I woke to the radio, but the voices were unfamiliar. Was it a dream? Or was it a radio play — another *War of the World*? I turned on CNN, just as the news broke about the Pentagon. At 7:05 a.m. I saw the south tower collapse, live on CNN. I turned the television off. I told my daughter that something terrible had happened.

I live far from the clouds of dust that swept across Manhattan. I live far from the field in Pennsylvania where the fourth plane crashed into the ground. Yet in Los Angeles, in towns across the nation, in towns across the world, this day seems to have no end.

What do we make of such a day? Perhaps we should think about it at a later time. Perhaps it will be a decade before scholars have the distance to say anything definitive. Meanwhile, around us, Sept. 11 is constructed by others.

“It’s a new kind of war,” the president says. He says we shouldn’t discriminate against Muslims, but then hundreds of Muslims are detained based on tips from neighbors and friends. The attorney general seeks broad new powers for domestic surveillance. We

are doing these things, the president says, to safeguard civilization and to protect our way of life.

The nation is awash in American flags. Amid the strains of the national anthem, our concerns about civil rights at home and human rights abroad seem to strike a discordant chord.

Yet when we look back at other moments of crisis, we find words of self-reflection. We find in moments of profound grief a call for self-examination and a call for change.

On April 4, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy spoke of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. He said, “In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in.” He quoted Aeschylus: “In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”

But can wisdom and self-reflection happen now, at a time of war? We might find an answer in the words of Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn. Toward the end of World War II, he stood before too many newly dug graves on the island of Iwo Jima and delivered a eulogy. The soldiers beneath the soil had done their job, he said. It was instead the living “who are here to be dedicated and consecrated.”

Gittelsohn called upon the mourners to embrace democracy, but he did not invoke a narrow conception of nationalism or a faith in Manifest Destiny. Instead he imagined a transformed democracy among the soldiers, and he called upon his listeners to transform themselves.

“Here lie men who loved America,” he said. “Here lie officers and men, Negroes and whites, rich and poor, together. . . Here no man prefers another because of his faith, or despises him because of his color. Among these men there is no discrimination, no prejudice, no hatred. Theirs is the highest and purest democracy.”

The burden on the living after World War II was to give meaning to Gittelsohn’s transformed image of America and to work as well for peace in the world. What burden might be placed in our hands?

Many scholars have argued that moments of crisis can also be moments of transformation. Perhaps it takes a crisis to up-end the cultural and political status quo. We know that in American history, moments of crisis have sometimes led to terrible acts of repression. But sometimes out of crisis comes meaningful, progressive social change.

What is our role now, as scholars? We didn’t ask to be placed in this moment in time. But as we gaze through the television lens at the cranes moving rubble and remains at Ground Zero, or at the bare hands moving bricks to uncover a loved one in a collapsed building in Afghanistan, we must take up the burden of the living. This moment will be shaped, for good or for ill, either with us or without us.

★ *Mary L. Dudziak is the Judge Edward J. and Ruey L. Guirado Professor of Law and History. This essay was excerpted from her presentation at the American Studies Association annual meeting. Dudziak coordinated a May conference with the Center for Law, History and Culture examining Sept. 11 as a moment of transformation.*