

On 9-11

Opening words¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, September 10, 2006
by **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

Opening Words: We live in covenant and community with each other, no matter how rudimentary that sense of community is or how unaware of our commitments to each other we may be. Five years ago our community, in the largest sense of the word, was shattered by the most egregious transgression of our most precious covenant—the sanctity of life.

History is seldom as clearly demarked as it was on September 11, 2001. It is impossible for us to gather on this day here in New York without our thoughts drifting back to that day when a senseless violence visited our city and our nation. A day when quiet grief engulfed our land; when the engines of commerce and industry were muffled; when agencies and institutions were shocked into silence; and when the halls of government were hushed.

There has been and will be much said of that day, about the senseless death and destruction and the emotional burden it left behind. Some even timidly ask, “Why?” and finally try to understand the causes of which there are many. None are justification but they were motivation for the unjustifiable.

But little attention has been or likely will be paid to the attitude of the days surrounding 9-11—September tenth and September twelfth.

The world changed on September 11, 2001, changed in painful and unforeseen ways. Changed so much that an expression arose that alluded to the comparatively blissful state of the day before. “That’s so September tenth” was used as reference to the naiveté of the pre-nine-eleven era in which we thought everyone liked us and wanted to be like us. *That’s so September tenth* serves as a reminder that with the change of tragedy must come a change of thinking.

Many ask, “What happened to that world of September tenth?” and they find their answer in the horror of 9–11. But my question is, “What happened to September twelfth?” What happened to the sense of global togetherness that caused people and nations to set aside differences and proclaim, “Today we are all Americans.” The world mourned our loss as its own and for one brief moment we were all together. For one brief moment we were one, united in our grief and in the understanding that the loss of any of us is a loss for all of us.

Much was lost on 9-11. In addition to the obvious we lost that September-tenth sense of security. But we’ve lost even more since then. We’ve lost that September-twelfth sense of togetherness. Instead, we’ve allowed that which could have united us to divide us, and a great opportunity has slipped through our fingers. The promise reflected in the world’s sympathy has been squandered, along with much of our national reputation and integrity.

On September twelfth, 2001 the world mourned our loss and we cried together. But the crying stopped. Our mourning morphed into a quest for revenge. And in the quest for retribution we reacted differently that the world had come to expect of us. That sense of

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker’s presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

global citizenship disappeared into the fog and friction of war. The unifying sorrow that held so much promise was gone before our tears had had a chance to dry, and in its place we're left only with regret.

Whittier said "For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been!'" To which Bret Harte added, "More sad are these we daily see; 'It is, but hadn't ought to be.'"

I've asked Jerry for some appropriate music to accompany your thoughts. As you remember 9-11 and its impact on you personally, reflect not only what was and what might have been, but also on what is, and hadn't ought to be.

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2 West 64th Street • New York, New York 10023
212.874.5210 • www.NYSEC.org