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A woman grieves at the inscription of her late husband's name at the national 9/11 Memorial

A woman grieves at the inscription of her late husband's name at the national 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York City Sept. 11, 2014. (OSV News/Reuters/Chang Lee)



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Joseph Connor had his back turned to the large window of his 36th floor office when he "suddenly more felt than heard" the massive impact of a commercial jet slamming into the north tower of the World Trade Center a third of a mile away on Sept. 11, 2001.

As Connor watched pages and pages of office paper slowly rain down from the burning skyscraper against the clear sunny sky, the realization hit that his cousin Steven Schlag, a bond trader at the brokerage firm Cantor Fitzgerald, worked high up in one of the towers.

The banker suspected the number of lives lost was quickly rising as he frantically tried to call his cousin, a very close relative. Then, the middle of the second tower burst into a fiery ball, struck by a second jet. For Connor, this confirmed a terrorist attack.

"How could this happen again?" he remembers asking himself. "[Steven] had a wife -- a foreign-born wife, like my mom was -- and three kids. My mom had two. But why, God? What? How did you let this happen?"

He knew well the anguish of a young widow left with young children. It was the story of his mother on the day she lost her husband to a terrorist bombing 26 years earlier, at a historic tavern near his Wall Street office.

Connor, 60, recently described to OSV News the devastation that unfolded before his eyes in New York on Sept. 11, 2001, as the United States prepares to mark the 25th anniversary of the terrorist attacks. The al-Qaida-led attacks in New York and Washington, with a thwarted attempt failing in Pennsylvania, left close to 3,000 people dead.



People walk away from the World Trade Center in New York City Sept. 11, 2001.  
(OSV News photo/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)

Connor said he questioned God after seeing "specks jumping" from the blazing towers to their deaths on 9/11.

"How are people left to make a choice: whether to burn or drop 1,000 feet?" Connor asked. "So, that's something I had struggled with. But I think over time, my faith has gotten much stronger, and certainly in the last decade or so, I think it has even gotten more so."

Connor, a regular Massgoer, credits his stronger faith after the losses in part to his son, an Augustinian friar studying for the priesthood. He said his son's faith has helped him to "become more introspective ... and understand what it means to be Catholic ... to really embrace God and embrace Jesus."

Now a New Jersey-based anti-terrorism advocate, Connor lost his father days after his ninth birthday. On Jan. 24, 1975, 33-year-old Frank Connor was at lunch at Fraunces Tavern in the heart of Manhattan's financial district when he and three other men were killed, and nearly 60 were injured in a bombing. The Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), a Puerto Rican separatist group, claimed responsibility.

Connor said he has had no inclination to walk away from God, unlike some others he knew who lost loved ones on 9/11. The experience, he said, of losing his father and being raised by a mother and grandmother who were devout, Irish women kept him grounded and better able to handle the loss of his close cousin, whom he described as tough and funny.

"We went to church and all those things, but Grandma Connor always instilled in us never to be raised with hate," said Connor.

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His cousin Jean Schlag Nebbia of Naples, Florida, also clung to her faith shortly after her older brother Steven, who was 41, died in the attack.

"I never blamed God for 9/11. I felt that you're given the gift of life, and then you're given the gift of choice. And sometimes there's bad people and they make bad choices, and other people are hurt through bad choices," Nebbia, a former special needs teacher's aide, told OSV News.

Three months after the attacks, she came to a realization.

Nebbia, 63, described watching news footage of the burning towers obsessively, trying to find her brother among those jumping out of the buildings. On the third month of non-stop viewing, her husband gave her some advice a Christian coworker had given him: "to say 'I'm going to put this in God's hands.' "

"The moment he said that to me is the moment I started to live ... giving up my worries and giving up the unknown," Nebbia told OSV News. "You know, 'God, I need a good night's sleep. I'm going to put this in your hands.' That, to me, was a turning point. And I don't know if I could have done that if I didn't have my Catholic base."

Nebbia said her 12 years of Catholic education and growing up as a regular Massgoer gave her a solid grounding in faith in God's providence. She said she goes to God in prayer for almost every aspect of her life because "he has my back" just like her older brother, whom she was very close to, "always did."



Elizabeth Adams reacts at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum reflecting pool in the Manhattan borough of New York City, Sept. 10, 2025, ahead of the 24th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center. (OSV News/Reuters/Jeenah Moon)

Vera Murphy Trayner also leaned heavily on her faith after losing her husband, Patrick Murphy.

On the morning of the attack, Trayner prayed the rosary fervently as she rushed home from her son's nursery school while pushing him in his stroller. Murphy, 36 and the vice president for technology at the resource and management consulting firm Marsh McLennan, was on the 97th floor of the first tower that was hit three floors below. His department had moved there just months prior.

Trayner's go-to devotion "always" came through for her with prayers answered.

"I prayed and prayed and prayed that Patrick would find a way out. He was so smart ... and athletic and young ... and it was the first prayer that I made that was not

answered," Trayner told OSV News.

She said she "was disappointed" but also held firm to the belief that her husband's death "happened for a reason" and she "had to accept it."

"Well, it's free will. The terrorists, obviously they're guided by evil and they were able to do such an evil act," Trayner said. "I don't want to feel sorry for myself because all through history, there have been traumas, wars. There's death. There's fires."

Now 60, Trayner said her studies at Jesuit-run Boston College opened her up further to the faith during difficulties.

"I was able to ask questions and being a woman in the Catholic faith, being a widow in the Catholic faith, being a mother, I read quite a bit of different books ... answering my own questions and talking with people," she said.

Trayner, a Tampa-based college counselor who remarried in 2006, has relied on the Holy Spirit "to give me the right words," the Blessed Mother to intercede in raising her children, and the saints, especially Joan of Arc, to guide her through every major challenge.

Still, she said, as she described breaking into a sweat while speaking to OSV News, she remains haunted by the thought of how her first husband must have suffered as the north tower became engulfed in an inferno and collapsed.

Nebbia admitted that as a Catholic, in recent weeks she has begun to struggle with forgiving the terrorists.

"I just feel like I don't need to forgive them. That's not my job. So now I'm questioning myself, like, 'Alright, how do I go about forgiving these people, how?' That was their goal. They achieved their goal. Now, I question that part of me," she said.

Connor said he has come to accept his family's tragic losses.

"Maybe I didn't understand the reason, and maybe I don't understand the reason why Steve was killed and the other 3,000 people, but I do feel that God does have a reason for it," he said.

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This story appears in the **Sept. 11: 25 years later** feature series. [View the full series.](#)