

We must find inner peace in troubled world

By AMY E. TUCKER, Special to the Times Union
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My brother is flying from Austin, Texas, to Albany today for Christmas, and I can't help but feel a twinge of trepidation.

When I reminded him last week that Dec. 21 is the 18th anniversary of the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, he took pause, remembering that I lost my good friend Steve Boland that night.

"I forgot," he said simply. Then he assured me that the terrorists would never target Jet Blue airlines.

As usual, his wry humor failed to placate me. But what really bothered me wasn't his determination to fly today. It was the thought that he could have forgotten something that changed my life forever.

Americans aren't just desensitized by the media; we're selective about what events we choose to remember -- and when. We're big on celebrating anniversaries of significant events, but the nonmilestone years get lost in the shuffle of our busy day-to-day lives.

Every day, civilians are dying in suicide bombings, the war in Iraq and global catastrophes like the earthquake and tsunami in Southeast Asia. People die, and life moves on.

Remember after 9/11 when you were embarrassed to drive down the street without a flag on your car? Where is that flag now? A few cars still sport faded magnetic ribbons. But individuals who weren't personally affected by the tragedy have gone back to their routines.

More than a year after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the South, New Orleans and surrounding towns are struggling to rebuild. The world has moved on; next story, please.

Steve, who came from Nashua, N.H., was only 20; most of this year's high school seniors weren't even born when he died. Like others on the plane, including several from the Capital Region, he was returning home for the holidays from a semester abroad in England where he indulged his passion for the Beatles, visiting Penny Lane and Abbey Road.

Steve worked for me in the bookstore at Syracuse University, where I was also a part-time student. We became fast friends and I took him under my wing, screening his choice of coeds and advising him on the nuances and intricacies of college life and life in general. I had only known him for a year, but he was one of those good souls who leave a lasting impression on everyone they meet.

He did not deserve to be blown from the sky, to plummet 13,000 feet to the frozen, unyielding earth. And he deserves more than to have his life remembered every fifth year in some commemorative ceremony.

Every generation has its "I remember where I was when ..." moment. From the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 to the Challenger explosion in 1986, the murder of John Lennon in 1980 to the terrorist bombings on Sept. 11, 2001.

Though 9/11 wasn't the beginning of terrorist activity, it gave the United States a wake-up call about what countries around the world experience every day. Americans are not immune and insulated in safe, cellophane bubblelike existences with our iPods and BlackBerrys.

The motto of the French Canadians of Quebec is, "Je me souviens" -- "I remember." Though the significance of the motto is often disputed, at least they remember not to forget. It's a lesson that would serve us well.

I had transferred to the University of Miami in the fall of 1988. I remember where I was when I received the call that Steve's plane went down. I remember watching the news, hoping he was one of the lucky few who had missed that flight, or had booked a later plane. And I remember receiving his final letter in the mail the week after he died.

That was my worst Christmas. Every Christmas since has been ushered in with a bit of sadness, reflecting on the unnecessary loss of life.

It took 11 years, four months and 13 days to convene a trial in the neutral venue of Camp Zeist, Netherlands, for the two Libyans accused of the bombing. The Scottish High Court of Justiciary found Al Amin Khalifa Fhimah not guilty of murder or conspiracy to murder on Jan. 31, 2001. Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed al-Megrahi has served five years of a life sentence, and will be eligible for parole in 15 years.

If paroled then, he will have served one year for each year of life he stole from my friend. That's equity, not justice.

And his was only one of the 270 lives lost that day in 1988, including 11 civilians on the ground. There would never be enough ink

to tell you about Steve's life.

It's not about Steve, or terrorism or our presence in Iraq. It's about you and me, and the realization that in a world that refuses to make peace with itself, we have to find peace within ourselves.

I guess my solace will come when I finally visit Lockerbie. It's something I have to do for me -- maybe to mark the 20th anniversary of his death.

Amy E. Tucker has been writing for local and national publications for more than a decade. Her e-mail address is imask8r2@hotmail.com.

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