

A LUMP IN MY THROAT AND A GIFT FROM A FAR AWAY PLACE

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In November, after two months of providing bereavement counseling to the Long Island community, a box arrived from Oklahoma City that brought much needed joy and hope to the author, the team she worked with, and the children who received the gifts.

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center, our Long Island, New York, our agency went into overdrive working long intense hours to serve and support the community. We met with hundreds of children and adults in an effort to promote stabilization. We talked about reestablishing a sense of safety and encouraged individuals and families to cope with their feelings of fear, anger, anxiety, and sadness. We worked to support people's natural coping mechanisms and to get support groups up and running for those families who felt a need to 'connect' with other survivors.

We met with mothers and fathers whose adult children died that day. One man, Mr. W., called anonymously one morning and softly inquired as to what services we were providing for families. He stated he wasn't sure that he would take advantage of anything. He was hesitant to disclose exactly what loss he had experienced, but his careful inquiry let me know that whatever it was, he wasn't able to talk about it at this time. I tried to help him to feel safe and comfortable. I thought I had done a pretty good job. Before hanging up, he promised to call again soon to let me know what he would like to do. A week passed and then two, and then several more...and no call.

About two months later, Mr. W. called. He said that he was ready to come in. He explained that he had gone to a walk-in-center in the area but it was closing and he wanted to join an ongoing group. "Do you have a

group for parents who lost adult children in the World Trade Center?" he asked. We did. He went on to say that he lost his only two children, a son and a daughter, on September 11th. I could feel my breath being taken away. I marveled at the fact that he was still functioning and moving forward.

He now credits the group for being one of the reasons he is able to get up each day. His quiet courage in the face of such devastating loss is one of the reasons I am able to get up each day and face the burden of this work.

We also met with siblings, fiancées, new brides, spouses with young children, and, of course, the children, from 4 years of age to 16 years of age. Meeting with the children the first time was difficult. I didn't know how much they knew, or would feel comfortable in asking. Billy's daddy was a businessman and Billy was sure that his dad was alive in the rubble at the World Trade Center. He knew his father would be returning home. Or so I thought.

One evening in the group the other children were sharing stories about going to the viewing platform erected especially for the WTC families. As each of them who had been there told their story, Billy proudly exclaimed, "I love to go there!" All eyes were on Billy as he described how "my daddy would take me up to his office and let me twirl around in his chair."

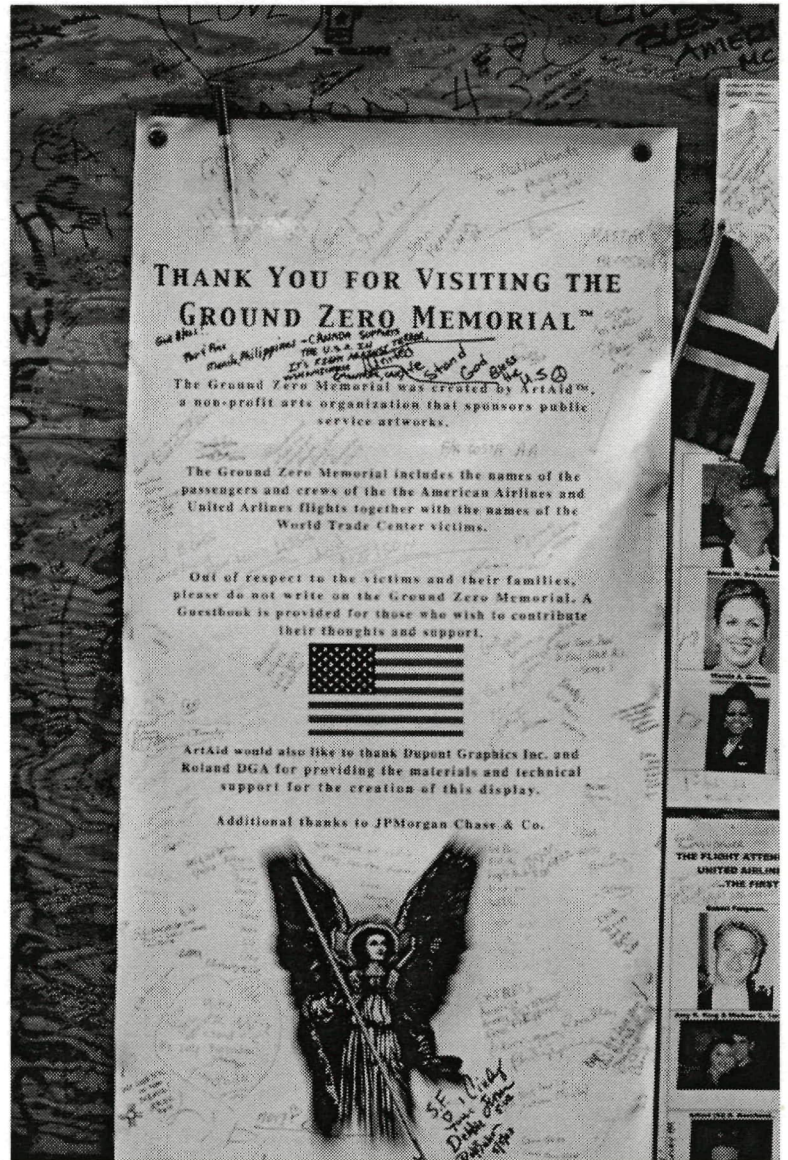
With a lump in my throat, I told Billy, "That's a beautiful memory to have, going with

your daddy to work.” And, then he must have realized and said softly, “Yeah, I know, I’ll never get to go around and around in the chair again. I’ll never get to see my dad again.” What could I tell a seven-year-old boy that would keep him together and yet help him face the reality of his father’s death? I thanked Billy for his remembrance and talked about how important it will be, as we move forward, to talk about memories of their dads.

As the accumulation of calls like Mr. W.’s and recollections like Billy’s add up, the weight of this work becomes overwhelming. Thank goodness for the support of colleagues, near and far. One afternoon during the first week of November, at the end of the day when I was cleaning up to go home and the night ahead looked too short and incapable of providing the respite I needed, something miraculous happened. A large box about the size of a computer carton arrived at our agency. I stood alone as I cut open the tape and the cardboard flaps pushed out, giving me a glimpse of soft acrylic fur colored black, tan, or gray. It was a bevy of stuffed animals, a group of critters that had been sent to the children of 9/11 from the children of Oklahoma City.

Immediately, I called for the team I work with to share with me in this moment of joy. It felt so good! My heart was racing a little bit and I felt this surge of excitement that I couldn’t find words for, that I hadn’t felt since September 11th. Each animal was wearing a laminated and personalized note of good wishes, which said, in part, “You are holding a gift of love, donated by the manufacturer and tagged by caring volunteers in the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma area, and It is a gift from our heart to yours.” A cheerful drawing was added on the notes as well. The package came from The Kids Place, a bereavement center in Oklahoma that was created in response to the 1994 Oklahoma City bombing.

The power of human kindness filled the



room. The Ida Freeman Elementary School, in collaboration with The Kids Place, had put together baggies with postcards from Oklahoma City, a Hershey’s Kiss, a candle, and a poem surrounded by American Flags. In addition, there were handmade friendship bracelets mixed in the box from one of their local churches. Our staff of social workers stood around the table and together started lifting the baggie kits, the bracelets, and the critters out of the box, reading the notes aloud to each other. Smiles and tears intermingled. I look back and I am sure some people didn’t understand or grasp the powerful impact this

act of kindness had for me. As a result of this gesture, I was infused with new energy, compassion, and hope.

The week before Thanksgiving, I felt we should use this gift to support the ability to be thankful, even in the face of grief and terror. Each year in our bereavement program, we struggle with families to look beyond their grief. It's never easy, but this year the magnitude and terror of the event made "looking beyond" seem all but impossible. The arrival of the box of critters gave to our families what I felt was a reason to be thankful that was easily embraceable.

They could be thankful that there were people who, though they had also suffered, were able to understand their pain and reach out. By reaching out, they offered hope and maybe a glimpse into the future. It was just what they needed. Handing out the stuffed animals, I sensed an energy being passed on to the children as they closed their hands and arms around the bears and seals and rabbits. I think they felt it, too. I gave the zip lock kits to the adults to share with their children when they got home. Though the candles in the bags weren't lit, the room was illuminated with the light and warmth of this special gift from a far away place.

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