

Weekly Reflection for week of September 10, 2001

### Loss of Innocence

I was born in the United States of America, 27 years ago, on July 17, 1974, after Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, after the Vietnam War, after the civil rights movement, and after the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. My whole life I have really never struggled for much. I have always known space travel to be possible, I have always known girls could grow up to be anything they wanted. I have black friends married to white friends and I never understood what would cause a country to go to war. Like it or not this is how I was raised. This is the society I grew up in. This is what I know to be true. This is my story.

I went to elementary school during the 1980s, the Regan era. It was a time of a prosperous economy, the MTV generation, the Berlin wall came down, communism started to collapse and democracy ruled. I was a wealthy child according to my grandpa, who lived through the depression, fought in World War II, and told me many stories about the "olden days." I was wealthy, he said, "because I ate every day, I went to school, I had a roof over my head, and I was safe." "Silly old man," I thought, "of course I am fed, I am educated, I am safe, I live in America."

I remember the feeling I had when the space shuttle Challenger, exploded, and when we held hands across America.

I felt empathy for those who were hurting and pity for those who were starving and then went on with my life. In the 1990s, when I went to high school and college, more tragedies struck. I lit candles for those who died in Oklahoma and those who perished at Columbine and then, again, went on with my life.

Yet it was not until September 11, 2001, that I really understood what devastation meant. It was not until this day that I genuinely understood patriotism. It was not until this day I truly felt pride in the symbol of the American flag, the concept of a democracy and the ideals of capitalism.

You see, all these years, all this time, I have been walking around the United States of America as a pampered, spoiled, naïve little girl. My generation has never experienced such terror. My generation has never experienced such a threat. My generation has never really seen war. My generation felt that it could never happen to them. My generation, who has been out of control through our own self-indulgence and greed, came together today, in the face of tragedy, and for once became truly united. United not for what we would get out of it, but united to help others, to help our country, overcome with such grief, and move a little closer to healing.

Grandpa used to tell me stories of what it was like when he fought the Germans. My mother tried to explain to me how it felt to see the boys in her neighborhood come home in wooden boxes from Vietnam. But until this horrid day, I never could or would have been able to truly understand those events. Today, I am changed forever. I can't help thinking of my ancestors; those who watched many bloody battles unfold here on our very soil, the ones I assumed I would never witness.

I am an American, for goodness sake, and, well, those things just don't happen here. What once was safe, what once I took for granted, I never will again. Just like everyone in my generation, I thought freedom meant free. Now today I know where that freedom comes from, the blood of the victims, the tears of their families and the sweat of the brave men and women who risk their lives to find those who were killed and to hope to find some who survived.

Did I mention I'm a schoolteacher? I used to roll my eyes every time my class was interrupted by late announcements of The Pledge of Allegiance. I thought it was trivial, I thought it was annoying. I thought, we could get by without saying it for one day. After all, The Pledge of Allegiance took up my valuable classroom time.

However, in contrast to those feelings, on Wednesday, as I recited The Pledge of Allegiance, I cried. I truly understood what I was pledging for, and what I had been pledging for the last 27 years of my life, "...one nation... indivisible...with justice and liberty for all." Those words never penetrated me more deeply than on that day, the day when we came together as one indivisible nation to seek justice for the victims and maintain liberty for our citizens.

On Monday those were just words, by Wednesday they were vows. Vows to remember the victims and their families, vows to pay tribute to this great nation's hero's, vows to respect all that I have taken for granted these past 27 years.

This nation that gave me an education, a hope of pursuing happiness, a hope of living the "American Dream" has taught me the greatest lesson of all, freedom comes with a cost. My only regret is that I did not listen to my grandpa's stories with enough devotion and enough attentiveness, because today I truly can understand the perspective he had and the sacrifices it took to stay a free and united in this nation. I now look at my own children, and hope that I can some how instill in them a sense of patriotism, a sense of understanding, a sense that being free has its costs. I wish I would have been able to comprehend those values, to truly understand the impact of their

meaning during the 14 years I knew my grandfather, who lost his innocence and his leg in World War II.  
He would have been 79 years old this week.

Written By: Cheryl Martin, proud citizen of The United States of America