

The Center for Bioethics sixth anniversary reflections of the catastrophic events of 9/11 provided a deep understanding of its human toll, and challenged us to ask questions about how we cope and where we need to go next – as individuals and as a nation.

The somber observance began with a rhetorical questioning of why our nation refers to that day as 9/11 and not September 11th. Across the world, the day is remembered as September 11. Other momentous events in our nation's history also have been memorialized with the month in which they occurred, followed by a specific numerical day, such as July 4. This day, however, has been abbreviated into only a numerical day.

Does the “9/11” designation give it a distinctly contemporary American flavor? Is it a play on the 911-emergency number? We were all left to ponder the reason.

The depths of the losses that touched New Yorkers and people across the nation and world were powerfully captured in the Portraits of Grief that the “New York Times” published for many weeks after the horrific events. Our discussion remembered the contribution of those columns, which were poignant glimpses into the lives of the victims. The portraits were meant to remember the victims differently than an obituary. These were portraits of their lives, not their deaths.

Michael Ragsdale shared some of his collection of 9/11 memorabilia. He has over 3000 pieces of ephemera and over 220 autographs of people who rescued victims, comforted bereaved families or risked their own lives and health to dig at the site, as well as leaders and educators in the post- 9/11 era. His collection is meant to show the 9/11 aftermath story. It is a collection not just of those who died, but also of those who helped and participated in rescue and social service efforts in hundreds of ways. At this point, Mr. Ragsdale has compiled 65 binders full of archives of the day and the subsequent events. One unique attribute of his compilation, however, is that it neither contains photographs, nor missing person sheets.

Dr. Ruth Fischbach followed with an explanation of Project COPE- a joint effort between the Columbia University Medical Center, the New York Police Department and the New York Police Foundation. Project COPE enlisted a mix of psychiatrists and social workers to help the first responders, and their family members, regardless of whether they were showing symptoms of trauma. The program urged that every police officer and their families get counseling. Each officer's anonymity was scrupulously maintained.

Dr. Dina Feivelson used the metaphor of a wedding to show that a single date cannot contain all the meaning, complexity, and rich layers of an experience. The world remembers September 11, 2001 as one day, just as one remembers a joyous wedding day or the day of a more personal tragedy, such as a cancer diagnosis. Anniversaries are merely symbols and markers of days that represent the beginning of greater life changes, and we remember them as the catalysts that brought about the subsequent changes. Therefore, she said, we need to continue to look forward, rather than backward: we need to focus more on what has happened since these cataclysmic events, rather than focusing on the details of that one day.

Working at a marriage requires more effort than remembering the beauty of the day, and understanding and structuring a post-9/11 world requires more effort than simply recalling the terror of one day.

People remember 9/11 with sadness as a day for lost innocence, but there are other such days in the days and years since that may have more immediate and lasting repercussions. She advised us to cease focusing on the one date of the national tragedy to the exclusion of other subsequent life events.

Dr. Fischbach spoke once again to discuss whether or not we should continue to remember 9/11 as much, or if it is time to move on with our lives. She asked if there was a point in gathering together and setting up 9/11 events, such as the Center for Bioethics did, or if they no longer served a purpose. Furthermore, if we continue to remember that day so intensely, are we hindering the process of healing and moving on? Should we focus our efforts more on overcoming that day, than reliving it? That day killed not only people, but shook the very foundations of the values of our nation and the ideals on which it was founded. She posed a question: If the US is to triumph over 9/11, is it time that our focus shift to rebuilding our nation and strengthening what we stand for?