

Bearing Witness

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscape.

—Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese”

Mary Rowland



ON SEPTEMBER 12, FIRST LADY Laura Bush sent a letter to schoolchildren across the country, urging them to turn to family, teachers, and school counselors to talk about the distress and fear they felt after the attacks of September 11. It was a short, eloquent letter, a small attempt to find the words to help them cope with events too large and too frightening to take in.

Advisers I speak to are facing a similar challenge, looking for ways to help their clients fill the hole left by this tragedy and address the fear of what will happen next. One planner asked, “What do I say to clients trying to plan their lives when we know it’s not safe to travel around our country or even safe to sleep in our beds?” Words fail us. But maybe words are not what’s required right now. One of the things financial advisers do best is listen. And that—more than anything else—may be what clients need.

Everywhere I’ve gone since September 11, people tell me over and over again where they were that morning and how they first heard about the attack on the World Trade Center. They want to describe how they processed what happened. They need someone to hear their stories and bear witness to what the tragedy means in their lives and how it has changed them. An adviser can be that witness.

My own experience that day surely echoes what many

others describe. My husband and I rarely travel together—when he was a child, a friend of his was orphaned when both parents were killed in the same plane crash—but we had each scheduled early meetings for September 11 in New York. September is a busy time, and New York is just a train ride away. Surely an average business day needn’t require such precaution.

The day started out routinely enough. My husband packed lunches and made breakfast for the kids and took care of the dogs. Without

bothering to tell the kids where we would be or that we’d be home any later than usual, we took the train together, arrived in New York at 8:40 a.m., and set off in different directions, not feeling the need to exchange schedules. I was in a bookstore when I heard that the first plane had hit the World Trade Center. I stepped outside and saw smoke rolling across Fifth Avenue. By the time I got to my first appointment, the Pentagon had already been hit. I didn’t have a cell phone with me. I tried to call a neighbor at home but couldn’t get a line on the public phone.

And so it goes. Financial advisers have heard hundreds of stories like this. Misses and near misses. No one ever expects a tragedy. As I walked around New York that day, I thought about the book that was sitting on my desk at home:

You can help your clients find hope again. But it won't have much to do with whether they have a well-diversified portfolio

The Beneficiary Book: A Family Information Organizer (Active Insights), by Martin Kuritz. It's a wonderful book that provides forms for you to list all your crucial information, from your life insurance policies to your stock portfolios to your pet's vaccination records to where the gas meter and car title are located. I never got around to filling mine out.

Updating records is an essential step. And advisers will find clients more willing now to get things in order. But it's going to take more than organizational skills to face what appears to be ahead of us. I fear that my generation, the baby boomers, has not developed the kinds of resources needed to deal with the events of September 11. When I compare myself with the folks in Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation* (Dell)—the generation that lived through the Great Depression and fought World War II—I don't come away feeling confident.

More than once I've asked my mother how she could have lived in places without electricity and plumbing. How could she have traveled around from place to place looking for work without even enough money to buy groceries? "I guess we didn't expect so much," she said.

My husband's parents married in December 1943, when his father was on a weekend leave from the Army Air Corps. He then flew to Europe, where he was the navigator on a B-24 bomber. My mother-in-law waited for him to return, knowing that there was a good chance he never would. Viewed in relation to my parents and their friends, people like me seem a bit narcissistic and self-absorbed and maybe even a bit too focused on our stock portfolios.

Where does one find the strength to face that kind of uncertainty? I recall an article I read in a yoga magazine years ago that offered 10 ways to relax. The last was "Be prepared to die." Although I recognized the wisdom of it, I didn't find it all that relaxing at the time. I see it differently now.

In New York that day, when I considered the families whose lives had been toppled, I thought about whether I was ready to die. I hadn't filled out the forms in my *Beneficiary Book*, so I wasn't ready in that sense. My death would have been an extra burden on my survivors because I'd procrastinated. But in coming to terms with the loose ends that make up a self, there are things I have made time for. To be ready to die, you must be at one with yourself—to feel that you've given it your best shot, that you have no regrets, that you've left no one cut to the quick by your sharp words, that there's no greed or envy gnawing at your insides, no turmoil there

either. That's a tall order. But it's something you can help clients deal with just by listening to them if they need to talk. You can help them raise the hard questions.

Like the one raised in Hermann Hesse's book *Narcissus and Goldmund*. A peasant girl who's lost so many of her friends and loved ones to the plague asks Goldmund, "How can one be happy when one knows that soon all will be finished and over with?" It's the eternal question. And it's the same one being raised in the on-line newsgroups I monitor and in the conversations I've had with friends. People want to talk about finding hope: "I was just starting to conquer my despair," explains a woman who has survived breast cancer. "How will I ever be able to hope again?"

We can find hope again. And you can help your clients find it. But it won't have much to do with whether you—or your clients—have a well-diversified portfolio. Indeed, perhaps some of us have focused too much of our energy on financial concerns at the expense of developing the strength of character that's called for in times like these.

My colleague at MSN MoneyCentral, Tim Middleton, a mutual fund columnist, reminded me of what Alfred Lord Tennyson had to say on this subject in "Ulysses":

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.

For many of us, I suspect the events of September 11 will become a starting place, the beginning of a search. We will look back on it some day and say, That is the day when I changed. That is the day when I took the first steps toward becoming a better person.

Too bad there is no easy recipe for completing that process. It will take some work. It will take some time. Still, it is a journey that needs only a starting point. Why not this one?

Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.

Mary Rowland is the author of Best Practices for Financial Advisors (Bloomberg Press). She speaks regularly to financial advisers on issues of practice management.