In the days that followed September 11, I have formed a new routine, not one that I can sustain but one that has come about as I stumble along in this world around me that has changed so suddenly, without warning. The new world is dominated by actions that pretend nothing is wrong, that it is business as usual in the Northwest United States. But, the normal actions, the usual things to do, are now out of place in an America that is surreal in the aftermath. People board the bus as usual and the traffic crawls along at a snail’s pace as effective public transportation remains an idea in the eyes of a government committee. At both sides of the commute, everyday events stay the same. The lawn continues to get mowed, faculty meetings continue in force, emotions remain hidden and at bay. The dry season makes way for the wet season and the rain in Seattle begins to fall. The salmon continue their upstream run.

One small, imperceptible step outside of this tenuous sense of normalcy, everything has changed. My daily task list and routine are unchanged, yet in the process of trying to adjust, to accommodate incomprehensible horror, the emotional routine has changed. Each morning begins with a brief five minutes of feeling that it had never happened, that the innocence of my precious country, even in spite of its imperfection and its mistakes, remains. Quickly, the emotions, the awareness rush back into my soul, crashing through my fragile defenses, filling my heart first, then radiating through my chest as I soundlessly travel through the motions of shower and dress. Just out of range of the scattered rays of my consciousness, outside the comfort of the warm bath towel, lies a spiritual energy that radiates wisdom and sadness. The energy knows about the ways and the rhythm of humanity; it understands why these things have come to pass. I am aware of how solid the wisdom woven into this energy is, but I cannot understand it.

Before I am safely wrapped in the seatbelt of my little Honda, the pain goes further, traveling another step on its daily path through my psyche. The stinging at the back of my eyes threatens more tears by the time that I reach the cozy familiarity of the Community Transit bus. The solace normally afforded me by my warm and stressless commute pales in comparison to the pain, as it pushes forward relentlessly. My eyes absorb the red, white, and blue around me, the ribbons streaming from the bus, the flags waving from every imaginable vehicle on the highway.

At work, the emotion, the pain, the grief travels further, beyond eyes and heart to a wide-eyed throbbing at my temples. By late morning, the ache and emotional exhaustion are more than I can handle, and I slam myself into work, conscious of the deadlines that are piling up behind me. I am aware of colleagues and students frustrated by my inability to go 100 mph on the clean and flat freeway of my career, the way I used to when things were the way they were. A few short hours of denial allow me to do the work, to peck away at the keyboard, turning out
another paper, proposal, or set of lecture notes. By mid-afternoon, denial gives way to exhaustion. My fingers no longer skim over the keyboard, losing productivity as I feel the fatigue move through to the core of my being. I am intellectually and emotionally desperate to share some small part of the pain, the shock, the grief with anyone who also carries this grief without denial. Students come in and out of my office, but I do not remember their questions only seconds after I have answered them. Colleagues greet me in the hall, yet I have no recall of the conversation. And, finally, the work routine ends as I stare numbly out the window on the bus ride home, dimly praying for hope and peace. I am begging God for a miracle to cure and soothe the hate and anger that has changed our world, our isolated country, in an hour of unprecedented horror.

The end of the daily routine does not lead to the safety that sleep afforded for so long before it happened. Now, the nightmares come every night, scattered all over the map in topic: murder, frustration, knives, guns, and horror, all reflecting the anguish of a subconscious that cannot process this loss of innocence. I need restful sleep so desperately, something to lend me more strength; More and more, I am praying on my knees beside Grandpa tree, a magnificent Douglas Fir in the yard that has lived here on this fragile planet far longer than I. As always, before and after September 11, an intriguing peace surrounds this wise old tree, providing strength for me to hold onto, to fill my heart. My heart seems so weak, but is determined to change to fight the hate and anger, in a way that only God can know completely. I pray longer and harder to a God that I know and trust, but can never understand.

The energy moves around me in waves, unstable, disturbed, and wise. One day on the bus, when the last young man boards before the freeway, the energy shifts drastically, transferring an awareness that hate and anger are nearby. The concrete, rational reasons that explain this energy shift are nowhere to be found. Another day, again on the bus, when I am so lost and tired, the peace; the very strange quiet and wise energy under the gray clouds over Seattle sky, are folded around me like a homemade quilt. It is as if the energy of God, of all that amazing love, is wrapped around me in peace. The peace first comes on Sunday, almost two weeks after it happened, and it ebbs in and out. Today, another day of the new routine, on the bus, the energy around me has shifted even more; the air is now too quiet, gentle under the cloud cover, suggesting something else that is infinitely wise and strong and kind, swaying in powerful force around my limited senses.

I have spent years as an engineer, in industry, in graduate school, and at the university, hiding my emotions from the outside world for survival, professional success, or other reason. After so many years of hiding, I am clumsy in expressing my full experience of life; combining my emotional, intellectual, and spiritual perspective into an effective communication with others seems hopeless and impossible in my technically-focused mind. I long to communicate adequately my sense of urgency, but lack confidence that I can be effective. I continue to feel drawn to try harder to communicate these things now; their urgency has extended outside my local community and experience to a much more serious and global context. My Mentor has shifted me on this path of life to an incomprehensible global context; He is my best friend and other set of footprints in the sand and has brought me to a very new and unfamiliar place on the path; it is such a strange place, here on this new path, that I do not yet understand how to move forward. I wish that God could make footprints in the sand obvious for us, and turn our thoughts irrevocably away from intellectualizing all that has happened.
Before September 11, I spent most of my time in my local community, in my local context. I had convictions that every little bit of kindness and love I could possibly distribute (while keeping enough to sustain myself) would be another small step in making the world a better place, in preventing anger and hurt from blowing up into hate and evil. All the kind gestures and acts that I have watched around me should surely keep evil at bay. I know that horror has occurred in other places in the world before September 11, but the line that has been crossed in terms of international war threatens to cancel and overcome all those thousands and thousands of acts of kindness that people around the world engage in every single day. The sense of global fear and horror that comes from violating the international boundaries of war, is a part of the grief and sorrow that shatters the barrier between my safe, local, isolated American life and my global community.

How familiar the environment of the commercial airplane in America is to me: the big elegant machine in which I have spent so many hours feeling safe, relaxed, freed, if only briefly from the overwhelming demands of my job. How many times have I safely left the runway, once again stunned by the magic and wonder of aerodynamic lift that carries so much weight into and across the sky? How many times have I looked out of an airplane window at sparkling snow on mountain ranges, geometrically perfect figures of crop fields in the midwest, gentle twinkling lights of a city skyline late at night? How many times have I found peace in the innocence and safety of an airplane, looked around on a red-eye flight, at 2 in the morning, to so many faces that are sleeping peacefully, temporarily relieved of the complicated nature of their daily lives? How many times have I watched flight attendants smile at me, even as fatigue creeps in around their eyes, to offer me something so simple to soothe me as a glass of orange juice? How many times have I listened to the pilot’s jovial, if not joyful description of the exciting scenery below me, the weather report in Seattle (raining and 55 degrees)?

In my life as a government worker, as a university professor, as a public servant, I have savored the innocence of flying across the skies, the charming twinkle of jets approaching Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. I can feel, at a profoundly empathetic level, the sick combination of fear and determination as those on the fourth plane that turned around abruptly over Cleveland bravely and selflessly prevented tons of jet fuel from reaching their fourth target. The innocence and simplicity of flying across clear blue sky, over fluffy white clouds, over a country protected by its isolation, is now all gone.

How many times have I taken an elevator in a tall, elegant building, felt safe, perhaps even bored in a meeting, coddling my favorite beverage from Starbucks first thing in the morning, in a conference room that overlooks a breathtaking view of an American city? It doesn’t matter which city really. From tens of floors, they all look innocent and sparkling; they all vibrate with the energy and optimism of the American way of life. The negative energy of the city (the drugs, crime, litter, bitterness, and poverty) remain on the ground, unable to drift up to the serenity of the glass-windowed view in the conference room. How horrible is it, then, to attack that part of us, our work day, the optimism and energy of capitalism? How unspeakable is it to slam a Boeing 767 into that conference room, to deny even the opportunity to say goodbye to those who had begun just another workday? I can sense those emotions: first the shock, disbelief, then the wide-eyed panic, then the reality sinking into some minds faster than others; the last thought, the last ounce of both fear and courage left on the same window ledge by those who jumped. I can feel most of it; it is so, so much bigger than me. I can feel a hand shaking as the last call on the cell phone is made. I can feel full-blown panic and fear in the stairwell. I can feel the feeling I cannot
even describe as the building starts to fall around the simplicity of a white-collar business day. I can feel what the passengers feel as they open their eyes, jolted from napping on the westbound morning flight.

I can feel, in my own self, the sad loss of innocence in my adult life as it leaves to join the lost innocence of my childhood, creating an emptiness and a confusion that cannot possibly be described or dissipated with the intellect. God bless America. Give us the strength, courage, and insight to move forward wisely as we learn the rules of this new world.