

Tuesday, September 11, 2001

I saw the first signs of something amiss when the Goldman Sachs trading floor came to a standstill. People left their desks and gathered beneath two mounted televisions. Traders have a tendency to attach human significance to financial matters, so my first thought was that the stock market had crashed. Then I saw a young woman in the next row cover her face with her hands, and I knew it had to be worse.

I made my way over to the televisions and saw footage of the World Trade Center on fire. CNN didn't know whether it had been a bomb or an airplane but it had happened about ten minutes earlier. Outside our window, debris was falling. I called my mom to tell her what had happened but there wasn't much else to say, and we hung up after only a minute.

As tragic and tremendous as this was, it still felt remote. All other terrorist acts on U.S. soil that I could think of had been single incident events, so there was no reason to think that this would be any different. I was twenty-four years old at the time and I still felt completely safe – shielded by the protective and invisible hands of authority.

One minute after I hung up with my mom, we felt a rumble and heard a loud roar. A trader yelled, "What was *that*?" I started to shake, wondering if we were being bombed. Almost instantaneously, a CNN anchor announced, "*Another* plane has just flown into the World Trade Center." Debris was flying like crazy outside our window. I called my mother again but it was difficult to contain my voice. For some reason, *two* planes crashing into the World Trade Center buildings were so much more horrific than just the one. It seemed uncontrollable, lacking order or reason. If you want to commit an act of terrorism, you bomb a building. You don't bomb two.

I hung up the phone with my mom as a man with a blue jacket appeared and yelled at us to evacuate immediately.

We filed down twenty-nine flights of stairs, silently, with grave faces and no clue about what to say. And downstairs, the lobby was not vast enough to house us so we spilled outdoors into the bright sunny air. The WTC – its apex a huge cloud of black smoke – loomed over us.

We gathered in clusters and talked about people we knew in the World Trade Center. I tried to call my family and tell them what was happening, but my phone would no longer work. Every time I dialed, a mechanized female voice droned, "*All circuits are busy.*" Everyone around me had the same problem.

I decided to go to a different building in the Goldman campus – 10 Hanover Square. It was three blocks eastward and the workplace of my closest Goldman friend, Carla. It gave me comfort to think of going through this with her.

The walk over to 10 Hanover felt like a dream. I was the only person on a road that was usually bustling with people. And, once inside the building, I saw Carla in the lobby, along with the rest of the staff. People were filtering in and out of different groups – a mix of bewildered, nervous and panicky.

I joined a group of co-workers but a loud noise from outside caught my attention. When I turned around, I saw a sight that made my stomach drop, a spectacle that trapped my breath in the back of my lungs and forced a choked exhale. Outside, just feet in front of us, massive throngs of people were running for their lives. I think I shrieked, “What is happening?” I think we all did.

“The planes fell out of the Trade Towers,” someone ventured.
“They’re shooting, someone must be shooting....”

I tried not to watch the hysteria unfolding just minutes from where I had been. If I were still out there, would I be running? What would I be running from?

And then it appeared....an avalanche of ash, dust, soot, smoke, debris rained over the building, covering cars, vendor stands, people in its wake, everything. The sunny day was demolished and nighttime had taken its place. Inside, fire alarms were going off and no one seemed to know what to do. Finally a voice appeared on the loudspeakers, directing us to the cafeteria.

We rode the escalators up, entered the cafeteria and chose seats. Someone mentioned the Pentagon. Someone mentioned the State Department. Camp David. The Capitol. Two more planes en route to Los Angeles. A field in Pennsylvania. It was impossible to do the math. Outside, sirens shrieked and hollered into the black. Somehow, Carla had cell phone coverage and she was able to reach her mom. Carla’s mother informed her that one of the towers had fallen not ten minutes earlier, while we had been in the lobby. And, when a second rumble of black and gray and ash washed over us, she was able to tell us that the second tower had fallen. And then they were cut off.

By then, someone had brought in a radio. The announcers repeated what we already knew and confirmed our suspicions about the Pentagon and the fourth wreck in Pennsylvania. They said that the New York City skyline would be altered forever. One woman said, “It’s a bright sunny day outside but you’d never know it,” and I thought how ridiculous this woman was. Bright and sunny? It was no closer to bright and sunny than it was a normal Tuesday. The day was as black as night.

A blazer-clad security officer appeared in the doorway. She informed us that smoke had entered the building and she routed us to the third floor.

We walked up the stairs, through a hallway and into an area of open cubicles. I looked outside and saw a cluster of young businesspeople attempting to cross Water Street, their faces covered by gas masks – some makeshift, some real. As they blended into the gray that had consumed everything, they seemed to move at an alarmingly slow pace –

ambling reluctantly among rubble and dust. They looked like the dead, marching towards a fate they had narrowly escaped. They lowered their heads so they could breathe. And once they were gone, only the ash-covered shell of a vendor stand remained.

About ten minutes later, the same security officer appeared, her arms overflowing with Goldman-insignia shirts. “The mayor’s office just called and they’re worried about gas leakage,” she said. “Everyone, take a Goldman shirt, tie it around your faces and try to go home.”

Carla and I each took a shirt and left the building. Outside, ash covered everything. It was hard to walk and even more difficult to breathe but we ventured nonetheless, trying to make light as best we could. “When I first met you Carla, I never thought we would be doing this,” I said into my shirt. I think she laughed.

We ambled up William Street, past Pearl and Beaver. Our feet up to our ankles were caked in ash. On Wall Street, I turned left to look at Trinity Church but all I could see was a big black cloud, blacker and thicker than the one we were walking through.

We trudged and trudged. The ground was littered with debris – not metal or shrapnel or the usual remains of war. Just ash and soot...and tons of paper...everywhere. Charred, torn remnants of the daily work life at our feet. We stepped over it as best we could and ventured forward. As we moved at a snail’s pace, it was all I could do not to look left. The thick plume was sandwiched between buildings but still massive. I tried not to notice all the emergency crews absent from the scene, not telling us to avoid going down that road for our safety. I breathed into my shirt. I squinted. I trudged.

“We have to go back,” was one of my suggestions.
“We can’t go back; where are we going to go?” Carla countered.

So we pressed forward amid the ash and paper, giving each other little hints about how best to breathe with the shirt and avoid the debris. At one point Carla pointed her finger at the side of the road and exclaimed, “Is that a *bus*?”

I turned my head to the right and sure enough, a city bus had pulled over and was letting people on. Relieved and scared, we rushed towards it. The driver was impatiently negotiating the bus’s ultimate destinations with two elderly women. “Are you going to stop on the East side?” one woman demanded.

The bus driver gave a belabored sigh. “Lady, I don’t know. I’m not gonna open these doors until it’s safe to do so. *Now get on the bus!*”

I might have smiled to myself as I boarded behind them. But as I made my way to the back, all humor in light of the day’s tragedy subsided. I noticed that we all had a gas mask or some similar breathing mechanism around our necks. We all wore the day’s

events as ash upon our finest. We all had been changed – suddenly, inexplicably – and the kinship we felt as the bus trekked eastward solidified in unspoken words.

Carla found a seat and I leaned over her and stared out the window. Ours was the only vehicle heading out of downtown as ambulances and other emergency vehicles flanked us going the other way. As the bus turned from east to north, we passed teeming droves of pedestrians. Right as we hit Chinatown, the sky finally opened up and the sun shined again.

The more we traveled north, the more I realized how anomalous we must have looked. People pointed at the bus as we passed them; some took photographs. The numbers on the streets grew and grew, but still I didn't feel far enough away.

Watching the cityscape glide by, I finally had a chance to think about what I had experienced. Not surprisingly, I was overwhelmed – not by hate, retribution or fear...but by the notion of community.

We were all New Yorkers that day – part of the same shell-shocked, devastated, loyal family. Some of us escaped from a building and fled downtown Manhattan. Some of us marched up Broadway, heels clacking against the sidewalk grates – and cried on the shoulders of strangers. Some of us ruined freshly pressed business suits while assisting people we didn't know. Some of us saw burning buildings and ran inside. Some of us waited in line for hours to give blood at the American Red Cross facility. So many of the stories from that day were preserved and archived, and yet, so many will never be known.

The doors finally opened on 34th Street and a group of displaced pedestrians crushed against us as they boarded. A woman looked at my ash-covered legs and shook her head. Without asking me what had happened or how I was feeling, she put her hand on my shoulder. “God bless you,” she said.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I fought back emotions that would find their way to the surface in the days, weeks and months to follow.

“Thank you,” I responded.

It seems fitting that my September 11 essay would preface the Mourners Kaddish today.

Although I was lucky in that I didn't personally know anyone who lost his or her life, in the time immediately following 9/11, I lost my way, spiritually and religiously.

But, life goes on, and eventually I found my way back, as did the people around me. We were able to move on because we found a way to hold on to hope. Firefighters cleaning up the rubble found a cross that had formed when two steel beams from

the Twin Towers fused together, and this gave them faith that we were all still being watched over and protected by a higher power.

There was life in the stories that emerged about people whose lives were tragically cut short.

There was beauty in the revitalization effort of lower Manhattan that allowed New Yorkers to press ahead while still eulogizing those who were lost.

And finally, there was light in the beams reflected northward from Ground Zero during the first anniversary of September 11. These twin lights started in the pit and reached upwards until they could no longer be seen, almost as if a metaphor for life itself. We are of the earth but always reaching towards the sky, as if trying to touch G-d himself, ever seeking His presence, the divine within us.

When times are tough, I try to remember the faith, the life, the beauty and the light that brought me out of despair after 9/11. I wish the same for all of you.

L'shana Tovah.