

By Rosie McCobb

The Anniversary of 9/11 in NYC: from Outside My Window

I made my way to work this morning being somewhat aware of what day in history this is. Though the weather is nothing like it was on September 11, 2001 - today it is grey, humid, and foggy - I did still bring my camera with me, figuring there would likely be opportunity for me as a photographer to document this day in New York City.

I work at 1 Liberty Place in Lower Manhattan, which - to those of you not familiar with the gnarled traffic pattern on the southern tip of the island - means that my building is one block away from the site of what was once the World Trade Center. When my train pulled into the station at Broadway Nassau, and I mounted the wet, crumbling steps toward the outside world, I was a little wary of what I might find myself amidst once I stepped foot on Broadway. The scene on the streets surrounding the World Trade Center site resembled what I had pictured in my mind: crowds of tourists, weaving and walking slowly down narrow sidewalks, consulting their plastic maps of the city; throngs of cops stationed at every corner of the blocks leading up to the WTC; and single-file lines of workers like me, who were forced to walk at a much slower clip than usual while they tried to make their way toward their jobs.

As I approached my building, the crowds thickened, and silver fences blockaded streets. The out-of-town wanderers wearing shorts and rain jackets, with cameras around their necks, tentatively ambled closer to the blockades, peering over the heads of the police stationed there to see if they could get a glimpse of the scene. On Cortland Street - the street that runs between my building and the discount department store Century 21 - a PA system was set up through which you could hear the voice of a woman was reading the names of people who had died during the attacks. In the greyness and light rain, her voice took on a ghostlike quality, and the combination amplified my feelings about the attacks on the World Trade Center. As I made my way closer to my building, the slow, somewhat monotonous reading of the names, which were followed by the solitary ringing of what sounded like a ship's bell, made tears well up in my eyes. I remembered how incredibly horrifying and awful it was on that day in New York City, six years ago, when the towers fell, and I wished that they were not performing this ceremony right downstairs from where I work.

There have been many articles in New York City newspapers, leading up to this "anniversary," debating the validity of having such large-scale, public ceremonies commemorating the attack on the World Trade Center. The opinions have been across the board, ranging from people who would like to move on, and not be bombarded with the situation, to others who feel that we must pay our respects to all the people who lost their lives on that sunny Tuesday in September. I did not lose any of my friends or family during the attacks, and I was in Brooklyn - not Manhattan - when the planes hit the towers. But everyone who lived in New York City during that time, and sat and watched

this scene unfold - in person, from rooftops, and on TV - was deeply, deeply affected. After the first tower collapsed, I watched the remaining tower burn from the roof of my building. It was impossible to process the fact that what I had seen on TV – total chaos, flames spiraling out of windows, bodies flying through the air - was happening across the river in this tall edifice that from my roof, seemed solid, and unwielding. At that point, I couldn't call anyone to talk about it, because shortly after the second tower fell, all phone lines in New York City became so jammed that no one could get through on either cell phone or land lines. I had spoken to my family already, and assured them that I was ok, but the fear and trepidation that filled me, and everyone else that day, stemmed from not knowing if the people who you knew in NYC were themselves ok. I spent over two hours that day trying to call a close friend who had recently started a temp job someplace in Lower Manhattan, and it wasn't until four days later that I got a message from her.

One would think that six years would be enough time for this event to be processed through the minds and souls of every New Yorker, but I was surprised at how sad and heavy I became listening to the names of the dead being read over the loud speaker. It's bad enough, sometimes, to be sitting at my desk and look out the window at my unobstructed view of Ground Zero. Though the site where the towers once stood merely resembles countless other construction sites sprinkled within a four block radius of my job, I often brood over how terrifying it would have been to sit where I do today, six years ago, and watch the scene at the World Trade Center unfold. I've wondered if people on my floor got evacuated as soon as the planes hit, long before the towers fell, or if they stayed at work and got trapped in the maelstrom of dust and debris. Did anyone who worked at 1 Liberty die that day? Thoughts such as these drift in and out of my mind like the smoke from a blown out candle, and are often easily stifled by the notion that the spot where I sit is now probably the safest place in the city. But to be trying to get to work, and be forcibly reminded of what happened on the morning of September 11, 2001, was not the way I'd intended to go about my day in 2007.

When I got to the corner where I usually turn to head toward the entrance to my building, I realized the street was blockaded and foot traffic was being re-routed away from 1 Liberty Place. I had to physically move aside and sneak through a space in one of the fences just to get to the pavilion on which my building sits. A cop yelled out at me to come back after I had passed through, but I would have had to walk two extra blocks, and then go through a checkpoint just to get into my building, so I ignored her. Once I mounted the steps on to the pavilion, I walked to the western side and tried to get closer and see what the scene was like down on Church Street, and to maybe shoot a few photos; I couldn't get past the shrubs and planting boxes. I went through the north side entrance to the lobby of my building and then walked over to the south side. I asked one of the security guards if I could go out through the south entrance, which opens up on to the park where the ceremony was taking place. I said I worked upstairs, and was also a photographer; I just wanted to shoot a few pictures. He exuded a sigh that sounded empathetic, but said that the doors were locked, and "they" were guarding the exterior exit. I glanced at the men wearing suits who were stationed at the other side of the doors, and wondered if "they" were New York City cops, or even higher up the security command. Without a press pass, the closest I could get to the park was to peer through

the windows of the lobby of 1 Liberty Place, and gaze at the tops of peoples umbrellas, clustered together, which formed a seamless sort of tent over the proceedings.

I gave up the notion of shooting photos, and rode the elevator to the twenty-second floor. Once upstairs, ensconced at my desk, the sounds from the outdoors became faint for a while, and I focused on my work. But then came the sound of a choir, sounding their lamentations into the thick fog, and I started feeling choked up again. With the grey sky and thick clouds, the music could not have been any more melancholy. Once the choir performance ended, it was quiet for a moment, and then a highly talented trumpet player did a rendition of "Taps." It was agonizingly sad and beautiful. A few people in the office went to the windows to try and get a glimpse of the scene below, and a few surprisingly carried on, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. I glanced over at a co-worker across the aisle, who was wiping her eyes. I then realized that tears were welling up in my eyes, too, and I looked back down at the work laid out on my desk, hoping the mundane details of a regular day would dispel the headache that was beginning to spread through my forehead.

I know there are people who appreciate this kind of spectacle, who feel like the lives of their loved ones and friends are being honored by this pageantry. Fox 5 news in New York tonight had what seemed like an "all about 9/11" program laid out for the 10 o'clock news, with their main anchor, Rosanna Scotto, encouraging viewers to contact the station by e-mail or phone with their "9/11 memories." 9/11 memories? She said it in a tone that denoted the memories would somehow be pleasant. I didn't quite get it. An event like that day is not the same as reminiscing about your summers spent at camp in the Catskills. It's not like fondly talking about a favorite past Christmas or Hanukkah, or even describing the details of a particularly memorable day. Anyone who lives here can attest to the fact that amongst family members and friends, there are still plenty of hushed, intense discussions of "where were you that day?" Isn't this enough? Can we not have the dignity and sensitivity to pick and chose the moments in which we are in the proper mindset to ruminate about an awful, frightening experience?

For me, your average New Yorker, what happened on September 11 still feels like a short time ago. The fear, sadness, and anxiety I felt that day, and during the months followed-when this city virtually came to a stand still, the economy crumbled, and many lost their jobs - is still a raw wound inside of me. I hadn't realized it was, until I was forced to listen to dead people's names being read over a loud speaker. It's hard enough living here sometimes, with the latent knowledge that New York City is still likely a main target in the event another terrorist attack occurs. It's a dull sense of dread that never quite goes away. And because of this, I, for one, wish that the city had chosen not to mourn the dead in such a somber way. We, the citizens of New York City, need to be allowed to heal from this experience, without such bombastic reminders awaiting us at every street corner.

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