

The Day that Changed Everything

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Many of you may know that I read blogs on the internet—mostly blogs that write about news and politics and the nexus of faith and politics. During one of the conventions, a writer that I've met on several occasions, a blogger from Massachusetts, Charley on the MTA did a very short post that has haunted me since. He was using the one of the newest tools, "twitter" to send off to his friends and associates a short message: "You know, the ____ (party which shall not be named) acts like 9/11 was the best day in their lives. This little video is downright pornographic. Fear: Then Vote."¹ What it evoked in me was not a partisan "aha" moment, but a lot of thought about what it is exactly that triggers the best or worst in us. What are the events or motivations that cause our lives to change in dramatic ways? We have heard the catch phrase over and over again, "9/11 changed everything." If you mean by "everything" America's vision of what it is or should be in the world, probably not so much. The sympathy and solidarity of the world community was extended to us that day. But at that moment we were looking inward and when we bothered to look outside of ourselves the country's view was focused on an enemy. For some, having an enemy is the fuel that sustains their egos. That hideous, tragic, traumatic day and it's aftermath brought out both the best and the worst in our nation, the selfless servants and the profiteers, those looking for love and forgiveness and those looking for hate and revenge.

The attacks on 9/11 totally unmasked a feeling of vulnerability which was swiftly used and abused. It ushered in an entire set of "New Rules," rules that had been waiting in the wings to be brought out on such an occasion. It changed the way we understand our freedoms—we can't get on an airplane without going through a mostly for show security circus. We now have "designated free speech zones" at conventions and other events. Since when was free speech only allowed within the confines of a chain link fence on American soil? We now have no idea of who is tapping our phone conversations or reading our e-mail or watching our web surfing habits, all in the name of national security. Policing agencies have now found it acceptable to arrest people without cause and hold them in jail indefinitely.

Since 9/11, our response to it has changed the way the world sees us. Never before has the United States held a doctrine of waging a pre-emptive strike against another country whether or not it was a direct threat to us. We used to be known as a fair arbiter of justice. We decried the use of torture under all circumstances. That is, to use a phrase, "no longer operable." To the collective nations around the world, America now stands for actions and values we condemned of others. Yes, for the military/intelligence/industrial complex, it was the best day ever.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2008 have forever changed the lives of the friends and family members of those killed in the attacks. They forever changed the lives of the rescue workers who have been affected by the toxic air they breathed. They changed the lives of those who witnessed it or who were directly affected, indeed. They changed the lives of those in the military who were sent to Afghanistan and later Iraq and their friends and families, and of the people in the countries we attacked. The friends and families of the dead and wounded here and abroad will forever be altered. We will most likely continue to hear the phrase, but it begs the question, did 9/11 really change everything? Did the country mobilize to get behind a war effort—misguided or not? Have we all sacrificed in some way that affects our day to day lives? We go to work, to school, to the movies, to the baseball or football game. Our cost of living has gone up—gas, groceries, utilities. We are worried about what is to come. What will be the next economic shoe to drop? Will I still have a job, will I still be able to pay the bills? Do we link those concerns to 9/11?

¹ <http://www.BlueMassGroup.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=12840>

Probably not, nor should we. The same concerns were troubling us before the “day that changed everything.”

History has been full of “days that changed everything.” Going back into just the last century I could point out quite a few. The day the stock market crashed, Oct. 29, 1929 changed everything. The day the Reichstag burned Feb. 27, 1933 changed everything. The day that synagogues all over Germany, Kristallnacht, Nov. 9, 1938 changed everything. The day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941 changed everything. The day FDR died, April 12, 1945 changed everything. The day JFK was assassinated, Nov. 22, 1963 changed everything. The day the Civil Rights Act was signed, July 2, 1964 changed everything. The day 25,000 people marched to Selma, March 25, 1965 changed everything. The day Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, April 4, 1968 changed everything. The day the space shuttle Challenger exploded, Jan. 28, 1986 changed everything. The day the Berlin Wall fell, November 9, 1989 changed everything. The day that Hurricane Katrina hit new Orleans, August 29, 2005 changed everything. The day a severely troubled man entered the Unitarian Universalist church in Knoxville TN and started shooting and killing people, July 24, 2008 changed everything.

Yes, that’s quite a long list of dates. A number of them occurred before many of us were born, some of them are events we either personally witnessed or were drawn into by the news and media. Many of these days, if not the dates are burned into our memories, where we were, what we felt. Each one of these events brought about a new set of rules, explicit or implicit. Some of them have directly shaped our world view or changed us in some tangible measurable way. In each and every case there were or are people whose lives are forever altered because of what happened on that day. How do we begin to describe something that literally changes **everything**?

In her book, eat, pray, love, Elizabeth Gilbert writes about her moment of personal crisis in which she found herself curled up in a panic on the bathroom floor of their apartment. She wrote:

“This part of my story is not a happy one, I know. But I share it here because something was about to occur on that bathroom floor that would change forever the progression of my life—almost like one of those crazy astronomical super-events when a planet flips over in outer space for no reason whatsoever, and its molten core shifts, relocating its poles and altering its shape radically, such that the whole mass of the planet suddenly becomes oblong instead of spherical. Something like that.”²

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy and Toto are transported from their farm in Kansas to the land of Oz via a hurricane that uplifts their world, literally—at least through Dorothy’s mind and the concussion she sustains. She finds herself in a new land with new rules.

Libraries are filled with stories, fact and fiction, fairy tale and legend of people whose lives reached a precise pivot point and turned into something else. We see these stories portrayed in movies all the time. And of course, religion is filled with them. From Abraham and Sarah and Moses to Saul, in the book of Acts. A flashing light from heaven appears and he hears the voice of Jesus which changes him forever. He changes his name to Paul and establishes what would become the Christian church. Transformational stories appear in the Koran and Bagavad Gita as well. In our more secular world the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous contains stories of men and women hitting their bottom—reaching the end of their rope from drinking who found the miracle of sobriety. For some it was a day that changed everything. For others a long process that led up to that day.

² Gilbert, Elizabeth, eat, pray, love, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) p. 12

Every woman who gives birth to a child can witness to the fact that that day changed everything. The partners involved can also claim the same wonder and love and commitment of a lifetime, and yet they find a whole new set of rules by which to live their lives. The death of a child, a parent, a spouse or a sibling, the news of a debilitating or terminal diagnosis, an accident, a fire, experiencing trauma or being the victim of a crime can also change everything. Even the joyful attainment of a lifelong dream can change everything.

Everything—that's an awfully big word which is totally inclusive. It is an absolute. That "crazy astronomical super-events when a planet flips over in outer space for no reason whatsoever, and its molten core shifts, relocating its poles and altering its shape radically, such that the whole mass of the planet suddenly becomes oblong instead of spherical" pretty much covers it. John Lewis in talking about the wind storm that tried to lift his Aunt's house off the ground almost describes it too—literally. But for the most part, this kind of manifestation does not happen externally. What happens is internal in our minds. What happens is that we are thrust into a new mental universe where we see the entire world differently. Our relationship to other people and the environment changes. Our understanding of who we are and what we are doing changes. Our framework of our role in the universe changes. We see things differently, hear things differently and feel them differently.

The day that changes everything is in reality the day that forces us to change who we are, how we know ourselves to be, how we interact with one another and the world. It shifts our priorities. It strips everything to the basic fundamentals. What do we need and what do we have to give? What is THE most important thing in our life and how do we make sure that is taken care of?

Not all of us have defining moments that pierce our souls and give us a direction that is clear, that show us the way to a higher calling. All of us go from day to day trying to make sense of the life we find ourselves living. Some of us may have lofty goals in mind, a direction, an aspiration, a mission. For some of us, just getting through a day without feeling hurt or angry, or without being in physical pain is a great accomplishment, something that we can't take for granted. For some, just feeling something, anything, would make it a great day.

Life, were we to approach it as writers, is a series of chapters, of episodes. Some of those episodes or chapters can be put end to end to present a somewhat coherent story and reveal a plot with evolution and growth. Most of our stories have setbacks, challenges, pieces that don't fit the narrative, a good editor would throw them out with no looking back. If we were to take an objective look at our own story—stand back and view it from the outside as a stranger would—we would probably discover that our story is directly related to and grows from the collection of all of those smaller days that don't change everything but do change something. The chapter headings might be marked in time by the remarkable dates, but they are not the story. How they are integrated into our personal narrative is the story.

As I heard of the shooting at the Tennessee Valley UU Church I flashed back to one of those days in my life that "changed everything" at All Souls UU Church in Brattleboro VT and a lesson I learned from the people there. Each witness to the traumatic event that took place in that sanctuary on a Sunday in December of 2001 experienced that day within the already established frame of their own life. For the people who were present in our church in Knoxville on that Sunday last July, their lives will be forever changed and framed by what they witnessed and saw and felt within the context of each of their own personal stories that led them to that day. Many have yet to make any sense of it nor will they for a long time to come. That strong wind is whaling away at the foundations of that

church and hand in hand they are making their way to whatever corner they need to to hold it down and keep it together.

As we sit here on this hot September morning, we can look around in this room and not know how many among us have had their world turned upside down—Who among us has experienced a trauma; Who has found recovery from addiction; Who has found the greatest fulfillment in their lives through their children; Who has lived through or is facing life threatening illness. We don't wear our stories on our clothing for everyone to see, thank God. But we need to know that those stories are there, lying below the surface and we must treat one another's stories with respect.

Today we know that the residents of the Houston/Galveston area are in the depths of discovering the impact of their day that changed everything. We know the commuters in Los Angeles have just had their rules changed too. We can easily surmise that each day brings the potential to change everything for any one of us. These days test our character, our souls, our fortitude—all of the inner resources we have to muster. The greater question, the challenge that comes to each and every one of us is this—when faced with an ultimate test, when stripped down to the core of our souls, when thrust into a world with new rules, will we be wise? Will we be kind? Will we be just? Will our actions reflect love and hope or hatred and fear? Will we act to protect those who are weak and in need of help, or will they be self-serving? Are we going to clasp our hands together and walk with the wind holding the trembling house down moving from corner to corner, from story to story, from challenge to challenge together? Or are we going to run for cover and each try to save ourselves? It is on those days that change everything that we find out who we really are. They don't really change everything. They can't. They just bring who we are into sharper focus for ourselves and those around us to see. That goes for nations as well as people. Are we ready for the next day that will change everything? We know it's coming.