

Reflections in A Broken Mirror: 9/11, Twenty Years Later

I didn't do anything special or heroic on 9/11. I answered the phone when someone called looking for my wife, Peg Tyre, who had co-authored a book on the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993. I looked out the bedroom window and saw the towers smoking. I went outside and saw white dust in the air. It occurred to me that the terrorists might have figured out a way to put an anthrax payload on a flight that would catch the wind on impact.

I got in the car, rolled up the windows and picked up my two young sons early from school. As nonchalantly as I could, I told them not to breath in the air too much. No big deal. I reminded them that their grandfather had been alive for Pearl Harbor and had served at Iwo Jima.

'It's just our turn," I said. "We'll be all right."

We went home and had lunch. I left them in the bedroom where the window faced the burning buildings. I drew the shades and went to check the news. When I came back in, they were building an elaborate fort on the floor. I pulled back the shades and saw the towers were no longer there. But the smoke kept going, like a man who can't stop talking about something terrible.

When I think about that day, I think about the eyes of the firefighters I saw in a film clip, looking up at the flaming skyscrapers and the falling bodies, and walking *toward* them. I think about the people who traded bonds on the 101st floor or washed dishes at Windows on the World. People who didn't think there was any reason they wouldn't be getting home that night or making plans for the weekend. I think about the 33 Port Authority cops, the 343 firefighters and all the other public servants who died in the line of duty. I think of Mark Bingham, the hulking gay rugby player turned PR exec, who joined his fellow passengers in bashing down the cockpit door of Flight 93 and wrestling the terrorists for control of the plane (if that doesn't annihilate a stereotype forever, I don't know what will).

And I think about my friends who worked at the Office of the Medical Examiner and at the Fresh Kills landfill, sifting through remains and trying to offer a

measure of solace to victims' families, and who are still dealing with the physical and psychological consequences of their service.

I also think of the way we, as New Yorkers, as Americans, as citizens of the world, treated each other. There was a lot of phony posturing and fake grieving, to be sure. Some of that was used to justify torture and at least one war with no clear connection to the original attack, resulting in even more suffering and genuine grief. But there was also authentic fellow feeling. Sometimes, just a glance on the subway, with passengers acknowledging that it took a certain amount of guts just to get back on the train, but *screw those guys*, we're city people, and we don't take their crap. Sometimes, it was running into someone you just vaguely knew and within seconds finding out the true contents of what was in their heart right then. And sometimes, it was turning on the television and seeing the Queen's guard play "The Star Spangled Banner" at Buckingham Palace.

Now it's twenty years later. We just went through an election where close to half the country refuses to accept the result and one of the major political parties is willing to excuse a violent insurrectionary attack on our Capitol. When people cluck their tongues and say sententiously, "that's not who we are." I shake my head and think, "yes, it is."

It's who we've *always* been. Paranoid, tribal, resentful, violent, self-mythologizing, inclined to elevate our own God-given rights and to disparage the rights of anyone who disagrees with us. And yes, some of that applies to the extreme left who insist all cops are bastards and that anyone who doesn't pass certain ideological litmus tests is the enemy.

"It was the truths that made people grotesques," Sherwood Anderson wrote more than a century ago, in *Winesburg, Ohio*. "The moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood."

But it wasn't always so. At least not a hundred percent. Because for at least a few days after that awful murderous event, this really was, as Pete Hamill called it, "the city of people who don't look like you."