

*Dear Readers,*

*One of my 12 – yes, TWELVE – nephews sent me a letter recently about his morning flight on September 11<sup>th</sup> this year. I asked him if I could publish it, and he said yes. Here's his very encouraging letter -- for which I am very grateful.*

*Thanks Chet.*

*(Your Uncle)*

*Editor and Publisher*

## **I Flew in the Morning**

© 2002 Chukwudi–Chet Anekwe

When I booked the flight it didn't even strike me that I was going to be flying on September 11th, the one year anniversary of when life, here in America, changed forever. My brother was getting married on Saturday September 14th, in Newark NJ, just 11 miles from New York City. My company had directed its employees to take a mandatory 5 day vacation before September 30th. I had already taken 2 days and needed to take 3 more days of vacation before the end of the month. Why go to NJ for a long weekend? Leave on Wednesday and come back on Sunday. Wednesday, September 11, 2002.

It was one week before my trip when I realized the day I would be flying was 9/11. I told my wife. She asked if I could change my flight. I didn't think I could without incurring additional cost which we really didn't want. But as quickly as she asked is as quickly as we decided that I should fly that day. I had confidence that I will be safe. My wife and I grew up in New York City, she, in Brooklyn and I, in Queens. We met each other in lower Manhattan. We had our wedding ceremony in Brooklyn, even though we had already moved to Atlanta one year prior. No matter where we live, we are and will always be New Yorkers.

The event of 9/11 hit us very hard. I had worked in Jersey City for 8 years and my wife, 2 blocks from the Trade Towers. When we lived in Brooklyn we took the #4 train to the Wall Street stop where we would both get off and I'd walk her to work, before entering the towers to take the path train across the Hudson. My stop was the first stop in Jersey City, Exchange Place. We had lunched in the Borders bookshop in tower 1. We had shopped at the GAP, Sunglasses Hut and Sam Goody's stores all in the concourse underneath the towers, everyday. That place was and still is part of my life. After the second plane hit, I rushed to get my children from their school, I wanted them home. My son was right behind me when we walked back into the house to see tower 2 fall. I fell. On my knees where I openly cried. My son, Najir, one week to his 8th birthday, hugged me and asked why I was crying. The pain was unbearable. Now here I am, flying on the one year anniversary.

Hartsfield Atlanta airport was empty. My wife, with kids in tow, drove me to the airport. I had originally wanted to take the Atlanta's Marta transit to the airport so I won't make the kids late for school. When I suggested it, my niece, Abie, overheard and said "Nooo! We want to come and see you off". I looked her pretty smiling face and knew she was right. Today of all days is the day you should spend every moment you can with your family. At the airport I kissed my family and said goodbye as I noticed all the TV news trucks in the distance. Checking in at the Airtran ticket counter, the attendant told me that "We are a little light today. So you can sit anywhere you would like", she then offered me a whole row.

The terminal was empty and calm. Boarding attendants playfully joked at how light the passenger count was. People's minds were heavy but focused on their present tasks. All rows were boarded at the same time. There was no need for staggered boarding. When I got into the aircraft, I began heading row 12, seat D, when a flight attendant stopped and told me to take seat upfront in business class. I turned around and went and sat in the very first row by the window. Only 9 other passengers joined me on the flight. Flt 580, departing 8:15 A.M. from Atlanta to Newark had only 10 passengers.

We were offered drinks when the captain came out to address us personally. He thanked us for our courage for flying today. He then informed us that the FAA had ordered that all passengers remain seated for the last 30 minutes of the flight into Newark. Any violation of this would force the crew to contact the authorities immediately. He informed us that flights leaving the NY/NJ area from Newark, LaGuardia or JFK had to make sure all passengers remained seated for 30 minutes into the flight. The rule was for today only. The 10 passengers, all in business class, settled in for our flight.

You could see that everyone's mind was full, our hearts heavy and our spirits were struggling. I pulled out the 9/11 edition of Newsweek that I had brought with me. I started to read some of the stories of heroism, challenges and struggles, the survivor, and the rest of the country have been dealing with. Many times, I fought back tears. I felt proud that I decided to wear my NYPD tee shirt and FDNY baseball cap.

About 30 minutes into the flight the captain's voice came over the speaker. He told us that the time was 8:46 A.M. At this time, exactly one year ago, the first plane had struck. He asked for a moment of silence for those lost in the tragedy. Funny thing was the cabin was already silent. No-one had been talking. There was something missing. The giddiness people get when they get something for free. The talkative nature of people, who collectively have received some unexpected fortune, like a business class upgrade, was not there. The Captain then thanked us again for our bravery to fly with them today and the courage to show that we will continue our way of life. Then I realized why we were so quiet, guilt. Guilty that we are now considered brave when the true brave ones had flown this day, this time, one year ago. A lump welled up in my throat. A jumble of emotion wrestled inside of me. Anger, sadness, resolve, reflection, determination and fear all resided in the same space of my psyche.

How do we reconcile the events we witnessed one year ago? How does one do that? Does one ever reconcile a profound paradigm shift in the way we live and see our lives? Is that ever really done? I have changed deeply. Being a Muslim I try and find a way to reconcile that this heinous act was done by people who called themselves Muslims. These are the same people that bombed my continent, Africa, when they plotted and blew up the American Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing many Americans and hundreds of Africans. They have attacked and defiled my two homes and worst of all, my religion.

Islam means peace. Yet will I, will we, ever truly find peace in a world that creates people like Osama Bin Laden and Timothy McViegh? I pray we do.

May peace find you in the place it matters most, the heart.

Chukwudi-Chet Anekwe , Atlanta, GA. 09.11.2002