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About 2465 words

## Twice When the World Stood Still

by Kari Kilgore

Like anyone old enough to remember September 11, 2001, I have unusually clear impressions of that day and the strange, frightening days and weeks and months that followed. My husband Jason and I share recollections of watching our hometown news network, which happened to be CNN. The same network we'd watched years before from Virginia, when Jason was in the National Guard and bombs were falling over Iraq.

Thankfully he was never deployed, and we'd relocated to Georgia by 1994.

That day in 2001, Atlanta locals and millions of others in the United States and around the world saw the same stunned CNN reporters, the same grim footage over and over again, the same running commentary at the bottom of the screen that's now become commonplace.

As we approach the twentieth anniversary of one day that changed so much of the world, we're gripped in the midst of another unprecedented crisis that's altered life on planet Earth. I

write this in June of 2020, when the US is in the grips of the worst pandemic since the 1918 flu, an economic disaster akin to the Great Depression, and civil unrest not seen since I was born in 1969.

What makes stories and histories of events fifty and ninety and one hundred years ago interesting to me is the individual point of view. The unique impressions of people, more than the dry, static facts of history.

Especially points of view from those who had an unusually close perspective to what was happening as it happened.

When it comes to 9/11, in many ways my husband Jason saw events unfold from the inside of the most affected industry, in one of that industry's most important cities.

All of Atlanta shared the unsettling experience of all traces of airplanes vanishing from the sky. Even those who didn't live close enough to hear jets passing overhead didn't think twice of seeing constant vapor trails during the day and glowing lights in the sky at night. In addition to being in Hartsfield International Airport's busy airspace, our house in the neighboring city of Decatur was also within the flightpath of a busy private airport.

So seeing and hearing planes overhead was nothing more than a part of life we didn't notice.

Until they all stopped flying.

Jason's experience of that moment was and remains especially vivid. He worked for Delta Airlines, in an office building near the passenger terminal about ten miles south of downtown Atlanta.

Right beside the air cargo terminal, which handled fleets for UPS, FedEx, and DHL shipping companies.

When the last of those big jets spun down, the silence was the sound of the whole world holding its breath.

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The first I heard of anything unusual on September 11 was a phone call from Jason, talking about the first jet hitting the World Trade Center.

It's strange to admit this now, but we actually joked about it. We'd visited Manhattan more than once with our Delta free flight benefits, and on one trip, we learned about an airplane hitting the Empire State Building in the midst of heavy fog in 1945. A military aircraft that made a tragically wrong turn.

Not much news had gotten out yet that morning, and we both wondered how a pilot managed to hit an even bigger building with modern electronics on a bright and sunny day.

Before either of us settled back into work, we realized the time for jokes was over for a long time.

Jason and several coworkers gathered into the entryway lobby, all of them watching a huge television monitor that wasn't as commonplace then as it is now. The set was quite likely smaller than the one you currently have in your living room.

The CNN broadcast coming from only a few miles away showed intense fire at the first tower. A fierce pillar of black smoke cutting through the deep blue September sky.

Everyone speculated about whether the tower would collapse, not yet suspecting that wouldn't be the only news story of the day, or even the most upsetting one.

In the back of his mind, Jason thought through his extensive knowledge of how heat and metal interacted. Part of his lifelong interest in history included years as a hobby blacksmith. Of

the group gathered in front of that big TV, he knew the most about how metal reacted—and failed—when put under heat stress.

Everyone in the room and anyone involved in aviation that day knew those jets hadn't been in the air long. So they were carrying nearly a full load of fuel, adding to the heat and the danger.

They all watched from a Delta Airlines lobby beside the busiest airport in the world as the second jet crashed into the World Trade Center at just after nine o'clock.

No one knew what was going on yet, and no one knew what the consequences or the response was going to be.

No one knew whether a Delta jet departing from Hartsfield at that very moment would be the next to be hijacked. Or whether that theoretical jet would crash somewhere in the city.

But every Delta employee knew there would be a national airspace response of some kind, and soon.

Forty-five minutes later, airspace over the United States was closed.

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In my office in a suburban business park about twenty-five miles north of the city, information was far more muddled and chaotic that morning. I heard about the second jet from Jason, before many of my coworkers did.

The group I saw huddled together watching TV were in the courtyard outside our breakroom, around an ancient portable set that was maybe nineteen inches and getting its snowy signal from an antenna on top.

Rather than getting ready for some unknown and drastic action like everyone in Jason's building, my coworkers were stunned and confused. The woman who sat next to me walked up

with tears in her eyes, asking me what was happening. I was heartbroken that I could only say I didn't know.

When I walked back around to my desk and sat down, I glanced to my right. At a picture Jason had taken of me on one of our trips to New York City. I was on the ferry to Ellis Island, smiling and delighted to be exactly where I was.

The cloud-shrouded towers of the World Trade Center directly over my shoulder.

My chances of maintaining any sort of composure deserted me in that instant.

Jason's moment of understanding the magnitude of what was happening hit at around the same time.

When they got the word that airspace was closing, he and a few coworkers walked outside. In normal times, the area around the building carried the constant stink of jet fuel and the never-ending roar of the cargo fleet's engines. Even more than passenger operations, cargo was an all-hours business.

Not long after they stepped outside, they heard one last jet spin down. The silence felt unnatural in that place. An undeniable sign that one of the engines of the city and the world had come to a halt.

When I called Jason to let him know I was going home, he said he'd meet me there.

Our experiences and memories diverge again at that point, and stayed that way for days to come.

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The truth is I barely remember that afternoon after seeing the photo on my cubicle wall.

My clearest recollection that I still can't say out loud even after all these years is driving under the highway alert signs on the way home.

They all said “National Emergency” in cool green letters that seemed far too impersonal and calm for what was unfolding all around us.

I do remember needing to get home to our house and our dogs and cats. And being aware I was driving closer to potentially big targets on a day when we had no idea what was going to happen next.

Atlanta itself would be tempting, of course, with CNN right at the heart of it. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was located not far from our house in Decatur at the time. The Atlanta airport itself certainly crossed my mind.

Another part of living in Atlanta during the mid and late Nineties—along with constant traffic jams, furious growth, and airplanes overhead—was the awareness that comes with your city getting bombed.

It seems strange to mention it in comparison with 9/11, but only five years before we’d experienced the bombing in Centennial Olympic Park during the 1996 Summer Olympic Games. What many people who didn’t live there don’t know is we had two more bombings in early 1997, at a women’s health clinic and a lesbian bar.

So on that September day, Atlantans had an uneasy and bone-deep knowledge of what made for a good target, along with the awful dread of wondering when an unknown assailant would strike next.

All of that paled for me, and for Jason, in comparison with getting home on that terrible day.

Unfortunately he hadn’t been there for long when he got a call from his manager.

With the closure of airspace nationwide, Delta and all of commercial aviation went onto an emergency footing. That meant communications had to be maintained 24/7.

Partly because Jason had gone home to meet me and therefore missed the discussion, he drew the overnight shift starting that same day. He was told to get some sleep and report back that night rather than finishing out his normal shift.

I remember being furious at this, thinking at the time it was terribly unfair that he had to work all night.

Why couldn't someone else do that? Why did it have to be him?

Looking back at it now, I know the idea of being alone that night felt utterly impossible.

The only way I did get through that night was with CNN on like so many other people in the country and in the world, watching the same unbelievable images over and over again, checking in with loved ones over the phone. Strangely enough I don't remember talking to my mother and father and brother, or my grandparents, though I'm certain I did.

What I remember is talking for hours to a dear Atlanta friend of mine whose partner was out of town that night, stuck in another state. It never occurred to either of us to drive to the other's house, only half an hour away. Being in our own spaces, with our pets, and having the connection of each other's voices helped us manage the long night.

One of my worst memories from that day and all the weeks to follow was going to bed when I couldn't stay up any longer.

I knew I'd forget everything that happened on September 11 when I went to sleep.

And that I'd remember it all at once when Jason walked back in that morning.

That happened to me several heart-wrenching days in a row.

Because Jason worked that overnight shift for the rest of the week.

Only a few people worked those eerie graveyard shifts at Delta. One person from each of a handful of technology and communication teams and one manager. The leader of the

technology group came in every morning with an update about developments overnight.

Coordination with the Federal Aviation Administration and other investigating agencies was critical and ongoing, as a major industry for Atlanta and the country paused.

Much like we all did again in March of 2020.

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Thankfully not much happened during those long overnight hours. The technological side of operations ran smoothly, all while trying to prepare for events and responses no one could predict.

Even Atlanta's typical snarled traffic stayed lighter during that time. My impulse to be at home was apparently shared by many.

The semblance of normal life that returned with Jason going back to his normal shift the next week never quite settled back in for the two of us.

We flew again as soon as we could, determined to keep terrorists or anyone else from frightening us. That first flight was somber and quiet.

We had the opportunity to travel to South Africa in January of 2002, when many people still refused to go overseas. Both of us responded with "of *course* we'll go!" That trip remains a highlight of all our Delta travel twenty years later.

I made a point of flying on September 11, 2002, on an even more sad and solemn day.

But travel changed for us along with the rest of the country. The flight benefits that made Jason's job so appealing became increasingly difficult to get, as all airlines cut flights and increased security.

Losing the opportunity to travel changed the way Jason felt about the job, and not for the better. His time with Delta came to an end before another year passed.



Not long after, we both realized that job and the chance to travel the world was a big part of what was holding us in Atlanta. By early 2004, we sold our house and moved back home to the mountains of Virginia.

With the nearest airport over an hour away—and that airport being of the tiny, regional variety—Atlanta’s vast Hartsfield International Airport is still essentially our local airport. We get the advantage of five-minute walks from the curb to the gate while still having access to the entire world after a forty-five minute flight.

Partly because of the geography, Delta is still our airline. They emerged from a difficult bankruptcy stronger and far more safety and customer-oriented than they ever were when we flew so often in the 90s. They’ve handled the dreadful challenges of 2020 as responsibly as any other US carrier, more than most. We’d choose to fly Delta whenever possible no matter where we live.

Of course we pay for our flights now, and that quick hop down to Atlanta is incredibly expensive. But we both still get the same thrill out of getting on a plane and stepping out into a new place a few hours later.

I never expected to experience a more uncertain time than the hours and days and weeks after September 11, 2001. When time stretched itself out into an unrecognizable form, and no one could predict what each new day would bring.

These endless months of 2020 have recreated that dissolution of time to a far greater degree, and with even less of an idea of how we’ll return to that semblance of normal. Tragically, the death toll in the United States and all over the world has far outstripped what we experienced on that awful day, with the end still nowhere in sight.

One thing both Jason and I agree on is while we're not going to rush back into the air anytime soon, we will return to the adventure and joy of stepping out of a plane and into a brand new place as soon as it truly is safe to do so.

We refused to give up travel after the devastation of 9/11.

After that, allowing reasonable caution to sour into paralyzing fear after living through 2020 would be unthinkable.