

REFLECTIONS ON 9/11: RELATED DISASTER MENTAL HEALTH ACTIVITIES WITH FAMILIES OF FLIGHT 93

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The events of 9/11 have led to many community celebrations of remembrance and reflection. In one small town in Pennsylvania, the program sponsored by the local high school involved reading letters from people who served at the front lines during times of crisis. The mother of the author's godchild asked him to write a letter for her to read at that event, and the main text of this paper is a copy of his letter to her.

October 5, 2001

Dear Lara,

Your mom asked me to write a letter that could be used as part of the upcoming program at your school. She thought folks there might be interested in the reflections of a tired and deeply saddened American Red Cross (ARC) Disaster Mental Health (DMH) volunteer who has been helping out since the terrorist tragedy struck our nation.

September 11th began as just another day for most Americans. Things changed quickly, though, as the hideous terrorist plot began to unfold. I was in my office at the Northampton County Mental Health office that morning helping several other staff members complete a physical office move that had begun the day before. We were positioning desks, file cabinets, and other pieces of office furniture. Someone got word that there had been a plane crash into the World Trade Center in New York City and my coworkers scrambled to get our TV set working to see the news. I simply kept moving furniture.

Before too long, the office was buzzing as a second plane crashed into the second Tower, another one hit the Pentagon, and another crashed in western Pennsylvania. Most work came to a standstill as more and more coworkers were watching the news or were trying to contact family members and friends. I kept doing what I could to complete the office move.

My office mates kept passing by and tell-

ing me headlines that seemed more and more surreal as events unfolded and the towers began to collapse. Some may have thought it odd that I kept working on my tasks for the day. Others knew I'd already taken a phone call from the Red Cross placing me on alert to travel wherever I was needed as soon as my destination could be determined. I have been a disaster relief volunteer for over ten years, and I am a member of ARC's Aviation Incident Response (AIR) Team. Our role is to support family members and everyone else involved in the rescue/recovery process when such incidents occur. Until I was dispatched, continuing the physical activity of the office move was something concrete I could do to help my own office staff as much as I could before I left the area.

By noon, our county offices were closed. I went home and packed, finally watching some TV coverage. Folks in the disaster services field plan for "worst case" scenarios, and yet no one imagined this could happen. By the time my kids got home from school, I'd gotten my assignment. I was to drive to the Johnstown area to support the relief operation for the families of those lost on United Flight 93—the "heroes" flight on which the passengers managed to stop the terrorists before they reached their intended target.

For the next 12 days, I served as the coordinator of the Family Assistance Center (FAC). The FAC is a "safe haven" spot where family members can come together and

share their thoughts, feelings, and memories with one another. There, they can also talk to mental health workers and members of the clergy, doing so in a secure place designed to protect their privacy. Many prefer to avoid the media, lawyers, and any others who might further victimize them at a time when they are quite vulnerable.

Part of our role is to organize family member visits to the crash site, and these are usually followed by a multi-faith memorial service. Most surviving family members need to visit the site, a visit that helps them accept their loss and begin to move forward with their suddenly altered lives. Disasters (and other traumatic life events) will always *change* us, but they need not *damage* us. Our work in disaster relief is based upon the fact that people are incredibly strong and resilient. Each of us builds character as we work our way through events such as these. Gradually, the victims retake control of their lives and shift from feeling like victims to feeling like survivors.

About 500 family members and close friends of those lost on Flight 93 were served by our ARC team. Helping us serve them were the warm wishes and prayers of people all over the world. We received a marvelous array of flowers, cards, banners, gift baskets, comfort kits, and letters of support. Especially helpful were the touching messages from innocent children, some of whom attend a school that was near the crash site. These things all gave great comfort to the families and, when we closed the FAC, these items became part of the permanent memorial to those brave souls who lost their lives while protecting the lives of others.

My experiences with mass casualty incidents always sadden me (something that generally hits us as we end our work) and this was no exception. In fact, this one was worse for me than usual. I cried off and on, all the way home from western Pennsylvania. For several days thereafter, I found myself having what I've jokingly dubbed "random acts of

crying" triggered by certain songs, pictures, or news reports. That ran its course but, as I write this letter, I'm tearing up again. I chose to write this for you as a way to pass my time while on a bus ride to New York City. I've had two weeks rest and now I'm on my way to join the larger, ongoing ARC operation there.

Disaster work gives people an interesting perspective on life. For instance, when someone works as many major disasters as I have, some of the pettiness of day-to-day activities can be more easily ignored, and it's easier to keep focused on what's important. During times of tragedy, one thing that is very important is support—support from family members, support from friends, support from communities of faith, and support from others who care enough to share something of themselves when people are in need.

I'm truly privileged to be able to help out as I do when terrible things like this happen. Others may think me a bit strange (or crazy) to give up my time and volunteer as I do. The fact is, the most rewarding moments of my professional career have all come to me as an unintended and unexpected result of my volunteer work with ARC.

As my bus approaches New York, in the morning mist I can now see the altered skyline at the southern end of this great city. I find myself thinking about the thousands of people who never got to say goodbye to their loved ones, people who never got to finish living out their dreams. Some of them also may never have experienced the joy of helping others who needed help in a time of crisis. Please encourage the audience members to let go of any animosity they harbor toward others and avoid putting off showing loved ones they care. Life is too precious a commodity to squander; as the events of 9/11 have shown us, it can be taken from us in an instant. And please encourage the audience to share some of their time, talents, and treasure helping others. They will, in turn, find they get

back far more than they give.

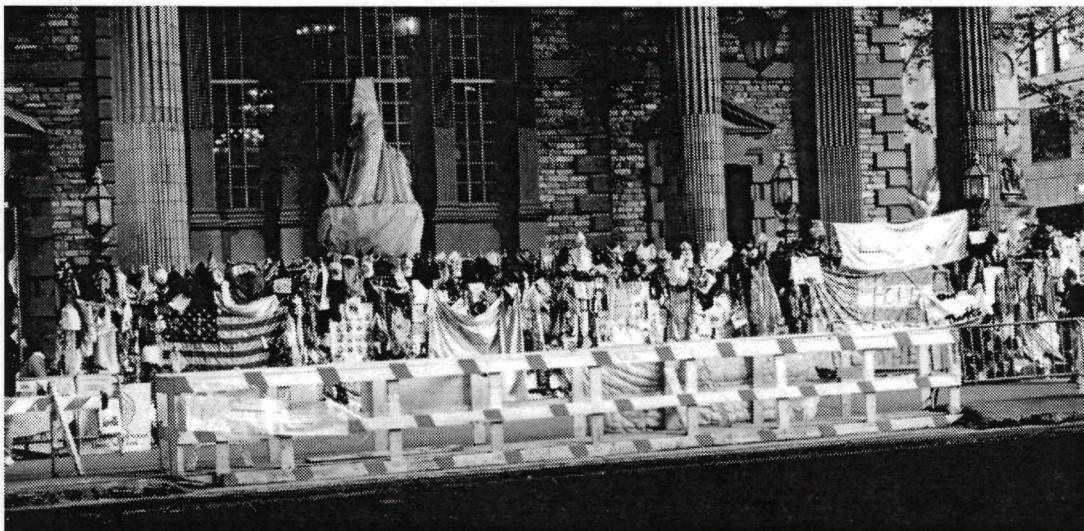
Love,
Uncle John

Postscript

The combined experiences of working in Pennsylvania and New York were, for me, an awesome reminder of humanity at its best and at its worst. As someone who enjoys writing, I always tend to begin my own search for meaning in stressful events via written reflection. Rather than write things that would be too upsetting for my goddaughter and her schoolmates, I shared only a few things in my letter and I tried to keep a positive focus. The following paragraphs offer a broader picture of my work and some of my more personal reactions to it.

involved at that time. From 9/11 to 10/19, over 73,000 DMH contacts were made by these workers with family survivors, friends, rescue/recovery team members, construction/cleanup workers, and fellow members of the various disaster relief teams. I was struck by the size and scope of the relief effort; despite having so many people to help, we needed more. Standing at Ground Zero and viewing the horror, I found myself thinking that the TV coverage did not properly depict the magnitude of the devastation, nor the great needs of the victims' families, coworkers and friends.

The Family Assistance Center, located on Pier 94, was as big as several jumbo jet hangars. In addition to the large group of ARC workers, there were people from many government agencies, social service organizations, support groups, etc. Therapy dogs and



St. Paul's Church on Broadway and Fulton near Ground Zero

On October 5th, I traveled to New York City and began 15 days work as the Deputy Officer (second-in-charge) for the American Red Cross (ARC) Disaster Mental Health (DMH) function for the World Trade Center (WTC) operation. There, I supervised several other Assistant Officers as we continued to manage the efforts of some 1875 DMH workers (1500 spontaneous local volunteers and 375 National ARC volunteers) who were

their handlers worked the room, in addition to all the other supports. Three or four site visits for families were run from there daily. People were taken by ferry boat/water taxi to a dock near Ground Zero and then walked in to the viewing location. New York also had many other work sites, including our headquarters office, eight Service Centers (at peak), kitchens, warehouses, lots of mass care emergency response vehicles, a Casualty

Contact Unit, and two Respite Centers (RC). These RCs were for recovery workers, police, fire, and National Guard personnel who were working on the cleanup effort. They could eat, nap, get a massage, watch TV, surf the net, get first aid, talk to clergy and DMH. Everyone involved was doing superb work.

In retrospect, I feel the Flight 93 operation was clearly the finest assignment I've ever had with ARC. My team there consisted of a superb group of volunteers, many of whom were on their first national assignment. The members immediately grasped their duties, dove in, functioned as a team, did whatever it took, and successfully completed the difficult mission. I was disappointed and even angry, at times, while working in New York, that things were not working as smoothly as they had in Pennsylvania. In New York, we had many workers who were causing additional and unnecessary problems, rather than being helpful, by letting their own needs supersede those of the operation. For instance, some folks did not seem to have the patience and/or flexibility to allow them to be successful in something this complex—a problem that arises in all large operations. The most troubling to me, though, were people who felt they had wasted their time and their “trauma expertise” in coming to New York, if they could not work right at Ground Zero. They had forgotten the parts of the ARC training that stressed the importance of DMH tasks at every work setting and/or they somehow lost the vision of our overall helping mission. Luckily, I did get to meet many folks who were fine examples of the same spirit and dedication that I'd seen in my western Pennsylvania team members, and that helped get me through the challenges posed each day by those who were the malcontents and trouble-makers.

There are many lasting memories from these events. One will be of standing next to several representatives of the Salvation Army during the second large memorial service for

Flight 93 and “passing the peace” (shaking hands and saying “peace be with you”) with them. Sometimes there is a rivalry between the ARC and the Salvation Army, but not at a time like this. Another series of Flight 93 memories is of our caravans of buses traveling in a motorcade to the crash site prior to the memorial services. Along our route we saw many patriotically decorated homes, many with memorial displays and signs in their yards. Police were stopping traffic at every major intersection. The officers would always come to attention and salute our passengers as we passed. There was also a larger memorial set up in the small town nearest the crash site, and beside it was always a crowd of people holding supportive signs and waving flags. These simple acts of reverence had me in tears each time we passed. In Pennsylvania and in New York we were able to draw strength from the many cards, letters, prayers, signs, banners, toys (especially the compassion bears), miscellaneous gifts, and floral arrangements that poured in from everywhere, and I cherish those memories.

There were some scary moments too, especially for my family (I tend to generally enjoy a robust sense of “healthy denial” that I will never be at-risk in my disaster relief work). As soon as the events of 9/11 began to unfold, I wanted to go somewhere and help out. My wife and kids accept that, but they were really glad I initially went to the Pennsylvania site rather than New York, fearing there was more potential risk there. By the time I did go to New York, they were more comfortable that things were safe there. That feeling was short lived, though, once the war began, as the National Guard presence there expanded and anthrax scares began. I got to experience one of those firsthand when, on my second-last day in town, our ARC Headquarters building was evacuated, and I found myself in the potentially contaminated group of early risers who had gotten in and had breakfast in a cafeteria where some suspicious,

sticky white powder had turned up. We were quarantined for a few hours while a HAZMAT crew examined the scene; then everyone was allowed back in the building. Officials took our local and home contact information in case it turned out to be the real thing, and that meant I had to tell my wife and kids in case anyone called there about it. They took it better than I imagined they would and, thankfully, it was not anthrax.

Since returning from my ARC DMH assignments at the WTC operation and in western Pennsylvania, I've especially welcomed the opportunities I have had to debrief, support, and thank others for serving and to be debriefed/supported/thanked myself. In addition to that peer support, I want to stress the value of written expression, which is extremely important for both its cathartic, self-debriefing nature and, when the writings are shared, its educational and supportive benefits. I've noticed that more and more people seem to be taking advantage of personal e-mail messages and postings to e-mail listserv groups. This public sharing offers stress inoculation to those considering joining the work and provides a great deal of comfort and peer support to all who have already been out there doing this difficult and yet personally rewarding work.

One of the first things I saw when I arrived in the ARC New York headquarters building was a prayer that simply stated what I see as our mission in disaster relief:

*Lord, take me where you want
me to go; let me meet who you
want me to meet;
tell me what you want me to say;
and keep me out of your way.*

Father Mychal Judge, OFM
NYFD Chaplain
R.I.P. September 11, 2001

For those who may not have heard of Father Mychal (or may not recall who he

was), I will also share this brief obituary:

Father Mychal will probably not be remembered as the first officially recorded fatality following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11th. His legacy as a caring Franciscan priest, mentor, and friend will solidify his memory in the hearts of all those he touched in the 68 years that he was alive. Becoming a fire chaplain in 1992 was a dream-come-true for Father Mychal. "I always wanted to be a priest or a fireman; now I'm both," he once said. His dedication to New York firefighters would be tested on the 11th of September. According to Cassian Miles, O.F.M., communications director for the Holy Name Province, Father Mychal was anointing a firefighter and office worker at the site. He removed his helmet in prayer and was fatally struck in the back of the head by falling debris.

St. Anthony Messenger
AmericanCatholic.org
10/19/01

Many of my reflections on 9/11 have been spiritual in nature. Spirituality issues seem to have taken on a more prominent role in many lives since these events. Historically there was a closer link between many mental health professions and spirituality and I'm pleased to see renewed and intensified interest as we grapple with changes in ourselves and our world. The longer I am involved in crisis intervention and disaster relief, the more I value resources that help address the spiritual issues that so closely relate to the mental health issues we face in this work. Grieving victims and helpers need to find suitable means and

opportunities for expressing their losses. Part of this comes out through our typical DMH interventions, especially defusing and debriefing, but these brief encounters can only do so much.

Expressions of grief can and should also be drawn out through encouragement of participation in well-planned, carefully timed memorial services.

*The grief that does not "speak"
in some way—through crying,
talking, rituals, tributes, or
creative expression—remains
unresolved.*

(Sarah York, 2000)

Sarah York has written an excellent book designed to help family members, clergy, funeral home staff members, hospice workers, and mental health professionals plan services and rituals that will help them say goodbye and begin to move forward with their lives. Here is the reference:

York, Sarah (2000). *Remembering Well: Rituals for Celebrating Life and Mourning Death*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

I received a preview copy from the publisher while I was in New York as they were willing to make a large donation of the books to ARC workers serving there. This is a marvelous book that is full of real-life stories and practical examples of ways to sensitively address all sorts of issues as families begin to face the difficult decisions that arise when they lose someone they love. Reading it (in small doses) upon my return home helped me process all I'd experienced while working these two assignments. Unfortunately, it also gave my family and friends more reason to question my mental state. In fact, I can remember overhearing one of the secretaries in my office telling another secretary, "He doesn't smile anymore" after I'd passed by them one day. Only my DMH colleagues could relate to this choice of somber reading material that

would, at times, restart my tears. It was what I needed at the time. My smile is back now.

One section of York's book contains suggested readings, prayers, and blessings. On pages 203-204 there is "A Litany of Remembrance" (see copy below) by Roland B. Gittelsohn that I've found to be especially helpful. Adapted from a modern Jewish liturgy, this has been used as a responsive reading at several memorial services that have followed aviation incidents, including the services for Flight 93. The service leader will generally read the first lines and the participants will reply by saying "we remember them." Following some incidents, we have also had this printed on small memorial cards that can be given to family members, friends, and all support staff who attend the site visits/memorial services. I never knew the original source until I read York's book.

*A Litany of Remembrance
Roland B. Gittelsohn*

*In the rising of the sun and in its going
down,
we remember them.*

*In the blowing of the wind and in the
chill of winter,
we remember them.*

*In the opening of buds and in the rebirth
of spring,
we remember them.*

*In the blueness of the sky and in the
warmth of summer,
we remember them.*

*In the rustling of leaves and in the
beauty of autumn,
we remember them.*

*In the beginning of the year and when it
ends,
we remember them.*

*When we are weary and in need of
strength,
we remember them.*

When we are lost and sick at heart,

we remember them.

When we have joys we yearn to share,
we remember them.

So long as we live, they too shall live, for
they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.

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