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COMMENTARY

Democracy Can't Pause For Anyone

"Monday," Kevin Madden was saying, "we had a service at St. Patrick's for the people we lost. The number is 206."

"What can I do?"
"Say a prayer we get him back." His company is AON, a major national insurance company, and it was on the highest floors of the World Trade Center.

"After it, we went to the Waldorf-Astoria for a quiet reception."

The husband of a woman who was lost came up to me with his son. They wanted to see me on the side. The son is in customs. They had this plastic bag. It was the driver's license and company identification and some sort of a note that had been in her purse. They were all charred on the sides. Somebody in law enforcement, a cop I guess, had found them over at Fresh Kills. I guess it was just there after they dumped a load of the wreckage.

"The husband said to me, 'What do you think?' What do I say? He said, 'This could be evidence. Maybe she's out there somewhere. A billionth of a chance. Still a chance.'"

"I told him, 'Your wife and your mother sent you a gift. Nobody else has anything like this. She left you something. She's in a better place. We're hurt. She's out.'"

Madden is one of these people known to everybody around his company and personal circles and since this catastrophe, he has been going to memorial services and talking on the phone to families of those left.

"I don't know if anybody realizes how many young widows there are. Widows with children. There are 1,500 children without a parent out on the island. You have 32-year-old widows, 28-year-old widows. With kids. I never heard of this. At the services I go to, there are women who get up and give the eulogy for their husbands. I never saw that before."

I met Madden after we had voted. If there was ever a vote you had to make, it was yesterday, when there were 6,500 dead of this city to honor by picking up the lance of their city. Their death was dishonored by Mayor Giuliani, who is a little man in search of a balcony. He searches for ways to change laws so he can be mayor again. He has tried to sabotage this election with rumors and even advising people that they did

not have to vote.

The vote in last night's Democratic primary elections was only 15 percent. I don't know when Giuliani stopped pushing for democracy and started working against it.

He is a national hero for his television appearances as the mayor of a city under attack. He didn't stop

this attack and he can't stop another. When the cheering stops and the bright adoring eyes looking at him turn back to daily life, Giuliani's real legacy will be a city school system of over a million, non-white mostly, that is in a disgraceful shambles, and it has been for every day of his time as mayor.

If you're going to be in a war that the government says will be long and torturous, you best not try it without those million kids being educated enough to help your armed forces.

It was hard to concentrate last night on the votes that were counted in the headquarters of the two top finishers, Green and Ferrer. So much time lately has been spent on the more important counting of the dead we knew, or hardly knew or never knew but who were on the job and working in this city before 9 a.m. on Sept. 11. Because of that, because they were honorable enough to be on time and do the job, they died.

And everywhere, you run into families who, like the one at Madden's reception, can't give it up. There have been no bodies found for days and days. There are no hints of people alive in the wreckage. There are no bodies in the morgue. The people are gone and the way to prove it is that they are not here.

And so I make a call to old friends last night, the third or fourth call. The woman's husband was a fire fighter and he is missing.

"How are you doing?" I ask.

"We're all right. We're hanging in there."

"What can I do?"

"Say a prayer we get him back. We're hoping for a break. We're hoping for the miracle."

"Who tells you that?"

"The fire department. They think there's a chance."

All interest last night was in her hope. This might be changed by the time of the runoff, when there would be time for inspecting winners and losers.



Jimmy Breslin

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