

Life and death at Ground Zero

John Dear | Sep. 8, 2008 | On the Road to Peace

(Note: Here's the final excerpt from my autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, published by Loyola Press last month. In 2001, I was living in New York City but traveling extensively speaking to groups large and small. In August, I addressed a gathering in Los Angeles. The violence that the United States wreaks on the world, I said, will come back to haunt us. I quoted Jesus, "All who live by the sword will die by the sword." I tremble to think of it, but shortly my words would prove prescient.)

On Sept. 7 [2001], I presided over a wedding in New Jersey, then took the train home. Along the way, for the first time ever, I spontaneously deviated from routine, making a pit stop for pizza at the World Trade Center. There I sat during Friday rush hour. The journey from New Jersey to New York passes right through that lobby, at the platform of the PATH train. A million people dashed by me in the lobby of the World Trade Tower. I marveled at the teeming city, its vast variety of characters and eccentrics, the sinners and saints.

On Sunday, Sept. 9, my parents would arrive for a rare New York visit. My father made plans to do the town up right: accommodations at the Millennium Hotel next door to the Two Towers where I'd sat over pizza, dinner at a fancy Midtown Italian restaurant, lunch on Monday at the Russian Tea Room, Mass with Dan and dinner with the community on Monday night. And then, the piece de resistance -- breakfast Tuesday morning at Windows on the World, the storied restaurant perched at dizzying heights atop the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

But just before my parents departed for New York, my mother called. "Your father and I don't want you coming all that way downtown, so we canceled our reservation at the Millennium. We'll be staying at the Park Lane Hotel on Central Park."

"OK." It made no difference to me.

"That means on Tuesday morning, we'll have breakfast there, instead of at the World Trade Center."

Thus, on Sept. 11, 2001 -- a spectacular day, cool and sunny with a clear blue sky -- I sat innocent as a newborn over breakfast in a room overlooking Central Park. Suddenly there was tension in the air. My father heard the news while checking out of the hotel: "A plane, they think, hit the World Trade Center." We switched on the television and saw the burning tower. My mother began to cry. "All those people are going to die," she said.

My parents and I bade hasty goodbyes; they left, and I hopped into a cab for home, where Bob Keck and I watched the horror unfold on TV. A second plane struck; then the towers fell. I cried, said a prayer, then headed downtown to see how I could help.

Like thousands of others, I hoped to lend a hand. I headed south on Broadway, swimming against the tide of the crowd walking up from lower Manhattan. It was an eerie scene, surreal and dreamlike, what you might expect from a disaster movie. The sky was crystal blue except for the gray and pink smoke coming up from lower Manhattan. I pressed toward the smoke, into a growing stench that would linger for weeks.

I walked for hours to St. Vincent's Hospital on West Twelfth Street, where my mother had worked as a nurse in the 1950s. About a hundred medics stood outside along a long row of stretchers, awaiting the arrival of the injured, while a dozen chaplains milled about uneasily. But the injured never arrived. I was shortly informed that there was no need for my services.

I turned away and drifted northward with the crowd toward home. Behind me, a forty-seven-story building fell with a rumble, disappearing almost instantly from the cityscape's notched skyline. A neighbor to the World Trade Center, it was one of several that would fall over the next few days.

I was back on Wednesday at St. Vincent's, but still there was nothing I could do. Finally, that night, I heard that city officials would be opening a center for anxious relatives. The next morning at dawn, I made my way to the hastily assembled Family Assistance Center, a crisis facility set up in the old armory on Lexington Avenue and East 25th Street.

Already, thousands lined the street. They waited in worry and tears, hoping to fill out missing-person reports and glean what information they could. Inside, the place was packed with police officers, Red Cross officials and desperate New Yorkers. I wended my way to the Red Cross chaplains' corner.

There I met Mindi Russell, a bright, charming Baptist minister from Sacramento, Calif. Mindi was September's on-call national coordinator for the Red Cross Spiritual Care program. If an emergency arose anywhere in the country that month, it was her solemn duty to board a plane pronto and coordinate the Red Cross's response. She enlisted me on the spot.

Running on adrenaline and caffeine, she gave me a double-time tour and a speedy lesson on the setup, then handed down my assignment. "Okay, Father John," she said, "go stand over there against the wall, and after everyone has filled out their paperwork, we'll send them to you if they want spiritual counseling. All you have to do is listen and be a compassionate presence." She gave me a smile, turned on her heels, and headed off to attack untold problems. For the next three months, I tried to be that compassionate presence of peace. During my tenure, I met one-on-one with some 1,500 grieving relatives.

As the first day came to a close, Mindi and a handful of Red Cross officials approached me. Would I be willing to serve as a local coordinator for the Red Cross chaplains, here at the Family Assistance Center? And might I be the supervisor? I considered a moment. Yes, I would. Mindi handed me a coordinator's pass, which gave me

the highest clearance possible, authorizing me to travel anywhere in the city. It was clear they were desperate -- they hadn't a clue who I was, of my criminal record or my unpopular stand for peace.

And so I embarked on my new role. More than 550 chaplains from every religion ministered under my supervision. I worked out difficulties in scheduling and problems of security. I gave orientations to each new chaplain and debriefed each one at the end of every shift, and I taught others to do the same. None of the chaplains were to leave the center until we had gathered together and prayed and shared how each was bearing up. And no one was dismissed before telling the group what he or she planned to do that night for relaxation and rest. I took on no chaplains who refused to participate in those daily sessions. It was a lesson for all, including me, in the fine art of pastoral care and compassionate listening. You had to take care of yourself if you were going to be of service to others.

On Sept. 14, the day after I had assumed my role as coordinator, I ventured with churning innards and a measure of curiosity to Ground Zero, where my eyes met destruction on a scale beyond imagining. Every block closer struck the senses harder. Blocks had been obliterated, 16 acres all told, with many buildings hit by debris from the two towers. Everything was covered in white ash. At the World Trade Center plaza rose "the Pile," a mound of steel and rubble looming seven stories high. Smoke billowed forth, flames here and there. The stench was overpowering.

Hundreds of rescue workers poked about, tugging on fragments of girders and masses of stone, coming periodically upon a body. In my clerical attire and yellow hard hat, with a security pass slung around my neck, I was an incongruous sight. I marched right up to the edge of the site and stood there overcome with astonishment, nausea, and grief.

Within seconds, a fireman came scrambling down the Pile, ran up to me and said, "Father, quick, give me your blessing. I'm digging for my best friend." I uttered a prayer and off he dashed, back up the Pile like a squirrel up a tree.

For the rest of the day, workers accosted me -- desperate to talk, overwhelmed by grief, exhausted and running on adrenaline. One begged, "Father, please, teach me how to pray. We found the body of my friend yesterday, and I just don't know what to do." No one had ever asked me how to pray. Never had I been pressed for such large answers in such short order, much less before such a sight. God loves you very much, I told him, so just turn to God, ask for help and guidance, and keep on doing that for the rest of your life.

For hours, scores approached me, grief-stricken and tired. I remember one man in particular, Emilio, a friendly police officer. It was his task to sort torsos and limbs, and he woke up each night after ghastly dreams screaming at the top of his lungs. "What should I do, Father?" he asked me.

By Monday, the city uprooted the Family Assistance Center and transported every computer and pencil and stapler to a convention center on West 54th Street by the Hudson, a venue typically used for fashion shows and beauty contests. Big enough to accommodate five thousand people, it now served as a center of operations for cooks, nurses, ministers, police officers, city officials, mental health workers, and the grief-stricken throngs. This would be the center's home through Thanksgiving.

In one wing, hundreds of booths were set up with phones and computers; there families could register their missing, submit DNA specimens, pore over lists of the bodies, and complete death certificates. Another wing housed a warren of offices -- for the Red Cross, the police, the mayor, translators and volunteer coordinators. A third wing offered an elegant restaurant that turned out fine meals for the bereaved at all hours, free of charge. And finally, there were the lounges, places of respite where the exhausted could secure child care, watch television, or get a massage. Every day, sacks and sacks of mail poured in. The walls soon filled with letters and bright drawings from children around the country.

I met countless poor souls. Mary, a security guard employed on the 70th floor of the North Tower, clambered down flights of stairs and broke for daylight just before the collapse -- all her co-workers presumably died, and her poor self trembling still. When I met Neil, a Long Island Catholic, he was clutching a bag of hairs snatched from a comb -- a DNA specimen from his missing brother-in-law. In his case, the body had been found, one of the few intact. Neil hunched over hours of paperwork; then, in tears, he placed the dreaded call to the family. I got him through as best I could and sent him on his way with a blessing and a prayer.

Then there was the family of 12 who flew in from Europe in search of a missing son. I bestowed a blessing and each in turn offered me a hug and a kiss. And the retired New Jersey couple searching for their son; I sat by as their mouths were swabbed for DNA. And the crying and quaking young man who flew in from Italy all by himself in hopes of finding his mother; and the businessman who had lost 50 colleagues. At Ground Zero, I met the dozen firefighters just arrived from Mexico -- a gift from the Mexican government -- diminutive and scrappy, awaiting their chance to attack the Pile. "Please lead us in prayer, Padre," they said. We joined hands, I murmured my prayer and they burst into tears. Then off they went, up the Pile. So many people, a streak and a blur in my battered memory, all of them crying out ?

Thousands died at the World Trade Center towers, 125 at the Pentagon, and 64 more in the plane crash near Pittsburgh. And with hearts of flesh we mourned, our days overwhelmed by waves of grief. But in Iraq, thanks to U.S. sanctions, mourning had long ago reach a different level altogether. For years in that region, the people had been drowning in oceans of grief. How does one begin to fathom the deaths of half a million children? The psychic ruin of the survivors, their grief? ?

As we begin to comprehend the massive grief we've inflicted around the world, can we deny the possibility that enraged and powerless people, when given the resources and the opportunity, would resort to such insanity? You will reap what you sow, Jesus said long ago. Future attacks, perhaps far worse, are our lot unless we radically alter the way we as a people behave in the world. I believe that unless we make restitution, stop our war-making, feed the world's children, and show respect to the human family, we are doomed to more 9/11s.

John Dear's autobiography, "A Persistent Peace" (440 pages, with a foreword by Martin Sheen, published by Loyola Press) is now available at www.amazon.com [1]. For information about the book and his upcoming national book tour, see: www.persistentpeace.com [2] and www.fatherjohndear.org [3].

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