

# THE LONGEST DAY

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*In this narrative, one of our guest editors reflects on the ways in which he and other volunteers attempted to help families of the World Trade Center victims find closure. These volunteers learned that an important part of the healing process is to take actions that represent triumph over feelings of helplessness.*

“And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd...and this also has [become] one of the dark places of the earth.”

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

A chill returned as the sun disappeared behind the ruins of the World Trade Center. Renee Fleming, accompanied by the orchestra of St. Luke's, sang “God Bless America.” I waved to a police officer wearing a light blue windbreaker. The words NYPD COMMUNITY AFFAIRS were printed in white block letters on the back of her jacket. She waved back and smiled. I headed for the emergency lane on my way to the boat that would be returning the mental health workers to Pier 94 on 57<sup>th</sup> Street.

Moments earlier I said goodbye to the family I had stood beside during the memorial service. They sat in the back row of our section, one of scores of sections filled with thousands of folding chairs, each chair occupied by a grieving family member. I stood with my back against an iron gate so I wouldn't block anyone's view. The family lost their father and husband, a decorated firefighter. The widow was a slight woman of Italian descent, probably in her sixties, although it was hard to guess her age because of the years added by September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Her husband's photo was pinned to her wool coat and to the coats of her three children. He was handsome. He had a white mustache and full head of silvery hair, combed straight back. When the memorial service started an hour earlier, one of her sons, an off-duty police officer, asked me to please make sure that no one obstructed his mother's view. He said, “You can see how short she is, less than five feet.”

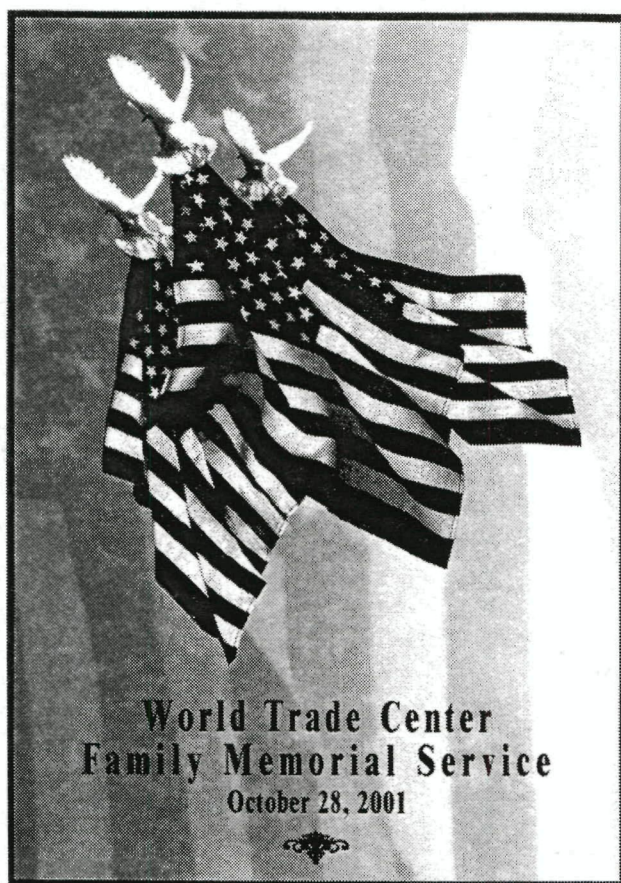
## **World Trade Center Memorial Service: October 28, 2001**

The service began with a processional that included His Eminence Edward Cardinal Egan, Archbishop of New York. Then, singing the “Star Spangled Banner,” was police officer Daniel Rodriguez of the NYPD. He had become a presence across the nation in recent weeks, appearing in his dress blues and singing the national anthem at Yankee Stadium.

Everyone was on his or her feet. A massive wall of mourners rose around the tiny figure to my right. When I saw her struggling to climb, I took her arm and helped her up onto the folding chair. I told her that she could grab on to me. “Hold on to my shoulders,” I said. She hesitated. “Don't worry you won't knock me over,” I told her.

I could feel her trembling as she removed her right hand from my shoulder and fumbled for a tissue inside her coat pocket. I reached into my pants pocket and handed her a hand-

kerchief. When I was picking out my clothes earlier in the morning I came across several unopened packets of white handkerchiefs. They belonged to my father who died seven years earlier. As I got dressed I thought that today my father would want somebody who needed it to have one of his handkerchiefs. At first she refused my offer, not wanting to impose. I urged her, "Please, take it. It's okay."



A program from the Memorial Service

As I stepped away from this family to exit the memorial service, my eyes were drawn to an attractive young woman with blonde hair wearing dark sunglasses. She held a framed 8 by 10 inch photo portrait of her husband. I can still see his face clearly. Earlier, a colleague of mine talked to the woman with the photo. She leaned over and whispered to her, "You know when I look at him I feel like smil-

ing." And the woman holding the photo of her husband smiled weakly and said, "That's the kind of guy he was, he made everyone smile."

After a few more goodbyes, I continued down the emergency lane. The organizer told us earlier that "God Bless America" was our cue to leave the site and head for the boat. I walked along a narrow path sandwiched between 15,000 mourners of every shade and age. Some were singing, some crying, and some holding up photos of lost loved ones. Passing me in the opposite direction was a woman who was hooked up to a respirator. Emergency personnel wheeled her away on a stretcher, while a companion walked alongside wearing a surgical mask.

Many mourners wore surgical masks. The odor of the smoldering ruins was strong and distinctive. After three hours, I could feel something accumulating inside my throat. My imagination jumped ahead ten years. I wondered about the health risk to those who have been exposed daily to the toxins rising from Ground Zero. I thought about a photojournalist that I met who barely escaped the attack. He referred to his assignment that day as "a field trip into hell." Maybe this is what hell smells like, I thought.

### The Tyranny of Imagination

After walking several blocks to the Hudson River, we boarded a boat and headed back to the Pier. It would be about a thirty-minute ride. As we drifted away from Ground Zero, I tried to wrap my mind around what I just came from. The idea of 15,000 mourners at a gravesite for thousands of murder victims in a location less than an hour from my home was hard to absorb.

I thought about the dozens of people I met in recent weeks who escaped and their surreal descriptions of the morning of 9/11, images and sensations that will never leave them: the odor of jet fuel; sweat-drenched firefighters in full gear climbing up stairs and

urging everyone else to head down; women bursting from the buildings carrying shoes in hand in order to run faster; people jumping to their deaths rather than being burned alive; and frantic figures scattering from the site holding food trays overhead to avoid the blizzard of debris, running as fast as their legs would carry them past stretch limousines with assorted airplane parts jutting from the hoods.

One woman, an Empire BlueCross BlueShield employee, told me that when she exited the building the first thing she did was look up. Almost immediately she saw the second plane crash into tower two. She said that before she could run to safety she had to find another witness to confirm what she saw. "I thought I was going crazy, hallucinating," she said. The horrifying images of those who escaped are rivaled only by the tyranny of imagination that now plagues the bereaved.

Weeks before the memorial service we had been receiving calls at the agency from businesses, local government, the New York City Fire Department, and local schools and community groups.

We also received direct calls from people who escaped and families who lost loved ones. One call was from a parent whose eleven-year-old son Danny refused to eat. His father was missing. Through Danny's story, I learned about the tyranny of imagination. Danny imagined his father to be alive in his office in the World Trade Center and trapped, alone and starving. If his father couldn't eat, Danny reasoned, then he wouldn't eat.

### **A Community Agency Responds**

As the leading community-based children's mental health center on Long Island, we anticipated an avalanche of calls from individuals and institutions. We knew that how we organized our efforts would be critical. We also knew that there is no blueprint for the unprecedented.

How did we respond? On September 11<sup>th</sup>, several top staff gathered to make a plan.

First, all staff members directly affected by the attack were encouraged to do whatever they needed to do for themselves and their families. Second, staff members were directed to contact all agency clients to check in and make themselves available as needed. We knew about the potential effects of the disaster on persons with less exposure but who had significant risk factors such as prior unresolved trauma or loss. Third, the agency would extend its hours and days of operation. Fourth, we would make a list of staff willing to make themselves available for special assignments including responding to individual and family crises, providing consultations to schools, leading groups for surviving family members of deceased firefighters, and offering support to displaced employees who escaped and lost colleagues. This was how we started. Soon thereafter we addressed how to meet the ongoing needs of our own staff, soon to be steeped in the recovery effort.

### **Preparing for the Unprecedented**

Within 24 hours of the terrorist attack there was a request from an employee assistance program. Professionals were needed to meet with court personnel in New York City. I was one of two who volunteered. The "debriefing," as the EAP director called it, was to take place all day on Friday, September 14<sup>th</sup>. There were no further details or instructions.

I took down travel information, identified a contact person, and wondered what I would do when I got there. I figured that I would draw on my clinical, group work, and crisis intervention experience. Intuitively, I started reaching for frames of reference.

One of my assignments fifteen years ago was to meet with a group called Parents of Murdered Children (POMC). The lay leaders for the group, a bereaved husband and wife who lost their son, called the county executive's office and said that the group was

“stuck” and needed some assistance. I learned from that experience that trying to act smart was a big mistake. A colleague from another agency took a prescriptive stance, while I sat quietly. Being there, listening, and bearing witness was where it was at. In time I was accepted, enabling me to help the group to identify their need to do more than repeatedly tell their stories.

They expressed a need to take social action. I learned from them about secondary victimization at the hands of various bureaucracies. In time, they moved their meeting place to the agency to accommodate their growing membership. They became effective advocates, influencing legislation and treatment of crime victims and their families. My experience with POMC also taught me about the value of moving from support to social action.

I remembered another group, a group of kids I once worked with from changing families. One prospective group member witnessed the murder of his mother at the hands of his father. Some of my colleagues didn't think he should join the group. They reasoned that he would vicariously traumatize everyone else. In other words, he would freak out the other kids. I insisted that he be included. He did well in the group, spoke as freely as he chose to, and was readily accepted by the others. I learned from that experience to always err on the side of inclusiveness.

I remembered my part-time job as a crisis worker. The beeper would go off and soon I was in the emergency room or police station with little time to prepare. I learned from that experience that by assuming a stance of uncertainty and cultivating a part of my mind reserved for the unknown, I could cut myself some slack and learn from the inside out. After all, no one is an expert at another's experience. Inside out, that's the way to go.

How does one prepare for the unprepared? Listening and bearing witness, offering groups to reduce isolation and foster

social connection, and learning from the inside out. It was a start. After all, social workers always talk about learning by doing. This was as good a time as any to do just that. I had to rely on what I already knew and, most of all, be flexible. It was also important for me to say to myself, “I'm not in this alone.” Many would be spending time with individuals, families, and groups who were struggling with the aftershock of 9/11. We struggle ourselves. Emotionally no one has been spared.

### **Zero Degrees of Separation**

So, three days after the attack I went to the Supreme Court to meet with court personnel. I met with three groups for about one-and-a-half hours each. Participation was voluntary.

The groups included individuals with missing relatives or friends, individuals with relatives or friends confirmed dead, individuals who were in the World Trade Center complex during the attack, individuals with family members who barely escaped, individuals who witnessed the attack and collapse of the Twin Towers from courthouse windows, and others who heard about it, like many of us, on television, radio, or through word of mouth. All were deeply affected. Most were in a state of disbelief. Following are my reflections on the day.

When I first arrived, court officers confiscated my pocketknife. I learned that this is a new policy at the courthouse. Prior to the World Trade Center attack, any blade less than four inches was okay.

I met with my contact person, gathered some information, and quickly suggested how to organize groups. Knowing something about planning groups was invaluable. There were three groups of 8 to 12 people. We met in a vacant courtroom where I had arranged chairs around two long adjacent prosecution and defense tables. I asked that there be no observers.

While I was waiting for my first group a

court officer stopped by and told me, "Today should be interesting." When I asked him what he meant. He said, "It's foreclosure Friday." He explained that every Friday there is an auction of foreclosed property and, typically, about two hundred Arab-Americans participate. This seemed to signal growing unease with people of Middle Eastern descent.

Although there were many differences among the participants, there was common ground in their struggle to cope. Many signs and symptoms of trauma and stress were reported. These included numbness, shock, headaches, loss of appetite, aches and pains, frequent trips to the bathroom, sleeplessness, flashbacks, disbelief, startle response to loud noises and especially airplanes, helplessness, gruesome nightmares, anger, uncertainty, guilt, and fear.

Fear was a powerful theme. Many felt that the courthouse was unsafe. During one group meeting, a female court officer came in to search for explosives. We later learned that a bomb threat had been called in. She looked under chairs and desks and behind the elevated area where the judge sits. She never said a word. She just searched. Several group members nodded in agreement with one who said, "I feel like we are a target in this courthouse."

Many group members reported having difficulty regulating and expressing emotions. In every group at least one or two people wept openly, women and men. In every group at least one person bolted from the room and then came back. More than one person said, "I can't stop crying." And more than one said, "I can't cry." More than a few were angry.

There was anger at the government. "How could they let this happen?" they wondered. There was strong sentiment among a few to strike back. There were some not-so-veiled signs of bias towards people of Middle Eastern descent.

Many shared feelings of disbelief, saying

how surreal it all seems. One group member said, "I am in a semi-daze; I feel like I am not even here."

Guilt was a powerful theme, especially guilt about going on with mundane day-to-day activities. This was balanced by the belief that showing strength and not giving in to terrorism was necessary. A court officer said he felt insignificant, like "a grain of sand." He said he felt helpless and wondered if he was going crazy.

A group member who lamented, "Aren't our children entitled to the life we enjoyed," best expressed the loss of innocence.

Someone's son escaped from the 78<sup>th</sup> floor. He took the stairs. His coworkers waited for the elevator. They didn't survive. His mother through sobs retold the son's story. When he emerged from the building, she told us, he witnessed flaming bodies falling from the sky. Two colleagues held her hands as she told the story.

In each group, members reached out to comfort one another through physical contact and understanding words. In one group a woman who said she couldn't understand why she hadn't cried was brought to tears by another's pain over a missing sister.

Despite the pain, all three groups welcomed humor. A court officer who loves to dance said he'd never dance again. Later, when the group was discussing ways to cope with stress, it was recommended that he teach the group how to dance. The image brought laughter and momentary relief from tension.

In closing, participants said, "It was good to vent," "It's good to get it out," "It's good to know you're not alone," and "It's good to know you're not crazy."

I was struck by the difference between what I was first told about these people and the reality. I had been advised that not too many people were personally affected. I discovered that everyone was profoundly affected. The experience generated empathic connections, fostered mutual support, re-

duced isolation, and normalized people's responses and reactions to a surreal situation.

I remain deeply moved by the intensity of the experience and the participants' ability to reach out to one another. It confirmed for me what I was already feeling. All of our lives are changed forever and to move forward we need each other. I knew that experiences like this, in groups, would be important for people in other settings and workplaces. And so I discovered a new frame of reference for the work ahead.

I discovered from this experience that the culture of people's associations in the workplace and other settings had to accommodate to the disaster. I felt that in order for September 11<sup>th</sup> not to cause alienation, people needed permission and support to tell their stories and share ongoing difficulties and concerns. This would foster social connection, reduce alienation, and help people to cope with their reactions to the terrorist attack and anxiety associated with war in Afghanistan and domestic threats such as bioterrorism. My experience in the courthouse helped me to understand in a deeper way that trauma isolates and atrophies otherwise healthy relationships, preventing them from growing.

### **Taking Care of Ourselves**

The leadership of the agency created various opportunities for the staff and board of directors to tell their stories and share concerns. It required thinking "out of the box." At the October board meeting, at which the traditional yearly strategic planning agenda was abandoned, board members and administrative staff debriefed and defused. After the meeting, a past president of the agency described the experience as a "defining moment for the organization." It galvanized the board's commitment at a critical time, stimulated a course of action for supporting the development of our trauma and bereavement services, and strengthened the bond between board

and staff.

Debriefing and defusing is only the beginning. We are learning from one another that the lessons we will offer to the traumatized for coping with the disaster also apply to us. In time we would learn about "vicarious PTSD" and "compassion fatigue" and "secondary traumatic stress disorder," fancy terms for our own vulnerability from too much caring and too little self-caring. Eating well, exercising, going easy on caffeine, getting sufficient rest, and... well, everything we advise to others now applies to us. We're really all in this one together.

### **Parade of Grief**

On the boat ride back to the pier, it was more comforting thinking about the pride of being associated with a committed organization and dedicated colleagues than being tormented by what brought me there in the first place.

As the pier came into view, I knew that many families would soon be arriving to collect urns with ashes from Ground Zero. Each family would also be given an American flag. If the deceased were Veterans, families would receive a special plaque acknowledging their service to the United States. And a few would get the rest of my father's handkerchiefs.

My job was to accompany families to any one of dozens of booths occupied by Red Cross workers. As each family approached a booth, a Red Cross worker would recite a few well-rehearsed lines of condolence and then hand them a single urn and flag.

After they collected urns and flags, I accompanied families to a communal area where they could have a bite to eat. If people needed to talk, there was an informal spot with comfortable chairs and couches. Most did not choose this option.

Two sisters asked me if they could go to the photo wall where family members posted thousands of snapshots of the missing. They said they wanted to write something on their

brother's photo. I escorted them to a wall that was bordered on the base by hundreds of teddy bears that were placed there by family members of those who died. There were lots of teddy bears at the pier. There were also therapy dogs on hand. These gentle creatures were sprinkled about, offering their intuitive gifts to comfort the children, and grown ups too.

Many of my colleagues had been in this place weeks before, staffing what was known as Children's Corner, spending time with the children while their parents presented DNA samples or applied for death certificates. A family assistance center was also set up on Long Island to offer a more convenient setting for the thousands of surviving family members living in the suburbs just east of New York City.

Photos and intimately detailed descriptions lined the walls inside and outside of the pier. They were also posted on buildings and makeshift walls that surrounded Ground Zero and in various other locations throughout the city. Loved ones described ankle bracelets with nameplates, dimples on elbows, and birthmarks of various shapes and sizes. And there were love poems and pleas for help in finding the missing. Following is a handwritten page I saw posted in Penn Station:

**Ray Valdez, age 39, wearing khaki pants, navy blue long sleeved shirt**

*"My brother arrived at work at 8:30 on September 11. His building was hit soon after. He called home on a borrowed cell. He left this message: 'Liz it's me, Ray. My building has been hit. I made it to the 78<sup>th</sup> floor. I'm okay but will remain here to help evacuate people. See you soon.' Those were my brother's last words. We have physically searched every hospital on the list provided to us. He was always the type to help one in need. If anyone has seen Raymond please call. God Bless."*

I offered an older couple who lost a daughter in the disaster a bag for the urn and flag. Macy's had provided paper shopping bags with handles. Macy's bags will never look the same to me. As I helped them with the bag, I saw the tears in their eyes. I was a little surprised when the gentleman said how well taken care of he felt.

In a conversation a little while later, three brothers shared a slightly different sentiment. Ranging in age from mid-twenties to early thirties, they told me that their brother, a firefighter, left no wife or child behind and that both of their parents were deceased. They wanted to know why they couldn't have three urns, one for each brother. They were also angry about the lack of benefits provided by the fire department. "Just because he didn't leave a wife or children behind, it's as if he doesn't count," said the eldest. The brothers signaled something that was coming, something that would replace the warm feeling associated with the abundance of good will generated in the aftermath of this disaster. Coming are disillusionment, frustration, anger, and feeling overwhelmed with the inevitable bureaucratic nightmare of red tape.

**Reconstruction, Recovery, and Reaching Out**

Seven years later, survivors of the Oklahoma City terrorist attack continue to struggle. Many are still in counseling and some, particularly rescue workers, have only just begun. Marriages have ended, custody of children has been lost due to new addictions that have developed, and there have been more than a handful of suicides related to the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building. There are also signs of getting through the trauma. An important part of recovery and reconstruction is taking some action that represents triumph over helplessness and despair. We learned about this first hand.

One of the services offered by the agency in the aftermath of 9/11 is bereavement groups

for children who lost parents in the World Trade Center. One group worker made contact with an Oklahoma organization to exchange information and experiences in order to prepare for the work ahead. One day a large box addressed to the children in the bereavement groups arrived in the mail. It came from a group of elementary school children in Oklahoma City.

Inside the box were 55 teddy bears. A laminated card bordered by American flags was hanging from string around each teddy bear's neck. Each card contained a message written by an Oklahoma City child to a child from New York. One of the cards said:

*"Dear New York,  
I am very sorry about the plane crash.  
And I am very sorry if someone special to  
you died in it."*

Accompanying each Teddy Bear was a plastic bag with several items inside and a note explaining their significance:

*"To the families and friends of the lost:  
A candle to remind you of the light they  
brought to your lives,*

*A (chocolate) kiss to remind you of the  
love they continue to send,*

*A flag to remind you that America will  
never forget,*

*A postcard for when you need to reach  
out,*

*We promise to be here."*

Everything feels different to me now. I remember a conversation I had many years ago with two parents whose son had been murdered. The father said, "It's six years since our twenty-year-old son was stabbed to death in his own home in the middle of a sunny afternoon. The pain of our loss is still sharp and tears are never far from the surface."

Many years from now when September 11<sup>th</sup> is remembered as a national day of loss, I'm sure I'll think back and try to recall what things felt like before that sunny summer morning.





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