

My college asked its graduates who lived in NYC to write their accounts of 9/11 for the alumni newsletter and website. This is what I wrote.

Tuesday, September 11, 2001

I wake to a ringing phone and a friend's nearly hysterical voice saying, "You're home! I didn't know where you were!" I'm still on vacation. What's the matter? "Turn on your TV. The twin towers are on fire!" I switch on the television to see replays of the planes flying into the buildings. I call my office which is a seven-minute walk from the World Trade Center. My friend Janet answers. "Do you know what's happening?" Yes. She describes the office as controlled chaos due to our proximity psychologically as well as geographically to the World Trade Center.

I work for Willis, one of three major insurance brokerage firms in the world. The other two, Aon and Marsh, are in the World Trade Center. Many of us, including Janet and me, came to Willis from Aon. Have you heard if Rosalie is ok? Caroline? I rattle off names of people we both know who were on the 103rd and 105th floors of Tower Two. She hasn't heard anything and has to hang up to deal with the unnerved people who are gathering in her office.

I watch television in stupefaction. The towers fall. Rosalie. Tom. Shirley. Susan. Debbie. Lucia. Jim. The names and faces reel through my mind. I have to tear myself away from those images, leave my apartment, walk my dog, get groceries. The Upper West Side is always full of vehicular traffic. Now there is none. Only pedestrians. The quiet seems ironic.

Tuesday night, September 11

It is hard to get through on the phone, easier to connect on the Internet. I exchange e-mails from friends in California, Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, New Jersey, even midtown-Manhattan. When calls finally do get through to me, they are from people who have been trying for hours. They are almost always near tears. Are you all right? I'm fine. Don't worry about me. I am numb.

Wednesday, September 12

Erika e-mails me that the animal shelter where she works has been asked for help. Search and rescue dogs are going through three and four sets of boots a day because the rubble is sharp and hot. Can I search the net for suppliers of dog boots and give her their URLs? She'll make the calls. I am thrilled to be able to do something and spend the next several hours searching and e-mailing to her appropriate web sites.

The weather is gorgeous. A perfect New York September day. The American flag is cascading out of apartment windows, draped across buildings, taped in store fronts, attached to car antennae and on lapels. I cannot find a single container of Gatorade in any store, nor any bottled water, so I buy large bottles of apple juice and a bag of energy bars to take to a Red Cross drop-off point on 83rd Street. The sidewalk is already filling up with boxes full of water, energy drinks, batteries, and

inside, women at long tables make sandwiches which are neatly wrapped in plastic and stacked in more cardboard boxes. A man labels the boxes: Red Meat. Cheese. Turkey.

I can't remember when the wind changed and the heavy cloud of smoke and dust was swept up over Manhattan. I can't forget the smell. I can't remember when pictures of the missing began to appear on lamp posts, in windows of stores, the doors of the movie theatre, on the outside bulletin boards of churches. I don't remember which day I walked past Engine Company 74 and saw the bank of flowers growing against the outside wall around the photo of a missing firefighter. Among the flowers were candles, religious pictures, rosaries, notes, and letters, many from children. Outside an apartment building on 84th Street, another small shrine appears – the photo of a missing tenant and more flowers, candles, notes: We miss you.

Thursday, September 13

Volunteer stations are overflowing with people they can't use. Blood banks are full. Ambulances are standing by. Hospitals are...not filling up. There is a collective gasp, a city-wide sickness of heart as we realize...there is nobody to save.

The fire fighters have become awesome figures of heroism. The mayor is a rock.

The streets are still relatively empty of traffic. The shelves of stores are beginning to empty. People have bought all the water; juice, and packaged foods to give to the Red Cross.

Friday, September 14

I finally get a call through to a colleague in Willis' Jersey office. Also a former Aon employee, she has a short list of survivors and those who are missing. Two people I am concerned about are not on either list. She gives me the Aon crisis hot-line number. I don't call it, thinking it should be saved for the families.

Sunday, September 16

I can no longer bear to watch television, so I go outside and walk. I find myself 30 blocks north, in front of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. It is virtually empty. The sign says prayer services are being held every evening at 6. I imagine the Cathedral fills up then. In the main part of the sanctuary a large table bears long strips of white cloth upon which people are writing their remembrances and feelings. I don't write anything because I have no feelings.

I walk home again, down Broadway. Still few vehicles, but people are out walking and eating in restaurants and sidewalk cafes. There is a sudden quieting and I look north. Rolling down Broadway is a block-long convoy of machinery. Huge cranes. Gigantic trucks. Equipment that I don't even recognize carried along on flatbeds the size of barges. They must be coming from across the George Washington Bridge – volunteers from out of town. No one claps as they do down at the site for people going in and coming out from Ground Zero, but everyone stops what they are doing and respectfully watches. The convoy passes. People resume their conversations, their movements.

I pass a small park in the middle of the square planted with shrubs and flowers. Benches line the perimeter. A fountain splashes in the center. The low brick wall around the fountain is covered with candles, flowers, notes and prayers. On the long walk back to my apartment I notice candles in window sills (inside and out), on steps, sidewalk corners, fences and walls. Many are burning, some have burned out. New Yorkers have placed candles all over the city to burn for people they hope are awaiting rescue, for the families, for the rescuers. Perhaps, for their own broken hearts.

Monday, September 17

Finally, I call Aon's crisis line. A man's gentle voice answers. I mean to say, I am calling to find out if...but I can say nothing. I just burst into tears. The man is kind. Patient. He's heard this before. I finally get out the names and he tells me they are on the survivor list, and as I say Thank God, I wonder how often he has had to say the bad news. I learn that he lost a friend who was on the first plane. I'm so very sorry, I say. When I hang up, I weep again in relief.

I still can't go back to work. Our building has no power. Giuliani has asked that people stay out of lower Manhattan. There is no way to get below 14th Street anyway.

Monday, September 24

The subway has been routed around the WTC so I can get as far as the Wall Street station. From there it is not much of a walk to my office building.

Tuesday, September 25

Maura and I take the short walk up Broadway to Ground Zero. And still, I am prepared to see the towers there. But they aren't there. The scene is ghastly, smoke rising in white whorls: hell on a cold day. The National Guard and police wear filter masks and I wish I had one. (On some days you don't smell it until you get to Chambers Street. Some days you smell it as early as 14th Street.)

The buildings surrounding the site are still layered in grayish-white ash. Some are completely covered in plastic. You can't get too close. But close enough. Rubble doesn't describe it. Devastation has become just a word. The tall, gleaming buildings with courtyards and plazas, plants and walkways and shops, health clubs and beauty salons – are gone. What was a self-contained, bright community is a smoking, smoldering slag heap. A mass murder site. Beyond comprehension. Beyond describing. But it is finally real.

At work, I begin to hear personal stories.

Janet: My cousin was on the street by the towers and everything suddenly shook and went black. She was paralyzed – just couldn't move. A man grabbed her and said, "Run!" They ran south. Businessmen tore off their shirts and ripped them into pieces, handing them out so everyone had something to cover their faces so they could breathe. Next to her was a man whose ankle was hurt and he couldn't keep up. Two guys came behind him and just lifted him up and carried him. Everyone kept running until they got to South Ferry and all piled on to the Staten Island Ferry. A boat full of strangers hugging each other. When they disembarked on Staten Island and looked

across the water at the Manhattan skyline, they fell to their knees and they all started to sing “God Bless America.”

Maura: I was outside when the second building fell. I saw the black cloud come boiling down the street and I ran. I got half way across the Brooklyn Bridge and flagged down a Jeep. The driver already had picked up four people but he said, “Get in!” I was crying, “What if I don’t see my little boy again? He’s only five months old.” And this guy said, “Don’t worry, we’ll get you there.” And he did. He drove me all the way to Queens. Right to my door, and I don’t even know his name.

Janet: Joe came and got me. He said let’s go NOW. So we ran to the ferry boats going to New Jersey. We didn’t care where they were going. We just wanted off the island. We got on the first boat. I was standing on the deck in the middle of the Hudson River. I could see the top of the tower, above where the plane had hit, tipping over. And I said to Joe, that’s going to fall down – look at all the people below! The pier was crowded and the streets were full of people and they couldn’t see like I could that the top of the building was going to fall on them. And then I saw bodies falling from the building and people jumping off the pier into the river. And then – the building just collapsed. I didn’t believe my own eyes. I just didn’t believe what I was seeing.

Thursday, September 27

At a memorial service for someone I knew at Aon, I’m speaking to a former colleague. I’ve heard that Aon has office space in mid-town, so I ask, Susan, are you back at work yet? She had made it down from the 105th floor. She says, somewhat hesitantly, “I’d like to be. I don’t like sitting at home thinking. Human Resources is trying to find me a new assignment. The guys I worked for...they’re both dead.”

October 4, 2001

West 83rd Street is empty of cars. Only a few people are lined up waiting because most West-siders are already at work. I shield my eyes to look east across Amsterdam Avenue. The morning sun bounces off the police car’s headlights giving them a huge spiky brilliance. From a block away, the car’s movement is almost imperceptible; the beat of a single drum is slow, faint, nearly subliminal. The car inches forward, the beat gets louder. It crosses Amsterdam and is now on my block, the drum providing the cadence, achingly slow, for the people in step behind the car, which passes me now, so very slowly. Its open back brimming over with flowers. I cannot tell if they cover a casket. Behind the police car step the kilted fife and drum corp. No fife today.

A priest in flowing white, carrying the golden processional cross, goes before the fire truck, its lights flash silently. Now Engine Company 74 in their dress blues. It is almost a revelation to see them as ordinary men, not the giants they appear trudging wearily out of Ground Zero in their massive coats and boots, helmet, heavy gear on their backs, axes in hand, covered in ash. Among them straining against her leash to go faster than the slow cadence will allow is the company’s Dalmatian, wearing a red, white and blue bandanna. In the last row a fireman carries his little son high in his arms. The child’s red jacket bobs brightly in the solemn sea of blue. They are followed by a woman, a man holding her hand, and a boy and a girl. The girl carries a red rose.

The only sound is the slow beat...beat...beat...of that drum.

What is it like in New York? There is sadness here. There is still shock. There is fear. I keep in my backpack the things I need to live for two days. I have placed instructions in my wallet. Please call Erika Mathews to take care of my dog and I list all of her numbers. My friend Billy keeps a bag packed for himself and his partner right by the door, next to the cat carrier. Janet and her husband Joe have decided to never commute into the city together. One takes the ferry, the other the train. If something happens, their daughter shouldn't be an orphan. Maura and her husband are drafting their will.

Conversations often turn to pondering the last moments of those trapped in the tower. Did they feel pain? Were they dead before they hit the ground? Do endorphins release in the brain at the final moments of death to bring peace? Few can bear to dwell on the final moments of the people in the planes.

We are dazed and hurt by the knowledge that there are people who hate us and want to kill us, and have succeeded horribly.

We are resilient, hopeful. We are getting on with life.

I sense no anger, either on the streets or among the people I know. I have heard no talk of revenge. There are no slogans splashed across buildings and billboards – just pictures of the missing everywhere, flowers and flags everywhere. We are held in a kind of palpable sweetness; grace, if you will. New Yorkers, not known for their politeness, are more tender with each other, like a people who have just experienced a death in the family. Six thousand times.*

**This is the number we believed to have been lost at the time I wrote this article.*

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