

We Will Never Forget the Superheroes of 9/11 and Their Families

It was a beautiful Tuesday morning on September 11, 2001. I was making rounds in the hospital greeting a couple of patients with a smile, as I knew they were well enough to go home that day.

Others were holding steady, but not quite ready to return home for their recovery. In another section, patients were either tenuous, holding onto life with whispered prayers and the modern machines of medicine or they were preparing for the final paradigm shift of life.

I spent the most time with the third group, where death most commonly approaches like a steam engine. The whistle blows and is followed by the low rumble of the engine, and we can sense the friction of the wheels upon the track. When it finally rounds that last corner, we are prepared as it approaches because we know death is arriving.

However, sometimes death arrives like a semi-truck that has run a stop sign. On September 11, 2001, it arrived by planes hitting towers, government offices and fields of summer grass not yet greeted by the coolness of fall temperatures.

The world stopped.

We held our breath. We could not have imagined what we were seeing on the small screens in our patient's rooms. Death had arrived and *no one* was prepared. To this day I can remember the emotions of that day—patients and families wanted to go home.

They sought comfort and safety in *their* people and *their*

familiar surroundings.

I had to convince some they were not well enough to go home. A sense of fear settled like a fog everywhere I walked.

I reflect on this day, and all the days, since when death arrived suddenly at the hands of evil.

I cannot imagine the sense of desperate grief that afflicts the loved ones of those who paid with their lives, or those who still suffer through injury, emotional distress and mental health disorders and grief.

I wonder about the families of those who ran into those buildings, helping those who were attempting to escape. Do they find comfort in knowing their loss is a sacrificial loss?

One life given on behalf of many. Are their lives affected indefinitely by the loss of their one? Grief is grief and no two griefs are the same.

We don't get over grief, we learn to live with it.

However, those who serve others at the risk of their own lives and the families that love them deserve a special recognition on this day. We must recognize their grief, and their suffering is sacrificial.

Their lives were not lost in vain, and their lives had incalculable meaning. Those who run into conflict as opposed to fleeing have courage beyond their human fear. Their bravery exists in the silver strands of their DNA. They are heroes, in fact, superheroes.

This is not merely a visceral reaction from a seasoned physician who has cared for veterans. I have met these superheroes throughout my 30-year career in medicine.

Superheroes are not just created at birth. Their lives reflect a generosity of spirit and compassion. Superheroes are

sometimes created in normal everyday life. They rush into burning buildings to save the one. They stop at all accidents.

While a car is burning, they use super-human strength to save the driver while risking their own life as flames dance close to life-ending fuel. He or she swims into a riptide to capture a child whose frightened face is the only thing visible as the sea threatens to take them away.

Danger lurks on every street, beach walk, the drive to work or in movie theaters. They are observant.

I believe that those who sacrificed their lives on September 11th would reveal their superhero power in each of the scenarios. Those who continue to suffer from injury to the physical body and emotional health live among us as superheroes. They would risk their own life for the life of another. They would give their life to save only one. That is *who* they are, not just *what* they do.

We must make every effort to acknowledge not only the fallen but also the living whose lives have been changed indefinitely. If we do not, we have failed in our humanity to love one another well. We have also missed what it is like to know or have known a real hero.

I have also encountered them through the lives they leave behind. The imprint of heroism is embedded in their family crest. Strength, courage and bravery almost universally exist in the families who have paid the ultimate price. These survival skills help a family transition to a new normal.

Our superheroes laid down their lives for the one and the many. Their sacrifice and legacy are not decreased by time. The families of those who were lost or injured deserve to know that it was not in vain. They knew or know a superhero who ran in when others ran out.

I believe it is our collective responsibility to honor the

lives of our superheroes and the families that bear sacrificial suffering. We will then remember our superheroes would have given their lives even if for just one. One day, you or I may be that one.

Thank you, superheroes. Thank you families who risk the shattering of their heart each time their superhero walks out the front door. Thank you, September 11th families who suffer sacrificially. We see you, and we shall not forget. {eoa}

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