

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 27

Article 9

4-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Rodriguez, Orlando (2005) "What I Have Learned Since 9/11," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 27, Article 9.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol27/iss1/9>

What I Have Learned Since

By Orlando Rodriguez

This reflection was offered on September 10th 2004 at Fordham University, Rose Hill Campus, at the service commemorating Fordham alumni victims of the September 11th, 2001 bombings.

One year ago, three months ago, I would not have been able to stand before you to talk about my son Greg's death on September 11th, 2001. I am glad I can now and I thank many of you for all the support you gave me that makes this possible.

I am a professor. I teach criminology, so I teach about the causes of violence. Like many criminologists, I don't believe in the death penalty, but our job as teachers is not to convince you of that, but to give you the intellectual tools by which you can make your own ethical judgments. But I don't come here as a professor, ready to analyze the social causes of violence. I come here to speak you as a member of our community.

Greg Rodriguez was 32 when he died, while working on the 103rd floor of Tower 1. Many of you may rec-

ognize your brothers in his life. Ambitious, outgoing, hard-working, a good brother to his sister, a good husband, a good son. He had been married for a year - his second marriage - when he died. Although his first marriage dissolved, Greg loved the product of that marriage, his now 13-year-old son. He kept a deep bond with him, a bond from which my wife and I immensely benefitted.

Greg had everything going for him - a loving wife, a promising career, plans for having children. He enjoyed his work, scuba diving, rock and salsa, cooking gourmet meals. He made friends easily, yet kept his old friends, some of these friendships going back to elementary school.

I have learned that I can think of Greg's killers without anger boiling inside me.

If one thinks of the phrase "innocent victim," he was the perfect example. He disliked violence and saw through the posturing, self-hatred and unhappiness that is the background to violence. So his death, like those of so many others, seemed the result of crazy, distorted thinking, and therefore unthinkable, hurting even more.

A bleak picture. Yet I can tell you that much good has resulted from his death. I would gladly trade off all this good for having him back; but, in the impossibility of that trade, I want to tell you how I have learned this simple lesson.

I have learned that it is possible to live two lives: an outside life where you are and look ok — teaching, running a department, joking with colleagues; and a companion life of turbulence, where you brood over your losses. Over time you come to manage your two lives, so that you can be sad but not unhappy, enjoy life but within a reservoir of darkness.

How is this possible? How can you live two contradictory lives without becoming



Keating Hall, the signature building of Fordham University's Rose Hill campus.

September 11th, 2001



Members of the Santa Clara University community conduct a mass of remembrance.

schizophrenic? By trying to learn how I fit into the joys and sufferings of others, by reflecting on the pain they have and the comfort that they bring me.

I have learned that it is possible to make deep friendships with those who come to your help in grief — colleagues, priests, students.

I have learned that my wife and I now have relationships with our family, our daughter-in-law's family, our friends, that would have taken decades to develop had not our son died.

I have learned that you and I have at Fordham priests, sisters and brothers who live their faith. They reached out to my family, opened their arms, opened Fordham's doors, and brought us sorely needed comfort.

I have learned that men have a lot to learn from women, that many women instinctively know how to deal with pain in a way not open to most men. Without them, my pain would have been harder to bear; and they taught me, I hope, to offer help to others in pain, and to view that as what a man does.

I have learned that Greg's suffering, my family's suffering, is part of the suffering of millions of people. Many who have reached out to me, students among them, suffer, and it's hard to measure whose suffering is greater. I was helped by being able to listen to students who told me of their pain, and

whom I was able to comfort.

I have learned that just as I have joined the suffering of others, we as a people have common bonds with victims in other lands - civilian and military. There are many Greg Rodriguezes all over this world: Palestinian and Israeli, Irish Catholic and Protestant, Russian and Chechen, Spanish and Basque, and yes, Iraqi and Afghan civilians who have died through our government's actions. I have learned to equate their suffering with Greg's.

I have learned that I can think about Greg's killers without anger boiling inside

me. His killers were five or six young men (Greg looked a lot like a few of them). Men who were so angry, so blinded by beautiful-sounding dreams about a better world coming for their people, that other human beings — the passengers on that plane, Greg and his co-workers — meant nothing to them, were less than human. I have been often tempted to think that these young men themselves became inhuman by what they felt and did. But I'm glad to say that I see them as human beings, as human as you, I, my son, deserving of what they themselves destroyed — life.

I have learned that as we left a mad century of mutual violence, and as we continue this madness in our current century, peace-making becomes less and less of a utopian pipe-dream and more and more of a logical necessity — the only way in which we can prevent increasing mutual violence and our mutual destruction.

I have learned that my belief in the possibility of peace, is not just intellectual, that it has been tested by personal tragedy, and it is still intense, valid, life-giving.

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