

The Other September 11th

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Ironically today, the 18th of September, 2001—one week after the monstrous attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the deaths of thousands of innocent people in the jets, in the buildings, and on the ground—today is the *Dieciocho*, the Eighteenth, the Independence Day of Chile. As I write this, I think back twenty-eight years to a terrorized, battle-torn *Dieciocho* of denunciations and arrests, house-to-house searches, dusk-to-dawn curfews, and preemptory on-sight shootings. The 18th of September of 1973 was exactly a week after Chile's great political calamity, the military coup that overthrew the government of Salvador Allende. And today—a week after our own horrific event—is also a time of chaos, fear, and agonized reflection. Americans ask: how could this have happened to us? What could we have done to prevent it? And since we can't turn back the clock and undo what has already befallen us, what can we do in the future to ensure that no such horror ever occurs again?

In these last several days, as I follow the coverage and commentary on our national calamity, communicate with the members of my small and scattered biological family and my worldwide community of friends, and send messages of solidarity to Muslim Bangladeshi and Pakistani and Iranian friends in this country and elsewhere, I find myself recalling and reliving the social tensions and uncertain political conditions that resonated in the lives of my Chilean friends and acquaintances, the hopes and fears that influenced their relationships with me and with each other, and the larger forces of history that ultimately swept some of them away. Although the Chilean tragedy has been hardly a blip in the media coverage of these last days, it has been heartening to hear the concern so many commentators and political leaders and callers to talk radio programs have expressed for the innocent people of Afghanistan, victims themselves of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's repression. It is heartening that the response of so many Americans has been compassionate and mature, careful to distinguish the terrorists' and their supporters' heinous acts from the innocent lives of most people

who share with them a common Middle Eastern origin and Muslim faith.

It is heartening that relief organizations are striving not only to alleviate the suffering of those who lost loved ones on September 11th, but are also stepping up efforts to feed starving Afghans; heartening that so many Christian and Jewish religious leaders have opened dialogues with Muslims in American communities; heartening that most Americans have resisted jingoism and acts of ethnic hatred against Middle Eastern Americans; heartening that even the potential saber rattlers in the current administration have responded with caution and moderation, with the avowed intent of avoiding as much as possible the loss of more innocent lives in the military and intelligence responses to the September 11th attacks, the campaigns of our so-called war on terrorism.

September 11, 2001, started out slowly, as I drifted in and out of sleep, the sounds of National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* news program playing softly on my clock radio, background voices to some episodic predawn dream. I was sleeping in, after dancing that previous evening with the Oklahoma City International Folk Dancers group, which meets every Monday at the First Unitarian Church downtown, not far from the National Memorial site where this nation's worst terrorist bombing to date had taken place on April 19, 1995. The dancing that September 10th evening had been particularly magical—everyone in my carpool ride back to Norman had commented on it—as if the lovely Bulgarian and Turkish, Scandinavian and Israeli, Greek and Cajun Zydeco melodies, to which we wove our intricate dance steps, prefigured a greater global unity and understanding among all peoples of the planet. A halcyon evening, in whose shimmering afterglow I slid back into deeper sleep as the NPR voices reported soothingly on routine morning news—meetings of world leaders, the stock market's opening tallies, upcoming previews of the fall season's new TV shows.

At about 10 a.m., though, I found myself struggling to wake: disturbing presentiments were filtering

through my dreams' newscasts, scraps of phrases like "plane crash," "Pentagon ablaze," and "hijacked aircraft" swirling out of my small radio. But as the phrase, "World Trade Center towers collapsed," came into auditory focus, I experienced an instant of despairing disbelief, and wondered if NPR were pulling off a colossal Orwellian stunt, a *War of the Worlds*-style hoax. But it wasn't April Fool's Day, and the reporters' voices were tense with genuine shock and controlled anguish. I sat up as the full magnitude of the catastrophe poured into my waking awareness, then ran out to the living room and turned on my roommate's small TV set. With millions of other Americans, I stood transfixed in front of the television, sobbing in horror and grief as, over and over in instant replay on every channel, the doomed jetliner crashed full speed into the second tower and exploded, and the first and then the second World Trade Center towers collapsed in billows of smoke and fire. As cameras close to the towers just before their collapse replayed the rain of file cabinets, computers, confetti-like reams of paper and burning debris, and—most horrific of all—the tiny, flailing figures of people who had jumped or been thrown from shattered windows by the shock of impact or the terror of being burned alive at their desks.

Throughout that day, the President and other national leaders were moved with utmost secrecy from one undisclosed location to another, and news broadcasts careened from one lead story and one clue to the next as to the identity of the perpetrators of these ghastly crimes. Along with hundreds of millions of stunned Americans and human beings throughout the world, I trembled in front of television sets, tried in vain to make telephone calls on jammed circuits to find out the fate of friends and family members in New York or Washington, called the local Red Cross to find out where to donate blood and clothing and money, and gave up on the plans for my task-filled day, its safe and comfortable sense of order and purpose. Along with millions of others, I felt chaos and aimlessness and arbitrary danger invade my structured existence, and wondered whether our national life, not to mention our personal lives, would ever return to what we had thought was normal.

As cameras panned over the gaping, fire-scorched impact crater gouged in the Pentagon's formerly impregnable walls; the rows of body bags laid out near Ground Zero, so grimly flat with their fragmentary con-

tents; the exhausted, grime-smearing firefighters and policemen digging through rubble to pull out wounded survivors; the knots of ash-covered office workers hugging each other and sobbing in front of the immense, smoking heap of debris that had been the World Trade Center, I thought back to another September 11th that already lived in infamy in the memories of several million citizens half a hemisphere away from our own scenes of devastation. It was the twenty-eighth anniversary of this cataclysm that I had anticipated would occupy some fraction of the day's news, at least on NPR—before our own national disaster began to unfold that morning.

On September 11, 1973, twenty-eight years before the current horror, the democratically elected government led by Chile's President Salvador Allende was overthrown by the military forces of General Pinochet. Thousands were killed; thousands fled into exile in the ensuing days and weeks. Pablo Neruda's books and manuscripts were burned by Pinochet's soldiers as the Nobel Prize-winning poet lay dying of cancer in a nearby room. Acclaimed folk singer and human rights activist Victor Jara was arrested, tortured, and shot by military guards in the improvised prison camp in the national football stadium. President Allende and a few loyal followers made a desperate last stand in the Moneda, the presidential offices in downtown Santiago, as the building was bombed and strafed by low-flying military fighter jets, and then the troops stormed in to finish him off. The condemned leader fulfilled his grimly premonitory statement: if anything happened during his term, they would have to carry him dead out of the Moneda.

As a young Fulbright scholar, I lived during Allende's presidency in Chile, a country in the throes of a courageous but ultimately doomed political experiment. When I arrived in mid-1971, I was a rather naive young woman with no political agenda beyond the anti-Vietnam War, pro-environmental and American civil rights idealism of the Sixties generation. By the time I departed a year later, in the midst of violent street demonstrations, I had witnessed and participated in events that would forever mark my life. I had become the foster mother of a poor Mapuche girl and done illegal transactions on the black market. I had attended Young Communist study cells in working-class barrios, and cocktail parties hosted by wealthy conservatives in upper-class suburbs. I had traveled throughout Chile,

staying with rural medical doctors in an Atacama Desert mining town in the North, and with peasant tenant farmers on the shores of Lake Llanquihue in the South. I had worked with people who would later die at the hands of military torturers, and I had met people who would work as torturers.

For a year, I participated in Chile's culture and national life, so that when the coup came, and the Chile I had known was swept away in violence and terror, in the deaths and exile of thousands of its citizens, I understood in my own heart and memory the magnitude of what was lost, and the finality of that destruction and those deaths. The coup left many of my own Chilean friends dead, disappeared, or exiled, and I have not to this day been able to trace the fate or whereabouts of many of them. After the initial days and weeks of arrests and disappearances, kidnappings in the street in broad daylight or midnight knocks on the door by military police, the country was plunged into a seventeen-year military regime of state-sponsored repression for anyone suspected of sympathy for Allende and his policies.

Although I was back in the United States on September 11, 1973, watching the destruction of Chilean dreams of freedom and democracy via television's fuzzy black-and-white footage, I was deeply shocked that such barbarity could occur in such a civilized country. My experiences there, I could see, were not going to be easy to reconcile with the self-absorption in American public life that I perceived immediately on my return. I was disheartened by the massive indifference to Chile that I encountered, at a time when politically engaged Americans were preoccupied with the bitter final years of the Vietnam War and the scandalous proceedings of the Watergate affair, and could not be persuaded of the importance of goings-on in a narrow shelf of a country nearly a hemisphere away. Nevertheless, I found myself buttonholing American friends and fellow graduate students, trying to explain to them the enormity of what had happened in that small country. Many listened politely; others couldn't conceal their boredom at my frantic babbling.

"That's nice," one friend drawled. "Say, this dude I know can get tickets to the new Dead concert. Wanna go?"

I wonder if that Grateful Dead fan of nearly three decades ago, or any of his friends or family members, lost a loved one in the World Trade Center or the Pentagon or in one of the doomed jetliners. Just as the

tragedy of that earlier September 11th and its aftermath gave the Chilean people and their friends a bitter taste of national calamity, I wonder if anyone in this vast United States has not been touched or affected by the events of those terrible hours on the morning of our own September 11th. Like most human dwellers on this planet, I hope that the man-made cataclysm on American soil will teach us greater compassion for the victims of political catastrophes elsewhere in the world, some of which (as in the case of Chile) our own government policies have helped to bring about. Now that politically motivated death and destruction have visited us on a massive scale, we have experienced personal losses as intimately as millions of innocent people caught in the crossfire in Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, the Balkans, Sri Lanka, Tibet, East Timor, Guatemala, El Salvador, the Sudan, Somalia, South Africa, Rwanda, and yes, Afghanistan (to name just a few locations). Perhaps now we can begin to move beyond our smug insularity, and grow in compassion and empathy for what citizens of many other nations have suffered for years in their own communities and homes and families.

The September 1973 military coup was led by General Augusto Pinochet, but the preparations for it had been covertly supported by my own government's efforts, as orchestrated by President Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, to destabilize the economy and aid Chile's far right-wing opposition—all in the name of that Cold War goal of removing the threat of Communism and making the world safe for American democracy. Many thoughtful Americans look back in dismay at the political monsters spawned in our Cold War proxy conflicts. We ask how our leaders' efforts to secure democracy—if only within the borders of America—and for American and multi-national business interests everywhere (whether or not these interests have any relationship to, or concern for democracy)—how these efforts may have destabilized or toppled other governments, installed or propped up brutal dictatorships because they claimed to support American interests, despotic regimes that have murdered their own people and crushed any movements toward democracy among the survivors, leaving millions of innocent people in mortal danger in their own countries, in their own homes? Has the U. S. government's sponsorship of repressive regimes in the latter half of the twentieth century really been any different, in morality or in ultimate effects, from the sponsorship

of the September 11th terrorists by some Middle Eastern governments?

Chile today still suffers the long-term after-effects of its September 11th. Besides the more than 3,000 *detenidos y desaparecidos*, those people detained and disappeared during the Pinochet regime—most of whom are still unaccounted for—there are many more thousands of *exonerados políticos*, the politically exonerated, employees of the Chilean government during the Allende presidency who were dismissed or compelled to resign from their jobs after the military coup, usually because of their alleged support for Allende. They have long been cleared of any charges of wrongdoing, but more than a quarter century later, those still living, or their survivors, have had to present documentation to establish their right to a belated pension for the jobs they lost. The amount of the pension, somewhat adjusted for inflation, is calculated according to the employees' rank and salary at the time of dismissal, not on their estimated salary and rank had they been able to keep their positions until retirement. There is no compensation for lost wages or ruined careers.

The children orphaned by Pinochet's secret police in the 1970s and 1980s are adults now, but the whereabouts and final resting places of their disappeared fathers, uncles, mothers, and older siblings are still unknown. Members of the main survivors' group, the Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (AFDD), still demonstrate in Santiago and elsewhere on key memorial days (such as the 11th of September), holding up placards with photos of their missing loved ones, with messages that demand to know *¿Dónde están?* Where are they? After nearly thirty years, many AFDD members have died of old age, their missing loved ones still undiscovered and their questions unanswered. Many others have died of cancer, a malady that seems to afflict this group in higher percentages than other population groups.

Violeta Morales, one of the AFDD's staunchest members, explained to me what she believed to be the cause of the high rate of cancer. "*Los milicos*," she said, using one of the derogatory terms for the military, "have the documents, they know what they did to each and every *detenido desaparecido*. But they won't turn over their files until they are absolutely compelled to do so. One doctor among us says that cancer is the disease of those who grieve with no relief, since we have no closure for our sorrow. We're literally eaten up by uncertainty."

In Santiago's chic, upper-class *barrio alto* neighborhood of Providencia, there is a street that runs parallel to the main Avenida Providencia, a street only recently constructed through several blocks of long-standing residential and retail buildings. This new thoroughfare, La Avenida Once de Septiembre, has displaced rows of stately villas and fashionable shops, much to the resentment of residents and business owners. It was constructed ostensibly to handle increased vehicular traffic through this affluent district. But its name, The 11th of September, seems more like a boast by the triumphant military authorities, a slap in the face to victims of the coup, who have protested it in public demonstrations and demanded that it be changed. After the election in December 1999 of Ricardo Lagos, the first Socialist President since Allende, there was talk of altering the street name to something less offensive. Now, however, in the wake of this new September 11th political horror, I have heard from friends in Santiago that public sentiment favors leaving the name as is, as a memorial to all victims of terrorism and political violence.

Perhaps September 11th will join the many dates in human history which commemorate national tragedies and mourning, and become a universal date for atonement, for recognition that we have all failed each other in large and small ways, and yet we seek each other's forgiveness for our shared, inescapable human condition, in all its tragically flawed beauty. May September 11th become a date for reaching out to all peoples across cultures and languages and ethnicities and religious traditions, for a global recognition of our common humanity.