

TIMING IS EVERYTHING, BUT WHO HAS THE CLOCK?

MY NAME IS LISA D. JEFFERSON. You may have seen my face on network television, recounting an experience that has forever changed my heart and my once-quiet existence. You may have seen the experience—and me—portrayed on film, both in the theater and on television.

I was the Verizon Airfone supervisor who spent an incredible fifteen-minute audio journey with Todd Beamer, one of the heroes of United Airlines Flight 93. For those fifteen minutes, that telephone on the back of the airplane seat was literally a lifeline for him, as he used the last

moments of his life to put himself before others, to fight for the preservation of America's liberty.

And those fifteen minutes changed me forever.

TODD BEAMER WAS KILLED when Flight 93 plunged into the ground in an abandoned strip mine in out-of-the-way Shanksville, Pennsylvania. In fact, there were no survivors. All seven crew members and thirty-three passengers perished—and they were all heroes.

I was there, at least in spirit. I could hear the cries and screams for help in the background, as Todd Beamer painted in vivid detail the occurrences aboard the plane on that awful day. I've accepted the fact that I'll never be the same. I've been interviewed more times than I can recall . . . radio, television, and print. I've consulted on movies and now, as the last surviving "voice of Flight 93," have been asked to assist in fund-raising efforts for a permanent memorial to honor those who fought for their country.

When I was first approached about writing a book chronicling my experience, I felt sure it was an

unnecessary venture. I mean, what could I possibly say that I hadn't said before? It wasn't until I realized, through the wisdom of my church, as well as family and friends, that God had given me a compelling message.

An experience this deep and profound *should* be shared. My life has changed, and when you read this book and see September 11th through my eyes, your life may change as well. There are many facets of this national tragedy that will be examined for decades to come. This is my story, and this is the message I believe God wants to share with you, based on my experience.

IT WAS A TUESDAY MORNING. It started the way any other weekday morning would for me. I went to bed at a normal hour the night before, to ensure I would get plenty of sleep. I got up around 5:15 a.m. in our home in suburban Chicago. I'd packed the kids' lunches the night before. My son Warren was six at the time, and my daughter Lonye' was eight. They're pretty good about getting themselves dressed and in school mode, but preparing their

lunches ahead always helps me glide through the morning routine, with one less task to perform.

The kids take a bus to school, and my mother was there to see them off. As usual, I left the house at around 6 a.m. At that time, I'd been a supervisor with Verizon Airfone (formerly known as GTE Airfone) in Oak Brook, Illinois, for the past seventeen years. I started at Airfone in 1984 and was there when the first phone was installed on an airplane. After six months I was promoted to team leader, and after another six months I became a supervisor. It felt like a good, secure company with opportunity to advance.

It was also where I met my husband, Warren. We were both city natives, he from the West Side of Chicago and I from the South Side. I was attracted to his can-do, take-charge kind of attitude—an attitude I would find myself relying on not only in the difficult post-9/11 days but throughout our marriage and in our parenting. Warren's the kind of man who steps up wherever he's needed, helping around the house and with the kids. He now owns his own property redevelopment business, but at the

time he was a senior program manager for Verizon Airfone. Some mornings, we'd drive to work together, but on this day I went solo.

As I negotiated the early morning traffic on the Tri-State Tollway, radio on, sun shining, I felt at peace with my life. My children were healthy and happy; both my husband and I had good jobs; I was blessed with close friends and a loving extended family. Oh, it wasn't perfect—but it was *settled*.

I pulled into the parking lot at 6:45 a.m. Verizon Airfone is housed within a huge and beautiful corporate campus composed of seven tan brick office buildings, all with tinted glass. My particular building has three floors overlooking lush landscaping. Trees shade well-manicured lawns. There's even a pond, inhabited by two white swans, as well as mallards, and snowy egrets. It's really something to see. As I crossed the



As I crossed the parking lot almost without thinking, I of course was completely unaware that my tranquil, settled, everyday-Tuesday state of mind would be dramatically interrupted in less than two hours.

parking lot almost without thinking, I of course was completely unaware that my tranquil, settled, every-day-Tuesday state of mind would be dramatically interrupted in less than two hours.

I even remember what I wore that day: a black print skirt and matching top. I hadn't had a chance to grab breakfast at home. After taking the stairs to the second floor, I walked down the long corridor to my office, which looks out over tan, blue, and gray wraparound workstations. Each station has a computer and more telephones than a Jerry Lewis telethon.

There are file cabinets positioned on the sides of each desk. And we all share a host of printers and fax machines. I'd just settled in and reached for a banana I'd planned to eat with my instant oatmeal. I got a little distracted by some paperwork on my desk that needed tending to, so I put breakfast on hold.

My office was actually *in* the Verizon Airfone Call Center. There is a window inside that allows me to see all of the workstations. After a couple of

hours of work, I walked outside my office to join a few other employees fixated on the radio news reports in the Call Center. I wanted to know what had suddenly captured everyone's attention. I was abruptly stopped by a Verizon Airfone representative under my authority. She was already on the job, wearing her headset and obviously talking to someone.

A call for help had come in at 8:45 a.m. central daylight time, answered by the Airfone rep, who beckoned frantically for me.

“Lisa!” she said with urgency, adjusting her headset. I was at her side in seconds. She was clearly traumatized.

“Oh my gosh!” said the representative. “You’re for real, aren’t you?” In just a few moments, I would learn that the person on the line was Todd Beamer. He was telling the representative that United Airlines Flight 93,



*“Lisa!” she said
with urgency,
adjusting her
headset. I was at
her side in seconds.
She was clearly
traumatized.*

bound for San Francisco from Newark, had been hijacked.

You may recall that in the aftermath of the World Trade Center disaster, there were reports that many of those who perished on the two planes that sliced through the towers were able to call their loved ones using cell phones. That was only possible because those planes were flying at a low altitude. But that was not the case with United Airlines Flight 93. The passengers aboard that plane made calls, some using the Airfones located in the back of the seats—and many of them called home. Todd Beamer was the exception, and his call came directly through to the Verizon Airfone Call Center. He simply dialed “0” from the phone nestled in the back of the headrest on the seat in front of him.

I’VE ALWAYS BEEN what some might call “reserved.” Those who know me say I don’t excite easily. The only time I remember really falling apart was when our daughter, Lonye’, was two. She had been born with a cyst on her brain, and when she was two she found her way through a guard gate

I had left open. She fell, hit her head on the floor, and was unconscious. I blamed myself for not locking the gate, and I lost it.

She had surgery when she was six, and now she's fine. Looking back, I wonder if that trauma was, in a sense, preparation for what God was going to send my way that Tuesday morning.

THERE ARE PROCEDURES we follow in the event of an emergency. The first thing we needed to ascertain was the flight information, the name of the airline, and the routing of the plane. All that we learned would be turned over to the Airfone Operations Surveillance Center (AOSC) for processing. The Surveillance Center is responsible for contacting the authorities in emergencies. (I later discovered that when the AOSC called the local 911 operator to report the incident that the operator's name was Lisa.)

Initially, the Airfone rep was able to give me basic flight information as she muted her phone, while speaking with the caller. I tried to contact the

Surveillance Center on another phone, but when there was no answer, I ran over to the AOSC next door. Time was at a premium. I knew lives were probably at stake, so I had to act quickly.

Having memorized the flight numbers, I informed officials that a United Airlines plane had been hijacked, and then I returned to the representative in the Call Center. There she sat, completely frozen. I realized this call was more than she could handle, but I wasn't certain I was prepared to handle it either. As a supervisor I had not spoken directly to a customer in nearly two years. Furthermore, our department had no prior training for *this* type of emergency. There was no protocol, no corporate manual to use for guidance. I had to rely on my own wisdom. I spoke calmly to the Airfone rep.

“I'll finish the call; you can move to another station.”

I sat down in the tan cloth chair, not realizing I'd be riveted there for the next hour. I gazed down briefly at the gray, tan, blue, and mauve speckled carpeting as I put her headset on. I took a deep breath.

“Hello, my name is Mrs. Jefferson. I understand your plane is being hijacked?”

“Yes,” the man said, quite calmly.

“Can you explain to me in detail exactly what’s taking place?”

The caller began to honor the request, but his voice was devoid of any stress. In fact, he sounded so tranquil it made me begin to doubt the authenticity and urgency of his call. The Call Center had never had a hijacking reported. We’ve had our share of scares, like bomb threats (none of them legitimate), and passengers becoming ill on the plane. Generally, the Call Center gets bombarded with inquisitive customers or children playing with the phones.

While I spoke with the caller, I watched a monitor that showed me the airline, the time, and information confirming that the plane was still in flight. This was real. The more the caller spoke, the more I realized the



The more the caller spoke, the more I realized the gravity of the situation he and his fellow passengers were facing.

gravity of the situation he and his fellow passengers were facing.

“Three people have hijacked the plane. Two have taken over the cockpit, and they’re flying the plane,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

I was concentrating so deeply that I hardly noticed that my colleagues in the Call Center had begun to gather around my station. I could hear intermittent conversations: Someone in the background said, “These are suicide attempts—they are intentionally taking those planes down!” It was then that I learned that two planes had actually felled the World Trade Center Towers, but I remained intensely focused on one voice—that of the man on the phone.

I knew that Flight 93 could be in real trouble, but at this juncture I had no idea the hijacking incidents were tragically and inextricably linked, part of a terrible plot. (Interestingly, it has since been suggested that Zacarias Moussaoui, recently on trial for his role in the 9/11 attacks, was originally supposed to be one of the hijackers on Flight 93.)

My colleagues could not hear the man speaking with me. They could only hear my responses to him and my inquiries. The man continued to describe his surroundings.

A note was then handed to me by someone. The FBI wanted me to try to determine if the caller could figure out the nationality of the hijackers. I never got a chance to ask that question, because *the caller* was providing a steady stream of other vital information. I didn't want to carelessly cut him off, break his focus, and possibly make him nervous.

“Two of the three people taking over the plane have knives. They've locked themselves into the cockpit,” he said. It was later determined there were actually four hijackers. Later, when I was asked to testify at the Moussaoui trial, the number of the hijackers was a vital piece of information the government sought.

“One of them has what looks like a bomb strapped to his waist, with a red belt. He's standing in First Class. They've ordered everyone to sit down.”

My breathing grew rapid, but I tried to remain calm. I felt as if I were having an out-of-body experience. I felt ill . . . sickened by what I was hearing. I didn't want to be there; I wished someone else could take over. But my voice never reflected that. I knew this was not a fantasy or a dream, but it was almost as if time slowed—and I was trying to respond to this crisis in real time. The caller continued.

“The flight attendants were standing. The hijackers ordered them to sit, and one just happened to sit next to me. That's how I'm getting my information.”

I wrote as he spoke. I wanted to make sure the notes I passed on to the Call Center were accurate and timely. Those notes would later be examined by the authorities. (I had not had a chance to press the switch in my office that initiates the taping of a conversation.)

“There are two people lying on the floor in First Class. I think they're hurt,” he said, his voice remaining even.

I then asked him if he could tell me anything more about the people lying on the floor of the plane.

“I can’t tell if they’re dead or alive. The flight attendant next to me says it’s the pilot and the co-pilot.”

It was then that a fear rose up in me such as I’d never known before. I prayed silently in my mind and heart, not really knowing what to ask God. I felt as though my faith was on the line, and I was compelled to remain steadfast and unmovable. I realized, with a dread certainty, that this hijacking was linked to the tragedy in New York.

The caller told me that the terrorist standing in the aisle had pulled the curtain in First Class, shrouding their view. He could no longer see what was going on.

By now, a sizeable crowd had gathered around my workstation as word of the emergency situation spread through other departments. I was keenly aware of the workers’ presence, but by the grace of God, I managed to block them all out.

I wasn't even aware of their body heat as they pressed up against the cubicle. As odd as it may sound, it was as if no one else were there except me and *the caller*. It was almost as if we were just sitting there, talking. I never had to tell those around me to *shush*. They were clearly in shock, but never spoke above a whisper. It wasn't until I stood up that I became truly aware of the throngs of people around me.