

Some of us remember where we were when JFK was assassinated in 1963.

But 50 years later, nearly all of us remember where we were on September 11, 2001 when 3000 people were murdered in terrorist attacks on our own soil.

As the days and weeks were followed by unrelenting media stories, the depth of this tragedy was apparent everywhere one looked... TV, radio, online and printed news media.

So many people around the US were sadly affected by the loss of life and, the loss of innocence surrounding our daily lives.

More than ever in our past, we now needed "Big Brother" to watch over & protect us.

We felt grief stricken, violated and some of us felt helpless with our own security in our daily lives.

I was no exception.

I kept asking the same question... "How could this have happened to the almighty United States of America" ?

As the weeks and months passed, I discovered that I was a "fringe" person to the September 11th tragedy.

I didn't personally know anyone who had died in the attacks, nor did I know anyone who knew anyone.

Yes, I am a US citizen and this tragedy happened to my country and my fellow countrymen, but "nothing" happened to me personally.

I could sympathize with all those souls so badly affected by the tragedy, but I could not "empathize"... I am simply not a member of that "tragic club".

Being unable to help in any meaningful way after September 11th, I just "moved on" with my life.

As the 2001 Christmas holidays approached, my family began to make Holiday plans.

We had a tradition: my two parents, 1 sister, 2 brothers their families, and myself always spent the week between Christmas and New Year's at our family's lake house in New Hampshire.

This was an event that the entire family of 17 people looked forward to.

My parents would become parents again, my siblings and I would turn into "teenagers" and the grandchildren would watch in delight as their parents were "chastised" by their grandparents.

One year, my young nephew was gifted a rubber tipped dart gun in his Christmas stocking.

Suddenly, the sound of breaking glass filled the air. My nephew "screamed"... I didn't do it !

My 2 adult brothers were shooting ornaments off the Christmas tree and my father was hollering "I'll box your ears" if you do that again !

It was also customary for our 7 school age grandchildren to bring an occasional neighborhood or school chum up to our lake house on holiday weekends or during the summer months.

The Christmas of 2001 was no different... my 9 year old niece brought up a little girl to spend the December school vacation week with our family.

We now had a full house of 18 people !

In addition to my family's many traditions... I had a personal tradition at my family's lake house.

My bedroom had a king size bed and a TV with a built in VCR player... Remember those ?

I also had an enormous collection of old cartoons dating from the era of my childhood... Casper the friendly ghost, Felix the cat, and so on that the kids loved.

I also had a nightstand draw filled with candy !

Early in the morning, the kids would tumble down to my room and "bang" on my door.

I would call out... "What's the password?"... and the reply was always the same... In unison, the kids would scream... "Coffee, black, no sugar"!

Then, the kids would all pile into my bed, settle themselves amongst the pillows and whatever "blankies" they brought in to watch Auntie Sue's crazy cartoons and eat candy "before" breakfast.

FYI... I had learned many years prior that the best candy to give out while watching TV was lollypops... It's very difficult to talk and suck on a lollypop at the same time.

So I invented a "rule" for all the children: you may have as many lollypops as you can eat so long as you suck each one to the stick and give me back the "evidence".

So, I always bought a bag of the tiny "dum-dum" lollypops and usually drank my coffee in relative silence.

This early morning tradition also included any "guest" that the kids brought up to our lake house.

The "guest" was granted the "Prized" position of sitting immediately next to me in the bed.

This spot gave the guest the "honored" right to choose first from the lollypop bag and then dole out the remaining flavors to the others.

On this particular vacation morning, a child I had never met sat hip to hip with me in my bed.

She was a sweet little girl of about 9 years old.

After an hour or so, my youngest brother appeared at my bedroom door to summon the kids for breakfast.

The kids tumbled out of my bed and I proceeded to pick lollypop sticks and wrappers from my sheets.

My brother hesitated, then quietly closed my bedroom door and proceeded to ask me a favor.

Would I let the kids use my room all week in order to watch my collection of cartoons ?

Apparently, my brother had told all the kids that the TV in our family room was "broken" and couldn't be fixed until after the holidays.

When I asked what happened to the TV, my brother said the TV was fine and that he had shut off the circuit breaker to the TV so no one could watch anything all week.

When I asked why... my brother sat down on my bed and told me that the little girl sitting next to me in my bed was the daughter of the Airline Pilot who was forced to fly the plane into the World Trade Center on September 11th.

Apparently the Pilot, his wife and 2 young children lived in my brother's neighborhood.

My brother and his wife took the Pilot's daughter while another neighbor couple took the Pilot's son for the school vacation week.

This enabled the Pilot's widow to spend time alone with her parents and siblings for much needed support.

Meanwhile, my brother had disabled our TV so as to keep any 9/11 news away from the Pilot's daughter, the other children, and ourselves.

My brother then asked me to do everything I could think of to make this a fun week for all the children...

In other words... be the best & most creative Auntie Sue that I could ever be.

Once alone in my room, I pondered the tragedy of 9/11.

How did I go from being a "fringe" observer to this tragedy -to- being front and center... facing a little girl who can't possibly make sense of her father's death ?

Suddenly, my own "vacation" ceased... I had a daunting job to do and I needed to focus all my efforts on the care of a stranger's child.

Fortunately, I had help from a most unexpected source...

Mother Nature came to my rescue.

She provided the snow and I provided the sleds, snowballs, game ideas, hot cocoa, and anything else that my furtive brain could think of.

When indoors, it was Arts & Crafts, Cartoons, popcorn, dress-up, games on the living room rug and one excursion out to breakfast at the local diner.

But of all the things I did with the children, one memory stands out above all else.

One evening, in the dark of night, I gathered up all the children and put them into their bathing suits.

I opened up our family's large hot tub and we all piled in.

Suddenly, it started to snow again.

Our heads became covered, our eyelashes twinkled with ice flakes and the yard became freshly coated... obliterating the foot prints of the day.

Suddenly I shouted... "Let's make snow angels" !

I hopped out of the hot tub, ran barefoot across the snow covered deck and down the stairs into the yard.

I plopped my hot body down onto the snow and made a snow angel.

When I stood up, the snow angel glistened in the moonlight as it froze in the cold air.

As I ran back into the hot tub, the kids all piled out into the yard... snow angels began appearing everywhere as we laughed and ran in and out of the yard and hot tub.

Finally, when the hot tub cooled and our lips became a bit blue, we hurried into the house for showers and PJs.

The next morning, as I stood in the living room with a cup of coffee in my hand, I gazed out across the yard.

The specter was ethereal... countless snow angels surrounding the one in the middle made by the Pilot's daughter.

I don't personally believe in angels or the hereafter, but the sight on my snow covered lawn was enough to give me pause for thought.

Later that day, my family members began packing up for the trip back to "real life".

As my brother and his family were leaving, the Pilot's daughter ran up to me, threw her arms around my waist and asked... "Auntie Sue, can I come visit again?"

I hugged her with all my might and said "yes I would love to see you gain".

My purpose in telling this story has nothing to do with me or what I did for this child.

It has everything to do with simply “doing the best you can when faced with unexpected and difficult circumstances”.

No one expects or requests perfection.

All anyone wants or needs is “help”, compassion... or a shoulder.

All that you need to do - is to try your best in whatever way you can.

It doesn't make any difference what the circumstances are... good, bad, or indifferent.

Just accepting the “spot” you find yourself in and then doing something useful... letting someone in need know that you support them and/or help them... means more than can be imagined.

And the intangible reward “for being there” is the icing on the cake of our lives.

I will always remember and cherish the picture in my mind of the snow angels surrounding the Pilot's daughter on my lawn.

This memory is and will always be, a bit of icing from the cake of my life.

My story has a post script...

I never saw the Pilot's daughter again.

The Pilot's widow sold her family's home and moved away to be nearer to her parents and siblings.

My niece did keep in touch with her childhood friend and told me that the Pilot's widow had remarried some years later, the 2 children had graduated college, and the daughter was now married herself with a baby on the way.

And so ends my message.