



not stop sobbing. After a long while she regrouped; after I offered a meditation, she very ostentatiously swung her arms around me and said “Oh, how I needed this, thank you, thank you.”

A father walking with his teenage son approached me; despite his son’s gestures to the contrary, persuaded his son to follow us to a private booth. It soon became clear that they were unable to communicate over the death of the boy’s mother, from whom the father had been divorced. After many gentle questions and examples of other people, the boy finally allowed himself to open up and acknowledge his pain and loneliness. We were all moved and the father was able to say consoling words that were actually acknowledged by his son. It was quite moving; we held hands and meditated on God’s presence, mercy and compassion.

Each encounter was different and required a different approach. On my own I could not have managed, but I learned to improvise by relying on divine guidance. To my own astonishment, it worked; it proved helpful to the individual family members, and energized me through the many hours each day that I spent there.

One day, without prior knowledge, I was asked to accompany families on the boat trip down to “ground zero”. I had hoped for this to happen, as I felt I needed to know what it was like, to better understand what families and the workers down there experienced.

We were asked to connect with one family and to accompany the family members during the trip. I saw an African-American family of five clutching bears and flowers, most of them provided by the Red Cross. I approached them, and after a few words they accepted my staying with them. We were all solemn but somewhat excited in anticipation of what might await us. I found out that the missing, presumed dead person, was a brother, boyfriend and cousin to this family. From photos they showed me, he appeared an attractive, life-loving man. He was to have gone on a trip with his lady friend of fifteen years; while she herself made it out from one of the towers, he did not. Now, as we traveled down the Hudson, the warm and beautiful day was in stark contrast to our mood. After docking, donning our hard hats, the family and I took the flowers and bears and began to walk by the Financial Center, seemingly intact from this side, towards a small viewing platform. On the way we passed some workers who had stopped to pay their respects by taking off their helmets - it was a very touching gesture. Once we arrived at the stand, we began to take in what we saw: the almost overwhelming magnitude of destruction. Nothing like what was shown on TV or in print came close to it. Huge cranes seemed dwarfed by their surroundings and the humans operating them in turn were dwarfed by them. The fire was still smoldering with its acrid smell and smoke. It was only later that I was to find out that its source was human flesh. The temperatures were still in the thousands of degrees.

While my main concern was to be there for this family and help them cope with what they saw, as well as with the dawning conclusion that nobody could have survived this disaster, I was also quite aware of the impact on my own personal level: the scope of the destruction, the distinct feeling of many souls still hovering, and last but not least, the fact that this was not a natural disaster, but an intentional and well-executed deed. The staggering proportions made it more difficult to see God’s presence or the lack of God’s involvement at the time. Yet the small and big gestures of kindness of so many people made this presence more real and acceptable.

We were soon asked to return to the boat, some shaken by the loss of hope, the finality of death, some working on a new perspective, some overcome and crying quietly, some writing notes to be left at the designated place. I walked with different members of the family, stroking their backs, trying to smile in an encouraging and emphatic way. Just then the Statue of Liberty came into view and I pointed it out to them. We talked later about this symbol of freedom and how the terrorists managed to destroy many buildings and lives but how they did not succeed in destroying our spirit. They nodded, but the girlfriend pointed out that their trip was not ever going to be.

I had to agree. At the end of the trip we stayed together for a while - they had some more paperwork to complete - then we hugged and left each other, each with a deeper if not new understanding of the meaning of 9/11.

At the end of each day, there was time for “defusing” with a supervisor to help the transition to our normal lives. Shortly thereafter I was asked to work downtown at one of the respite centers, set up by the Red Cross, to receive any and all of the workers involved in “ground zero”.

The first few days I spent at Respite 2, the ship “Spirit of America”, rented for the sole purpose of allowing the workers to rest, eat and relax during their long hours of work. For many this meant 12-hour shifts, seven days a week. For me it was a totally new set of circumstances. Some of the workers, including police and firefighters, had lost friends, few actual family but most had been there since the beginning. Almost despite themselves, they needed to talk about their experiences to relieve tension, stress, and often, nightmares and sleep problems.

I had been the only chaplain on board and the Red Cross people did not have to ask much to make me return - it was like being on the front of a war zone rather than behind the lines with the wounded. There was nobody to debrief in a formal way. When I needed someone to make the transition, I did find appropriate persons to speak to and sometimes I even had to call SAIR office.

But I was doing fine except when I found that on weekends in the country, I needed much more sleep than usual. I found grounding in gardening and cooking as well as in regular running. In the city I found consistent joy in listening to music as well as in visiting museums.

Curiously, I was drawn to explore several places that memorialized heroes of another time, only one of which I had visited before. All turned out to have something in common with the WTC catastrophe, namely the undeserved death of a group of people. These were the Museum of Jewish Heritage, the Museum of the American Indian and the Vietnam War Memorial. I found a curious balance in this new awareness of events linked by the intent to harm “the other” as defined from a mostly politico-religious perspective, a scapegoat for their own misfortune.

After only a few days, the ship was returned to its original purpose and the Red Cross operations were transferred to the Marriott Financial Center, now called Respite 3. Respite 1 was located at St. John’s University.

As time went by more chaplains joined the downtown scene and regular visits by SAIR chaplains made it all more organized. Nonetheless, I had to readjust to a new scene with different characters. While the Red Cross emphasized the secular aspect of their organization, I played very much along the individual needs of the people I encountered in the course of the weeks that I spent there. When it seemed difficult to get these mostly very masculine and joking people to open up I often resorted to telling them about my own first experience of seeing the “site”. It helped them to start: yes, that was exactly how they felt, the first time and then there was this additional experience and so on.

Throughout these days, I had been thinking about what I had been hearing and certain ideas emerged from being physically and spiritually so close to the “pile”.

1. At first the impact on the senses was still perceived the strongest: the scope of the destruction with its grayness, its odor, its flying ashes, its continuing smoke and smoldering, and last but not least, the ongoing drone of machinery.

2. People spoke about it as a war zone, a demolition-, a construction site, a graveyard, a sacred place where souls were still hovering.

3. It became clearer that this was not like a natural disaster where the horror of destruction could reach the same proportions but that these acts were planned by people, no matter how insane; it was this evil intent, based on their hatred of all that the WTC in New York stands for, that has shocked and wounded all of us on a very deep level. It caused us to lose our bearings; we are now in the process of finding new ones and like most transitions it

feels very uncomfortable and unsettling.

Even before the first PR efforts for the “Lord of the Ring” movie were launched, the idea of evil evoked memories of J. R. Tolkien’s trilogy. It was described as something almost seductive that could capture your attention and when you stayed too long and too close to it, it would suck out all your positive energies. I could imagine the same effects from exposure to the continuous grinding noises of the demolition apparatus consisting of cranes, back hoes, bulldozers, trucks and steelcutting instruments. In addition to the physical sapping I also observed strong feelings of anger and revenge by wishing to annihilate countries who might harbor terrorists, “let’s nuke them”. Many had become righteous and belligerent amongst themselves and towards their superiors. Tensions with spouses started to show.

There was this big, strong man who called himself a “burly fellow” who after a while of talking with me, broke into tears and said he needed to cry to cope with the pain and sorrow he felt each day while working as a crane operator and frequently coming upon bodies or body parts.

A seemingly relaxed police officer spoke about the death of his younger brother that occurred 16 years ago! He said he had not been able to talk about this until now - it was simply too painful. Now the feelings resurfaced with new strength and he just had to speak and was happy to have found someone who was willing to listen. We ran into each other another time and after continuing the conversation he admitted how helpful it had been.

A young female police officer was almost breaking under the strain of the extended hours, of taking care of her two children, once she got home, and of following classes at school. She probably knew it herself all along that something had to give but she needed somebody’s permission to take these special circumstances into consideration to give something up, if only temporarily. Acknowledged stress and physical and spiritual depletion. Each case different and yet so typical. The learning continued.

Some police officers told me of the unenviable privilege of working on the Staten Island sifting station. 12-hour assignments in special suits and respirators —a very lonely and grim job, combing through debris and looking for the smallest body parts or possessions of the dead. I listened and encouraged them to talk to God to fight off depression. Maybe it helped, maybe they forgot.

I also encountered employees of the Marriott hotel who had lived right through the attacks and had witnessed the fleeing evacuees. In addition, two colleagues had perished in the other Marriott located between the towers. One of the staff specifically requested me to spend a moment with him. He needed to talk through the events as in addition to being there he had also lost a cousin. The fact that he finally was able to ask somebody to share his recollections and emotions with seemed to relieve him of a great burden. When I offered a prayer, he cried tears of relief.

Sometimes, even Red Cross volunteers needed assistance as I learned one afternoon when the head of mental health asked me to talk to a young woman. Her recent losses of a friend in one of the crashed airplanes and of her beloved father seemed suddenly unbearable in view of the proximity of the site of the recent tragedy.

So often I needed to switch gears but I trusted being guided and most days it seemed to become easier. One day, I listened to a young police officer who told me how he had tried to help people out of the burning towers. At some point, he realized that the towers might collapse and he started running away from them. Falling ashes were already obscuring his vision as he was bumping into quite a few funny-seeming pieces on his way. It was only when he once stopped briefly that he realized what he was bumping into: human body parts likely from plane passengers, freshly torn apart by the planes’ impact into the towers. He had to stop to catch his breath and emotions before he could continue. He was safe but could not stop thinking about it, nightmares followed and he appeared still traumatized. He found it helpful to talk to me, retelling this story of unthinkable horror seemed more manageable now.

Each time I heard about experiences of people jumping to their deaths, I cringed and my otherwise compassionate heart shrank from my acute inability to have been of help to these people in despair.

At the end of November I went on a family trip. Our son signed himself up for the adventurous experience of a bungee jump. I thought this would be the last thing I ever wanted to do, but for a 25-year-old it would be a thrilling expansion of body, mind and soul. As parents we were planning to come along, to watch and photograph. It was in a remote area of a canyon and only participants, family and close friends were allowed to come. After watching and wondering how scary it really would be, our son had his turn and came back with a special expression on his face. He looked at me and said “ you have to do it - there is this epiphanic aspect”. He knew very well what he was saying as he was familiar with my outlook and past experiences. While I was shocked at the prospect there was also something that seemed to draw me and go for this otherwise “ridiculous” exercise.

To summarize, there were the moments of terror in looking down, the final decision to jump by overriding intense instinctual resistance and finally the awareness that my soul had separated from the body: I was in a timeless very blue space and totally at peace. After a seemingly long time (according to the clock less than 10 seconds) I felt jolted back to human reality and awareness of my body.

It took me days to realize what had compelled me to follow my son's suggestion: the many people jumping from the twin towers had haunted me. Their dreadful decision to escape heat and smoke and to choose another death had each time evoked intense feelings of compassion for them. By sort of simulating their jumping I was given insight into the possible separation of body and soul, thus conceivably sparing them the final horror of impact.

Nothing can ever be verified but through my experience the possibility became a personal reality that proved deeply consoling and brought some peace to those disturbing images. Indeed it was an epiphany, a manifestation of the divine that evoked love, hope and, ultimately, redemption.

I returned to New York and to a changed scene: all respite centers had been closed and transferred to a new center set up by the mayor's office and run by the Salvation Army. They did not use any outside chaplains. I learned, however, about St. Paul's Chapel continuing their support for workers at the “ground zero” site with the help of chaplains. So I returned to find some of the same workers and uniformed people whom I had met before. We were glad to reconnect.

The Pier closed after a few weeks and operations were transferred to a location near City Hall. The Red Cross continued to be involved with volunteers and I continued to counsel returning families and people who were re-applying for financial aid. While the initial shock has subsided the grief was ongoing especially during the holidays and the stress over no new job opportunities was taking its toll. While all this is far from normal and the people do need attention and care, the situation only occasionally reached the intensity or urgency it had immediately after September 11.

Each person's story is different and my willingness to be different each time allowed grace to affect both the receiver as well as the giver of care. It appears as if the healing process is well on its way.

PS For future reference, I would strongly suggest that people who work as caregivers and who have professional training and experience, might gain invaluable by visiting the actual site of the disaster. It would help them to understand better what the people they are counseling are talking about, what they could be feeling and what might have overwhelmed them.