

On the Path from Loss to Renewal

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By R. Benjamin Cirlin

The subways were not running below 42nd Street today, and so I was forced to walk to my part-time job as Bereavement Coordinator at Jacob Perlow Hospice in lower Manhattan. The streets were eerily quiet. In spite of little traffic, police recruits, instantly recognizable in their grey and black uniforms, were directing traffic. This was no time for them to be in the classroom. I stopped in a deli to buy coffee, and joined a line to pay. The local 24 hour news station was blaring away in the background, repeating their broadcast of yesterday soon after the Trade Center was hit. The situation was surreal. Death and destruction as background music. I continued my walk to Seventeenth Street, grey smoke still painting the sky in the spot where the Twin Towers once stood. I hear a rumbling behind me, and turning, viewed a phalanx of city clean-up trucks proceeding in military style downtown: scores of bulldozers, garbage trucks, dump trucks.

I entered the hospital, passing a long line of New Yorkers waiting to give blood, standing patiently, on what on another day would be considered a gorgeous New York morning. After entering the hospice offices, I proceeded immediately to the window where I would often gaze upon the Twin Towers and the beauty of downtown Manhattan. Colleagues who were present yesterday (I was not) described in vivid detail watching the crashes, the explosions, and the collapse of the buildings. We hugged each other, expressions of disbelief, sadness, and anger pouring out of all of us.

We are all mourners now. We have all lost something precious to us. For some, most painfully, it is a friend, relative or acquaintance. For others a job, a place to visit, a place in the skyline. But for all of us, we have lost an America we have come to know and rely upon. Yesterday we lost our sense of complacency, normality, and our ability to control our environment. Yesterday we faced evil run amok. This cloud will grace our skies long after the fires have been put out.

In mid chapter, and with no warning, the plot line of our lives has radically changed. And so like all bereaved people, we struggle to grasp what has happened to us. We valiantly try to comprehend the senselessness of what has occurred. We become preoccupied with that tragedy that has befallen us. We become glued to our televisions and radios, viewing and reviewing the scenes of destruction. Perhaps if we see it one more time we can assimilate the truth of yesterday. But of course that doesn't work. Not yet. Not this soon. Perhaps never.

In a country of millions of conversations, it seems that today there is only one Conversation. Our lives have been disrupted. Who knows how long it will take to repair them. Standing in line at the bank on my lunch break, I witness a young student pleading with the teller to help her withdraw money. She was forced to evacuate her dormitory and did not take her bank card, and now she was penniless. Compared to the person who has lost a loved one, this is minor. But nonetheless it is one of the many stories of dislocation.

I sit with clients in the afternoon, and again and again I hear the same refrain: disbelief, anger, and also embarrassment and almost shame at talking about one's personal grief over loved ones who have died prior to yesterday. Somehow their grief seems puny next to the cataclysm of yesterday. I try to support

these people to honor their own stories. These stories are the lens through which they view the events of this week. Their families of brother and sister griever has expanded exponentially.

I leave the hospital in the early afternoon to return to my offices at the Center for Loss and Renewal. I pass the emergency room and the ten or more stretchers lined up on the street waiting to be filled by patients who seem not to come. I pass by make shift bill boards with the headline: "Have You Seen These People?" They are plastered with names and pictures of missing loved ones. My heart breaks. The faces of America stare at me. So many young people in the pictures with their young children and spouses. Mothers, brothers, sisters, fathers: all missing, most of whom will never come back.

Outside on the street it is clear that the direction of the wind has changed. Yesterday it was blowing towards the south, towards Brooklyn. But now the smell of smoke is strong. Walking down the street I see scores of people wearing protective masks. I walking in a strange new land.

I walk across Eighteenth Street towards the west side of Manhattan. At each cross intersection, Third Avenue, Fifth Avenue, Sixth Avenue, and finally Seventh Avenue, I look downtown to see the billowing smoke. Walking up Seventh Avenue I pass a camera store with two big posters of what was once Manhattan's skyline. No more. In the same windows hang pictures of the Towers ablaze.

Continuing up Seventh Avenue to catch the subway at 42nd street, I wonder how we are going to get through this misery. I think about all the unanswered questions. Having worked with grieving people for years and years, I know how grief and pain can linger. We are only at the beginning. And then my mind turns to the impromptu prayer service held on the hospice unit earlier today. We sat together, some cried, asking for understanding, compassion on those who were suffering, and peace. I felt comforted, if only temporarily, and less alone. I was grateful. Sharing the stories, sharing the pain. Not an answer, but a response.