

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## *Book Notes #211*

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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### 9/11: 24 and Counting



Today's **Book Notes** #211 falls on the 24th anniversary of 9/11 – Sept. 11, 2001.

Perhaps as a by-product of having successfully arrived at old-guy status, it scarcely seems possible that 24 years have elapsed since that ash-ridden, sunlit, early autumn, late summer Tuesday morning. I was in my dean's office when my secretary came in, shocked that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. My first reaction was that a small, local plane had somehow lost its way; the reflexive possibility of terrorism as first response was something we had not yet

learned. The president's office across the hall had a television. As I and several others gathered to watch the "Today" show, news of another jet airliner broke, just as it crashed into the second building live and in real-time. I turned to two colleagues saying, "This could be another Pearl Harbor."

Which it turned out to be, kinda, sort of. A War on Terror was soon declared, the Patriot Act passed, and two indecisive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq launched. Approximately 6,900 American troops died in Afghanistan and Iraq [1] — not counting the 19 terrorists and 2,977 people (Americans and visitors) who died as a direct result of the attacks in New York City, at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and aboard Flight 93 at Shanksville, Pennsylvania. [2] In addition, an estimated 500,000 people died in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. [3] Years later, the plot's ringleader would be hunted down and killed. In the meantime, a new generation of Americans were born and grew to maturity for whom it was only history.

As Kurt Vonnegut said in "Slaughterhouse-Five," "So it goes."

In 2001, Americans' first reaction was to unite and fight back. That Tuesday afternoon, in a now almost unthinkable display of bipartisan unity, both Democratic and Republican U.S. Senators and Representatives stood on the Capitol steps singing "God Bless America". [4] Country pop singer Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" captured the spirit I saw on a billboard in Kent, Ohio, that autumn proclaiming against a background of the American flag, "These colors don't run." That spirit exhausted itself in what then-presidential candidate Donald Trump vilified as "endless wars" and that Congressional unity evaporated under the pressure of equally endless culture wars.



What cannot be permitted to be lost is the heroism and sacrifice of those who ran not away but into danger that day to try to save others. Like Fr. Mychal Judge OFM, Franciscan friar, priest, and chaplain to the New York City Fire Department. Fr. Judge is an alumnus of St. Bonaventure University, which I had the honor to briefly serve as president. Fr. Judge is the first official victim of 9/11 – Death Certificate No. 1. He ran into the burning buildings to give aid, comfort, and last rites to "his guys" the firefighters of FDNY. His daily prayer was "Lord, take me where you want me to go;

let me meet who you want me to meet; tell me what you want me to say; and keep me out of your way." [5]

And especially, one cannot forget the firefighters and other brave public servants who died that day trying to help and save others. In researching my new series on American popular music as a window into the American soul, I found two Bruce Springsteen songs that have become iconic expressions of their courage, bravery and sacrifice: “The Rising” and “Into the Fire.”



*from Into the Fire*

The sky was falling  
And streaked with blood  
I heard you calling me  
Then you disappeared into the dust

Up the stairs, into the fire  
Yeah, up the stairs, into the fire  
I need your kiss  
But love and duty called you some place higher  
Somewhere up the stairs, into the fire

May your strength give us strength  
May your faith give us faith  
May your hope give us hope  
May your love give us love... [6]

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Nor can we forget the victims. Fortunately, the poets won't let us. One in particular struck me as hitting just the right chord. Martin Espada's "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100." Espada is "a poet, essayist, translator, editor, and attorney, (who) has dedicated much of his career to the pursuit of social justice, including fighting for human rights and reclaiming the historical record." [7] His poem reminds us that the victims, like all Americans, constituted a collage of immigrants and older citizens of mixed ethnicity and heritage. It is a powerful reminder of both the complexity and the richness of the fabric of the tapestry of America's many stories. (Nb. "Alabanza" is Spanish for praise.)

*from Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100*

*for the 43 members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees of Local 100, working at the Windows on the World restaurant, who lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center.*

*Alabanza.* Praise the cook with a shaven head  
and a tattoo on his shoulder that said Oye,

a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo,  
the harbor of pirates centuries ago.  
Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, candle  
glimmering white to worship the dark saint of the sea.  
*Alabanza*. Praise the cook's yellow Pirates cap  
worn in the name of Roberto Clemente, his plane  
that flamed into the ocean loaded with cans for Nicaragua,  
for all the mouths chewing the ash of earthquakes.  
*Alabanza*. Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked  
even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish  
rose before bread. Praise the bread. *Alabanza*.

Praise Manhattan from a hundred and seven flights up,  
like Atlantis glimpsed through the windows of an ancient aquarium.  
Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen  
could squint and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:  
*Ecuador, Mexico, Republica Domincana,*  
*Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh ....* [8]

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Arguably, the most famous poem that emerged from 9/11 was not written for the occasion or by an American. Polish poet Adam Zagajewski's "Try to Praise the Mutilated Word" was written a little less than two years before 9/11 as he was trying to process the experience of growing up in a European world littered with the remnants of tragedy. When he was an infant, his family was relocated by Stalin from their home in Lwów to the Soviet Union. The poem "Try to Praise the Mutilated World" itself grew out of his experience walking with his father through abandoned Ukrainian villages in Poland caused by the forced transfers of people during the Soviet occupation. [9] As an aside: my ancestors on my father's side suffered a similar fate after World War II, as they were forced to leave their Transylvanian village to labor in Russia.

In 2001, a week after the attacks on the World Trade Center, in its special edition about 9/11, The New Yorker ran Zagajewski's poem on its final page. The spirit of the poem confronts the horror of the experience of political tragedy but amidst the horror asserts we must do better as it recalls life's moments of simple peace and joy. In recalling those moments, the poem becomes a powerful affirmation of life.

#### Try to Praise the Mutilated World

Try to praise the mutilated world.  
Remember June's long days, and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew.

The nettles that methodically overgrow  
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.  
You must praise the mutilated world.  
You watched the stylish yachts and ships;  
one of them had a long trip ahead of it,  
while salty oblivion awaited others.  
You've seen the refugees heading nowhere,  
you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.  
You should praise the mutilated world.  
Remember the moments when we were together  
in a white room and the curtain fluttered.  
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.  
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn  
and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.  
Praise the mutilated world  
and the gray feather a thrush lost,  
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes  
and returns. [10]

Or, to quote another poet, Jack Gilbert, from our time, remember:

*from Highlights and Interstices*

We think of lifetimes as mostly the exceptional  
and sorrows. Marriages we remember as the children,  
vacations, and emergencies. The uncommon part,  
but the best is often when nothing is happening.  
The way a mother picks up the child almost without  
noticing and carries her across Waller Street  
while talking to the other woman... [11]

Or, to quote yet another poet, Emily Dickinson, but this time from another time:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –  
And sings the tune without words –  
And never stops – at all – [12]

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“Fr. Mychal Judge OFM,” at **New Ways Ministry** available at [The Unique Spirituality of Father Mychal Judge - New Ways Ministry](#) accessed August 28, 2025.

“FDNY image, Krista Niles,” at **The New York Times** available at [Here Are Some of the Photographs of 9/11 - The New York Times](#) accessed August 28, 2025.

### End Notes

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