

The William and Mary Vigil
September 11, 2001
President Timothy J. Sullivan

I am grateful that you have come. I am deeply, deeply sorry for the reason you have come.

A week ago, we met here in sunshine and in joy—we met to celebrate the beginning of a new year and to welcome the newest members of this special community.

We gather now in darkness and in sorrow—in the midst of a great national tragedy we do not yet understand—to affirm—despite our anguish and confusion—to affirm that we are a community that cannot be sundered—that we are a country that cannot be broken.

We—here in this place—sacred to us all—proclaim our unity—assert our determination—claim our birthright—all to the end—that those who live in darkness and abide with evil—will regret the day they challenged the integrity of American values and provoked the righteous wrath of the American nation.

This day—and none who live through it will ever forget it—this is a day to be remembered most of all as a day of personal tragedy. We know that thousands have died. We know that thousands more mourn the loss of those they loved—or suffer in the agony of uncertainty about their fate. We long to help them—to heal them all—to give them comfort beyond our power to give. It is up to everyone of us—in the days and weeks and months ahead—to find ways to provide what help we can in whatever way we can. This is our duty—and not just our duty—but the privileged obligation we owe to all who share the honor of living in this great nation.

We are right to think first of personal loss—of the unimaginable tragedy of thousands of innocent and violent deaths. But we must remember—not just the tragic fate of those who died—but the evil which caused this unspeakable tragedy. A just world will never come if the good and decent define their duty solely in terms of comforting the innocent. Evil is unmoved by kind hearts and good intentions. Evil delights in the doubts of the righteous. To leave unmolested those who believe in a divine right to violence is to assure that today's tragedy will be repeated.

We must hope—and pray—that our leaders have the courage and the wisdom—not to seek revenge—but justice—not to unleash pointless violence—but to make the indulgence of evil too painful even for the evildoers to contemplate. This is the obligation that all of us—not just our leaders—owe to those who made this country great. This is the duty that honor—our honor—owes to the memory of those in whose shadow we gather—and whose example teaches so powerfully—that we have nothing to fear in fighting for our freedom.