

SHARED REMEMBRANCE HELPS IN GETTING ON WITH LIFE **by Marie Coady**

When is it okay to get on with life?

In the aftermath of the horrendous tragedy that befell our country on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, our lives were sent into a perpetual state of mourning, a state of mourning that can have its own psychological perils. The major peril to our well-being at the moment seems to be getting on with it. Getting on with life, that is, without feeling guilty.

How do you get on with your daily life without seeming to have forgotten the families who were devastated by tragedy? Or, worse yet, go on a vacation? But like many others, I found myself in that position.

Along with another couple, my husband and I had planned and pre-paid for a weekend getaway that just happened to fall only 3 days after the terrorist attack that we all witnessed live and in color, and I was conflicted.

Do I stay put and mourn in a familiar setting, or do we go ahead with our plans to travel up the coast of Maine for what we hoped would be a restful weekend, drinking in the beauty of Boothbay Harbor from the balcony of a quaint inn overlooking the inner harbor? It seemed somehow unpatriotic in light of all the flags flying and the declarations of national sadness, but our country's leaders were encouraging the population that the best thing we could do to get this country back on its feet was to keep on, keeping on.

After several back and forth phone calls, we made the unanimous decision to make our way up the coast to decompress. This was after all a yearly pilgrimage. Our friends, Lorraine and Jim, and my husband and I have celebrated our wedding anniversaries jointly for more than 20 years by planning some time away together. And somehow, in spite of the gloom and doom of the 24/7 news reports, it seemed appropriate to do what we had done traditionally for so many years.

Besides, that's what the experts were advising. According to the guidelines on coping with tragedy laid down by psychologists, "reestablishing routines", "taking time off from the demands of daily life", as well as "getting together with close friends" and seeking comfort in each other's company seemed to be major factors in coping with grief. And our planned vacation seemed to fit the bill.

But when we arrived in the peaceful village of Boothbay Harbor, we seemed so far removed from the center of turmoil and fear it was an almost surreal experience. The sun warmed the deck where we sat attempting to unwind as we watched pleasure boats bobbing rhythmically in the harbor while other, larger boats ferried passengers across the bay or took them out for deep sea excursions.

In spite of the activity, what struck me was the quiet. The inn was fully occupied and the docks swarmed with strollers and sightseers, yet they seemed to be murmuring respectfully as they milled and strolled past. It occurred to me the other guests in this tourist town had made their plans weeks ago just as we had and were making the best of it.

Lorraine and I strolled through the town and scouted out the shops and restaurants looking for a place to have dinner later that evening. But Bill and Jim couldn't seem to drag themselves away from the TV. They sat with their eyes glued to the screen pausing now and then to comment on some new bit of information or insight being broadcast in the frenzy to be first. Only hunger could drag them away from the TV screen.

After dinner we returned to the inn and sat on adjoining decks, sipping wine and watching the sunset over the water. As the moon rose and lights began to twinkle on the boats in the harbor, the men went back to watching and commenting on the latest bulletin, but Lorraine and I were content to enjoy the peaceful sights and sounds of a moonlit bay.

Then suddenly, at exactly 7 p.m., shadowy figures began appearing on balconies and decks all around us, their faces illuminated by the light of flickering candles. It was then that I remembered that I too had received the e-mail message urging everyone to come out of their homes and businesses at that hour and light a candle of hope and remembrance. In fact, I'd actually packed a box of candles, just in case.

I ran to get them and handed them out to the four of us, and after they were lighted, we stepped out on our balconies to join in silent salute to the more than 6 thousand souls whose lives were taken so unexpectedly and the countless numbers of relatives and friends who mourned them.

Then, from the silence, there emerged a steady, strong voice singing the national anthem, and as we all joined in, the voices of strangers, friends and passing acquaintances swelled across a peaceful bay, sharing our sorrow and declaring our pride.

Being part in that spur-of-the-moment tribute delivered what psychologists promised. It helped all of us identify our shared feelings of sorrow and realize that we were experiencing a normal reaction to an abnormal circumstance. It also relieved us of our collective guilt and assured us that it was okay to get on with our lives, knowing that we had not forgotten.