

THREE DAYS: A PERSONAL MEMORY

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Soon after the collapse of the Twin Towers, the author went to work as a volunteer for the Red Cross. In the chaotic days after the tragedy, many volunteers found themselves offering assistance in unexpected ways.

For me, September 11th started as a beautifully sunny, late summer day. When I heard the first plane hit the World Trade Center Tower I, like most New Yorkers, believed a terrible tragic accident had occurred. Our students had arrived at school and gone to classes before any of us knew this was not just an accident. Since I had a small portable TV in my office, colleagues were clustered around it and we saw the second plane hit. In an instant, our world changed. Someone realized that we had to interrupt classes and try to help our students, some of whom might have had friends and/or relatives at the World Trade Center. It was hard to grasp the magnitude of the event, and as I went to the classroom I wondered how I would break the news. I interrupted a class and said that I had some disturbing news. Their first reaction on hearing the news was a total silence. Gradually, some asked questions, most of which I could not answer, and several took out their cell phones and went out to make calls. I sat with the students for a while and tried to help them connect with their fear and plan for what was next for them. It was not until I returned to my office that I learned the buildings had collapsed.

A colleague who had Red Cross disaster training said he was going to the Red Cross to volunteer, and some of us decided to also volunteer. The Red Cross headquarters is only a few blocks from our school, and by the time we got there, slightly after 10am, other potential volunteers had begun to arrive. There

were probably a dozen of us with mental health training, a mixture of social workers and psychologists. After a long period of filling out paper work, waiting for the issuance of Red Cross Mental Health team badges, and making calls to our homes to say we did not know when we would be back, we waited to be sent out. Feeling a tremendous sense of frustration, we waited for the vans to take us where we were needed. Some of the volunteer psychologists heard from their private patients and left. Others in our mental health group thought of the possible risks in what they were about to do and, given their obligations, wisely chose not to join the teams being sent out.

None of us were prepared for the chaos and disorganization that follows such a disaster. There was doubt about where we could best be used. Much misinformation was flowing in, and it was hard to get a true sense of what was going on. After what seemed like many hours, the team I was assigned to was dispatched to the Bus Terminal where we had been told many people needed help. When we arrived, we found the building evacuated except for several people in the clinic who had been at the World Trade Center and were in shock. While several of the team stayed with these persons, the rest of us went to mingle with the crowd outside the building to provide support for people who were trying to get home from a "locked down" city. None of this work seemed important given what we imagined the need was at Ground Zero. In

retrospect, I can see how our being there and listening provided reassurance and stability in an unstable world. Later, we were sent to the Pennsylvania Railroad Station where we again mingled with the crowd and gave support to persons who were finding it difficult to cope. One person who I talked to that evening was a homeless person who had lived in the area of the WTC and was now seeking alternate shelter for the night. Late in the evening, I returned to Red Cross for "debriefing," which at the time seemed more like reporting as the eyes and ears of the Red Cross at the disaster. So that first day I learned that, just like a person's coping strategy can be overwhelmed by a traumatic event, an organization can also be overwhelmed. Those who wish to help need to be willing, through our patient waiting, to be a stabilizing force.

I arrived home late. Since I live in Brooklyn not far from the water front, my neighborhood looked like it had snowed while I was gone. The streets and cars were covered with white ash and occasional bits of paper that had blown over from Manhattan. I left home early the next day after a fitful sleep. Stopping at the office to leave messages saying I would not be in, I returned to the Red Cross. Since I already had my Red Cross badge, I went immediately upstairs to the mental health area to be dispatched. It was still a chaotic scene with well over 100 mental health professionals there to volunteer. There were many more volunteers than could be processed, and it still was not clear where people were needed. It was only due to the fact that a former student of mine was assigning people to sites that I was relatively quickly assigned to go to Staten Island. The Staten Island Red Cross office was presumed to need volunteers because many police and firemen live there, because from a number of schools the site could be seen and children had seen the building destroyed, and because that was a site through which many rescue worker were being dispatched to Ground

Zero. As we headed downtown, we picked up six exhausted firemen returning to Ground Zero to search for colleagues. Their discussion gave us the first reliable information about the very heavy loss of life and the emotional pain of those who lost friends and colleagues. We dropped them off close to the site where we could see the smoke. The area smelled very much like burning electrical wires, and our throats hurt.

When we arrived at the office in Staten Island, it was unclear where we should be assigned. It was finally decided that we should go to the ferry terminal to provide debriefing and support for rescue teams returning from the disaster site. By the time we finally got to the ferry about half the team decided that they had to leave to see their private patients or because of other obligations. I began to understand why the Red Cross looks for people willing to make commitments to those long 12-hour shifts. The rest of us spent the day listening to exhausted firemen from many different states. This was not easy because I think none of us felt completely comfortable intruding on the personal pain we saw all around us. But we did it because we knew that many were not in a position to reach out to us.

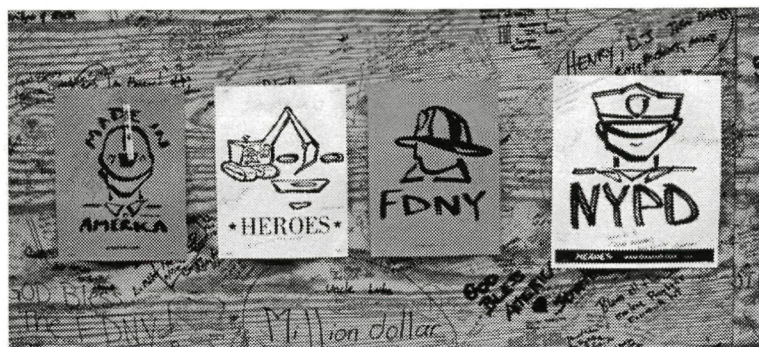
As we looked over at Manhattan, we could see the smoke. It all seemed so unreal on that cool sunny day as I sat with a fireman who was trying to get used to the idea that so many had been lost, and who struggled with his need to go back to that site of danger. Ground Zero clearly still seemed to be a place filled with danger with a continuing risk of collapsing buildings. Yet firemen, EMS, and others were desperately looking for survivors, and exhausted men were coming home sleeping a few hours, taking a shower, and going back to the site. It seemed that I was doing so little, and yet it seemed to be appreciated, even if not everyone was ready or willing to talk. Late in the day, we returned to Manhattan via the ferry. As we crossed the bay, I

talked with firemen returning to the site. They talked about their anguish and anger, and I realized that the ferry was an ideal place to provide debriefing and support. We drove up through a lower Manhattan crowded with emergency vehicles and covered with inches of white dust and papers. It was then that I got my first real glimpse of the awesome damage at Ground Zero.

When I arrived at the Red Cross headquarters, I called the Staten Island office as promised and gave them my assessment of the situation at the terminal. I suggested that persons should be assigned to ride the ferry. I then went for debriefing. I was beginning to realize that I, too, needed to talk. I realize now that my need to talk about what I was experiencing made it difficult for friends and family to be around me, but talking helped me survive. It is so hard to find the words to describe what in some ways is not describable and disturbing to the listener. As I waited for my debriefing, I met some people who were obviously deeply troubled by what they had seen and heard. Among them were some who, it seemed to me, should not go out again. The experience had touched something deep inside them, and they were barely keeping their heads above water. In our group debriefing I got to know some persons who had been working at the morgue at Ground Zero. One spoke passionately that what the men at the site most needed was American flags - a symbol to hold on to in this time of chaos and death.

When I arrived at the Red Cross the next day, I met one of the group I had met yesterday and she invited me to join their team at Ground Zero. The young woman who had spoken so passionately about the need for American flags had overnight arranged for a donation of over 100 small American flags that we picked up on our way downtown. I must admit that initially I had some trouble with giving out flags. Maybe it brought back memories of the Vietnam war era, or maybe

it was related to having always questioned the use of nationalistic symbols. But seeing exhausted rescuers brighten up when they received a flag, having persons search for us just to get a flag, and later seeing the flags attached to so many of the rescue worker helmets reminded me once again that it is not what I believe but what my client believes that is important.



Memorial Wall on Fulton Street by Ground Zero

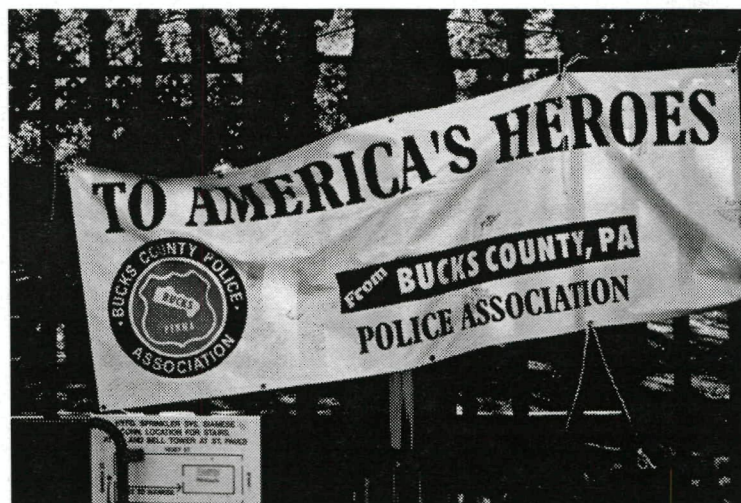
This was an exhausting day filled with differing tasks and experiences in a surreal world of crushed cars and fire trucks, burned out and deserted buildings, air that burned your throat when you took off your mask, and everywhere that thick layer of what was once cement. After giving out the flags, we helped unload a Red Cross truck filled with food into a former store used to feed the workers. One quickly learns in a situation like this that there are no clearly defined tasks. You do whatever is needed, and sometimes unloading a truck is what is needed to stabilize a situation. During the day, I was called to mediate a dispute that was about to become violent about who had the right to give out the water that had been delivered. I came to realize when everyone's nerves are on edge, just being there to listen can be a service. I talked with a policeman who had been on the scene when the plane hit and was filled with guilt that he had not saved more people. It was as though he had not saved anyone, when in fact

he had saved many lives. Eventually, he was able to tell me of his experiences and frustrations in leading people to safety. There were so many different experiences that day: the shaken young man with his search dog for whom this was his first disaster. The resting firemen who said, "It is not us who need you; it is our wives. We have our brother firemen. Who do they have?" The experience of dashed hopes that they may have found someone alive, and the silence that follows the evacuation of a body. The smell of a body bag as it was carried past me on the way to the temporary morgue. I met people, both men and women, from all walks of life who gave up whatever they were doing to come and work on the line. I ran with others to the boats to be evacuated into the bay when it seemed another building would collapse. Later in the day, a National Guard team called me to help with an elderly woman and her disabled brother who had been found living in one of the deserted buildings. It was clear that beyond the trauma of the event, the woman had emotional difficulties. I spent time helping her accept the fact that they needed to leave the area, dealt with her resistance to having contact with her son in Long Island, helped her make contact with him, and finally connected her to a Red Cross housing resource. These and so many other moments

crowd into my memory as I relive that day.

At the end of the day, I hitched a ride with a police car leaving the Ground Zero area and went back to the Red Cross for debriefing. By now I knew this was not an optional activity if one was to survive. The next day I left New York for a few days and did not return to Ground Zero until several months later. Even then the sounds, smells, and tensions were still with me. As I left the subway that day several months later, I immediately recognized the smell in the air around the World Trade Center and felt the tension throughout my body. I knew then that those moments at Ground Zero had never left me. How much harder it must be for those who were truly part of the tragedy.

My three days had made me proud to be a social worker. While others left to meet their private patients and other commitments, social workers by and large stayed. While others did not know what to say and often lectured people on how they should feel, social workers knew how to obtain resources and, more importantly, knew how to be there with those in pain. They knew how to reach out to people and did not expect people to come to them. They were there for those who needed them and were able to accept people at whatever point in their traumatic voyage they were.



The Bucks County Police Association in Pennsylvania shows their support at the Ground Zero Memorial

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