

TO BE OF USE AFTER SEPTEMBER 11TH: ONE SOCIAL WORKER'S EXPERIENCE

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These are the author's reflections from her experience providing crisis debriefing for a major financial company which had several thousand employees in the World Trade Center. This company recruited many mental health providers from outside the New York area.

Almost immediately after the September tragedy, I began searching for a way to feel less helpless. I imagine that was true of many social workers as well. Someone set up a television in the common office in our practice and between sessions we huddled around it feeling stunned and hoping for answers that wouldn't come. It felt surreal to just go on with our work while this catastrophe was unfolding. As the initial shock passed, the idea to find a way to contribute evolved naturally. For a social worker, part of the traumatic impact of such an atrocity is the inability to act and be of use. But the search over the week proved frustratingly futile. For the last ten years, I have developed a specialty in trauma and just like most people in this country, I wanted to help in the healing. My skills were perfectly suited for just this kind of work, yet I couldn't find a way to contribute.

On Sunday, September 17th by happenstance, I heard that an EAP, contracted by an unnamed company (for confidentiality purposes), was looking for mental health professionals to work with their employees who had been in the World Trade Towers. Hoping this would be my chance, after a flurry of phone calls I finally connected with someone in the know, only to find out they had already found their quota of people. By 5:30 pm that Sunday, I grew resigned to the fact that I would have to keep looking. I spent some time on the phone commiserating with a colleague about our thwarted desire to be of service. And then, at just before 8:55 pm, I

got one more call from another colleague, already en route to New York, telling me that they needed me. I was elated. On Sunday, September 17th, after calling my private clients to cancel their appointments for the week, I quickly packed a bag and bid my partner adieu. By 10:00 pm I was headed for New York City to offer my services as a crisis debriefer.

I joined a team of eight other women, some of whom were clinical social workers, and others from various professions who had experience in crisis debriefing work. Two members of this group were colleagues in the private practice where I worked. We nine were folded in with others recruited by the in-house EAP and the health care insurance company and began our work for a major financial institution that had had several thousand employees in World Trade Tower Two. Before the attack, these employees had been in the business of making money for their customers from the world financial markets. After the attack, everything was up for grabs.

Initially, I wasn't clear who had actually hired us. It turned out that the contact woman, who was the team leader for our little unit from Connecticut, had been a provider for the insurance company that also had a contract with the corporation in New York. After the events of September 11th, the insurance company had been unable to provide enough mental health workers from the New York area alone to address the overwhelming needs of the employees in this investment company.

So they had reached across the state border to someone who had experience and training in crisis debriefing. She, in turn, searched in her own area to come up with a team of people willing and ready to set out for the city. I was relieved and pleased to have been one of them.

We worked for five days from 8 am to around 6 pm at different locations in mid and lower Manhattan. In the evenings, some of us would gather for our own debriefings, feeling emotionally drained and hungry to process what we'd been through. Often, in the evenings, we would walk around the city just to be active and to find something other than the intensity with which we were dealing all day. Repeatedly hearing variations of the same traumatic experience began to feel traumatizing to us as well. I am so grateful for my colleagues who shared this gratifying, yet emotionally exhausting, experience with me. There was much to take in. Some of this was reminiscent of my early days in crisis intervention during the 1970s when I worked at the local crisis center. However, some aspects were totally unfamiliar, even alien, as I was interacting with people who moved comfortably in corporate America.

In an environment of hushed voices, polished wooden furniture, and what seemed like acres of half-walled cubicles separating workers and their desks and computers, I delved quickly into people's private agonies. At times I felt as if I had walked into a system of interconnected parts all working in unison toward a single product or output. The emphasis was on making money for themselves and their clients. The discussions were about markets and trends. Under fluorescent lights, computer screens flickered with graphs and charts while people stared earnestly ahead or spoke softly into telephone headsets. Despite all outward appearances of business as usual, I sensed a pervasive tension wherever I went.

For the first three days, I was assigned to different sites where employees who had fled the tower had been temporarily relocated to

try to reengage in their work. We scurried among the skyscrapers and yo-yoed up and down elevators, landing in expansive office suites that were distributed around midtown. The company issued daily memos telling each department where they were assigned for debriefing. We debriefers were sent in twos or threes to conference rooms or lunchrooms to meet with groups of people who had had their worlds leveled. Sometimes I met with people individually when they requested it. I was surprised, probably from my misconceptions about the kind of people who worked in the financial sector, by how willing each group was to share their stories. I had mistakenly expected that they would somehow be different in how strongly they held on to their reserve. However, of course, they expressed the normal array of ways people have of protecting themselves from such an emotional and psychological assault. There were those who sat stiffly, stoically refusing to acknowledge that racing down seventy-odd flights of stairs, in a shuddering and sometimes swaying building, had any effect on them. One young man had been in a building next to the towers and had watched people running out. His wife had barely escaped from the 68th floor. He had decided that he had no right to be affected by it all because he "hadn't even been in the towers like these other people." I watched him valiantly feign being untouched by anything. His building had also been destroyed by the calamity, but because he had not had to race down stairs, he believed he didn't deserve to be put into the same category with his coworkers. Others trembled and unsuccessfully fought back the tears. Many talked spontaneously about what had propelled them on at the moment they had realized that they might die. Several people recalled conjuring up the faces of their children, imagining what would happen to them if they were left fatherless or motherless. Men who probably hadn't cried in most of their adult lives dissolved into tears at the

thought of how close they had come to never seeing their families again.

Although their names have faded in my memory, I can still summon up their faces, sometimes contorted with anger or grief, sometimes expressionless with shock and numbness. Often when someone was talking, others were nodding or weeping quietly. People described the panic at having lost track of friends in the scramble to the bottom and the frantic search for each other at the other end of the run. Some had been in the promenade under the towers, buying their coffee and breakfast and feeling guilty about not having had to make the journey down the stairs. Because their offices had been so high up in the tower, descending normally meant taking two different elevators. Two middle-aged women talked about their momentary confusion when they couldn't call the initial elevator and the gradual dawning of the fact that they had to climb down seventy flights of stairs. Many people, some rubbing their calves or thighs, mentioned that their legs still ached from the climb down. Some spoke of their relief, before beginning the descent, at finally reaching a partner or a child by cell phone while others remembered how frustrating it had been to be unable to get through to the person they wanted to reassure. At the end of the sessions, somebody might approach us to offer an embrace of thanks, while others would nod or just smile weakly as they left the room. I felt viscerally touched by each person's story.

The company needed to get back to business as soon as possible since this was its reason for being and failure to do so would mean its demise. However, people can't shift so easily from trauma to normal functioning. Employees talked about struggling to concentrate on their work and about co-workers who were afraid to even come to work. Some of the debriefers spent time on the phones with employees who had retreated into what they thought was the safety of their own homes.

How ironic, that so many of us had been going about our lives, taking for granted the illusion of safety our country projected. Who among us, especially those in the middle class, would have thought we could be in such danger in our very own work places?

My mission was to be available, to offer myself as a witness and a tool for the survivors in order to prevent the longer-term symptoms of more serious problems. I wondered whether this was to be the case. I was uneasy about the corporate context and how free people actually felt to participate or not. We would tell people that we didn't want to know their last names, that we didn't report to anyone on the content of our discussions, and that we weren't taking any notes. Still, it wasn't completely clear whom we were serving. It went without saying: the company needed a healthy productive workforce as soon as possible. It seemed as if we had been imported to descend on their employees with the purpose of stitching them back together like battlefield MASH units. The dilemma for the workers was that if they didn't pull it together fast enough, they could be out of their jobs.

Some managers were genuinely concerned about their people, and others, we were told by the Human Resources (HR) people, didn't have any use for the service. This led to a feeling in some employees that to seek help negatively labeled them. I heard this in whispered tones from a few people, and was told this was the case by several HR contact people. Many people felt torn between wanting to immerse themselves in the experience and needing to get back to the tasks of daily living.

The staff seemed dedicated to their people, frequently expressing concern for a particular person or department. Because of the enormity of the task, they often looked as bewildered and overwhelmed as the workers did. Sometimes I found myself providing support for them as well. One middle-aged

HR manager sporting a blond French twist and long red nails, which she worried about as we stood talking, could hardly bring herself to acknowledge her exhaustion. The corporate norms could not have anticipated such a blow to the entire worker population. How could she be allowed support for herself when so many of her people hadn't made it or had so nearly escaped death? Her quandary about seeking her own support meant that her story trickled out as we stood in the hallway awaiting the next group of employees or while we sampled the ubiquitous buffets set up by the company.

Just as there is a hierarchy in any corporation, one developed pretty quickly among the debriefers. We were often crowded together into rooms waiting for our daily assignments by the head of the EAP company who had little sense of how to organize such an operation, and who seemed overwhelmed by the task. She would nervously flip the pages of her notebook back and forth while trying to figure out how to disperse us to our assignments. She often couldn't seem to make up her mind about who should go where and when. At times I felt impatient with the resultant chaos that left us wasting precious time. I was eager to be engaged in the work.

There were social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and people with other master's level human services degrees, as well as a few non-professionals trained in quick-fix interventions thrown into the mix. We came from Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, and California. I noticed that the psychologists and psychiatrists were assigned to provide debriefing to management groups, while the rest of us were given the workers. Many of the overheard conversations among the debriefers seemed to be about establishing and maintaining the hierarchy among the professions and between those who had done debriefing before and those of us who were first timers. I am not proud of the fact that at times in my life I have made sure that those

around me understood how many credentials I have. Soon after, I tend to feel chagrin at my own shallowness and insecurity. That week, I felt inundated by images of strength, courage, terror, and pettiness. I wrestled with my own ungenerous thoughts about this temporary group of colleagues. But I was astonished by the amount and level of verbal jousting that went on to establish who had the most authority, experience, connections, training, and expertise. It seemed unusually pronounced, and I wondered if it was somehow exacerbated by the circumstances. There we were, thrust together to work with so many people who had confronted imminent death and who were now expected to resolve it and get quickly back to the business at hand. Perhaps familiar structures and routines, even the old pecking orders, were felt to be reassuring given the trauma we were all experiencing and continuing to undergo. Maybe because of the depth and breadth of the trauma, many of us felt a need to tell ourselves that we knew what we were doing and were up to the challenge these courageous people presented to us.

Other distinctions quickly emerged. Some helpers were trained in a specific time-limited, crisis-debriefing format, used by the Red Cross and others, which was designed for medical emergencies, accidents, or natural disasters. These people seemed unprepared for and surprised to be dealing with many of the issues with which the employees were struggling. The result was that sometimes the most profound expressions of grief were met with platitudes or efforts to minimize it. One man talked about the guilt over his inability to convince a coworker to run with him. This person had died, so in addition to grieving this loss, the man wondered how he could live with himself as a manager of people after his perceived failure. A helper leaned over to hug him. To his credit, this middle-aged white man turned to her, his eyes brimming with tears, and quietly said, "A hug isn't going to

cut it." Other times, there was no attention paid to people's feelings at all. Instead, a group might consist of an expertly structured and orchestrated presentation made by the "helpers," but without much input from the employees (clients). It also seemed that the company managers were given pep talks and information about the impact of stress, while the workers were sometimes acknowledged to have a need for expressing their emotional reactions. I wondered if this reflected people's fears of the depth of feelings that might be unleashed should there be room made for them. Or was there a basic need for someone to be seen as in charge? The idea that no one was exempt from this assault might have been too much to absorb. Could this be a micro expression of the entire country's reaction to having the chimera of complete security shattered?

Entering this world of crisis debriefing was certainly a learning experience for me. I was introduced to several versions of a specific crisis intervention model. Some were highly structured formats that didn't seem to allow for the variations in the ways people were trying to manage. Once, I was teamed up with a person who had been trained in one of these protocols but who had no professional experience outside of this method. I watched her engage in what looked to me like a dance designed to keep people's reactions neatly packaged into manageable bites. We stumbled over each other in how we responded to people, and when I tried to attend to some of the group process she offered some well-meaning but non sequitur advice which had the effect of leaving the group sitting in nervous silence. At one point, she shared a story about a family crisis she'd been able to overcome as a way of offering comfort and inspiration. However, this was in response to a woman who was talking about seeing bodies falling from above as she stood at the window of her office. I started worrying about what my co-leader might say or do next, not

something I should have needed to focus on at that time. I subsequently requested that I be teamed up with someone whose work I knew. I had the impression that for many of the employees, this was their introduction to any kind of helping process. I worried what they would take away from this experience, particularly if they might need or want help later.

This company had been in the towers at the time of the first bombing in 1993 and thereafter had set up an emergency backup location in lower Manhattan to minimize future disruptions in work. This site represented the company's efforts to be prepared while not really appreciating how disruptive these events would be to the workforce.

On the fourth morning, two of us were sent to this site. After making a couple of wrong turns, including taking an unexpected tour of Chinatown, we arrived at a warehouse that had been set up and now accommodated hundreds of workers and their computers. It was hot. Fans blew the thick, heated air around the cavernous room as workers tried to concentrate on their screens or engaged in conferences with one another. Cardboard signs hung from the ceiling to delineate one department or unit from another. Rivers of people flowed between the lines of tables, and the hum of electronic equipment mixed with the buzz of many conversations. Bundles of wires taped to the floor ran along narrow corridors stacked with crates and boxes of supplies. Everything looked temporary as if hastily thrown up. The setting seemed to express the angst of the company.

In an apparent effort to take care of the employees, the company had set up an assembly line food area where packaged sandwiches and salads were served, and coolers full of bottles of water or soda were available all of the time. Employees I talked to seemed to understand the company's intent, which may have added to the struggle many of them had. The assumption appeared to be that the

suffering should be circumscribed and that it was possible for people to be debriefed and then go right back to work.

By that time in the week, the shock and terror had transformed in some to anger at the company for its lack of sensitivity. In the privacy of a group debriefing, I heard five men vent their anger at the callousness of a company that they felt was pushing them to return to work before they were ready. I thought I was also hearing echoes of the fear and disappointment over a surrogate parent's inability to protect them from the dangers in the world. These men fumed about a coworker who was being honored for his heroism. They maintained that this man had harangued them to get back to work as the other tower burned while he had stayed until the last possible moment before fleeing as well. The years of resentment against this man for being a loud-mouth and a braggart boiled over when they watched him maneuver himself into receiving recognition instead of being held accountable for lives he had risked by towing the company line.

As we helpers sat and waited, we wondered what was happening in the upper reaches of the company that depended on productive workers to keep going. The economy was taking a dive, and it wasn't a stretch to imagine they were also in turmoil. There seemed to be an urgency to get people through the shock as quickly as possible so that things could get back to normal. This tension was reflected in how the company was trying to support its workers by providing them with food, busing them to the memorial services held in St. Patrick's Cathedral, and walking tearful employees over to where we debriefers were stationed. At the same time, we heard from employees that individual managers were barking at their workers to get back into the swing of things. Rumors flew about cut backs and layoffs. It was the proverbial Catch-22.

In the middle of the first day at this site, I

noticed that I had already become accustomed to those strange warehouse-like surroundings. We had been given a lunchroom and three offices at the end of a room the length of a football field in which to conduct our sessions. Signs informing workers about our services and location were posted everywhere. We sat under banners indicating our function. Over the course of the day, managers would approach us to arrange sessions for their work units. Often a weeping worker would arrive on the arm of a coworker and one of us would link up with the employee and guide her or him into an office. I sat with people whom I probably would never have met under less unusual circumstances. It is likely that they would not have sought therapy or help from mental health providers, and I tend not to associate with people from corporate America. There were people whose values were very different from my own, and yet the enormity of what they and we had gone through drew us instantly into a rapport. Most people seemed compelled to impart their stories to me. They talked about being determined to live, about carrying others down seventy-plus stories, about praying quietly as the building swayed around them. Some remembered how calm everyone seemed as thousands of people trod down narrow, windowless stairways that allowed only two abreast. Even when the column of people came periodically to a stop, many remained supportive and soothing with each other and successfully avoided the panic that could have occurred. One man told me about following a woman who became paralyzed with fear and stood rooted to the spot. She held a steely grip on both handrails blocking the entire line of people behind her. Despite the growing tension in the stairwell, he and another man had spoken gently to her while they worked to peel her hands from the railing. Finally she had agreed to release her hold when they told her they would carry her the next fifty stories to the bottom, which they

did. Several commented on noticing how some served as coaches, urging people on and invoking hope for all. People talked about seeing women's shoes in heaps, hastily flung off because they impeded the race for life. One woman held up her sensibly shod feet and stated emphatically that she would never wear heels again. Others wept over lost friends with a sense of guilt over having been unable to save them. People told of their resolve to leave at the sight of the first tower being hit, in spite of announcements over the Public Address system that all was secure and that everyone should return to their desks. One person described seeing the flames and smoke spew out of the other tower while standing at the window. A few people spoke of how the sight of body parts and people falling by their windows kept them fixed to their spots while others fled toward the stairs. From most people, I heard of someone who hadn't made it or someone who now refused to come to work. One young man quietly sat down and without saying a word carefully unfolded a piece of paper on the table. He told me that it was a list of all of the friends he had lost in the other tower. There were eleven names.

This major financial company had accomplished what many non-profits are still struggling to do—have a truly multi-cultural workforce, at least at the lower levels of the hierarchy. Most groups I worked with were made up of people who are considered members of minorities or immigrants. As a White woman, I was often in the minority. This added to the richness of the experience, since I have a typical private practice caseload of mostly White women, with only a smattering of men and minorities. Most of the people I met told me that they had never asked for or considered using professional help.

One older African-American woman came to our area with a friend and coworker. She talked about how they had supported each other to come to see us, neither of them

ever having talked to a professional helper before. She and I sat in a small office crowded with boxes and worn furniture and she told me her story. It was similar to others' in some respects but, of course, also unique to her. She rarely looked directly at me, instead staring out the window or looking down at her hands and occasionally stealing a glance my way. Now and then as she talked, she apologized for taking up my time. She couldn't understand why she was having such trouble focusing on her work or why she couldn't sleep. She was jumpy and on edge, and scenes from that day kept intruding into her thoughts. She worried that she wouldn't be able to get back to normal.

She was a mother, a grandmother, and an aunt to relatives and kids in need, and her role had always been the family matriarch. To feel so undone and close to out of control was not something she had dealt with or could abide. It was indeed an unusual coming together. She was ten years my senior and originally came from the south. I am a northern European transplanted to the United States and strongly ensconced in my progressive, anti big-business, childless, middle-class life. As a single mother, the corporation was the medium to a financially secure life for her and her extended family. She was a devotedly church-going woman, while the legacy of my socialist, atheist roots lives on in my choices. Her troubles had made her open to me in a way that under most circumstances might not have happened or, perhaps, would have unfolded much more slowly. The attack on her place of work and my need to be of use brought us together.

At first she spoke haltingly, carefully, but as we went, her words came more easily. She told me, somewhat wryly, that after the first building had been hit she had gone back to her desk, closed up her computer, put away papers and files and gone to the bathroom to comb her hair and wash her hands. Then she had stopped by her friend's desk and the two

of them had calmly walked to the staircase. And as is often the case, the telling of her story was therapeutic. She had not told anyone most of it out of worry that she might burden the people she cared about. I teared up at aspects of her tale, although she didn't seem to notice. I watched her gradually relax. She talked about feeling better, and by the end we were even able to laugh. I hope I helped in listening as well as in giving her information about her natural reactions to this life-threatening event.

Not surprisingly, people sought solace in their religious beliefs. One African-American woman had obviously been sent into a religious crisis by her ordeal. In addition to having to run for her own life, someone she loved had been killed in Tower One. She talked with bitterness about how her loss had led her to feel murderous toward the perpetrators in direct contradiction to her religious beliefs. Two women of Hispanic descent talked about their jobs representing their having attained a success never before achieved in their families, and both wondered at what price. They had both sought answers from their priest, but found what they received unsatisfying and incomplete. An orthodox Jewish man described how his faith sustained him in this moment of crisis. I spoke with Eastern European immigrants who told me in heavy accents about their journeys to the U.S. with dreams for better lives sustaining them. One Russian woman, still in shock, talked about having left behind her fears of death when she came to the U.S., only to have to resurrect them. She spoke of her need for something more than the money to give her a reason to stay. It will be interesting to see the extent to which this event causes people to reevaluate or reorder their lives.

We had all been traveling along in our lives, taking for granted that each day would lead to the next without too much variation and according to our expectations. Suddenly each of these people had been confronted

with the possible end of life. One manager had suggested that because this company hired the type of person who was headstrong and independent thinking, this helped explain why so many had made it out. Despite orders from some managers to stay at their desks, and announcements over the address system that there was nothing to worry about, most of the employees of this company ignored those messages and orders and fled. Whatever the reasons, most of them had survived. That such a thing can happen to perhaps both ordinary and not so ordinary people, and that I was given a chance to experience it through the eyes of those who lived, gave me a push toward my own change.

Several people with whom I interacted had experienced the 1993 bombing. Many were reflecting on the existential dilemmas created by the attacks, particularly on how to proceed with the rest of their lives. Some teetered on the brink of deciding to make major changes, to quit, to move out of the area, to pursue deferred life dreams. Such reactions made sense to me at that point. After each encounter, I felt sad at not being able to see how a story would play out, but my brief encounters with them inspired me to consider changes in my own life.

My career began about thirty years ago in crisis intervention, and since then I have been listening to people share their stories in one context or another. However, the convergence of context and content in this particular experience left a unique impression. Before September 11th, I had been worrying about a particular decision without resolution. I have long wanted to visit Antarctica, but I mustered numerous arguments against it. I suspect that beneath the pile of reasons for my not going was plain old fear about taking on something so adventurous, as well as my typical belief about my lack of deservedness. My week in New York gave me the resolve that I needed to make my plans and go. Being with so many people, ordinary people,

who showed such courage when called on to face such an extraordinary event and who had shared their stories allowed a shift to happen in me. Three months later while in Antarctica, immersed in the natural wonders at the bottom of the world, for a moment some of those faces from September came back to me. Those faces reminded me of what had happened, what could happen, and how we are all linked in the sometimes fragile web of life on this small globe.

Ground Zero, May, 2002:
A view from the street, (right) and a
view from the platform (below).



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