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Remembering 9/11

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PROPER(TY) THOUGHTS

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September 12—fifteen years ago today—was the most difficult teaching experience of my forty-nine years behind a podium. Georgetown University Law Center, whose faculty I then served, elected not to cancel classes the day after the events of September 11, 2001. Though the city was still disrupted because of the events at the Pentagon the day before, the school decided it was better to go forward together than allow all of us to wallow in our thoughts alone. I was scheduled to teach a first year class. When word reached me that school was going to be in session, I had no idea what to do or say that could possibly make any sense to either me or to my then brand new students, many of whom were living away from family and friends for the first time in their lives. After a restless night I rose early and over a cup of coffee composed these words:

I have a few things I would like to say. I know that Gary Peller sought comments from you this morning and that a few of you spoke. If you have additional thoughts after I finish, I will give you some time to state them. Perhaps public statement of my own reactions to yesterday's events, which occurred on my older son's birthday, will help you cope with yours. We are all in this one together.

Tossing and turning in bed last night, trying and mostly failing to get some sleep, the images of the day kept flashing before me like surreal flashbulbs. Those moments were interspersed with worries about how I, my wife, and two sons would cope with the reality of yesterday's events and the fears we hold for the future, about whether all of you, your loved ones and friends were okay, and what I could possibly say to you that might ease the pain.

At moments like this, I suspect we all reach for people we love, hoping for their empathy and support. We think about events in our past that have given us comfort and provided a foundation for our lives. This sort of thing is especially difficult for many of you. Most of you just got here. You are away from home, family, friends, familiar places, childhood religious congregations, and comforting environments. It is a harsh way to be forced to rely upon your brand new classmates, upon friendships just beginning to bloom, and upon those of us who have worked here for many years helping students to cope with a variety of experiences quite unlike this one. We will all do the best we can to help. I appreciated very much those of you who emailed with various sorts of problems the day's events caused, all of whom also took a moment to type in words wishing me or my family well. Thank you.

As I tossed about last night a variety of images kept surfacing between those of airplanes, fireballs, and collapsing buildings. I thought about events in my past that form the foundation for my present life—being the last person to learn how to tie my shoelaces in kindergarten, switching to a new school at age 10, colliding with the arch-conservative views of my high school principal, my first

days in college and law school, Vietnam, walking with excitement and trepidation into the first class I ever taught, proposing to my wife in Boston, watching my children being born and enter kindergarten, and attending the high school and college graduations of my older son. But one image kept coming back into view. And as it appeared over and over again, its relevance for today became palpable. I saw my younger son chanting from Deuteronomy on his Bar Mitzvah day. Many of you have also participated in a rite of passage to adulthood—whether it was a bar or bat mitzvah, a confirmation, a graduation ceremony, or other event. Perhaps this image surfaced for me because religion is an important part of my life. Perhaps it surfaced because it occurred almost exactly four years ago. For among the passages contained in the portions of the Torah chanted on his Bar Mitzvah day are these, drawn from Chapter 16 of Deuteronomy when Moses is giving his second discourse to the Israelites before they entered Canaan:

You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes, in all the settlements that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall govern the people with due justice. You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just. Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

This famous text has been the subject of enormous amounts of commentary. But without fail, the focus is on the meaning of justice in an organized community. That, of course, is why you have come to this place—to struggle with the difficulties, the ineffabilities, the contradictions, the insecurities of establishing a legal system that is as fair and just as human beings can possibly make it. The Jesuit traditions of this university make this search for a just and ethical legal system an abiding institutional mission. It is one of the things that makes this place great and different from other law schools. As we all know, creating a completely just legal system is an impossible task. It is never finished. There is always more to be done. The struggle gets passed on from generation to generation, each new generation hoping they will do better than their predecessor. Without this struggle there is no way I know of to retain hope in the possibility of bettering the human condition. For me to give up that struggle in the face of madness is to surrender a large chunk of my own humanity. So now that school is open I must teach today. It will not be any easier for me than it will be for you. During the course of these 75 minutes my mind will wander off. Horror will flash before me. I may ask myself if I can get on an airplane this Friday to make a planned visit to St. Louis to see my 93 year old father and my nursing home confined 88 year old Alzheimer's mother. But I will struggle through this class and the next and the next, hoping against hope that I will in some small way increase the likelihood of your generation establishing a more just world.

Before we begin, I think it appropriate that all of us rise at our places for a few moments of quiet thought and reflection. At least one member of the Georgetown community, Professor Leslie Wittington from the Public Policy faculty on the main campus, died yesterday. In addition, our quiet moment is one way we can make a dignified statement to each other that we, and the vast bulk of other human beings in the world, are capable of decency, compassion, empathy, and mutual understanding.

These words still resonate deeply with me as I hope they do with you. Shalom, salaam, peace.
