

Standing at Ground Zero

I wrote this email to my family after visiting Ground Zero a few days after September 11, 2001. Two colleagues and I were in New York City for meetings with our Cornell Cooperative Extension NYC staff. I was serving as the Cornell Cooperative Extension Director at the time.

I'm in my hotel room in Manhattan, about 30 blocks from Ground Zero. Two of my colleagues and I came to New York City this morning to meet with some of our local Cooperative Extension staff from NYC and the surrounding counties. We are spending a couple of days in planning our organization's response to this disaster. We'll be looking at what we can do as part of the recovery and rebuilding process.

Members of our staff were on the job from that first morning, working in different ways to help their communities deal with this crisis. We've developed a website that provides research-based information (for social service workers, parents, community leaders, teachers, etc.) on a whole variety of issues. To give you a sense of what we're doing, you can visit: www.cce.cornell.edu.

The Haze

We crossed the George Washington Bridge this morning (coming from Jersey to Manhattan) on the upper lane. You couldn't see much because of all the smoke in air. We came down the Palisades Parkway from the north. When you come by this route, it feels as if you're driving through a forest until you suddenly arrive at the bridge where you usually get a spectacular view of the Manhattan skyline. The twin towers of the World Trade Center always dominate the scene. Although I knew intellectually what had happened in lower Manhattan, I was nonetheless stunned by the sight of smoke rising from the empty space where those magnificent buildings had stood; they were always my first view of the city.

As we drove onto the Hudson Parkway (which runs along the Hudson River on Manhattan's west side), we noted that several lanes were closed to accommodate a steady stream of emergency vehicles. Buses shuttled firefighters and police from a staging area to Ground Zero 40 blocks south. Manhattan was one massive traffic jam today. Radio stations warned people to stay off the island but we didn't know that until after we had crossed the George Washington Bridge; by then it was too late. One of the first things we saw was a huge, white Navy hospital ship docked at the port, surrounded by dozens of ambulances and other emergency vehicles. They weren't going anywhere.

A Different New York

We were stuck in Midtown traffic when one of my colleagues in the car pointed out something that had been nagging at me but hadn't fully registered; it was deathly quiet outside. People were not honking at each other. Pedestrians were not yelling at cab drivers who cut them off in cross walks. (New York drivers and pedestrians are known for their loud conversations with each other on the street. I've seen people in business suits yell, give each other the finger and threaten to slug each other after one had cut off the other at an intersection.) Today, I saw cab drivers stop and wait patiently as pedestrians crossed the street. Unbelievable!

Across the street, I saw a fellow staring at a map. Immediately someone came up to talk with him, obviously giving directions. That is not normal New York behavior either. People were walking slowly and silently. “Somber” was the word that came to my mind. When I commented to a New York City colleague about how different Manhattan felt than usual, she responded by saying that today was much better than last week. It wasn’t normal but at least today, people were actually walking around outside. Last week, by contrast, the streets and sidewalks were empty. The feel had been surreal, even eerie.

My staff and I met at our Midtown office from noon until dinner this evening, after which three of us decided to take the subway to lower Manhattan to see Ground Zero. My first shock came on the subway when a young man stood up and offered one of my colleagues (a 50-something woman) his seat. Never in the 11 years that I have ridden subways in New York City had I seen that before! I know the subway system but the routes near the towers had changed because at least one of the stations was buried under the rubble. As we stepped off the train, we were confused as to where we needed to go. As we looked for our transfer, several people came up and offered us directions. One woman insisted on walking with us to our connection to make sure that we didn’t get on the wrong train. Again, that had never been my experience in New York before.

On the train, people were talking with each other in hushed tones—conversing with total strangers. That is something else that you rarely see on NYC trains. The first thing my Extension colleagues told me when I started working with them on a project in Brooklyn 10 years ago was how to travel the subway; look straight ahead or stare at your shoes. Whatever you do, they told me, don’t make eye contact, don’t talk with other people and don’t respond to anything that someone else may say. These were considered survival tips.

The posters

What tears your heart out are all the *missing persons* posters plastered on the subway walls, light poles, buildings and the police barricades. The posters carry the same headline: “Has anybody seen ____?” I saw pictures of people in casual clothes and wedding dresses, engaged in normal activities and sitting for studio portraits. What struck me, however, is how many of these people were young, but then I remembered something. Last Friday, I saw a list of Cornell University alumni who were known to have died in the towers. Most of them graduated during the 1990s—many of them during the last few years. On the train tonight at the end of the evening rush hour, most of the other passengers were under 30.

I reflected on what a Rutgers University colleague had told me earlier in the day. (Cornell and Rutgers University will be working together on some of our disaster response initiatives.) A significant proportion of those who died in the inferno did not carry life insurance. The reason? Many were very young so probably still assumed that they would live forever. For others, these were their first jobs so they had to choose between buying life insurance and paying the rent. Many of those who died had very young children. Those with the youngest children were the least likely to have carried insurance, which means that many young widows will now be raising

families without any support. Rutgers and Cornell will be helping families learn to cope with reduced incomes as well as to develop the skills that some will need to find new jobs.

Ground Zero

People had warned us that we would see very little because of the police barricades. Indeed, that was mostly true. Some cops tried to discourage us from going to the scene but we ignored their advice and walked along the police barricades to within one block of the Trade Center. You could see into Ground Zero at the intersections. You would then walk another block during which you saw nothing (other buildings were in the way) and then as you came to another intersection, you could again see into the big hole. There were literally hundreds of police and soldiers lining the barricades, keeping passers-by on the sidewalks and away from the route being used by emergency vehicles. The roads in lower Manhattan are all closed except for emergency vehicles, telephone company trucks, utility company vehicles and buses shuttling rescue workers to and from the scene.

The picture that you get from standing there is exactly what you see on the television news and in the paper. Although you can see less than you do on television, your feelings are much more intense. People were gathered around at each intersection—watching in silence. I could hardly drag myself way; you watch in disbelief. It doesn't feel real. You understand why they call this place, "Ground Zero," because it really does resemble the scenes from movies that show a city following a fictional nuclear attack. Unfortunately, this isn't a movie.

Although we were there at night, the whole area was illuminated with powerful klieg lights. You could see (and smell) the smoke billowing into the sky. My eyes burned. I watched as firefighters poured a huge stream of water on one area where the smoldering fire had again burst into flames. We couldn't see the fire but the steam rising to the sky let you know that it was still burning. Meanwhile, a caravan of dump trucks loaded with twisted steel drove slowly by as we watched in silence.

The Officer

We found a good place from which to watch so I got into a conversation with a young narcotics officer from Brooklyn who was guarding the area. He had been home at the time of the explosions but was pressed into duty and on the scene by early afternoon on September 11. He and other rescuers came by boat from Brooklyn to the lower West side, touching ground about four blocks from the Trade Center. The heat was so intense that they couldn't approach ground zero until 9:30 that night. One of the policeman's friends had died on the 34th floor of South building. Somehow they had retrieved his body before the building collapsed. "Unlike the other friends and families of victims," he told me, "we at least have something to bury."

Last night, a waste disposal truck had tried to refill its water tank at a fire hydrant four blocks away. When they opened the hydrant, boiling water poured out, turning to steam in the night air. Earlier today, the fire was still so hot that that parts of the iron frame in the bottom of one of the holes were still glowing red. They don't expect the fire to cool down and go out until some time next week. It has been burning for two weeks.

Earlier, I mentioned that the smoke was still rising into the night sky, illuminated by powerful klieg lights. Through the haze and smoke, you could see that huge American flag, flapping in the breeze. What a sight! It reminded me of Francis Scott Key's words that night at Fort McHenry during the War of 1812 when he penned what became our national anthem. In the same way, you could see the flag barely visible through the smoke, flying high over the debris in the night sky.

I asked the officer how he was coping. He said that he didn't really know. He just had to go on. What was the hardest for him to accept, he told me, was hearing his colleagues who had been at the scene during that first hour as they described what they had seen. The worst, he said, was watching all the people jump from the top of the towers. They "came down like rain from the sky," he told me over and over. "There were so many of them," he said, though the media isn't (thankfully) showing the pictures. (I did see some video clips streamed on the Internet.) One jumper landed on a NYC fire department company chaplain and killed him.

The Rescuers

We saw this one wall standing precariously by itself. My colleagues turned to the policeman and asked what was holding it up. The officer shook his head and said that he didn't know. He was sure of one thing. If it fell, a lot of people would die because they were working down in the hole over which the wall was leaning.

The officer said that he had been working 20 hours per day but now he was down—at least theoretically—to 12-hour shifts. He goes home, takes a shower, sleeps for a couple of hours and then comes back because he just can't stay away. He told me that the other NYC police and firefighters felt the same way. I saw buses carrying firefighters from all over the country, people who had come in to help. Remember that more than 330 firefighters lost their lives; so did 75-80 police officers.

"Think of all the children who lost their parents," the officer told me. "We'll take care of the children of the firefighters and police," he continued, "but who is going to take care of all their children?" he asked me as he waved his arms in the direction of the six-square-block area that had been leveled. Earlier in the afternoon, my colleagues told me of one company that lost several hundred employees. More than 1,500 children associated with that company lost at least one parent; some lost both. Magnify that loss as you take into account all the other people who died on that fateful morning.

The officer told me that he spent the days on the bucket brigade. You needed buckets because that was the only way to move the materials, he told me. The concrete building had essentially melted down into sand. What you had was huge, twisted chunks of steel embedded in this sand. The only way to remove it was handful by handful, bucket by bucket. Now they couldn't even do that because heavy steel beams were blocking the way. Workers were carefully cutting them apart and removing them but by this time, the remaining pieces were so huge that they could only be moved by monster cranes. In the middle of this devastation, there weren't even any chunks of concrete left; they had disintegrated in the inferno. So did the people in the towers. Meanwhile, a man came by with a stack of flyers that he was handing out and posting on the

barricades. I saw a picture of the young woman for whom he was searching. I couldn't bear to ask who she was.

The survivors

This tragedy has a global dimension that I had not understood earlier. The restaurants and shops in the World Trade Center were generally staffed by international workers. (This is not surprising since these are generally minimum wage jobs). Many of these workers will never be counted or accounted for. Service jobs turn over quickly so nobody really knows who was at work on September 11. In addition, many of these workers were probably undocumented, so left no paper trail. They certainly didn't have benefits or life insurance. Their families will now be destitute in a foreign land. We also know that many service workers in New York regularly send money home to support their families in Latin America, the Philippines, India or other Third World nations. This source of support—a significant contribution to the hard currency in some countries—has now been lost.

Many people (certainly I was one of them) had initially assumed that the people who died were generally Wall Street bankers with huge pensions and big insurance policies. What I've learned is that many of our Cornell alumni who died in the inferno were young, beginning workers in their first jobs. (And I've already noted that the victims included many service workers who were on duty in the building.)

This tragedy will have an enormous effect on the local economy. The airlines have already laid off more than 100,000 workers; others will follow. Many of them live in the greater New York area. The hospitality industry has come to a halt in some areas. (Hotels are closing and restaurants are no longer open for business. Our hotel appears to be virtually empty except for my colleagues and I—and some firefighters from Georgia.) I mentioned earlier that a six-square-block area had been wiped out. All around Ground Zero, however, you have buildings that now stand empty. Companies have shut down their operations because the engineers don't know whether the buildings are safe. Many people will not have paychecks even if the family breadwinners survived. The companies are gone; so are the jobs. Helping people find employment will be a huge challenge.

Meanwhile, structural engineers are studying satellite pictures of the skyscrapers in lower Manhattan to see if they have shifted. If so, they will have to be razed rather than repaired and cleaned. A tall building in front of me, covered with glass, was caked with soot. It looked like an empty kettle that someone forgot to remove from the stove; I can't imagine what it is like on the inside. Whether structurally sound or not, this building will not be used anytime soon—and this was one of the lucky ones.

What could have been

The officer standing guard on the barricade this evening wanted to talk, and I was a good listener. He made several very interesting observations. First, he pointed out that if the second plane had hit within a couple of minutes of the first, both buildings would have collapsed almost immediately. If that had happened, 50,000 people would have died. Instead, many people,

particularly those on the bottom half of the second tower, escaped. Secondly, when the first tower fell, the top fell backwards (west) towards the Hudson and landed on an eight-lane highway. The rest then fell inward, collapsing on itself. The top could just as well have fallen east in which case it would likely have landed on the other tower, pushing it over and undoubtedly destroying several other skyscrapers as well. This was probably what the hijackers had in mind when they aimed the plane at the first tower. Awful as this already was, that would have been truly catastrophic.

As we turned to leave, the officer turned to me and said, "I wish that those people who oppose war could come and see this. They'd change their minds." Maybe or maybe not. This sight does, however, raise some wrenching questions. Tonight, after I returned to my hotel from Ground Zero, I found an e-mail message from one of my staffers. He's waiting by the phone for a call to active duty. He flies a helicopter gunship in the reserves and has been told to stand by.

I've seen some pretty awful things in my life but this was the worst. Tomorrow morning, we'll gather our staff and talk about ways through which the New York extension system can help people and communities deal with their loss and then rebuild. It's long after midnight; I'm going to try and sleep....

Merrill