

# WHERE I SAT AND WHAT I KNEW

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On the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, I sat in horror and intrigue in front of my television set and watched the World Trade Center burn, smoke, then fall. Only a few miles away, thousands of people spent the last moments of their lives in terror as I sat helpless, crying. For the next several hours I was mesmerized by what I was seeing before me. Listening to the confusion and uncertainty about what might happen next, I feared for my life and for the lives of my loved ones. I knew I would never be the same.

On the morning of September 12<sup>th</sup>, I sat around a table in the main office of a school in East Harlem. At the time, I was the administrator of the school's after-school program. I had reported to the school as was required of all social workers, to be part of a crisis response team. As I listened to the other team members tell their personal stories of the prior day, I felt disconnected and numb. At times I felt as if I was actually outside of my body. Everything was terribly wrong. I kept asking myself, "How am I possibly going to help children make sense of this tomorrow?" I knew that people were looking to me for answers.

On the morning of September 13<sup>th</sup>, I sat and listened to the school principal, who had started less than a week before, brief the teachers and the rest of the school personnel about how the day was going to be structured. When I looked around the room, I saw teachers crying, shaking, looking dazed. I felt inexperienced, unprepared, unqualified. And

yet, I had been charged with the responsibility of providing support and crisis counseling to the school community. Although I was unsure of how the day would unfold, I knew the social worker in me would take over.

That same evening, I sat at a phone, facing a wall, in a long row of people. Several hours before, I had walked across town to The Red Cross. They took any person that fit into the category of "mental health worker," I didn't have to show identification or credentials. Squeezed into a van with ten other volunteers, I looked at unfamiliar, nervous faces. For eight hours, I helped man a missing person's hot line. As I listened to crying voices on the other end of the line, I wondered what was in store for these people. They begged me to tell them all I knew. I knew nothing.

On the morning of September 14<sup>th</sup>, I felt an intense resistance to being around people. I sat in my apartment debating whether or not to go to work. I was so angry. I called and said I would not be coming in. I went to church for the first time in a long time. I could not speak to God. I just wept. It was the only thing I knew how to do.

On the morning of September 17<sup>th</sup>, I sat in my office with the door closed. I cried as I spoke to a colleague on the phone and told her that I could not keep doing the job I had been doing for the past two years. September 11<sup>th</sup> had changed everything. I had to be happier in my work. My supervisor called to ask me why I had not come into work the

day before. I broke down. Before I knew it, I was resigning from my position. I knew I was taking a huge risk.

On the morning of September 18<sup>th</sup>, I sat and listened to my boss tell me that I was letting everyone down. I began to assure her that I wanted to stay at the agency but that I needed to work more closely with people. Her tone softened. We talked for a long time, trying to help each other make sense of the events of the past week. She questioned whether I was being too hasty in my decision. I explained how isolated and lonely I felt working behind a desk, pushing papers, being an administrator. I missed being in a direct service role. I missed doing what I was good at. I had been unhappy for a long time. I knew I was doing the right thing.

On the morning of September 19<sup>th</sup>, I sat and began making arrangements for my departure from the school in six weeks. I initiated a purposeful chain of events that would allow me to transition conscientiously out of my position, but not without moments of uncertainty and doubt. The next six weeks would be painful in many ways. I had to say goodbye to children and families I had known for close to two years. The staff team that I had struggled and grown with showed me respect and love. No one seemed to care about or understand my reasons for leaving. I did not expect them to. I knew that in this role, I could not effectively serve this community anymore.

On the morning of September 20<sup>th</sup>, I sat among peers. For the first time, I had the opportunity to process my experiences of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Sharing my thoughts and feelings in a safe space allowed me to feel whole again. As I gave voice to fear, confusion, grief, and anger, they took their rightful place in my consciousness... ever present but manageable... newfound teachers that would guide me on my ensuing journey. I knew that I had begun the healing process.

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