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Gettysburg and Ground Zero

C. Kevin Gillespie S.J.

Saint Joseph's University, president@sju.edu

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Photography: George R. Merrill

“... President Abraham Lincoln transformed a battleground into a holy ground.”

Gettysburg and Ground Zero

by C. Kevin Gillespie, S.J., Ph.D.

He began by saying, “The morning sun of that dreadful day was radiant and the air was filled with a sweet moisture.” Then with feeling he presented the facts of how the thousands later that day died so tragically. He went on to tell us the ways by which so many lives and so many relationships were cut short. Spouses, parents, children and friends, he noted, spent anxious moments waiting to learn if their beloved survived the towering infernos of war. From all parts of the nation, he said, there were the cries of sorrow and grief.

A park ranger recently related this scenario. No, he was not speaking about September 11, 2001 but about July 3, 1863. And he was describing not the destruction that occurred at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, or on a Pennsylvania field; rather he was recalling the tumultuous tragedy that occurred much earlier in our nation’s history, on the Pennsylvania fields that surrounded the town of Gettysburg.

As the ranger led us on a guided tour of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, he described the last day of the battle. He suggested that there were about as many deaths that day as had died on September 11th. Further drawing analogues between the two American tragedies the ranger stated that of the more than 3,000 buried

at Gettysburg Cemetery, close to 1,000 had unmarked graves and noted that at both Gettysburg and at Ground Zero the families and friends of the deceased never had a chance to say goodbye nor were they even able to bury their loved ones. Yes, the ranger movingly brought together the sorrow and sadness that we Americans now feel for those who fell on September 11 with the feelings that so many of our American ancestors felt about Gettysburg and other battles of the Civil War.

In his enlightening and inspiring tour the ranger went on to describe how on November 19 of 1863, President Abraham Lincoln transformed a battleground into holy ground. Lincoln did so through a simple yet profoundly moving two-minute speech, which every school child knows as the Gettysburg Address. By his words President Lincoln expressed the insights and inspired the wisdom for our nation to growth through the trauma of battles and war. He, in effect, reframed the meaning of the trauma and helped our nation grow through it.

Turning to the resources of wisdom as a means of growing through the trauma has been a topic of recent research and is presented extensively in the book *Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis* (ed. by Tedeschi,

Park and Calhoun: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998). In their introduction the editors describe clusters of variables involved in such growth. One such cluster is the “philosophy of life” that includes the categories of “priorities and appreciation of life,” “existential themes and sense of meaning,” “spiritual development,” and “wisdom.”

While not a pastoral counselor, Lincoln, by his speeches and presence, had a way of invoking each one of these clusters. Through our pastoral presence we may do the same. Not through speeches, but through supporting those philosophies of life that help our clients arrive at their priorities and a sense of meaning, as well as to grow spiritually and attain wisdom. Pastoral counselors by definition have had extensive training in each of these categories. Consequently, through the training that our specialization has given us, we have a unique opportunity, indeed a responsibility, to continue in the spirit of Lincoln and provide resources for leading our clients and our country beyond the events of that dreadful day last September. ☛

Father C. Kevin Gillespie, S. J., Ph.D., AAPC Fellow, is an Assistant Professor of Pastoral Counseling at Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland.