



Tragedy, Recovery and Hope

September 11, 2001, was a day none of us will ever forget.

I had intended to focus in this column on the benefits of support groups for people with limb loss; however, the events of September 11 changed the focus for so many of us in so many ways. But I still would like to discuss ways we support each other, and the possibilities of good that may come out of this terrible tragedy.

During the heinous events in New York City and Washington, D.C., we saw the worst and the best in ourselves. We witnessed in horror as lives were shattered, then watched with pride as people at the scenes and across the globe came together to help others.

Throughout history, the worst elements of human nature have brought out the best and most noble aspects of human response. Physician, author and philosopher Paul Brand wrote of Londoners during the Battle of Britain in World War II: "Against a grim background of hardship and deprivation there came to light new resources of sharing and courage and interdependence that brought unexpected pleasure and even joy."

And now, in a new century and a new millennium when we are confronted with dark and devastating rages as old as our species, we see again the spirit

of goodness and togetherness that gives our humanity uniqueness. Evil tore our lives apart, but a spirit of greater good holds us together. On September 11, we all suffered a devastating loss. Thousands lost their lives or suffered injuries no person should ever have to endure. And hundreds of millions of us had our sense of well-being ripped away. But in the aftermath of those horrible events, we found ourselves supporting each other in the ways so many people instinctively know how to do. These actions enrich our spirit.

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We hear much talk these days about measures taken to increase our security. Improved airline security is frequently mentioned, which is good, but it does raise serious concerns about impositions on those traveling with prosthetic devices or wheelchairs. Fortunately, people involved in

transportation and security issues seem to be mindful of putting together security measures that take into account the needs of all travelers. Former U.S. Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater says, "When it comes to safety and security, we have to be eternally vigilant. But we have to ensure that service is inclusive and that no one is left behind."

The Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) is an organization devoted to people with limb loss and related issues.

The ACA is made up of individual amputees, support groups, limb loss professionals, educators, and families and friends of amputees. Among the many services available through the ACA is the National Limb Loss Information Center (NLLIC), an information clearinghouse providing comprehensive resources for people with limb loss, their families and friends, and healthcare professionals. The ACA also offers courses to educate healthcare providers on the most up-to-date amputation techniques, physical and emotional rehabilitation, and prosthetic issues for both civilians and noncivilians.

In expressing deep shock and sorrow over the events of September 11, the ACA pledged to make available to New York hospitals information regarding services for amputees to be given to those who suffered limb loss during the

tragedy, said John Miller, ACA president and CEO.

Sadly, it is historically true that in times of tragedy and war, people are killed and many others are devastated by limb loss. Equally true is that, historically, some of the greatest improvements in methods to help people cope with pain and limb loss occur during these times. Healthcare workers team up with engineers and scientists to advance technology that helps people recover and return to active and fulfilling lives. The worst things that happen during the course of human events have, time and again, brought out the best in us. This includes innovative advances in surgical techniques, rehabilitation and prosthetic devices. In mobilizing for war, attention must be paid to planning for the rehabilitation and high-level care of those injured in the service of their nation. They deserve nothing less!

Recent history helps illustrate how we are shocked and horrified by attacks on our safety and well-being. Pearl Harbor, the Oklahoma City bombing, product tampering, and now the attacks of September 11 come immediately to mind. But recent history also helps illustrate our abilities to work together and make improvements. We saw the World Trade Center towers attacked and come crashing down. We saw devastation at the Pentagon. But we also saw rescue crews working around the clock for days without rest, helping out in any and every way they could. We saw healthcare providers set up makeshift hospitals at the scene to immediately treat the injured. We saw people from all walks of society stop what they were doing to go to the aid of strangers.

Fortunately, the vast majority of individuals find the magical and magnificent inner strength to rise above adversity. My personal struggle is to assist the few who cannot do this. The reaction to amputation is not always proportional to the extent of limb loss. While we marvel at a hip level amputee overcoming this huge loss, I have witnessed one individual's life totally unravel following the amputation of a great toe. We must strive to understand, assist and motivate the few who do not instinctively rise above their loss. We need to support and work to help all individuals conquer adversity and injury.

As people, we are both vulnerable and wonderfully strong. One of our strengths is our togetherness. And when we pull together, there is hope. ■