CENTER VALLEY (September 10, 2006) – “We’re going for bodies.” That grim announcement, spoken somberly by one New York City firefighter to his fellows, takes us back to the fateful September day five years ago when 2,749 innocent and unsuspecting persons in and around the World Trade Center perished. The task of recovering bodies has long since ended, but the work of remembering goes on.

“I’m coming for you, brother.” This voice, too, was heard that day, as one firefighter communicated the promise of an entire department to a chief who was trapped with his crew in the crumbling tower. Astonishingly, they managed to survive in the hollowed spaced between the ash heap of the foundation below and the pancaked floors of steel above them.

Rescue and recovery – two tasks define the poignantly human dimension to what firefighters do, routinely and heroically. But it’s even harder to comprehend why they do it.

The images created in various media to immortalize the events of 9/11 express the drama of the everyday for those brave men and women of the FDNY (and countless other first responders). As scores of workers shuffled down unstable stairwells, those in heavy gear were proceeding upward. They had to know where that path was leading. They had to realize up wasn’t out. They had to feel it in the pit of their stomachs and the depths of their soul. Their destiny was directly in front of them, as above and below them life itself was collapsing.

That day 343 of New York’s firefighters died. Without in any way diminishing the deaths of the thousands of others, what happened to members of the FDNY was different. They knew it. They chose it. They acted in the face of it. And their fate challenges the rest of us not only to remember but also to think anew about human existence.

Why would anyone knowingly risk life and limb, especially for complete strangers? Yes, it’s their job, but who seeks that kind of employment? It’s not for fortune or fame that one fights fires. No
salary supplants the longing to live. The prestige that comes with public acclaim does no good for the hero who dies in the process. And whereas adrenaline may lead the young and the brave to do battle with an inferno, no one rushes in where he knows he’s likely not to emerge.

There must be something else, some other reason to explain why firefighters answer the call not knowing what awaits them, and why more than 250 persons each year, on average, have joined the FDNY’s storied ranks since that tragic day.

Perhaps it is faith. Perhaps more than many, they believe: in each other (the radio voice speaks of “brothers”), in the value of human life (which they seek always to save), or in the presence of God and the promise of another life.

Years ago, Karl Rahner, a German priest and theologian, pondered the power of faith in terms not typically religious. In acts of sacrifice, he wrote, particularly those made without a view toward receiving some acknowledgement or feeling the glow of satisfaction, the one who acts selflessly has an “experience of the Eternal, the experience that the Spirit is something more than and different from a part of this world, the experience that happiness in this world is not the whole point of existence, the experience of trust as we sink into darkness, the experience of a faith for which this world provides no reason.”

I suspect firefighters have had such experiences of the Spirit of sacrifice. Some witnessed it firsthand in the acts of their fathers and grandfathers who preceded them in the firehouses. Others grew up with it in the immigrant neighborhoods in which their families struggled to raise them well. And many of them grasped it through religion, in the preached messages and iconic images of churches that everywhere dot the cityscape.

Without the benefit of statistical research, which would make an interesting study, and based solely on assumptions from ethnicity and geography, I imagine the vast majority of the FDNY are people of faith whose belief system includes a fundamental teaching about heaven. For only with the prospect of fulfillment in another life where happiness is eternal can the limits of logic and the confines of mortality be overcome by the decision to risk one’s own death on behalf of another.

That choice is their honor. That faith is their foundation. Their memory is ours now to keep, as a reminder that the ultimate meaningful of life may be found in listening to a higher voice.