

Something good from something tragic

By HAMID R. TAVAKOLI

SOME TIME ago, I came across the alumni magazine from my undergraduate alma mater. In a moment of procrastination, I thumbed through it and began reminiscing about my college years. The magazine opened to an article about the Paul Ambrose Memorial Fund.

I remembered Paul, a pleasant, friendly and socially astute student who was in his first year of medical school when I was a college junior. Everyone liked him. He had the looks, the brains, the social graces. He was always down to earth.

I had decided by then that I wanted to go to medical school, and I looked to Paul as a role model and for inspiration.

Paul died on American Airlines Flight 77 when that plane was hijacked by terrorists 10 years ago and deliberately crashed into the Pentagon. While reading the alumni magazine, I realized how much I had avoided thinking about Paul's death. But that night, I stopped on his page. I stopped opening my mail. I stopped looking at the bills and working on my to-do list. My chores could wait. For several hours, my mind was preoccupied with Paul.

An online search revealed that Paul had become involved in the battle against adolescent obesity, the focus of his academic work. He died on his way

to a conference in Los Angeles on the subject. He was active in policymaking to improve health care in our country, and, at age 32, he was a senior clinical adviser in the office of the Surgeon General. His accomplishments did not surprise me.

I continued searching. A memorial site noted that he had gotten engaged a few weeks before his death. His dreams of marriage and family were shattered by men who walked less than 15 feet behind him through the security gates at Dulles Airport.

I was deeply saddened and filled with sorrow. What purpose did his unexpected death serve? What meaning can such injustice hold?

I went upstairs to get ready for bed. Everyone was asleep. I went to the kids' room and looked at them for a long while, feeling a powerful sense of loss. For years, I had been simply carrying on with the daily tasks of life. Now, I knew that while Paul's death was utterly unfair, it couldn't be without meaning.

The core of existential philosophy is to give meaning to events in our lives, no matter how absurd or tragic. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard believed that we are solely responsible for giving our lives meaning in order to live life passionately and sincerely.

His "knight of faith," as with Friedrich Nietzsche's "Übermensch," is representative of people who exhibit freedom because they define the nature of their own existence. The Founding Fathers built a nation on this principle.

By understanding events that have caused suffering and loss in our lives and giving them meaning through reflection and personal beliefs, we become better human beings. As a nation, we must commemorate this tragedy that has made us wiser, stronger and better. To avoid doing so, to ignore the reasons we continue to fight

terrorists halfway around the world, is detrimental to our great nation and, more importantly, to humanity in general.

It was time for me to stop avoiding memories of Paul and make sense of his seemingly senseless loss. So as I read about Paul's life, I gained insight. I was reminded to be joyous and thankful for all my blessings.

I miss Paul. I wish he were alive. He inspired me to be better by just being around him. I have a feeling that somewhere, Paul is looking down, content and smiling. Once again, he has made me a better man.

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