

The 9:03 story

We Stopped on Our Way Home.

Adam Bruderly



Almost twenty-four years since that morning, I stood again in exactly the place I once walked out of when the world changed. The first time I'd been back to that spot since the day my life became a before and after.

It was strange how familiar some of it felt, and how much of it felt completely foreign. Recognizing how long it had been. The same roads I walked out on that morning, weaving between sirens, dust, and disbelief. Back then, I was 22, fresh into my career and life, and like most twenty-somethings, certain it was a long stretch of open highway.

That morning taught me otherwise. A lesson we all eventually learn, but maybe not so early.

Walking to the memorial now, I could hear the sound of water in the pools where the towers once stood. The crowds. The reflection. The way it all

seemed to mute the city’s background music. I stood there looking into the pools with my wife and boys, thinking about the lives, the families, the unfinished stories. Thinking about the faces I saw that day and never saw again.

Then I heard my son ask my wife why Dad’s name wasn’t on the wall. And I heard her gently say, “Because Dad walked out of the building that day. Every name on the wall didn’t.”

In that moment, I connected to something I hadn’t fully put into words before: this place isn’t just about remembering the loss. It’s about what we do with the days we still get.



MOMENTS THAT DEFINE US

We all have them.

Sometimes they arrive gently without much fanfare. A conversation, a decision, a slow turn in the narrative. Other times they hit us, like 9:03 did for me, leaving a permanent break between what came before and what comes after.

That moment became my fork in the road. It forced questions I wasn't ready to ask: Who am I? What really matters? How do I want to spend my time? And who do I want to spend it with?

I remember the summer after 9/11. We were at the community park pool. The sun was hot, I am on the verge of turning 23, the world looked normal but inside, I wasn't. That winter, in what felt like both a literal and personal season of darkness, I probably wasn't in the best place. That day Alison, my girlfriend at the time and future wife, asked me a question about us and our relationship. I remember exactly how she phrased it and I know it was the question that changed everything. It forced me to confront the truth that I couldn't keep going as I was.

So, I started running. Literally.

That may sound simple, even small. But for me, it was the start. That first run started something. It led to another run, and another, and another. Eventually to Ironman's, climbing mountains, riding bikes, discovery, and discomfort. It changed my trajectory. It shifted my narrative.

That single decision, like the moment that prompted it, has shaped every major one since: my marriage, my career, my decision to become a father, my commitment to curiosity, my willingness to do hard things. It taught me that identity isn't what we say about ourselves. It's what we prove in the moments that break us open.

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS IN THE MAKING

Since then, life has been full and uneven.

I've had seasons of discipline and seasons of drift. I've done things I'm proud of and let go of things I thought would last forever. I've watched my

boys grow from babies into kids now on the edge of middle school. I've said goodbye to people I thought I'd have more time with. I've returned to a place I thought I had left behind. I've changed.

But one truth has held constant: every day is a chance to refine and redefine who I am becoming. Not in some grand, overnight reinvention, but in the small, repeated choices I want to make... how I treat people, how I care for my body, how I spend my time, how I show up in the relationships that matter. How I show up for life.

I'm sure I could list a dozen defining moments, in all caps and flashing lights. And yet, it's not just about one single moment.

It's about how those moments echo and how they continue to shape who I am becoming. But in truth, I don't think I'm even the same version of that person anymore. The one before that day. Physically. Mentally. Spiritually. How could I be?

There haven't been many days in the last 24 years when I don't reflect, at least a little, on it and what it gave me. Yes, it left me with some scars. Probably some patterns I haven't fully corrected. Some habits or defenses that have frustrated the people closest to me. But for me, it's given me far more than it's taken.

It gave me the ability to live a life I actually wanted. The courage to make choices and changes I wouldn't have otherwise. The ability to say "I love you" to a friend. To look inward and ask hard questions. The discipline to train for an Ironman. The endurance to climb Mt. Rainier. The honesty to tell a boss I needed to step back. And the faith to take a leap.

Because while everything changed in an instant at 9:03, who I became after that was built over years through small, repeated choices that slowly shaped a life I could call my own.

REFINING THE EDGES

Standing at the memorial, I was reminded that the process is never finished. Life keeps giving us moments, some chosen, some not, that either reinforce or reshape who we are.

The question is whether we let those moments pass unnoticed... or we use them.

And it's in those moments, both big and small, that we have a choice.

The 20 hours of travel and 30 hours awake to see my family standing on top of Mont Blanc, looking over the valley... worth it.

Leaving the place I'd spent 15 years growing personally and professionally to move back home to be closer to family, to live in the seasons... worth it.

Grabbing the bucket of balls, even after a long day, when my kids ask to practice again in the summer heat... worth it.

Riding out the ups and downs of 25 years together with someone and still waking up every morning knowing there's no one else I'd rather share this life with... worth it.

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

— Mary Oliver

THE MUSIC THAT STAYED

Over and over, I've talked about how music is a special thread in my life. It's been a connection to my dad. A companion on long rides, runs, swims, and travels. A soundtrack to the way I move through the world. It's helped me process, reflect, and sometimes just feel something real when the rest of life goes quiet.

It's not surprising, then, that after that long week of travel and vacation, when everyone else in the hotel was asleep or fading out that night, I sat up with my headphones in. Scrolling through video after video of the Oasis reunion tour. A band that's been with me for decades. I think about the show I saw in 2000. I think about the upcoming chance to see them again.

And there they are playing "Don't Look Back in Anger." Probably my favorite song. A song I've loved for years but lately, seems to mean so much more.

I hear that chorus and I get a lump in my throat. Sometimes I tear up. On runs. In the car. In bed that night. That line: "Don't look back in anger, I heard you say." I can hear it in my head.

Because I do look back. We all do.

And I ask: what if that day never happened? What if 9:03 never came?

Would I be sitting here now, almost 46, filled with regret? Filled with anger? Wishing I had done more? Tried more? Loved more? Lived more? Wishing I was someone else?

Honestly... probably.

But sitting here now, because that day did happen, I can say: Yes, I have some regrets. But I'm not carrying anger. I've tried. I've leapt. I've loved. I've lived.

And I'm still trying.

AN INVITATION

If you've read this far, thank you. I hope you've found something useful... maybe a thought, a feeling, or even just a few questions to think about:

What moment has most defined me? What is my "9:03" moment?

Am I living in alignment with what that moment taught me?

What's one thing I can do now to refine the person I'm becoming?

One day, you'll look back, whether it's 24 years later or 50, and you'll see the roads you've walked, the choices you've made, the life you've built. Not perfect, but yours. And you'll ask... because we all ask:

Did I live it on purpose?

That's the question I carried away from the memorial that day.

As we walked to dinner a few blocks away, my boys had already shifted gears pointing out skyscrapers, spotting dogs on the street, and laughing about who knows what.

And I thought: I don't know if I was living on purpose before 9:03. But I know that since then, I have, and I will.

And that's who I am.

