

**Five** *on*  
**Friday**

*Musings on Mental Health*

## **Remembering 9/11... and Other Memorials**

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*Everyone old enough to remember, remembers exactly where they were 15 years ago on September 11th when planes came crashing into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. I was living in Japan and heard about the first plane crash in time to witness the second plane crash, from 10,000 km away, broadcast live on TV. During a recent visit of friends from Japan, we paid a visit to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum. I have been to Hiroshima with these same friends.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*What is it that propels us to memorialize these moments seared in history? These moments carved forever in our lives? What is the power of places like the September 11 Memorial & Museum, Hiroshima Peace Park, the cemetery in Normandy, Yad Vashem and Robben Island – destinations each year for millions of citizens from around the world? Wouldn't forgetting be easier on our psyche?*

**1. Meaning making.** When unimaginable tragedy or suffering occurs, it is always much easier to describe what happened than to understand why. Volumes of analysis and generations of scholars have attempted to explain the Holocaust, the violence of the Islamic State, the inhumanity of apartheid. I've always believed that mental health is about weaving a narrative that has meaning, and when we are ambushed by life, our understanding and expectations of the world are crushed. Memorials are about picking up our broken pencils; they are about resuming writing the story that marches on in the hope that we can find a narrative that will make sense. But at some point, "why?" takes us to an infinite abyss – and can never fully "make sense." And so these memorials serve as a repository of anguish and incomprehensibility. Memorials are erected when remembering becomes the cornerstone of meaning making. .

**2. Innocence lost.** On 9/11, the first time the continental United States was attacked by enemy fire, our young nation lost its innocence. The Latin origins of innocence are *in* = not and *nocere* = to hurt. In the less usual way of putting these roots together, innocence can be understood by its roots as the state of not hurting or not having been hurt. Once we have been hurt, that state is forever lost. We memorialize because we need to heal from our hurt and grieve our loss of innocence.

**3. "The world breaks everyone, and afterwards some are strong in the broken places."** This is the opening quote in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Memorials represent the indomitable spirit of humanity to find inspiration, purpose and optimism in the wake of tragedy. The memorials declare, *we will not be defeated. We will remember our history. We will celebrate our heroism, we will strive to learn, and by remembering, we will never repeat. We will be strong in our broken places.*

**4. Memorials are public, shared representations of societal values that form the bedrock of our society, the values that connect each of us to the greater whole of humanity.** Life is hard even when it's good. Fully engaging in life means signing on to lose our innocence and experience brokenness – it's inevitable. The irony is that it is during those moments of greatest loss and despair that we feel completely alone. And it is true that we are uniquely alone with our idiosyncratic pain and loss of innocence. These are the moments when we can either opt in to be stewards of hope and resilience, or opt out. Memorials are a public declaration that we choose to opt in. They connect our personal, private and unique experiences with all of humanity. They stand to remind us that when we feel most alone, we actually are not alone at all.

**5. Violence, Solidarity, Heroism, Remembrance & Hope.** On this balmy summer day with my Japanese friends, our guide at the 9/11 Memorial and Museum took us from that violent and overwhelming explosion at the Twin Towers, through our loss of innocence and our response of solidarity and extraordinary heroism. We ended the tour reflecting on how the act of collective remembering is humanity's essential step to cultivating hope for the future. These are the same essential elements at the foundation of the Hiroshima Peace Park, the cemetery in Normandy, Yad Vashem, Robben Island and other memorials around the globe. They are essential to the story of humanity; they are core to each of our personal narratives.

*Around the globe, societies set dates and build memorials to remember, to make meaning, to be strong in the broken places - Our societal efforts aimed at collective understanding and well-being provide a model for strategies to do the same in our individual journeys.*