

FROM THE ASHES

*EXCERPTED FROM AN EMAIL WRITTEN BY SCOTT GASSMAN
AND FORWARDED TO ENTRE NOUS BY DICK AXELROD*

Yesterday was tough. I wanted to return to NYC to see the Wall of Prayer and the memorials. I had to get out from under the TV onslaught and see the humanity for myself.

I live in Queens and worked in an office on the 23d floor of the World Trade Center Building One. Yes, I was there on Tuesday, ironically reading about a terrorist turned teacher just arrested in for an airplane hijacking back in the early 70's. I was reading it at the moment the Building was hit. The first word that popped in my head was terrorist.

The fear was horrible, the screams and expressions on co-workers faces was terrifying. Suddenly everything taken for granted was shaking. Though I have a great view of the Hudson River, I chose not to go to my window. I looked through the glass of another office. I saw debris falling. I saw the roof of a building a few blocks south on fire. I didn't understand how my building could shake and a building that distance could be on fire.

My attention turned to the screaming co-workers. I put on my facilitator hat and sought calm. Let's get on the ground resonated from my head like the teachers taught us in elementary school.

I called a security number and they thought possibly it was an earthquake. Directions on how to proceed wasn't forthcoming. Then our floor fire marshal said they wanted us to go down the stairs. The first stairway was full of people and stagnant. A woman said, "Let's go to another emergency exit." We went. A woman stepped out of the stairwell—said she couldn't breathe with all the people. I don't know what became of her. We moved down the flights of stairs with a certain calm. Some had messages that we had been hit by a plane. Then it was 2 planes. I listened but didn't dwell. We worked well together making our way down to what's now known as Ground Zero. Someone provided paper towels and others shared water to wet cloths so we could breathe through the smoky walk down. We encouraged those showing visible signs of suffering to make their way down faster. Two or three people with escorts came from higher floors, announced as burn victims. We just made space so they could pass. We were respectful, aware they were able to walk but walking in pain with singed skin. No one spoke of what horrors might be above us.

Firemen started coming up the stairs. We were asked to move to the right to let them pass. Like a chain gang we sent messages up or down as needed. Hauling heavy gear, wearing their protective but weighty clothes, they passed us one by one. Trying to be positive, they told us we were close and that we would make it out. They said the air would get better.

Around the 10th, a fireman said to his leader, "We need to stop and rest, we are going to need our strength." His leader said "Yeah, to fight the fire." A co-worker below looked at me when "fire" was mentioned. It penetrated our silence. We continued going down, as the firemen went up. Three in civilian clothes followed the uniformed firefighters. One of them said, "Let me carry some of your gear, you've got a lot to carry." And with a deep understanding smile, he won some of the uniformed officer's load. It was symbolic of a fraternity's commitment to one another and to serving others.

The last seven or eight floors were filled with water. If ever there was a time to not wear high heels, this was it. Some took off their shoes and walked bare foot.

We made it down. The West Street side of the building was unrecognizable. The lobby was a shambles. Water poured all over us. Security personnel stood every 30 yards and kept herding us out...faster...faster. Then we were out. FRESH AIR. We left by the Bookstore exit, and moved towards Broadway. Someone said. "Look back!" I saw fires encircling each of the towers. Joe, who made it out with us said, "The people up there are never going to make it out." Grimness became real.

A reporter descended on a woman crying and leaning against the grate of a church cemetery west of Broadway. I didn't want to be fodder for the reporter's cannon. We moved towards City Hall Park, joining others looking for their co-workers.

Police were everywhere. Emergency vehicles were descending from all directions. A woman asked where I worked. She watched the first plane hit. She was in a cab on the East Side Drive en route to work on the 104th floor of Building Two. She worked for Cantor Fitzgerald. I kept to myself, Joe's message that it wasn't going to be promising for her peers.

I found some lawyers from my company, Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield. One said that he remembered that when we considered moving to the World Trade Center. An executive said she was afraid of heights and would only go if we moved to lower floors. I owe her a kiss and a hug because this might have been the difference for me and many of my peers.

Suddenly the ground shook. I looked up. The building must have been falling. I was afraid the ground could become a crater with all of us in it. I looked down Broadway and saw a humongous cloud of smoke moving north on Broadway. It looked like it was moving faster than we could get away. I didn't know if there was fire behind it. Everyone started running for their lives. People were screaming, falling, losing shoes and just attempting to get away. I ran for blocks.

I slowed when I saw a woman moving her belongings in an oversized portable suitcase. I could walk. I stepped slowly. I kept looking back. I wanted to know where the black cloud was.

We walked for miles. People started reaching out to others. Cell phones didn't work. Long lines stood by pay phones. At about 11 am, I called my wife and ended her hysteria. I saw this really muscular guy walking down the street crying. I stopped at the first bar I could find and had some scotch. I needed to let go of my defenses. Tears started to shake out of me as I watched a TV replay the tale.

I continued walking. I walked to 34th Street and 3rd Avenue. At about 1:30 pm, I got a ride through the Mid-Town tunnel to a bus I could take home. Once inside I cried and cried. The first two days, I cried mostly for the firemen that went up in the inferno and gave their lives for the me's of the world. I will never forget their bravery, sacrifice and commitment.

This leads me back to how I started this message. On Saturday afternoon, I grew anxious as I got ready to leave for NYC. I needed to get out of my house. I couldn't get behind the wheel to drive. Reeva offered to drive. We made it to the city pretty easily. Parked on 28th Street and 3rd Avenue.

We walked to Bellevue Hospital and the Wall of Prayer. We were entering a new zone. Photos, words and hope greeted prayers. I was drawn to them all. I came upon the picture of a woman from my company. Vivian hadn't been found. I sobbed and sobbed. Two grief counselors walked over. I tried to understand why she didn't make it. She had 3 children. That weighed heavily on me. The grief counselors were helpful. I acknowledged my pain. I offered my hope. It

is special to see a healing community spontaneously emerge to meet the needs of people feeling so much pain. The street and entrance to the hospital were no longer the cold, boring entrance to despair.

Candles, flowers, bouquets and charms adjoined the pictures, descriptions and phone numbers. People offered to be of service in whatever ways were needed.

I came upon two other Empire people who were also missing. More pain. Right before we left the Wall of Prayer, I came upon the picture of a fellow employee who chose to remain with a quadriplegic. How could this physically healthy person in his fifties make such a sacrifice? I tried to talk to my wife, but it was more than she could listen to. I wanted the grief counselors and within seconds they showed up. I brought them to the picture and asked if I could talk about this fellow's heroic action. They listened and offered condolence. I grew stronger by seeing the face of this man who put his friendship above his life. How many of us could do what this friend had done?

We walked past the Armory where searching families were waiting. We continued to Union Square Park. People all along the way offered food, drink and nourishment. The memorial at Union Square was a throwback to the late sixties. Tibetans drummed. Art and poetry lifted spirits. A version of London's Hyde Park shone through as debaters crowded to share points of view. New life was emerging in NYC. Out of the ashes, friendship and acceptance seem to be showing through.

I'm still crying at times. I have worries. I want to control things I ordinarily don't think about. But I'm also better. Stronger. I want to go back to work—to continue to serve others and share the inspirational stories. I know the world faces a difficult future, but I am heartened by the signs of people shedding their boundaries to reach out and help someone. This miserable destruction has given birth to a tapestry of friendship in this great city.

What ever you can do to help others is appreciated. Find that spark of inspiration in you and touch others.

Love, Scott Gassman