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Remarks at program of remembrance for victims of September 11, 2001

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Speeches

Remarks at Program of Remembrance Sept. 20, 2001 Matthews Arena

Before I begin, I would like to thank the people who put this memorial program together on such short notice. First, the offices of university relations, building services and information services, as well as members of the president's and provost's offices. I'd like to give special thanks to professor Judith Tick and our soloist, Tisha Stadnecki, for our wonderful music today; to Mercedes Molina, our senior theater major who will be doing the reading; and to the Northeastern University ROTC Color Guard for their participation. I'd also like to specially thank Michael Woodnick of the Office of Spiritual Life and Ed Hattauer from the Center for Counseling and Student Development for their work on this program and over the past week to provide counseling and support to our students, faculty and staff. And finally, my thanks to all of you for being here and supporting each other with your presence.

Nine days have passed since the catastrophic events in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania that we have come together to remember. We have, each in our own way, been struggling to come to terms with an occurrence of immense and terrible proportions. Some have sought solace in religious observances, while others have turned to family and loved ones for comfort. Some have been stirred by patriotism and have focused on response and reprisal, while others have feared the consequences of military action. Still others have kept their own counsel, not certain what to think or feel and seeking in each day's news some new insight that will suggest an

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appropriate response. Most of us feel a combination of all these sentiments. So we gather today as an institutional community to seek together a means to properly register the cataclysmic events we have all witnessed.

We do have terrible things to remember. We know that thousands of our fellow citizens have died in one of the most tragic and barbaric episodes in our nation's history. We know that the victims were ordinary people, going about their daily work, on a flight, passing by on the street or coming to the aid of those in need. We here at Northeastern know that students and alumni died, and relatives and friends of members of this community died, and we will remember these individuals in the course of today's gathering. So above all, we mourn the human tragedy of it all, and our spirits are burdened by a vast and numbing sadness over the loss of innocent life.

We also have quite specific emotions as Americans. We know that some as yet unidentified entity, apparently motivated by hatred of our society, carefully planned this act of mass murder. We know that any one of us could have been a victim, and we feel a powerful connection with the dead and the damaged and with the incident itself. Those feelings are heightened as we observe our fellow citizens coping with the consequences of terrorism: the greatest city in our country partially immobilized; businesses of many kinds threatened with bankruptcy; transportation systems weakened; and fellow citizens stranded far from home. And, of course, our nation placed on military alert with many, including members of this community, facing involvement in a military action. A deep sense of anger and shared nationhood matches our feelings of tragedy and loss.

We are conscious too that what we do not know is greater than what we currently understand. We wait for news of additional losses. We wait for knowledge of why this happened and who were the perpetrators. We fear that there are killers still among us, and that there will be further acts of violence. We wonder what response we will or should make as a nation and what will be the consequences of our actions. We have the sickening sense that life will not be the same in America for a very long time, but we are uncertain about the changes we shall have to face. Apprehension, confusion, fear of what lies ahead weigh on us.

As we wrestle with all these feelings, we are beset by the tug of our daily responsibilities. The new quarter is beginning. There are classes to be taught and taken. The business of the institution — like the work of the nation — needs somehow to continue. Yet we feel ambivalent, not quite able or willing to turn away from the events of nine days ago, yet not able to suspend all life as we await resolution and solace. We wonder about the appropriateness of moving on, even as we know that we will be living with the consequences of last week's events for many months and almost certainly many years.

I feel all of these emotions. Yet I also know that I am an educator, and I believe as deeply as I believe anything that the work we do is the best answer the world has conceived to the reign of death and destruction that occurred last week. For such actions are nurtured by ignorance, by bias, by lack of understanding, by hatred born of isolation, and the best antidotes for these conditions are education and scholarship. We should not be naïve. Knowledge will never solve all the world's problems, and international tensions arise from true conflicts of interest as well as lack of understanding. But in a dangerous and often violent world, enlightenment remains the greatest force for peace we have yet discovered. Therefore as we turn our attention to the work of the year, we can know that we are addressing the underlying conditions that so often produce the kinds of horrors we witnessed last week.

It is because of our unique role and responsibility as educators that we welcome students, faculty and staff of all backgrounds and place so much emphasis on mutual understanding, tolerance and reasoned discussion of differences. We cannot bring back the lives that have been lost or undo the events that have occurred, and we cannot prevent events yet to come that may flow out of these episodes. But we can know, as we grapple with the feelings and losses that currently command our attention, that we are laying the groundwork for a better and safer and more compassionate world, and we can make sure that our own community continues to reflect the values that must be sustained if we are to have any hope of seeing that world realized.

So we have important work to do. I wish to thank the members of our staff and administration for your efforts

during the last nine days — even while coping with your own losses — to ensure that our students arrived here and moved into the residence halls safely and securely. I thank also the members of our faculty for all you have done to be ready for this opening day of classes. In the days to come, through your words and actions, you will be demonstrating to our students, and reminding the rest of us, that the free exchange of ideas and respect for diverse perspectives are the foundations of democratic civilization.

Finally, a word to our students. It has long been said that Northeastern is a place where young men and women come to prepare for the responsibilities of the world that lie beyond the university. Last week's events have brought the outside world into your lives prematurely, and given you a special burden to bear for as students in your dealings with each other and with our community more broadly, you shall play crucial roles in helping us protect the values of tolerance and mutual respect that are the cornerstones of our society. I have great confidence that you will live up to this challenge.

So we are here to remember, but we are here to move forward also. We are here to acknowledge our apprehensions and share our losses, but we are here to shoulder our responsibilities with a renewed sense of common purpose. We must remember and mourn, but we must also affirm our belief in the civilizing force of education. Let us be together in our sadness. And let us join together in our vital work.

Thank you.