The Day Before

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Abstract

In this essay, based on an address given in December 2002, John Sexton, President of New York University, offers personal reflections from the days surrounding the attacks of September 11. He then considers the lessons of the attacks from a broader perspective, looking to the example of a past tragedy to see how cities might rebuild, literally and figuratively. He also underlines the potential for rebirth in New York, highlighting the importance of sustaining the “moral surge” experienced in the aftermath of the attacks and nurturing the unique relationship between New Yorkers and their city.

Keywords

9/11; New York University; NYU Medical School; Athens

The Day Before

Let me share a personal story—not of September 11, but of the day before. I awoke on Monday, September 10, knowing I had a special day ahead. Beyond the normal delights of my life, I was looking forward to lunch at the Four Seasons with Jack Rudin, to the final approval of a wonderfully ambitious plan for NYU’s Medical School at a meeting of the Trustees and to a Yankee game against the Red Sox with my son and two close friends.

Lunch with Jack Rudin is always special for me. Two decades ago, when I was just 4 years out of law school and a newly minted junior professor at New York University School of Law, this legendary financial and civic leader adopted me. I don’t know why he did it, but he has been a friend and mentor ever since, always there with good counsel.

At lunch, Jack and I caught up; we talked about New York, the future of the city, and NYU. But then we turned to a subject that weighed heavily on both our hearts. Jack’s brother, Lew, a great man, and one of the leaders who saved New York during the financial crisis of the seventies, was dying after a long illness. As I left Jack, I called my office to switch my schedule for the following week so that I could visit with Lew at his home.

Now up to Yankee Stadium and a rendezvous with my son Jed and two close friends, Chris Quackenbush and Lenny Wilf, both trustees of the Law School. The weather forecast called for rain. “I won’t be there until 8:00,” Lenny had said earlier in the day, “because that’s when my sources tell me the rain will stop.” Whatever the forecast, however, with Roger Clemens scheduled to dampen the last fading hopes of the hated Red Sox, none of us would take a chance on missing the game.

It did rain long enough for Chris, from his car in the parking lot, to bid successfully in a charity auction for a round of golf with former President Clinton. “I’m bringing my two most conservative friends,” he told me once he got to his seat. Then, at precisely 8:00, just as Lenny arrived, the rain stopped, the skies cleared, and the night was suddenly crisp and beautiful. As the grounds crew tried for 90 min to dry the outfield, we enjoyed stories, debates and, most of all, just being together.

At 9:30, the crew gave up—the field was soaked—and the game was called. The four of us hugged and Chris said: “It doesn’t get any better than this. Let’s do this again—often.”

Those were the last words Chris ever spoke to me. As the game was a washout instead of a 2:00 a.m. special, he was at his desk on the 104th floor of Tower Two when the second plane hit. His 11-year-old daughter would eulogize him, saying: “God wanted the best.” And his closest friend, Jimmy Dunn, would add: “Chris would want us to react with charity, not with hate.”

After the plane hit, Larry Silverstein’s “lifetime dream” literally collapsed, although even now this indomitable man remains determined that the dream will be reborn.

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The doctors, nurses, and staff of NYU’s Medical Center, whose aspirations for our Medical School and hospitals had been ratified just hours before, heroically stayed their posts in the hours after the attack—at first treating the initial wave of victims and then standing in wait for a massive influx of other survivors which never came.

Jack Rudin’s brother Lew died at home on the night after I visited him, September 20, leaving a hole in the heart of New York too big to be covered by one of the Big Apple pins Lew always carried to give away. Lew wouldn’t be available to help lead New York back this time. But he’d be proud to know of the collective surge of spirit and hope that sustained a city in its toughest hours, and proved once again that in all the world, there truly is only one New York.

For the most part, days simply happen, one after the next, seemingly loosely joined to the previous ones by connections and causalities that are planted at one time and bloom at another. But for me the embrace between September 10 and the day following is fierce and adamantine; rarely have I looked back and seen the tapestry of a day so vividly woven the day before. I wish they had not been, because I really liked September 10, and I miss it.

**The Day After**

But the next day did happen. And, I submit, as the World Trade Center fell, New York, the world’s city, and the world itself stood at a moral tipping point.

The architects of history’s greatest act of terrorism picked their instruments and their targets with precision to send a message that would instantly reach everyone, everywhere in a succession of horrific images. Modern communication conveyed the assault on modern civilization. When the terrorists drove two airliners into the Twin Towers, they sought to meld in a path to the future. Professor Connelly writes: “It was follow moned them to renew and realize their spirit in marble, and the result was the Parthenon and the other elements of what we result was the Parthenon and the other elements of what we

I saw the moral surge happening as our students and neighbors gathered for a vigil in Washington Square Park. One 1st-year law student from rural Georgia told how terrified he was that Tuesday morning, asking himself: “Why am I here?”

“Now,” he said, as he stood in front of the Arch, “I have seen New York, my classmates, my community. How could I be anywhere else?”

Amid the outpouring of spirit in the days that followed, we were all rescue workers, saving and affirming our humanity. Tens of thousands of citizens contributed their food, their money, their sweat, and their blood. Volunteers in record numbers were frustrated by their inability to do more. We all saw clearly the commitment of our police and fire fighters, and we came to view them differently than we ever had before. The whole city operated at this level. We reached out, we comforted, we united.

Now, we face a decisive challenge—to sustain the moral surge that welled within us on those days, even as we recover from the immoral onslaught we have suffered.

Lower Manhattan will be rebuilt. But in the end rebuilding structures is not enough; we have to build on the new spirit of New York as a permanent affirmation of what the terrorists were really trying to destroy—our values and our moral vision.

**The Lesson of History**

My NYU colleague Professor Joan Connelly tells a remarkable story of classic Athens which has profound lessons for us today (Connelly, 2002). She recounts how the massed armed forces of the Persian Empire relentlessly swept southward through Greece in 480 B.C., bearing down on Athens. The world’s most powerful autocracy was on the verge of enslaving the world’s infant democracy.

Following the code of war at that time, the Athenians withdrew from their city to find and fight on a favorable battlefield. But the Persian King Xerxes ordered his forces into Athens and ordered them to commit what Professor Connelly calls “the unthinkable”: they burned the Acropolis to the ground. In destroying the symbol of Athenian democracy, the shrines of the city’s faith and (literally) the high icons of Greek culture, the Persians sought not only to terrorize all who observed the event but also, in a singular, stunning act to break the spirit of freedom and resistance.

At Salamis, in the next and decisive battle, the seminal naval engagement of ancient history, the vastly outnumbered but far more maneuverable Greeks, themselves fired by the enormity of the unspeakable onslaught on the Acropolis, annihilated the lumbering, heavy-hulled 700-ship fleet of the Persians, who withdrew north—ultimately retreating into Asia, never to return.

The first question the Athenians faced was what to do with the burned-out, ruined heart of their city. In awe of the evil inflicted on it, as a monument and a reminder of that evil, they left the site as it was for three decades. Finally, Pericles summoned them to renew and realize their spirit in marble, and the result was the Parthenon and the other elements of what we know today as the Acropolis—structures that nearly 2,500 years later still stand not only as supreme examples of human art, but also as timeless expressions of the democratic ideal.

For us today, the remembrance of that past offers hope and a path to the future. Professor Connelly writes: “It was following tragedy that the Greeks achieved their finest moment. Along with the Parthenon came a full flourishing of art, literature, theater, philosophy, religion,” and with the continuing development of democracy, “the new and utterly revolutionary concept of self-sacrifice for the common good—[a] newly
hewn bond of altruism, a strong communal identity.” And, as he built anew on the ashes of a terrorist assault, “Pericles [was] the first to advance the concept that citizens must be in love with their city. Thus, the ‘I Love New York’ campaign finds its roots in classical Athens.”

Our Response
I was chosen as the 15th president of New York University in May 2001, with the expectation that I would assume the post at the start of the 2002-2003 academic year. But September 11, 2001 became, in effect, my first day as president. As the university mobilized to evacuate and relocate nearly 3,000 students from residences near Ground Zero, I assembled the university’s leadership team with this charge: “This is a defining moment for this university and this city. Henceforth, I do not want NYU to be called New York University; I want it to be the New York University. Now more than ever, we must embrace our roots in New York City.” Virtually all of NYU’s students chose to stay in New York and continue their academic work at NYU. Two weeks after September 11, the university broke ground on the first substantial construction project to relaunch in the city, a major new complex for the School of Law.

Now, in our own way and time, New Yorkers are called to rebuild from an attack and to build our own Parthenon—not just physically, but spiritually. We have a special link with the Athens of 2,500 years ago. Today, New York is the world’s first city, not just America’s. In New York, the world’s most welcoming city, we put our faith in tolerance, not, as the terrorists do, in conformity. That is what has made us great in every dimension of civic success, that is what the murderers tried to kill, and that is what we must now restate and celebrate even more boldly than before.

Societies live by stories. After the horror, we must tell and live our story the right way, both for ourselves and for a watching and listening world. We have glimpsed what we can be; let us nurture the possibility of that version of New York. New York, you can and must be the world’s “shining city on the hill.” For New York University, we pledge ourselves to work with you to make it so.

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