

Finding Friends on Sept. 11

By Ed Finegold

It's been nearly ten years since I called my sister from the corner of 4th street and Broadway because the World Trade Center was on fire. I told her that I wasn't going to work. I didn't want her to worry in case she turned on the news and saw the same massive flames shooting out of the ironwork that I was witnessing first hand. I didn't know what had happened. I heard mutterings around me; something about an airplane crashing into the building. I'd been on my way to the Subway; my office was at 90 West, directly across Liberty Street from the Twin Towers. Naively, I told my sister that I wouldn't go to work until I knew the fire was out and instead would return to my apartment at 4th street and 1st avenue. I called my father as I walked home to tell him the same. That was the last mobile call I was able to make for the rest of the day. The only other phone call I was able to make at all was a page to a friend, now my wife, to let her know I was still alive. Years later, she still had not deleted the page.

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As I walked east on 4th street from Broadway, the buildings obscured my view of downtown. They spared me the sight of the second jetliner colliding with the iconic buildings that dominated my view, and my lifelong memory, of lower Manhattan. I remember going home. I remember the news on the television. All too well I remember that I found my way to the roof and saw a pillar of smoke where Tower Two had stood just moments before. As I stared at Tower One, thinking it looked like a flaming cigar standing on end, a neighbor whispered to me, "that's what the other one looked like before it collapsed... you might want to look away."

I looked around instead. Every rooftop as far as I could see across town and uptown was covered with people. The silence in the city that is never silent was beyond eerie. Tower One slowly collapsed, its massive antenna shifting in slow motion as the colossal building fell in upon itself. The screams of millions of stunned New Yorkers filled my ears, delivering an unnerving soundtrack to a sight that I'm certain I will be able to recall with complete clarity for the rest of my life. Where the gleaming steel tower once stood was a pillar of smoke, as if the structure had left its sprit floating in its wake. A charred beam, remains of one corner of the superstructure, fell to the west, slamming down onto West Street. To the east, smoking chunks of debris flew in multiple directions, powdery white contrails following them to the ground. And there we all stood, wondering what we had just witnessed, having no idea of the implications it would have for the next 10 years of our lives.

I can't remember much about the rest of that day. Eventually I returned to my apartment and began

to wonder about the fate of my colleagues who may have been in the office. In particular, I was filled with dread regarding a friend, James, who I was to have met in the lobby of World One for breakfast. I was late. I knew the chances were that he would not have been. I'm not sure why it occurred to me to login to instant messenger, other than the fact that phones weren't working anymore. Everyone in the office had been using AOL instant messenger to stay in real-time contact at work. It was 2001; the days of the Star Tac flip phone, before text messaging was popular in the U.S., and long before anyone had heard of Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter. People from the office began checking in. Someone kept an unofficial count. Hours went by; no one had seen or heard from James.

Later, maybe days, maybe weeks, I really can't remember, I found out that a dozen or so people had been in the office when the first of the two towers collapsed. Our office building caught fire. One brave man, whose name I'm now struggling to recall but who I remember being Irish, smart, and tough led our officemates through the chaos on Liberty Street. Most people have seen the post-apocalyptic photos of fire trucks parked in a row, caked in dust, and covered in debris. Many have seen the video of men and women throwing themselves from the windows of the Trade Center to escape the fires. That brave colleague – G-d forgive me for forgetting his name – led our teammates through that carnage to safety.

Where the gleaming steel tower once stood was a pillar of smoke

The people that made the run from the office that day experienced horrors I refuse to recount. But James was not among them.

When I finally heard from him, I think it was by email. He was alive and unharmed, at least physically. He'd arrived at Tower One early and was just exiting the subway when the first plane struck. Everyone was ordered to evacuate. When the second aircraft careened into the towers, he was amidst a crowd at Broadway and Fulton Street. The collision happened right over his head. He had to sprint to avoid falling debris, he told me. The rest, he said, was a blur. Thousands of people walked uptown or to Brooklyn. Everyone was confused, afraid, and at a loss for what to do. Covered in soot, horrified by what he'd seen, James walked north for hours all the way to his apartment at 88th street; nearly six miles. I didn't know what to feel about what he'd told me; I was simply relieved to know that he was safe and alive.

During the next few weeks, life in lower Manhattan was bizarre. No automobile traffic, other than

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emergency vehicles, was allowed below 14th street. There were police and military checkpoints at 14th too and I remember showing my ID to someone, maybe a soldier, maybe a cop, in order to walk home. But I have no idea why I was north of 14th during that time. I spent most evenings with a small group of friends, trying to decipher what had happened. One night I rode a pedal bike down the double yellow line in the middle of Broadway thinking I'd never have another chance to do that. But most nights we visited the memorials that grew every day in Washington Square Park, and elsewhere; hundreds of candles flickering before signs and photos, calling out for the people who were lost. So many of them were young people, like me, with whom I'd traveled to work by subway every morning, resenting the fact that too many of us were trying to occupy the same crowded space at the same time. I wanted them back.

Soon, the phones began working again. Friends called to check on me. One came all the way from San Diego as soon as he could get a flight. I vaguely remember a heated conversation about how the U.S. should respond to the attack and being taken to dinner at Peter Luger's steakhouse in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. But my memories of the next six months are hazy at best. Every so often someone tells me a story of something we did together and of which I have absolutely no recollection. It is almost always from that period of time. All I really remember from September 11th, aside from the obvious, was watching the list of friends and colleagues who were safe grow in an instant messenger window and receiving an email late at night letting me know that one who could easily have been lost was still alive.