

Sept. 11, 2001 - Time Capsule



Here's our family's story from 20 years ago today. I sent this around to friends, colleagues, and relatives a few days after the event. It was a good way for many of them to have a personal connection to the day and its aftermath.

Dear Diana,

On September 10, 2001, you were six months old. The next day the world around you changed as it rarely ever does - with violence, stunning in its cruelty; with mind-numbing speed; and with a decisiveness almost unheard of in human history.

I bear witness to what happened because we were very close to the epicenter of this world-shattering earthquake.

At 8:48 in the morning that day, we were in our apartment in lower Manhattan, one third of a mile north from what was the World Trade Center complex. You and your mother were in the living room, and I was still in bed. I was awakened by a loud screaming outside that sounded like a plane or missile, then I heard a huge explosion coming from the direction of the World Trade Center. Your mom thought it was a sonic boom. I thought it might be what it turned out to be. I put my head out the window and saw the gash, fire, and smoke in the side of the north tower of the Trade Center. I knew it wasn't an accident. Not long after, while I was holding you, the second plane came screaming in followed by the explosion. In my remembering, you could tell that the engines were being revved up to full throttle as the planes came boring in for the kill.

Your mom and I decided that I should go down to the scene to see if I could help. There were not very many people coming up the street as I was going down. The people were being evacuated to the east, south, and west. When I got to Vesey (the street bordering the complex on the north), I saw emergency vehicles off to my right, to the west, on West St., toward the Hudson River, and fire trucks to my left on Vesey itself. I went under the overpass that connected the main complex with 7 WTC. There was a lot of activity in the truck bays there, with people coming and going. I had worked for more than ten years for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. The captain of the regional office's police detail came by heading into the building. He told me that the Pentagon had been hit.

I was considering where to go and what to do when I heard a third screaming that sounded to me like another plane or some kind of missile coming in. I dove to the curb and pressed up against a concrete barrier waiting for some kind of impact - and, it crossed my mind, my death. No shock came. I got up and moved toward the river, to West St., where scores of emergency vehicles and personnel were deployed, and where people from the Trade Center and other offices were escaping to the north. The screaming I'd heard wasn't another jet or a missile. It was the sonic wave from the south tower collapsing, something I had no idea had happened. Suddenly a huge black-gray cloud with the debris and dust from the collapse of the south tower came roaring up the street, people running for their lives before it. I managed to outrun it and got home a few minutes later.

My ignorance about the collapse of the south tower was bliss for me but unfortunately your poor mother had been watching this all on television. She had no idea where I was. She was quite terrified when the south tower went in and very happy to see me when I came through the door.

We grabbed some things for you, put you in the carriage, and left. As we were heading up our street, your mom could see that the second tower was coming down. I couldn't bear to look.

The three of us headed to your Aunt Nina's apartment on 12th St. in the East Village. On the way, there were thousands of people in the street, most of whom were going north, away from the disaster.

On Fifth Ave., we saw a man being comforted by strangers. He was saying that his fiancée worked in the towers. Then we went into your mom's church, the First Presbyterian Church (where we were married and you were baptized) and we prayed. I prayed to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for the souls of the innocent dead and the dark souls of the terrorists. Then I took a Bible seeking the 23rd Psalm, tried to read it, and broke down.

We went to Aunt Nina's where your grandmother, who'd come into town from New Jersey for a doctor's appointment, and your Uncle Roger, who worked downtown, eventually joined us. We watched the television for news.

Later, I walked back downtown to the apartment to close the windows and to fetch a few items back. Then I walked back uptown.

At six, we went for services at the church, had dinner at the apartment, then your mother, you and I went to our friends' place, farther west and uptown, where we went over everything. We exchanged solace and support with Uncle Charles and Aunt Stephanie. You gave us all wonderful hope, Diana. Believe it or not, you were completely good throughout all of the worst moments of the nightmare.

I woke up at 3:00 a.m. that first night with a raging neckache, found some ibuprofen, then went back to sleep at 5:00, and stayed asleep, thankfully, until 11. The previous day had been more emotionally, psychically, and spiritually taxing than any I'd had in a very long time, and more than I ever want to have again. The same can be said, I am very sure, for scores of thousands of New Yorkers, Washingtonians, and others who were directly involved.

That day, I walked back downtown to check on the apartment, to get some more things, and to see about volunteering. I was able to get downtown to the apartment with a photo ID. I took a hard hat from the apartment and managed to navigate police lines to get to where 7 WTC had collapsed onto Greenwich St. It was truly unbelievable, surreal, with fires still burning in the wreckage and being drenched by the Fire Department from an extended tower. There was an eerie quiet and a pall of dust and fine mist from the fire hose while I talked to a City truck driver who, it turned out, was studying structural engineering. We talked about how the planes had come in almost fully loaded with fuel and that the heat from the fires they had ignited was what doomed the towers. He was called to back his truck in to get debris out and I moved over to West St. to see what was happening there. There was lots of heavy equipment lined up. There was dust everywhere and office papers. I surveyed the scene from farther west, then moved back east and went down Church St. to Vesey. The block west of Church, where I'd seen the fire trucks deployed the day before, was a sea of crushed vehicles and debris. The spot where I'd been standing the day before when the south tower collapsed was underneath four stories or more of steaming rubble. I walked south, looking up and questioning the integrity of the tall and thin Millennium Hilton.

Where the Trade Center plaza had been was a mountain of rubble continuing to Liberty St. There were lines of workers handing out small pieces of debris, one by one, or in buckets. Firemen, emergency service workers, cops, medical personnel - by the hundreds - were concentrating their efforts near the center of the mountain. Ruined vehicles were being cleared by heavy equipment and tow trucks.

I can tell you that what you've seen and read about this is not an illusion and not a lie. It was much more real than you can imagine. There was a violence in the destruction that was without any light at all. After surveying the scene for a while, I simply gave up trying to grasp the scope of it.

There was a volunteer hauling food and drink to the workers on the rubble pile from the makeshift canteen in the ruined Burger King at the southeast corner of Church and Liberty streets. There was a small first aid center there too, with medics treating workers for dust in their eyes and blisters on their feet. That people's injuries on Wednesday were no worse than this was both a blessing and a kind of bitter irony.

I grabbed a milk crate and filled it with sandwiches and drinks and took them around to the workers outside. There were hundreds of NY firemen and cops, construction workers, and police and firefighters from around the NYC metropolitan area. There were National Guardsmen scattered around, and medical personnel, both hospital workers and EMTs. The work was not really dangerous, it seemed to me, nor requiring a world of skill, but it was tedious, working the bucket brigades.

I took some drinks over to ten or so iron workers cutting beams with torches and I noticed a strange sight on the ground: ears of corn and other fruits and vegetables smashed into the plaza - these were the remains of the previous day's Greenmarket; the same one to which you and your mother had gone many times that summer.

The other arresting human face of the debris was the scattering, absolutely everywhere, of office papers. Mixed in with the gray dust of the buildings was almost thirty years of paper representing some of the work of tens of thousands of people.

Of course - and it was too horrible to really grasp at the time, although I understood it on a visceral level - the dust was also composed of the bodies of close to six thousand people.

When we ran out of drinks at the canteen on Liberty, I went around the corner to find more. There was another makeshift canteen a block south and a block west, at Cedar St. and Greenwich. I was loading up, when the firemen inside there saw people running outside, presumably because of another imminent building collapse. One of the firemen said "Let's get the fuck out of here," and everyone bailed. Lesson One at disaster scenes: When a firefighter starts running, just go! We got down Greenwich a few blocks then stopped. The building in question, about ten stories, brick, seemed okay after all.

Thinking though that I should check in with your mother, I found, miraculously, a working pay phone. I got Uncle Charles on the line and told him what I had been doing and that I was going to work a few more hours. The point, certainly, was not that I was doing anything particularly important myself but that I was there and I was helping in my small way. I, like thousands of others who came in from all over the country, needed to be there.

I went back to where there was another cache of food and drink and started to load up again. It wasn't long, however, before another stampede of emergency workers came tearing down from the east toward Greenwich and then poured south. I asked no questions and lit out. This time they were talking about One Liberty Plaza, an enormous big black office building occupying a whole block just east and up a rise from where the hundreds of workers were concentrated. The firefighters were quite serious about thinking it might go. As it turned out, this building was never at real risk of going, but that wasn't properly determined until the next day.

In any event, with you and your mother in mind, I figured it was time for me to leave. I headed toward the Hudson River, came across West St., moved up past the shattered facades of the World Financial Center, where I got stopped and questioned by a National Guardsman, then I made it over to the yacht basin, where there were a number of fireboats and other work boats docked. The work boats were positioned at several spots along the bulkhead. The esplanade area along the river was part of the running route that I used when I went south from our apartment and where you, your mother, and I would go for long walks. At the north end of Rockefeller Park, there was a helipad on the lawn where people would normally be sunbathing on a beautiful day like it was that Wednesday and the kids from Stuyvesant High School would be hanging out. The high school was a major staging area and rest center for the workers.

I had learned earlier in the day that a former colleague of mine at DEC who had been working for the Port Authority had gotten out okay. I talked to him on Friday and learned that when the first plane came in, only 20 or so stories above him in the north tower, the building swayed and he and others thought it was going to topple, before it righted itself. His floor was evacuated. A few floors down the stairway, he remembered that he'd left his wallet behind. He didn't think twice about getting it, but a colleague of his did, and my friend thought that the man who went

back was probably caught in the explosion and shattered windows from when the second plane went into the south tower. In any event, the colleague didn't make it out. One former coworker of ours at DEC who also worked at the Port Authority died. The only other connection I had to a casualty was the brother of some teammates of mine from the White Plains Rugby Football Club. Your mom and I have heard about many more people who died, though, who were friends, family, and colleagues of our friends and family.

My friend at the Port Authority said that in 1993, when the first attack on the World Trade Center took place, there was no emergency lighting in the stairs. I knew from talking to people back then that the evacuation from the towers took many hours. I certainly had this in mind on September 11th when I was thinking of the probable death toll. When told later in the day that many, many thousands had gotten out in the hour before the south tower collapsed and the hour and a half before the north tower went, I thought it nearly a miracle. The lights in the stairs made a big, big difference.

I was also told of the firemen who were going up as my friend and the others were going down. One heard this story over and over from the other evacuees. These heroes didn't make it out. The firefighters and emergency medical technicians, and NY City and Port Authority police who went into those buildings were responsible for saving many more hundreds of lives than would have been saved had they not facilitated the evacuation. Almost four hundred of these truly incredible heroes died.

A very close friend - and the man who introduced your mom to me - worked on the 32nd floor of the south tower. As soon as he and his co-workers heard the explosion from the first plane, they were told to leave.

We all came home on Friday evening, after I'd scouted the neighborhood and after we'd bought a cell phone. The main consideration was air quality, so that you wouldn't be in any danger at all. There was a big storm on Thursday night and that helped, and the wind direction seemed to be only occasionally blowing to the north. The fires in the ruins of 7 WTC went on for weeks, though, and sometimes we did have to close all the windows. Although we had power, we didn't have phone service for weeks afterward.

I had and have my opinions and my views about why this all happened and what I think should happen and what I think will happen. As you grow older and get to understand me better and understand history, you and I will share our thoughts. One thing I have to say now: As I heard that first plane going in, I pretty much intuited what was happening and why.

The night we came home, I was on the cell phone with your Aunt Hannah. She was describing the coverage of the moments of silence and other ceremonies that happened in Europe that Friday, three days after the attacks. What she told me was all deeply moving, climaxing in the story of the woman in front of Notre Dame de Paris who said that she thought: "We are all a little American today." Aunt Hannah encouraged me to try to get our TV to work by trying to set up some sort of an antenna hookup. (The cable television line was out.) I did, and it worked,

and your mom and I were able to see the stories on the news. We were both crying because of the tremendous feeling of relief that we were not alone in this, that the Europeans knew that we Americans needed their support after the horrific attack and they were opening their hearts to us.

They also realized what we now knew: that there was a terrible depth of violence and hatred, ignorance and corruption at work in the world that had to be confronted. We would all have to get better at understanding and working to alleviate the conditions that bred the terrible, cancerous political movements that fostered such viciousness. This was one of the lessons from the Second World War which some people learned but which was forgotten in too many other places by far too many others.

We may yet learn how to treat ourselves and our children with love and respect. We may yet learn how to live with some peace, prosperity, and harmony. I, for my part, am not going to wait for your generation to grow into adulthood to see if it happens. I will be trying harder than I ever have to help bring the world to a better way of living. I think that on September 11, 2001, many millions of people in the world made the same decision.

Love Always,

Dad