

The Letters

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Friday, September 14, 2001
New York City

Dear Uncle Carl,

Your telephone call to me on Wednesday afternoon has been one of the few stabilizing influences in my life since the attack on Tuesday. The entire city and nation are in horrified shock. In the past four days the lives of many people seem to have spun out of control. As I told you, Janice's father, Eddie, was in the south tower when the attack occurred. Her husband, Larry, a New York City firefighter, was one of the first called to the scene. Both Eddie and Larry are among the missing.

Janice is certain that her father is dead. But she hopes desperately that Larry will be found alive. She is horrified over the prospects of losing them both. And so am I. You will remember that 6 months ago Janice's mother, Miriam, died of ovarian cancer.

Uncle Carl, in the last 15 minutes before the Trade Center collapsed, Janice talked with her father three times. He tried to joke about how he knew he should have never gotten into real estate. They laughed together, but between his attempts to soften the reality with humor, he repeatedly told Janice he loved her, and the rising panic in his voice betrayed his fear of the impending disaster.

We have been told repeatedly by the New York City Fire Department that many people escaped the buildings before they collapsed. We want so much to believe Larry was one of those! Perhaps your newspaper carried the pictures of people jumping from the burning buildings, choosing to die from the fall instead of the fire. Thousands of innocent people bore the brunt of this terrorist attack against the United States, just as innocent people around the world are bearing

the brunt of wars for which they are not responsible! It seems that evil usually targets the innocent.

I mentioned that Eddie and Janice had laughed together. Laughter was only beginning to return to their lives. Janice's mom's losing battle with ovarian cancer and the long journey through alternating hope and despair had ravaged Janice's spirit. Eddie, Larry, and her kids were Janice's reason to go on living. Now she is struggling to "keep it together" for her kids. How can a kindergartner and preschool child understand the sudden loss of so much family? And how does Janice go on being the mother her children need with the grief that surrounds her?

Surely Larry will be found alive. Out of frustration and fear, Janice went to Larry's station to find out if he had been located. Disappointed, she returned empty-handed.

You asked about the condition of Janice's faith. I could sense anxiety in your voice, and for good reason. Janice is the first person I have led to Christ. So far, her faith has made appreciable progress, but it has experienced numerous bumps along the way. Janice embraces her new faith but has some deep, unresolved questions.

Janice and Larry have regularly attended church services with me, and she has become part of a discipleship group. She has confided in me several times that she wished she had the faith Larry had. "He accepts God's love so readily," she once told me. "Why can't I be more like that?" She is learning to read and study the Bible and is trying to keep up with the books you continue to send her.

But, Uncle Carl, since Tuesday the gruesome magnitude of the attacks has begun to settle in. Janice has been forced to face the possibility that both Eddie and Larry might be dead, and her faith is suffering noticeably. To tell the truth, mine isn't hitting on all eight cylinders either.

As Janice told you when you were here in March, for years she dismissed the Christian faith. Her principal reason was the reality of evil. She found it incomprehensible that a good God and evil could exist in the same world. Truthfully, I had never given much attention to the problem evil poses for faith. Not that I had resolved anything; I suppose I just hadn't thought much about it.

This has certainly not been true for Janice. As I have tried to answer her sincere questions, I have been forced to confront the triviality of my own "solutions."

Since Tuesday, Janice's plaguing questions have come storming back with vengeance. Her attempts to pray lie littered about her.

Janice certainly doesn't think that New York City is an island of suffering or that her grief should receive special attention. She grieves for those killed in Washington and Pennsylvania. And she is profoundly aware of the occurrence of monstrous evils elsewhere in the world. The slave trade in Sudan and the many AIDS orphans in Africa have been particularly disturbing. In fact, it is the relentlessness and universality of moral evil that weighs so heavily upon her. And you can imagine that for her own children Janice is having a difficult time explaining why their grandfather and father are no longer here for them.

Recently Janice showed to me a statement by Zbigniew Brzezinski, former assistant to the president for national security affairs. He said that between 1914 and 1997, wars have killed 197 million people. That number is equivalent to nearly 1 in 20 of the total world population in 1990, or roughly the entire population of the United States in 1970.

Uncle Carl, either Janice will have to receive some honest and intelligible answers to her questions, or she will very likely say "Farewell!" to her faith. Recently when she tried to ask questions in a Bible study group, she was told that her doubts prove that she "doesn't love Jesus." I remember when my responses would not have been much better.

References to "miracles" abound in the aftermath of the September 11 attack. Yesterday I saw in the paper a story of one couple whose 33-year-old son worked in the Trade Center. The distraught father said, "We are praying for a miracle." I have heard the story of a man, somewhere near the 80th floor when one of the buildings collapsed, who "rode the wreckage" as the building fell. He was taken away from the scene with merely a broken leg. Some Christians have been quick to identify the narrow escape as a "divine miracle." I spoke with a secretary in a brokerage firm who overslept on the morning of the 11th. Had she made it to work on time, she would likely have been in the south tower when United Flight 175 struck it. The person is now telling anyone who will listen that God intervened and caused her to oversleep. She is certain that God saved her life and seems to have no sense of the broader implications of her statements. Janice and I have heard numerous similar shortsighted claims. Janice wonders why God could not have placed a deep sleep over a few thousand more people who did arrive at work on time.

Reports of such "divine intervention" disturb Janice. She says they remind her of a situation in which an adult who is supposed to be supervising a small child carelessly allows her to ride a tricycle into the street. An oncoming car strikes and mangles the child's body. Immediately, the careless adult rushes out of the house and into the

street to begin caring for the child's wounds, trying to make her comfortable, attempting to stop the bleeding.

Some people say the adult is blameworthy because of carelessness. But then friends quickly rise to defend. They say that the critics are most unfair to concentrate on the adult's "apparent carelessness." Instead, the critics should praise and honor the person for the excellent care given to the child after the accident. Beyond doubt, the defenders say, this service to the wounded child proved the adult's love and responsibility.

Janice says that no one in his or her right mind would believe such a defense. But all over the country people are being asked to accept just such a defense for a God who is supposed to be all-powerful and all-loving. The illogic in this defense of God and the implications regarding His timing and justice have caused Janice to ask, "Is this what it takes to prop up God and substantiate one's faith? If so, don't be surprised if honest and thoughtful people (including me) 'check out'!"

Uncle Carl, I will not belittle Janice's crisis of faith. She will likely not go farther until some good answers are forthcoming. In an effort to explain why God might have allowed the attack, some ministers have given bizarre explanations. Their "answers" cheapen the lives of the victims and their families. And they don't do God much of a favor either. One minister tried to compare the Trade Centers to a modern-day Tower of Babel. "By its quick removal," the reverend said, "God is declaring the transience of man and his accomplishments." Apparently the minister missed the point that God didn't kill those who built the Tower of Babel and that the goal for building the Trade Centers was neither part of man's "quest for immortality" nor an effort to defy God.

On the one hand, we are being assured that when the attacks occurred, God wasn't in the vicinity. On the other hand, we are being urged to put our trust in God because "He loves us and will protect us." Janice wants to know, and I suppose I do, too, "Which one is it?" "Why," she has asked me, "should we worship such a truant?" This morning as I was preparing breakfast for her, she asked, "Must a person reject basic logic in order to be a Christian?"

Uncle Carl, I can't adequately answer Janice's questions. Will you help? Clearly, Janice intends to "have it out with God." If such language is too offensive, then she at least intends to "have it out with the problem of evil." Will God hear her out?

As you know, through the years I have respected your faith and honesty. Some of my fondest memories stem from the times you and I

sat at night on the Charleston Battery in front of Rainbow Row. As we let the Atlantic breezes sweep over us, we talked of many things. You would talk about the meaning of Christ's call to discipleship, and you never dodged my questions.

Will you let me direct Janice's (and my) questions to you? If so, you might be in for a lengthy journey.

Later today I hope to watch the prayer service during which President Bush and Rev. Billy Graham will speak. I've invited Janice to come watch it with me. Perhaps both of us will gain strength.

I need your love and counsel more than ever.

*Christ's peace to you,
Barbara*

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Tuesday, September 18, 2001

(Six days after being shut down, the stock market responded on this day, symbolizing America's determination to defeat terrorism).

Charleston, South Carolina

Dear Barbara,

I have read your September 14 letter over and over again. I wish that I could be with you now. Hopefully, before long I can travel to New York City.

I have thought of little else but you, Janice, Michelle, Tony, and the many others whose lives and families have been so monstrously disrupted by these senseless acts of terror.

The contrast between Charleston and New York City today is striking. While rescue crews struggle to find survivors in the debris of the Trade Center, Charleston has never been more beautiful. Though fall is coming, the city is still resplendent in crepe-myrtle, magnolias, and chrysanthemums. The pecan trees are loaded this year. The harvest will be abundant. Yesterday I took my boat up the Ashley River

just to see the colorful flower gardens that grace lawns between the houses and the marsh. In a few weeks the temperatures here will still be in the mid-60s, and the New York City rescue workers could be battling cold weather. The beauty of Charleston, and September upon the harbor, have been partially eclipsed by the catastrophe in New York City.

Now, about Janice's determination to "have it out with God." No, I am not alarmed by your language, and I doubt that God is either. I suspect that on occasion some of God's defenders actually succeed in revealing their own insecurities rather than doing Him a service.

If the Book of Habakkuk is any indicator, Janice will not be the first one to hurl hard questions in God's direction. In the closing years of the seventh century B.C., the Babylonians were advancing on Jerusalem, killing, pillaging, and raping as they went. About that time the prophet Habakkuk put the following paraphrased question to God: "Are You God, or are You not?" Apparently thinking that his language was insufficiently direct, Habakkuk had another go at it: "Maybe You are a coward. Maybe You do well as God only when the big boys are not around. But when the Babylonians show up, You cower along with the rest of us!" In one last charge, Habakkuk demanded of God, "Either put up or shut up!" (1:2-17). Now, what do you think of a God who would allow a trusted friend to speak that way—and live to tell about it?

I have always been astonished by the fact that Habakkuk's attack didn't seem to rattle God. He let the old prophet "have at Him" and then allowed the Book of Habakkuk to become a part of the Bible. That episode in Israel's journey with God has caused me to suspect that He isn't as unnerved by honest questions as are many of His jittery protectors.

Maybe I am one of God's jittery protectors. Maybe I am searching frantically for ways to prop Him up, all the while telling Habakkuk to be quiet! Time will tell, because I intend to stay with you and Janice throughout the conversation.

Barbara, when I was a young parish priest, I was deeply plagued by the reality and problem of evil. At one point I thought that my theological and intellectual struggles would drive me from the ministry. That did not happen. Through much prayer, timely counsel from an older priest, and reading, I arrived at some answers that have made it possible for me to declare the gospel with faithfulness and integrity.

However, you should know that I have never arrived at solutions that can neutralize the hard questions raised by the reality of evil.

Often the problem of evil, my faith in God, and I—the three of us—engage in fierce debates. Frankly, I don't anticipate things being otherwise anytime soon. I value a statement by Frank Littell: "In the face of the deepest mystery of life and death, thoughtless utterance and premature closure are but the babbling of fools."

Barbara, I am praying for our nation and our world. I am also praying for you, Janice, and the children. I pray that Larry will be found alive, but I recognize that hope is dwindling. Janice must be aware of this as well. I am heavily invested in Janice's growth as a Christian. At the end of this dark night of the soul, I am confident that there is an enduring peace for her. But getting there will not be easy.

Barbara, don't be misled into thinking that faith comes easily for me. I pray regularly: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24, KJV). This morning I prayed the following prayer for you, Janice, Larry, the children, myself, and for our grieving nation:

"O merciful Father, who hast taught us in thy holy Word that thou dost not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men: Look with pity upon the sorrows of [us] thy servant[s] for whom our prayers are offered. Remember [us], O Lord, in mercy, nourish [our] soul[s] with patience, comfort [us] with a sense of thy goodness, lift up thy countenance upon [us], and give [us] peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen" ("For a Person in Trouble or Bereavement," in "Prayers," in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, No. 55).

When there is news regarding Larry, please call me immediately. I will await the questions you and Janice want to raise.

*His grace to you,
Uncle Carl*

[A note to the reader: Early on the morning of Wednesday, September 21, 2001, rescue workers located Larry's left arm. They were able to identify him by the description Janice had given of his wedding ring and initials on it.

[Janice said that never had she known such engulfing loneliness. First her mother had died, then her father, and now Larry—all of them gone. Her grief was compounded by the mounting death toll being reported by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

[Barbara called her uncle. He flew from Charleston to New York City to be with Janice in her time of grief. He arrived on Thursday evening, September 22, and remained until Sunday, September 25, when he returned to Charleston. Firefighters from many companies were present for the memori-