



WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES

700 Prospect Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44115-1110
Phone: 216.736.3700
Fax: 216.736.3703

J. Bennett Guess
Collegium of Officers, United Church of Christ

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Feeling God's Big Love for the World's Deep Pain

J. Bennett Guess

It was fall 2004, around the third anniversary of September 11, 2001, that I became obsessed with The New York Times' online "portraits of grief" that capsulated the lives of each of the persons who died that terrible day.

Most people nationwide were captivated by the poignant profiles soon after 9/11, but it took me years to muster the fortitude to tackle them by the thousands. The emotional scabs of 9/11 did not heal easily. Looking back, I now view my delayed yet careful reading of each victim's story as a sign of my own grief process at work.

It was there I met people like Eddie Calderon, 43, a security guard at the trade center for 22 years. His niece remembered him as an entertainer, how much he loved to dance. He was last seen running toward the north tower after guiding dozens of workers to safety.

I learned about Douglas Gurian, 38, who found pleasure in simple things. Each summer when he took his family to Fire Island, he would take his shoes off before they reached the shore and not put them on again for days. On the morning of the attacks, he was at Windows on the World, attending a technology conference.

I read about Lisa and Samantha Egan, two sisters aged 31 and 24, who worked steps away from one another at Cantor Fitzgerald. Their father took some comfort knowing they had one another during those frightening moments. "My girls," he said, "were outgoing, bright, articulate, giving, loving, caring. Not just my flesh and blood."

After 9/11, we all found ourselves imagining the horrors of that day through the victims' lived experiences, the panic and trauma they endured and the heavy weight of each family's loss. Augmented by the violence and death resulting from the 9/11-tinged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the collective well of grief seems incomprehensible.

I'm not a big believer in "atonement theology," a perspective that emphasizes Jesus' substitutionary role, that he somehow "took my place" through the crucifixion. Yet I do believe in a God that loves the world with a particular concern for those who suffer, a God who literally feels our pain and, in turn, mediates grace and healing.

The work of justice is to do the same — to feel the immensity of the world's pain in its varied, yet often hidden, forms. To imitate God's deep and urgent love for those tender places. To understand the vulnerability of the undocumented immigrant, jobless parent, or bullied child. To empathize with the sick and uninsured and to cast our votes with them in mind. To respond financially to the desperate needs of famine-stricken Somalis — people we will never meet — even as we make donations to address concerns much closer to home.

The enormity of the tragedy we call 9/11 rattled and changed us, as well it should. But other enormous events — public and personal, social and systemic, local and global — also beg for our attention. The lingering and persistent challenge of 9/11 is whether we have the capacity to love that fully, that completely.

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