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SEPTEMBER 11: WORDS ARE ALL WE HAVE

Just as families gathered for solace in the wake of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, the Colby family came together on the night of Sept. 11, which President Bro Adams described as “a very complicated and upsetting day.”

“I think one of the most upsetting things about it is that words are hard to find and attach to feelings and to the events and to describe in any accurate and satisfying way either what we feel or what we think happened,” Adams told the hundreds of somber students who packed the Page Commons room. “That’s a natural consequence of this kind of surprise and trauma. . . . But still, words are all we have.”

It was the healing quality of words that brought the community together on a day that had administrators setting up counseling services for students and comforting students themselves. “It’s been hard for us to comport ourselves as we saw students calling home and crying tears of joy to find that their parents were, in fact, okay,” said Janice Kassman, vice president for student affairs.

As of this writing, one 2001 graduate had learned that she had lost her mother and stepfather, passengers in the airliner that crashed in Pennsylvania. The husband of one alumna also died in that crash. But dozens of Colby parents, alumni and friends who worked in the World Trade Center towers had apparently escaped while thousands of others had not. “It’s a spectacle of loss we don’t very often confront in our lives,” Adams said.

Attempting to help the community cope with that loss, College chaplains asked students to refrain from hiding behind ideology, to resist the temptation of xenophobia, to see peace and love as stronger than violence. “Let us strive not to let this event imprison our spirit,” said Chaplain Rabbi Raymond Krinsky.

Professor Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (sociology), a minister, referred to the writings of philosopher Howard Thurman. “He says we live under the shadow of the event and our hearts reach out for some measure of relief,” Gilkes said.

And students did reach out, rising from the crowd and walking to the lectern, some in tears. They asked that everyone tell loved ones how they feel. One student referred to the Lord’s Prayer passage about forgiveness. “Today someone trespassed against us and I think it’s important to forgive,” he said.

For others, the trespass struck closer.

“I spoke to my mom at eleven o’clock this morning,” one weary student said, fighting back tears. “And my father and my brother both work in the World Trade Center. And um, when I spoke to her she didn’t know anything. And I just got an e-mail before this began that they’re both fine. But I’ve been sitting in my room for seven hours wondering if they were alive and really seething with hatred for a particular group of people. As a Jew and one of Israeli descent I find it difficult not to lay very specific blame, but I also received a forward from somebody I don’t even know asking to be aware that this isn’t the time to lay specific blame.”

She agreed, and urged the Colby community to refrain from blaming a particular religion or country.

Several students urged tolerance and forgiveness, while one said he was not willing to let hatred dominate him. Another asked the group to consider its capacity to love one another. One first-year student said a friend he made on a COOT trip two weeks before called him to make sure he was okay.

Another student wrestled with the tragedy in a more personal way. “I just recently got off the phone with my little sister and she was crying,” she said. “She described to me how at around nine o’clock when she was in English the principal came over the loudspeaker and described the events that had happened and the teacher was crying and how throughout the day they called students one by one, almost half of the school, down to the principal’s office to let them know whether their parents were alive. She described the tears that were shed and having to hold her friends and console them.”

The student said her sister had just seen a television news report



A student rises to speak during a silent vigil on the Miller Library steps calling for nonviolent response to the terrorist attacks. A handful of students ended their silence with brief remarks, then placed flowers at the war-memorial at the base of the flag pole.

of Pakistani children celebrating the attack. “She was pissed, really mad.” The student said she could not fathom celebrating anyone’s death, that she was shocked but was refusing to succumb to the temptation of hating back. “The whole thing is started by hate,” she said. “I think that should stop and it should stop with us.”

Still other students just wanted to talk, and they reached out from the stage, turning the room into an intimate place.

Describing herself as a New Yorker and a writer, one student said she was at a loss for words and felt very far from home. But she said it was good to gather with friends, though after each speaker she felt an urge to clap, “because the silence scares me.”

As she stepped from the stage, for the first time that night the crowd broke into applause. —Gerry Boyle '78