

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 30

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The Pentagon building after the September 11, 2001 attack

When I made the decision to go to law school instead of pursuing a PhD in Chinese history, I did so in order to make a living for my family. Obtaining a doctorate in my chosen field involved mastering two Asian languages, as well as one European language, years of study followed by original research and writing - easily a 10 year course with very little income. I finished my undergrad at Berkeley at age 35, so I would be starting my academic career already midway through the course of my life. My wife wisely urged me to obtain a law degree, a mere 3 year course of study. With the law, I could begin working at a firm after completing my first year. My starting salary as a lawyer proved to be significantly more than what I could ever make as an academic.

Thus, when I decided to teach, I took a significant pay cut, easily 90 percent. Another way to think about the financial difference: it would take me at least 10 years as a teacher to earn what I could be making as an attorney in one year. However, after my experience working for the diocese, God called me to shed power, position, status, and money to start over again. My restoration course demanded it. I felt rock solid in my determination.

My wife acceded to my decision. It had been at her prompting, that I surrendered my dream of a PhD to go to law school. Once I had become a lawyer, I had left two promising jobs in order to further her medical career. Moreover, I had turned down the Deputy US Attorney offer so she could take her first choice of medical practice in San Diego. More importantly, Cindy saw that my teaching schedule would

coincide with our children's school schedule. As our kids matured, I would be able to spend summers and holidays with them and be a significant presence in their lives. On an emotional level, this meant much to me. While I grew up, my Marine Corps father had constantly deployed. Though we looked at the separation periods as the meaningful sacrifice a military family makes for our country, my father's absence took a toll on us emotionally. In my own travels as a litigator, I saw how my absence affected my children as I spent time away from them. Teaching provided me an opportunity to break that pattern.

In short, we quickly embraced the benefits of my newly chosen path. A sense of symmetry, with things falling into place and smoothly working out, confirmed to us that this path was God given. When I walked through the door of my classroom at Cardinal Newman High School, and began to teach my first class, I knew I had found where I belonged. I quickly hit my stride as a teacher.

The morning of September 11, 2001, I had been teaching for just three weeks, when a student arriving late, told me to turn on the classroom TV. There, on the screen, we witnessed the horrific terror attacks on the Twin Towers, and then the Pentagon. With the rest of the country, we first felt incredulity, then heart wrenching sorrow and anxious uncertainty about what lay ahead. As flights hurriedly landed and airports shut down throughout the country, another, more personal drama unfolded in Washington D.C.

Both my sister and my brother worked in the Bush White House, a possible target of United Flight 93. They were evacuated. Though soon thereafter, my brother was called back as they wanted the National Security Council staff on duty. It would be a long and tense week of work for him.

Across the Potomac, at the Pentagon, my close friend from law school, Ed McDonnell, a Major in the Marine Corps, served as a lawyer on the Commandant's legal staff, along with another family friend and retired Marine, Peter Murphy. Their offices sat on the outer ring of the Pentagon, a few stories up. As they were watching the unfolding events in New York City, Ed picked up the phone to call security and asked what the threat level was for the Pentagon. Just as he set the phone back into the receiver, American Flight 77 slammed into their side of the building and exploded, only a few hundred feet from where he stood. Ed passed out from the shock force of the explosion, as a fireball roared past his window. He came to under fragments and dust from the ceiling, in darkness. His first thought was, "Those bastards tried to kill me." Everyone in the office was relatively uninjured. They forced open their door and stepped in the hallway, into a nightmare scene, as smoke and fire flooded and consumed the building. Disoriented, they had no clear sense of where to escape, when a Naval officer from down the hall, called to them to follow him out. In Ed's words, it was the first time he had ever been happy to see a sailor.

Once out, they began to help others escape. The parking lot was in chaos. Pieces of metal from the plane and building had launched like javelins in the explosion and pinioned cars to the pavement. They came across one woman, shocked and weeping in her car, a piece of steel had pierced the roof of her vehicle, gone through her seat narrowly missing her, and stopped her cold as she drove, locking her to the ground. Her car was still running, going nowhere. They helped her free and brought her to an aid station. Ed then began a long walk home to Woodbridge, Virginia. Miles outside of the city, he would flag a ride.

Pete Murphy's office was nearly directly above the point of impact. Miraculously, he and his staff survived, thanks to the structural integrity of the Pentagon. About 30 minutes after the impact, when the roof and floors collapsed, his office opened on the side like a cereal box top had been ripped off.

Of course, I knew none of this at the time. With the rest of the country, we sat stunned, watching film clips of planes exploding into buildings, over and over. That day, al Qaeda was our teacher, and I still wonder what lessons we learned. As the years passed, a good number of my students would join the military and serve tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq.