

E-NEWS ARTICLE: After The Fall (What It Was Like to Survive 9/11)

Contributed by Deborah Weiss, BA, JD

As I ran outside, I knew immediately that we were at war. The landscape was covered in white, and it looked as though a nuclear bomb had hit. Empty baby carriages and shoes were strewn along the path where people were running, unable to stop and pick up their belongings. I ran along the water with my cat in my arms. To my left I saw the towers burning. To my right I saw the sun. The first tower had fallen. The second tower was leaning in my direction. I wasn't sure I was going to live until the end of the day, but I knew that the outcome was in God's hands.

The air was thick with asbestos and dust. It was difficult to breathe. Covered in white, several of us jumped onto a rescue ferry that had miraculously appeared out of the blue to take us to safety. We spent the day at a triage center in New Jersey, where some were provided medical attention. The rest of us watched helplessly as the towers burned across the river, listening to the radio for the estimated number of deaths. That night, a kind stranger invited me to her house, along with a few others who had also been rendered homeless. She fed us and gave us clean clothes. I slept on the living room floor, and was glad to have a roof over my head. 3000 others had not been as fortunate. My home, the closest residence to the World Trade Center -- "Gateway Plaza" -- was unlivable and deemed a crime scene. My office next to 7 WTC had a wall blown off. It was difficult to obtain information because both my landlord's office and my work office were closed. The phone lines were down in Battery Park City for weeks. We watched TV trying to find out the status of our jobs and apartments. We had nothing but the clothes we ran in. After a week, I made my way back to friends' homes in NYC, and hopped from couch to couch. I'm a lawyer by profession, but suddenly wondered how winning a law suit ever seemed so important. I looked up at the sky where the WTC had once towered over the city. The skyline had disappeared, and the whole world had changed in a matter of minutes. At first, we thought our apartments were permanently uninhabitable. Later, we were notified that if we were to comply with numerous health-related requirements, we could resettle into our apartments after a few months. Nevertheless, 70 percent of the building complex opted to move out. During the ensuing months, the burden experienced by people who were displaced from their homes or rendered jobless was largely overlooked by outreach groups and the media. After all, we survived. The world was focused on THE DAY -- no doubt one of the most terrible days in our history. Yet, for those who lived through it, the trauma was ongoing for weeks without respite. Despite the attempts of reporters, health registries, and the helping community, history will be unable to accurately record the hardships, angst, ripple effects, and emotional wreckage caused by the wake of 9/11. The mini-traumas -- dealing with agencies after eight-hour lines, that were dark, dingy, unorganized, insensitive; FEMA inspectors telling us to throw out our clothes and furniture; hazardous waste cleaners, phone and electric companies, landlords, jobs, packing, moving -- were made worse by a whole neighborhood all doing the same. Uptown, phone lines were tied up for weeks. The Mayor's office set up a phone line to assist: "press one if you lost a loved one, press 2 to obtain a death certificate, press 3 if you lost your job, press 4 if …" There was also a Web site that listed the location of the funerals and memorial services that were being conducted daily. I returned to the scene of the crime. People wore masks over their mouths and had tears in their eyes. Through the gates of ground zero, the streets looked desolate except for the camouflaged guards and their tanks. Walking down the white asbestos-covered streets, the silence was deafening. The windows were blown out of neighboring hi-rises, as the damage covered a two-mile radius. It was not a building, the twin towers, or a block. It was a neighborhood, a city, a nation. I signed a liability release before being permitted to go upstairs and pick up my belongings. With the stench of burning flesh seeping through the window panes, and the fallen towers turned into a heap of ash and debris hovering over five stories high, I looked out my window where the statuesque buildings once stood. Now there was only a morgue. Rescue workers and work dogs looked in vain for injured people to help. Hospitals prepared to take in masses of individuals in need, but none came. There were only two outcomes: you lived or you died. What once was my home became a living memorial for those who perished at the site. A tent for those who gave service as officers and firemen plastered photos of men in uniform. Flags flew to honor the enlisted men. On the site itself was a list of the 82 countries that had citizens perish in the ashes. The largest memorial spanned a few yards in length. Piled higher than one can imagine, was the outpouring of love in the form of letters to heaven, to loved ones lost, to those almost married, those almost born, and to all those whose lives were cut short. Ruthlessly. Needlessly. Purposely. They were parents, sisters, brothers, children, and spouses. The teddy bears, flowers, family pictures, lit candles, and tears of grown men in suits standing quietly with their heads bowed down next to the memories of those absent -- seemed endless. It is now clear that our nation cannot sit idly by, based on the premise that we will be untouched by disaster. Whether future catastrophes are man-made like 9/11, or natural disasters like Katrina, there are steps that the helping community can take to ease the pain of those who survive. They are:

- Don't assume you understand the nature of the trauma. Ask survivors questions. Get information about what is most upsetting to them and how you can help. Terrorist attacks are NOT the same as "everyday traumas"; such as rape, and professionals have little experience in addressing acts of war on U.S. soil (which differ from acts of war abroad.)

- Expand your outreach to include people in the surrounding community even if they were not at the official site of the disaster. This includes: those who were in such proximity that they had to run for their lives, those who witnessed the death of others, and those who were displaced either temporarily or permanently from their jobs and/or homes.

- Understand that survivors are enduring a continuing trauma that lasts weeks, sometimes months. Living in a zone where rescuers are searching for bodies, coping with agencies, losing worldly belongings, being displaced, and working to rebuild one's life are all part of the trauma. Don't assume everyone has the support of family and friends. Social workers can provide emotional (and perhaps other types of) support during this difficult time.

- Be sensitive, and realize that everyone is different. While some might need to tell their story repeatedly in order to

cathart, others might prefer not to talk about it. If you work for an agency or charity, do not ask survivors to relive their experiences unless they want to. While you might find their stories interesting, the focus should be on the needs of the survivors.

- Anticipate future attacks and disasters. a) Before another disaster hits, gain insight into how terrorist attacks and disasters affect survivors, both practically and psychologically. b) Encourage agencies and charities to have procedures in place to minimize chaos after disaster strikes. While nobody could have anticipated 9/11, it is likely that terrorism and natural disasters will visit our shores once again. Be prepared. Social workers can play a great role in mitigating the extent of mass trauma for those who survive. However, it is also important to honor the memory of those lost by doing what we can to ensure that more people won't die needlessly in the future. Our country must come out of denial and face the unpleasant truth that we are in a global war with radicals who are preaching death to America. We should educate ourselves, stop our partisan bickering, and unite as a country in the effort to prevent future terrorist attacks. Remember, prevention is always the best medicine.

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