

Reflections on September 11<sup>th</sup>  
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Living in New York amidst the flickering memorial candles, flowers, and American flags, ever-present reminders that terrorism continues to lurk, I am touched by a spiritual presence that so often accompanies tragedy. So many of our professional colleagues here and elsewhere have reached out to help those in need. More than ever before, I feel proud to be a therapist. Because stories heal, let me share one of mine.

September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

Join me in a midtown Manhattan office, one of those hardest hit by the World Trade Center disaster. I am part of a group of volunteers (I.C.P. Volunteer Transitional Crisis Counseling) situated in a company that has offices in this midtown space and, prior to 9-11, had offices in the World Trade Center as well. Thousands of company employees were working in Tower I when the planes hit. The Twin Towers. Several hundred of those people are gone.

Many of those employed here in this midtown office witnessed the demise of the Twin Towers from their office windows on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Almost all had friends and colleagues at the downtown location.

New York City was virtually shut down for the week following 9-11. The following week, the survivors from this company who had been in Tower I were relocated to this midtown location. Virtually all of the employees had had to cope with multiple stressors: daily funerals, grieving families, the loss of long-time friends, colleagues and co-workers, the potential realization that more losses were pouring in addition to the discomfort of relocation and crowded conditions.

The mission of our volunteer group is to support the survivors. With no formal disaster training or experience, I am grateful for the critical incident debriefing and crisis intervention counseling I receive. Armed with instructions to begin by encouraging people to talk (initiating the process of integrating the disaster and normalizing the typical reactions to trauma) and offer practical suggestions of how to deal with PTSD symptoms (hyper-vigilance, flashbacks, & numbing), I begin this daunting task: making informal contact with those struggling with grief, trauma and loss

It is in this context that I meet 43 year old Rene, who had been identified by a colleague as needing help. Rene had not been back to work since September 11<sup>th</sup>. Now, 13 days later she has returned. Although she is back at her desk, she cannot concentrate and feels dizzy, weak and weary.

With two cups of coffee and a bagel in hand, I knock on Rene's office door, introduce myself and ask permission to come in. With an apathetic nod, Rene lifts her head from her desk and begins to talk. In a shaky voice she recalls the details of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

*While watching the attack from the window in her office she kept picturing the face of her close friend, Maria, who worked in Tower 1. Only weeks before the attack Maria had transferred to the downtown location: Tower 1. As Rene watched the smoke and heard the sirens, she grew increasingly sickened: Maria was habitually early to work and was inevitably at her desk when the plane hit. When that reality: that Maria was one of those unaccounted for—was confirmed, “I shut down,” Rene said. “I just couldn’t deal.” She had left worked on the 11th and only returned at the insistence of her husband. “I couldn’t stay home any longer--my kids were frightened seeing me like that--numbed out and laying in bed.”*

Over the next few weeks, we met informally several times. She began keeping a journal to help her through sleepless nights. In one meeting she talked about her father-in-law’s suicide: six years earlier he had jumped from the sixth story of his office building following a business failure. IN another she recalled that at age three she had mysteriously fallen ill and almost died after a neighbor’s house had been a victim of arson.

“I’ve been through a lot,” she realized as filed through her unmetabolized grief evoked in this tragedy.

Through tears she talked about what kept her going: 14 year old Todd and 15 year old Annie, whose Sweet 16 was scheduled for October 11<sup>th</sup>. Soon after she invited Maria’s husband to her home for dinner.

“I never thought about how much I have survived--how strong I really am,” she said as we were saying goodbye in what was to be our last meeting. I reached out and touched her arm, and she put her head on my shoulder.

“Thank you for listening,” she said, ”Talking helps.” And after a pause she said, “And thank you for the bagel.”

Since September 11th, I have gotten a strong reminder of what originally drew me to becoming a psychologist—helping people in distress touches something deep within my core and heals me as well. What I have learned is what helps all of us to heal are the basics we learned both from graduate school and from Grandma. The capacity to be present, to listen deeply and the willingness to offer a shoulder, or even a bagel is sometimes what is most needed when we face the darkest moments of life.