

September 11, 2001

My Story



By Marybeth Miceli

Written before the 20th anniversary · Compiled with the presentation given on the 10th anniversary

Some images and materials may be difficult for people of all ages to see, particularly for young people.

A Note Before You Begin

The following is my story from 9/11 and afterwards. It has not been edited, as I cannot bring myself to read it again. But it was important for me to finally write down my story before the 20th anniversary came and went again. So, if you are reading this, please be kind and know that this was very difficult for me to do. And in that vein, be kind to one another and share love freely to honor those who did not have a chance to do so.

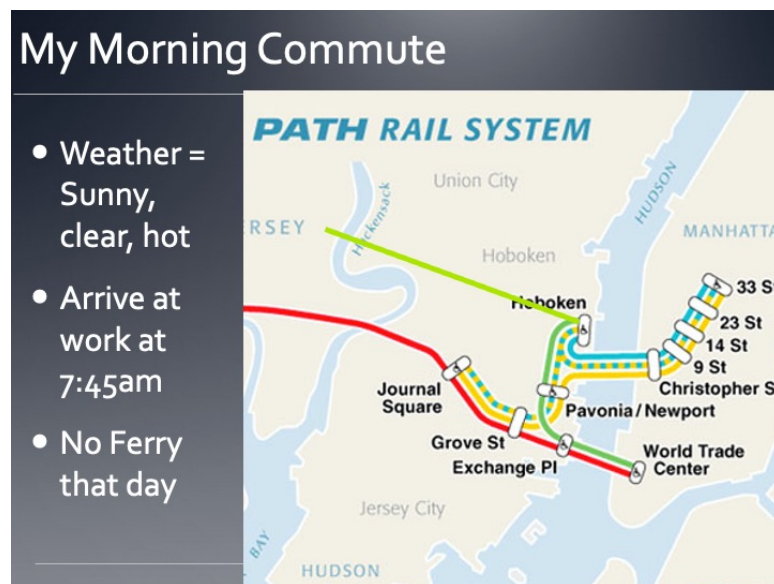
— *Marybeth*

Part One: The Day Of

The day was hot, too hot for mid-September, and I was not dressed well for it. A black wool pencil skirt and a purple blouse with a built-in tie, along with black pantyhose and black pumps. I should have looked at the weather before getting dressed. Oh well.

As I walked over the bridge from my roommate's condo complex in Secaucus to the NJ Transit "station" (actually just rocky ground at the stop), I could not believe the color of the sky. God, it was so blue and crystal clear, just gorgeous. I took note of it and picked up the pace so I wouldn't miss the train. I was just hoping that the car that Judy and I got on that morning had A/C. I got down there just in time and said hi to Judy and Martin, my morning train comrades.

We took the short ride from Secaucus to Hoboken. Judy and Martin went to take the ferry across the Hudson, but even though it was a gorgeous day I knew I needed to get into the office early so I could use one of the few computers with internet that morning before Carol got to her desk. I needed to do some research on heat transfer of train axles to see if we could use infrared thermometers to determine which axles were having problems with friction, which may lead to cracking and fracture. So, I took the PATH train to the World Trade Center instead.



My morning commute. Sunny, clear, hot. No ferry for me that day — I took the PATH train in through the World Trade Center and was at my desk by 7:45.

As I ran up the escalator I smiled at the flower vendor in the trade center; he had gerbera daisies that day, my favorite. One day I'll stop and buy flowers. Not today though, gotta get to that computer. I rushed up the four blocks to the deli but no time for coffee, will have to

drink the stuff at the office, hopefully one of the field techs had already gotten there and made some. I got into the office and there were only a few people there when I got in, 7:45, that gave me an hour and change before Carol would get in and ask for her computer.

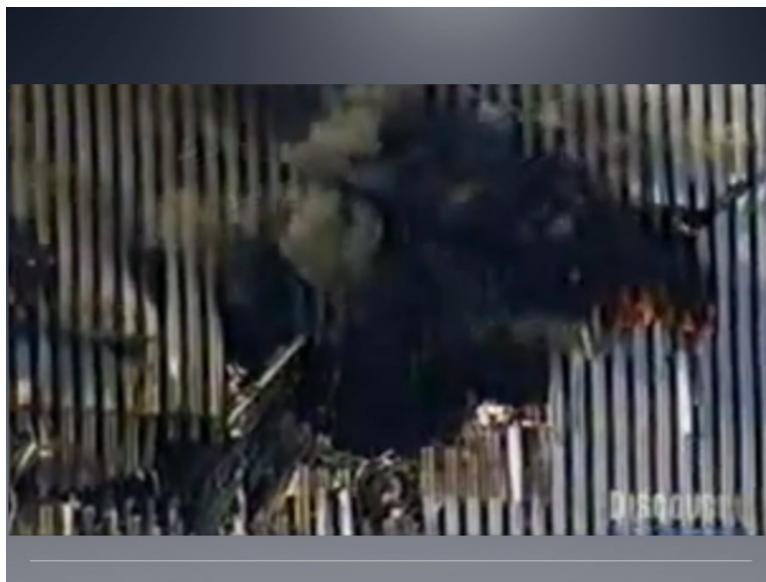
I ran upstairs, dropped my stuff at my office and headed back down to do my research. I grabbed some coffee and settled in. I was looking at a webpage with research on heat transfer through axles. The background was tan. The calculation looked like it was going to be more complicated than I had first thought. Oh well, I've got 15 more minutes till Carol gets here, let's see what else I can dig up.

FROM THE PRESENTATION: WHAT WAS I DOING?

- *The office at 50 Hudson was about as far from the towers as St. Andrew's is from Sawtelle and National — Ralph's*
- *Researching problems with overheating and cracking of railcar wheels*

Bang!

What the hell? I nearly fell out of my seat. Did a truck just hit the building? Well, I was closest to the door, I ran outside to see what happened. A man walking by me said, "Holy shit, a Cessna just hit the tower!" I looked up to see a gaping hole with wings in the north tower. Damn, I was just there. I thought to myself, "I hope not too many people were at their desks yet, it's not quite 9 so maybe not."



The gash in the north tower.

I walked to the end of the block where the Danube restaurant was. I had met my second (third?) cousin Eddie there the Friday before, after finding out we worked so close to each other. We had made plans for the 14th to get together. Anyway, I stood at the corner of

Reade and Hudson, watching. You could see people in the tower at the hole and above the hole. One guy on what seemed like the top floor was waving a white cloth frantically. You could see the smoke billowing around him. Helicopters were in the area and I thought how difficult it will be to land them on the roof for a rescue. Holy shit, was that a person? I suddenly thought to myself. I think someone just fell from the tower. Just wait, the helicopter is coming. So many thoughts running through my mind.

People, Horror



People, horror.

Shoot, that is where the PANYNJ is. They were our clients. By now much of the office had filtered out on the street with me. I turned to my boss and said, well, how are we going to fix that? I knew we would probably be involved in the investigation. But before he had a chance to answer, there was an explosion at the south tower. We felt the heat on our faces and had to shield ourselves. “What the fuck was that?!” “Do you think it is the fuel tank from the plane?” Questions swirled and sirens were everywhere.

How do we fix it?

- St. Andrew's to Starbucks
- Failure Analysis, knew we'd be called
- Discussion on the street when second hit
- Felt the heat from the explosion
- Didn't know about the other plane



How do we fix it? We did failure analysis — we knew we would be called. We were standing on the street having that conversation when the second one hit. We felt the heat from the explosion. We didn't know yet about the other plane.

I better call my mom. I eventually made my way back inside and called my mom. “It’s a terrorist attack!” she said. “What? No, I’m right here, it was just the fuel tank or something,” I said. “No, we just watched a plane crash into the other tower.” “Maybe they couldn’t see what they were doing with all the smoke.” “No, it’s on purpose. They crashed one into the Pentagon just now too.” Silence... “Oh... I’ll call you back later when I have more information, Mom, but I’m ok.” I then informed the office what my mom had told me.

We headed back outside for a few minutes. By now there were more people jumping out of the tower and the cloth waving man had slowed down. The helicopters were gone. “Well, how are they going to get them out then?” I thought to myself.

People, Horror



People, horror.

My boss turned to everyone and said ok, let's go back to work. Uh, ok. I mean, this was my first real job, I'd only been here for 8 months, so ok, maybe that's just how things go in the city.

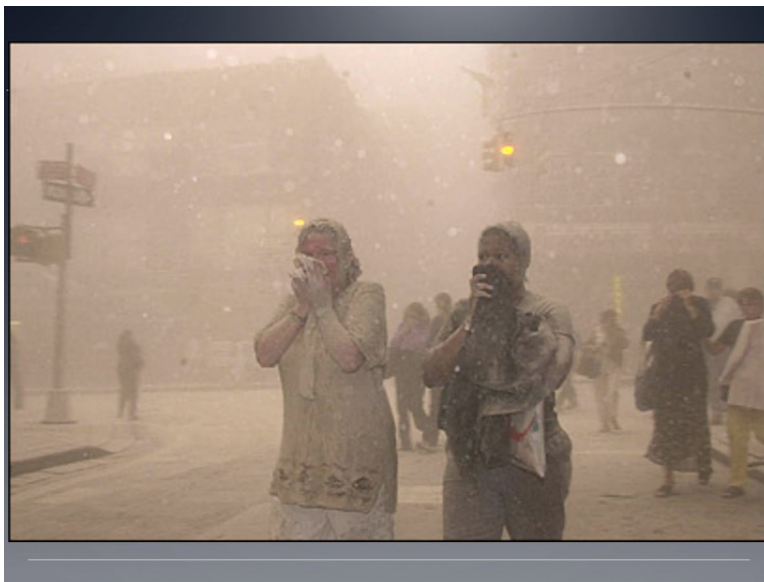
I decided to change into my field clothes since I clearly will be taking a different route home later today. Oh shit, why is the ground shaking? I ran back downstairs and got outside as the south tower topples and collapses. Oh God, no. Did everyone get out ok? Did they have time? What the hell is that? A cloud of smoke and dust rushed up the street. I ran back up the block and inside the office. I will never forget that smell. Concrete, fire, burning flesh, blood, all mixed together, making you sick to your stomach. An eerie darkness blocked out the sun for a while.

The next hour

- Phone calls, emails
- Shock
- Forgive them
- Back outside
- Great shake
- Dust/Darkness
- Shaking again
- More dust
- Changing
- Shock



The next hour: phone calls, emails, shock. Forgive them. Back outside. The great shake. Dust and darkness. Shaking again. More dust. Changing. Shock.



Fuck this, I'm taking a sick day and going home. Phones were jammed so I emailed my mom that I was ok and I was headed home. I headed upstairs to finally get changed in the bathroom. I was the only woman on the second floor so I knew I was alone. I started to get changed and burst into tears. "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do," I said out loud to myself. How could anyone knowingly do this?

I got into my field clothes — jeans and steel-toed boots and my polo shirt. I stashed my nice clothes and felt the rumble again. This time I knew too well what it was. I rushed downstairs to see the cloud of dust rushing by again. As I hit the ground floor, Joe yells to me to go and get the first aid kit from upstairs. I see cops coming in bleeding from their heads. I run to get

the kit. I hand it over and I'm caught just staring. "Whaddya starin' at?" "Oh, I'm sorry, I just...uh, nothing." Clearly I was in shock, but I had to pull my ass together and get home.

The Next Hour

- Triage
- Medical supplies
- Gas masks
- Safety glasses
- Given an "option" to go home
- Making a plan to get out of Manhattan



The next hour: triage, medical supplies, gas masks, safety glasses. We were given an "option" to go home. I started making a plan to get out of Manhattan.

Joe, I gotta go, I'll see you tomorrow.

Getting Out

I went back upstairs to get my stuff and called Vinnie. Vincenza Maria Italiano, my friend from graduate school, worked straight up Hudson at 375. I needed to make sure she was ok. She had gone to a colleague's place. She would meet me back at her office and we'll head out to Jersey together.

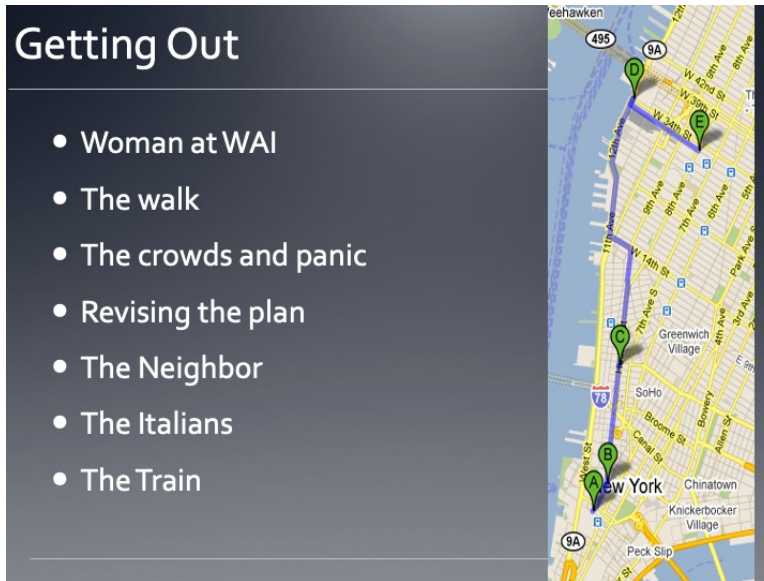
So I walked up from 50 Hudson to 375 Hudson with ambulance after ambulance rushing by. I got there first. I leaned against one of those safety bollards at the big building Weidlinger was in. As I leaned against the bollard, I watched people. One woman in particular had a vacant stare as she crossed the street. This woman should not be by herself. I walk over to her, and just as she was about to cross the street an ambulance comes rushing down Hudson the wrong way. I throw my arm in front of her, nearly knocking her to the ground, to keep her from getting hit by the speeding ambulance. She turned to me, burst into tears and said, "Oh God, thank you so much." "You're welcome, just keep an eye out where you're going today, ok?" She nodded and carefully crossed the street.



I wait a few more minutes and eat some pretzels I had grabbed from my desk and drink some water. Shoot, I haven't eaten today. Oh well.

Vinnie strolled up in her skirt and black high-heeled sandals. Boy, was I glad I had field clothes. I might have been hot, but who knows how long we were going to have to walk that day.

We hugged each other and made sure each were ok, and she says, "I heard the ferry in midtown is running ferries to Jersey, let's go." So we walk to midtown from SoHo. As we approach the ferry we see my neighbor, Martin. "Martin, oh God, you're ok!" "Yes, but we're not getting out of the city that way, there's hundreds and hundreds of people in line and people are getting testy. Besides, I hear NJ Transit is running trains out of Penn Station," Martin explained in his British accent.



Getting out: the woman at WAI, the walk, the crowds and the panic, revising the plan, the neighbor, the Italians, the train.

So we decide to head there, but by this time it's after 2pm, super hot, and we're all hungry, so we decide to stop at a deli and get some food, not knowing how long the journey would take. We all get our sandwiches, Vinnie with a salad, and sit to eat for a minute and rest our feet. Vinnie said, "Oh God, I just realized that today's date is 9-1-1, like the emergency. Do you think that was on purpose?" "This is all so awful, all those people."

We finished up and headed towards Penn Station. As we arrive on the main floor, the announcer says the last train to NJ is leaving on Platform 4. We run down the stairs. It's packed, no room. We run to the back of the train and it's also packed. Martin pushes his way on and pulls me and Vinnie onto the train just as the doors try to close. Everyone smushes together so we can get as many people on as possible in the vestibule.

The train starts to pull out with more people than it has ever had before. It is dark and hot in the vestibule and everyone is smushed against each other and it is deadly quiet. Everyone is silent as we go through the tunnel underneath the Hudson. God, I don't remember the tunnel being this long, I thought to myself. As we get to the other side and daylight pours into the vestibule, everyone cheers, so freaking grateful to be alive.

The Next Hour and Beyond

- Vinnie's House
- 7 Collapses
- 5 course meal w/ grappa
- The ride "home"
 - Secaucus Closed, bomb scare
- The television



Vinnie's house. Seven collapses. A five-course meal with grappa. The ride "home" — Secaucus closed, a bomb scare. And the television.

We get to the Linden NJ Transit station where Vinnie's Mitsubishi Eclipse convertible is parked. I call my parents and tell them where we are and that we are going to Vinnie's house and that we'll meet them there. It took us about 10 minutes to get to Vinnie's house. She had already called her mom, and her mom was already cooking and had set an enormous table to feed her big family, mine, and Martin's. As we walk in the door and hug Mrs. Italiano, we are just in time to see Building 7 collapse. Damn.

It should have taken my parents about 45–60 minutes to get there, it took them 25 minutes. I cannot imagine what they were going through. Martin's wife and kids arrived as well. Mrs. Italiano fed us a feast and Mr. Italiano broke out the grappa, which we all needed at that point. Everyone was so grateful to be alive.

After we were all well fed and exhausted, we said our goodbyes and headed back down the Parkway to Brielle, my hometown.

I turned on the TV in my childhood bedroom and called my roommate. She said Secaucus is in lockdown because they found a truck with a bomb in it. Damn. I hung up and stared at the news. There are people dancing in the streets and singing in celebration of what had happened, in Paterson, NJ, right across from Secaucus. People were singing and dancing, celebrating... how?... why? How could anyone celebrate all that death and destruction? All those people I saw jump and fall to their death. The guy with the white cloth. The flower guy — oh God, I hope the flower guy made it out. That was just this morning. Now thousands of people are missing or dead and these assholes are celebrating. I ran to my mom sobbing.

Part Two: The Day After

I finally collapsed in my bed, physically and emotionally exhausted, though my sleep was restless. I'd see the people jumping every time I closed my eyes.

In the morning, I silently got up and took a shower. I heard my dad call my mom at work and say that he didn't know what to do because I wasn't talking at all. I got dressed in whatever clothes were there that fit me. Pajamas. A big Sea World nightshirt from my youth, and sweatpants. I asked my dad to drive me to church for mass.

I entered the only church I had ever attended in my life. The place where I had sung and played my flute in the folk group. The place where I had had my first reconciliation and my confirmation. I entered the church and sat in the back and kneeled on the kneeler and cried through the whole service. The sending hymn was Amazing Grace. I sobbed.

What I remember most, though, is that not one person — not a parishioner, not a priest, not one person — asked if I was ok, if they could pray for me. Nothing. I was still crying on the kneeler when the next mass started. I listened for guidance, for answers. I got none. I went outside and called my dad to be picked up. Amazing Grace played again as I waited.

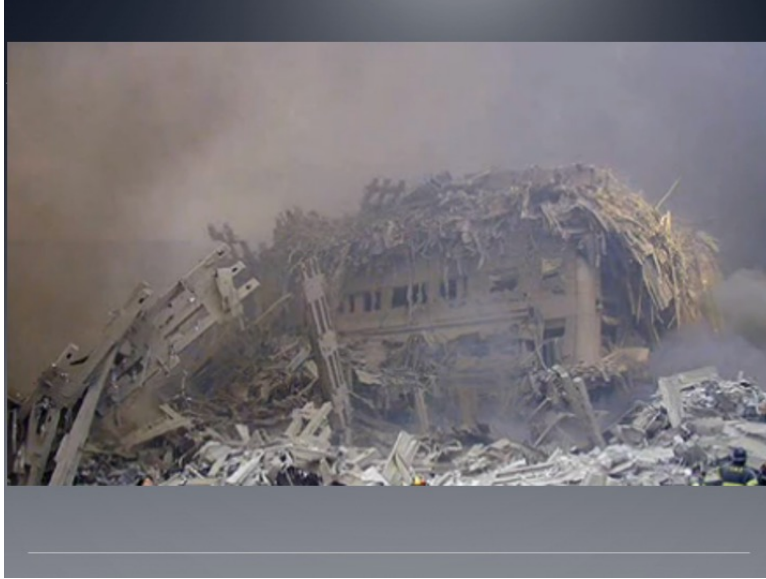
Part Three: Getting Back to Work

I spent the next few days trying to piece together the day and explain it to my family. I talked to my bosses, who had gotten us passes to be escorted into lower Manhattan, which had been on lockdown, so we could get to our office to work on Monday.



Getting to work on the 17th: escorts, IDs — and the photos. Everywhere, the photos.

The next day, on Tuesday, one week after the events, I was asked to bring some cameras to my boss, who was on site (Ground Zero) at the pile of rubble and remaining buildings to make sure there were no more collapses while the rescue and recovery continued. I stayed on site to help determine what buildings were safe. We went below ground that day in buildings WTC 4 and 5 to look at the remaining subsurface structure to document which columns were buckling and which areas/bays were unsafe to place construction equipment on.



What was left standing had to be watched. Part of my job was deciding which of these buildings were safe to work around.

The FDNY, NYPD, and construction workers were frantically picking up pieces of debris, trying to find anyone still alive. Often they had very little regard for their own safety, and it was our job to remind them that undermining the ground that their own heavy equipment sat upon was not a good idea, nor a good long-term plan.



Here I was, a 24-year-old woman in a hard hat, essentially new to the working world, telling these grown men with the vacant look in their eyes that they had to slow down and be careful, for their sake and for the sake of those around them. It was not easy. You could see that they needed to do this work, to do something, anything, to try and make a difference.

I worked there on and off for 6 months afterwards, primarily on the night shift, to help the recovery and clean-up efforts.



The site as it was when I was working in it. The buildings I spent those months in and around — 4, 5, 6, 7, and the Verizon building — are all here.

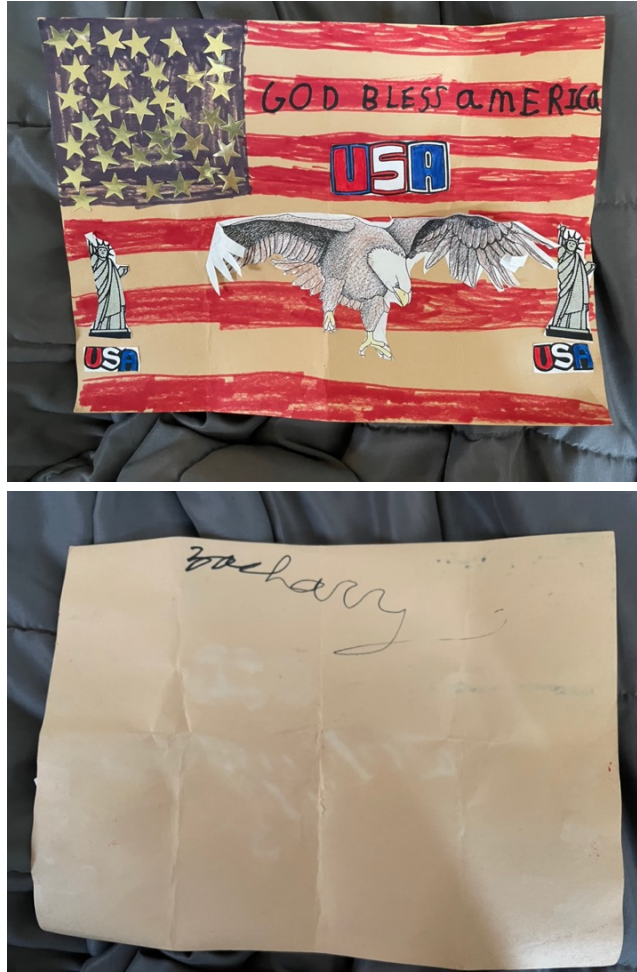
Part Four: Ground Zero

A few moments stick with me most from my time working at Ground Zero.

- The sunrise at every shift was eerie. How could the sun rise on this smoldering heap where so many souls had died? And the temperature always drops before sunrise, which just added to the hopelessness of it all.



- At the end of September I finally made it to Trinity Church during one of my breaks. I received a homemade rosary and a card from a child from somewhere in America. It felt good that the country had not forgotten what had happened.

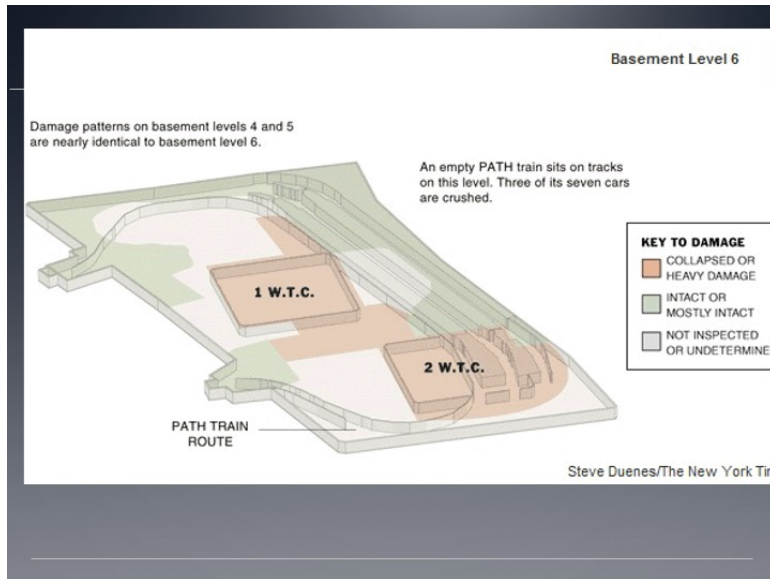


The card I received at Trinity Church during one of my breaks on the night shift, signed by "Zachary." These cards and the rosary meant so much to me. The rosary I gave to a family friend after the death of her son, who was my age.

- November 15th they had us start wearing masks. Turns out the air wasn't "fine", as the EPA had assured us. The first ten floors had asbestos fireproofing. That mixed with all the other plastics and chemicals in the air were apparently bad for us, oops. I still have lung damage that will not ever go away.
- Being in buildings 4 and 5 to check which columns were buckling. Seeing all the paper and the desks and the dust. People's lives frozen in time. Seeing all the shoes. Going into the World Financial Center and seeing the escalators and papers and dust. So much dust. Realizing that the dust was also the deceased.

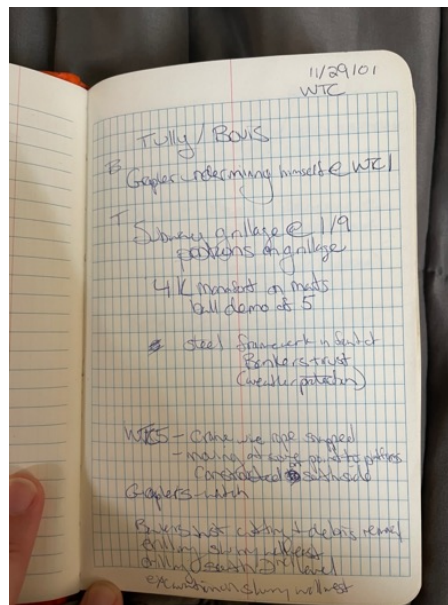
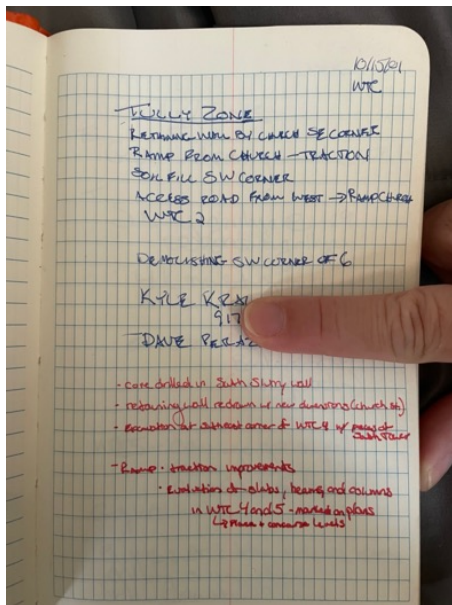


The collapse mapping we worked from. Red is complete collapse; blue is unknown. Nobody could tell you what was under your feet.



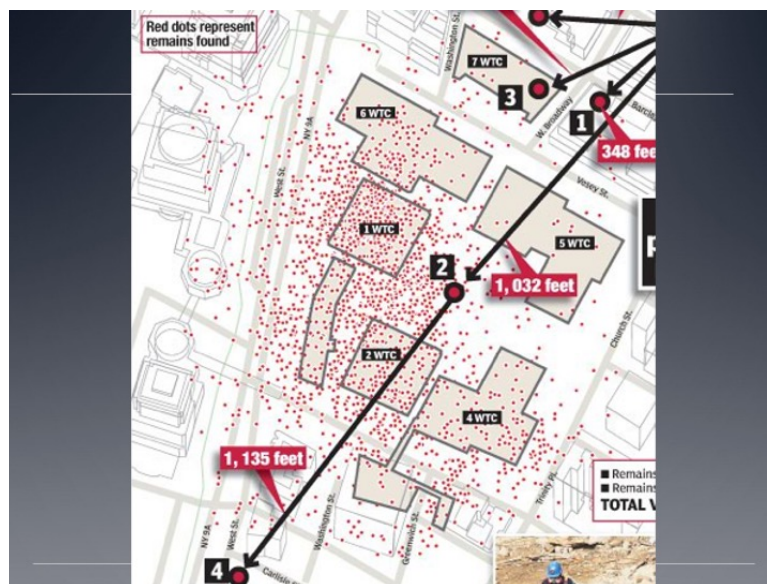
Six levels down, an empty PATH train still sat on the tracks. Three of its seven cars were crushed. I had come through there on the morning of the 11th.

- I remember the briefings I gave in the mornings about what was happening and where the danger spots were. Having to keep rescue workers from digging right where their vehicles were sitting.



Some of my notes from Ground Zero for the morning briefings to the next team.

- I remember the smell every night and stripping off the clothes from the site in the afternoons once I finally got back to the apartment and no matter how much I washed them, the smell wouldn't come out. And it was stuck in my nose all of the time.
- But most of all I remember the vacant stares, the brokenness of the FDNY and NYPD there. Always searching for their fallen brothers and sisters. Whenever a body was found, which was rare, everything stopped (except that damned fire, which burned forever) and there was silence as the body was brought up out of the heap. Taps was sometimes played.



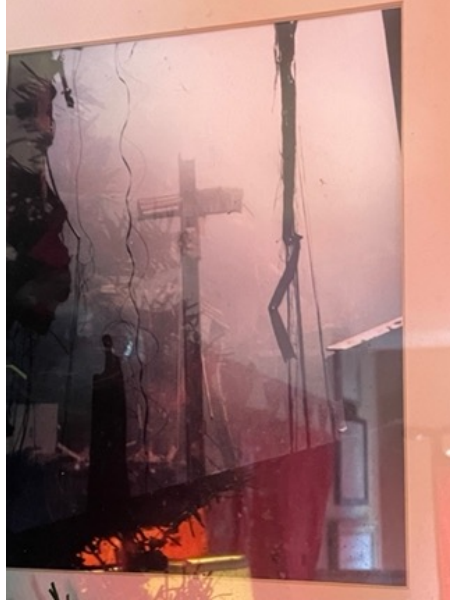
Every red dot is remains found. This is the map of what we were standing on.



My hard hat from the site, signed by Hillary Clinton (who was Senator of New York at the time), George Pataki, and Rudy Giuliani.



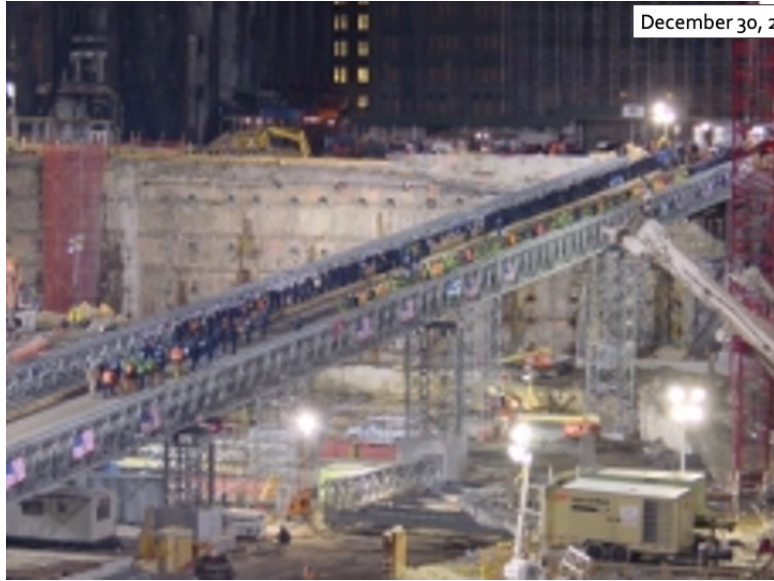
The cross of steel. Many of the remaining columns and beams looked like crosses rising from the smoke and ash that was ever present for months.



A photo a friend took and framed for me.

So much of my time there was a blur. I'd work all day at the office, work overnight at the site, then head home mid-morning the next day. I'd immediately do laundry to try and get that smell out of my field clothes, and then try to get the taste out of my mouth. Sometimes, at a construction site when demolition is being done, the smell triggers me.





December 30, 2001. The ramp down into the pit.

Part Five: My Recovery

We are 25 years out now, and certain smells, news stories, fireworks, action movies, seismic events can render me into a crying ball on the floor without warning. I've learned coping mechanisms along the way to try and get me to climb out of the darkness. Some climbs are harder than others.

Like the time I was on the E train by myself in an empty car, headed south from the office and going through the WTC stop all boarded up, and I felt like there were dead people all around me on the train. Or the time I was at a grand opening of a Target and they set off fireworks, and the next thing I remember was my mom finding me on the floor in the card section hugging myself and crying. Or even the time I was watching WandaVision and there was a bombing of the building they were in as kids, and I had to hide my face and my shaking from my kids so that they wouldn't see me losing it from a scene in a TV show. 9/11 stole my innocence. I don't want anything to do that for them, though I guess the pandemic has scarred all of the children in some way.

Through it all, the support of my husband has been priceless. His humor has kept me sane from the first weekend after 9/11. We were just friends back then, but he came up to NJ and spent time with me and made me laugh, even as he was going through a difficult season in his own life. He is an unbelievable human and I am so blessed that God sent him to me.

Sometime in all of this, I became aware that Osama bin Laden was almost exactly 20 years older than me. Here I sit, nearly 25 years later, and contemplate that this is what he decided to do with his life: kill thousands of innocent people. I can only hope that by dedicating my life to helping others save lives, to volunteerism, to making the world a better place, that I can say I have put the life that was given to me, when so many others didn't get that chance — that I put this life to good use.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...



The certificate of appreciation I received from the City of New York as part of the engineering team that helped with the rescue and recovery efforts.



The gold medal I received from the City for my work at Ground Zero.



Author's Notes

1. Living on the west coast during the 10th, 20th, and 25th anniversaries has been weird. I've been back to NYC quite a few times since moving away in 2007, but just last year was the first time I went to the memorial. I had my family around me. I almost immediately had a PTSD attack. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EDMR) has helped a lot in these instances. If you have PTSD and want to talk to me about it, happy to pass along some info. I've included some photos from this visit below. They were taken by my daughter (12 yr old at the time).

2. An email I sent to a friend on 9/12 at 3:45pm from my parents' house:

I'm ok, traumatized but ok. I was there less than an hour beforehand. I watched everything happen from just blocks away, where my office is. I will never rid myself of the sight, the bodies falling/jumping from the building, the hole in the building, the smoke covering all of us, the wounded police officers rushing into our office for help, the endless sirens and chaos and panic to get away from the buildings and off the island. I can only imagine that this is what war is like. Thank God for everyone and everything around you, I know only too well how quickly it can all disappear. I have currently accounted for everyone I can think of, I am truly blessed to be alive. Take care, God bless. —mm

3. I wrote most of this story right before the 20th anniversary, as Afghanistan was falling back to the Taliban. The photographs and slides throughout are drawn from the presentation I gave to my church family on the 10th anniversary. I've added some editing and notes throughout as we approach the 25th anniversary.



Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning

Spencer Finch (American, b. 1962)
Watercolor on paper

This art installation, created in 2014, is composed of 2,983 individual watercolor drawings, each a distinct attempt by the artist to remember the color of the sky on the morning of September 11, 2001. Commemorating the people killed in the attacks of September 11, 2001 and February 26, 1993, every square is a unique shade of blue, combining to create a panoramic mosaic of color.

Finch's work centers on the idea of memory. What one person perceives as blue might not be the same as what another person sees. Yet, our memories, just like our perception of color, share a common reference.

No Day Shall Erase You from the Memory of Time

This quotation from Book IX of *The Aeneid* by the Roman poet Virgil suggests the transformative potential of remembrance. The same idea is expressed in each of the letters which have been forged from pieces of recovered World Trade Center steel by New Mexico artist Tom Joyce (American, b. 1956).

Originally trained as a blacksmith, Joyce was invited to harness the transformative process that occurs when iron is touched by fire. He took wounded, remnant steel—made of iron and carbon—and forge it, by heating and folding, into letters of hope and beauty. The result reminds us that Virgil's words are not just a statement; they are a promise.



WHAT'S IN THE DUST

By the night of September 11, 2001, environmental health experts realized the potential dangers of the dust cloud that had spread across and settled on lower Manhattan. Within days, they began collecting and analyzing dust samples, anticipating the illnesses that people exposed to the dust might face.

By October 2001, early test results heightened the experts' concerns. Ultimately, analysis found 352 chemical agents in the dust, component parts of the concrete, insulation, jet fuel, electrical and computer equipment, and plastics that had been pulverized. Dr. Paul Lioy, one of the lead researchers, also identified unusually high concentrations of glass particles in the dust. In its immediate impact, the dust was particularly damaging to the sinuses and gastrointestinal tract.

NEVER FORGET

Maximizing health coverage for those suffering 9/11 illnesses took tenacious lobbying efforts.

In 2015, the Zadroga Act was slated to expire. Then, Congress extended the act's funding of the World Trade Center Health Program until 2090, but only replenished the VCF for another five years. Advocates mobilized again in preparation for the 2020 deadline.

In powerful testimony on Capitol Hill, advocates spoke frankly about their illnesses and declining health. Some traveled to Washington, D.C., in spite of sickness. Some have since died.

In 2019, new legislation authorized funding of the VCF through 2092. Known as the Never Forget the Heroes Act, it was named in honor of James Zadroga, Ray Pfeifer, and Luis Alvarez.

WIDESPREAD SICKNESS

Within hours of the Twin Towers' collapse, many exposed to the dust and smoke began to cough. Some had what researchers and doctors would label World Trade Center Cough Syndrome, which includes rhinosinusitis, asthma, bronchitis, and acid reflux. Subsequent studies of New York City firefighters determined that those who arrived on the scene earliest suffered the highest rates of respiratory illness.

When residents, office workers, and students returned to lower Manhattan, more were exposed and began experiencing similar health issues. Over time, many also developed other respiratory conditions and different types of cancer. Eventually, these conditions were certified as 9/11-related illnesses and approved for healthcare coverage. Today, more than 80,000 people are known to be suffering from 9/11-related sicknesses.

FACES OF GROUND ZERO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE McNALLY

Joe McNally photographed hundreds of people in a lower Manhattan studio, many of whom arrived after their shifts at Ground Zero. Relying on word-of-mouth to advertise the project, it incorporated a wide array of participants who reflect the diverse, collective efforts to restore New York City.

His unique choice of photography equipment consisted of a dual camera set up: a more standard film camera underneath a GoPro. Planned cameras intended to be printed at a massive scale, the images in this collection personally reflect the immediate, selfless response to the 9/11 attacks.