

Leaving September

Written by Garry Lee Wright
Tuesday, 02 October 2001 18:00

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Along with the shock, grief, and anxiety of the past few weeks, some of us have been feeling, for want of a better word, inadequate. We're not, most of us, very knowledgeable about foreign countries, or their cultures, or how they relate to each other and to the United States. Relatively few Americans are combat veterans; even fewer are bona fide military strategists. None of us can single-handedly jump-start the economy, much as we would like to. What the typical American knows about air travel is limited to making a reservation and finding the right terminal on time.

But everyone knows something about being a parent. We've either held that job, or spent some enlightening moments on the receiving end.

In our house, after some unpleasant, unexpected development comes to pass, the head of the family frequently asks: "What did you learn from that experience?"

It's a cruelly loaded question. But ironically, the most painful events yield the most positive fallout. What we take away from tragedy is the knowledge to protect ourselves from tragedy in the future.

Parents are also big on rules: don't touch that stove; look both ways before you cross; study for that test or you'll wind up taking it again. Rules are about cause and effect; you improve your odds against random chance by making the right choices up front.

Parents also like to drone on about history, both the kind they've lived through and the sort that comes in books. Saying the past is prologue is just a glib way to remind us that whatever frightening thing we're facing today was faced by someone else before, someone who lived to tell about it.

All these parental clichés have been going through my head this week, and they seem relevant as we end a month that none of us is likely to forget.

With a few notable exceptions, most of what has transpired in America since September 11

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has been positive change, necessary action based on what we've learned, much of it inevitable and most of it long overdue.

We are finally – *finally* – paying real attention to the potential for danger on a commercial aircraft. The people and procedures that should have been put in place years ago to protect travelers and airline personnel from air-raging sociopaths and common drunks might, just might, have prevented the horrible assaults on September 11. We are learning too late, but we are learning.

Another good thing: Americans have (finally) begun paying closer attention to the larger world we live in – a role that too often defaulted to politicians and policymakers instead of the rank-and-file citizens whose lives and livelihoods are actually at stake. Lincoln, the last president to fight a war on American soil, said that we defeat our enemies by making them our friends. That idea we will take more seriously in the future.

The economy, however paralyzed it seems at the moment, has to improve, and will. Consider that our grandparents lived through a depression in which one out of four Americans was more or less permanently unemployed, even more in many areas. Somehow, the country found a way to bounce back from that dark economic time, and with considerably fewer resources than it has now. Could things be worse? They were, much, and we survived them, coming out stronger than before. This too will pass.

As I was writing this, some good news finally broke, news from a country rarely mentioned outside geography classes until three weeks ago, whose map now shows up on virtually every newscast. Afghanistan's rulers, the Taliban, blinked. They finally asked Osama bin Laden to leave.

Whether they are intimidated by our military, or are considering the mortality of their own repressive regime, or have simply realized that their guest is not a hero but a criminal-at-large, this development will undoubtedly save lives. Good news, finally.

Let's hope by next week we're feeling well enough to get some humor back in this space. Page me if Jerry Falwell goes on TV again.