

Going Back to Ground Zero: A Personal Perspective October 24, 2001

I had to go back for me.

The smell hits you first. Some New Yorkers told me they have sensed it as far north as Madison Square Garden; that's on warm days when the breeze is light. For me it became intense as we reached Canal St.

Looking in from Broadway near Wall St. was being part of a crowd of visitors. The folks who work in the financial district don't look now. They've seen plenty already and are busy getting to their destination. It's the tourists who clog up the sidewalk while they gape and take pictures.

I felt out-of-place.

"I was in there" I screamed inside my head so none of the onlookers could hear me. "You have no idea what it was like" I said to myself as I eavesdropped on inane conversations about September 11th. It never ceases to amaze me how people can pontificate when they know nothing but TV images.

Go around to the other side. The world looks upside down when you stand by Battery Park City. The empty place in the sky is powerful, invisible and magnetic. Like a "black hole" I thought.

Standing on the corner of West St. and Albany St. It's so big. Huge. Awesome. A pile of concrete and steel that large is difficult to grasp.

Everything is replayed in the mind in minute detail. I found myself comparing then and now. Half the south bridge is still there. I remember running under it.

The little things are remembered.

Like the calming smile on the uniformed man in the lobby of the Marriott who helped direct people out through the emergency door in the Tall Ships bar and onto Liberty St. He was doing this during those 18 minutes before the South tower was hit.

I went out that door with hundreds of my colleagues. All of our NABE conference registrants are alive and safe. He stayed to help people. I wonder?

At the edge of the "hard hat" area near the Marriott and one block from the corner of West St. and Liberty St., I am surrounded by activity and I am also alone. The devastation is immense. The steel frame of the first floor of the Marriott is still standing; all the upper floors collapsed along with the adjacent towers. The lobby floor held. It is hard to imagine but it's true. They reinforced it after the 1993 bombing and now it held under all that weight.

Maybe that doorman with the calming smile was under the reinforced steel? Maybe he survived?

The mind asks strange questions at moments like this. Metaphors appear from the recesses of the cerebellum. Did the Angel of Death pass over the Marriott portal?

Miracles are possible. We know that now, don't we? Thousands know it.

Yet six thousand don't. It feels so heavy.

Going back has helped me.

From September 11th until my return, every night was interrupted by the scenes seared into memory. The towers on fire, the jumpers, the man bleeding. Sometimes I awakened from a dream in which I was inside during the collapse. Horror. No more sleep that night.

Returning to West St. didn't remove the images but I have not awakened at 3 am in the same way since my visit. The images are still there; it seems that the nightmares are gone. At least they were last night.

You may need a strong stomach but for some a return visit may be helpful. That's a shrink's question and better left answered by that discipline.

If you go to see ground zero don't cut short your time. Allow about 3 hours. You will need it to walk around and absorb its enormity. I was able to talk with my escort about my experience. That helped me. It might do so for other survivors.

Weekdays are probably better because weekends bring gawkers and crowds. At least that is what I was told. The cabbies know where to take you.

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