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JOYCE PURNICK/Metro Matters

Our Daily Tribute to Differences Provokes Dislike Among Many

As readers of this space must know, Matters is not your most emotional of columns. A temporary departure from routine, however, for two reasons. One is Mohammad Salman Hamdani. The other is the Rev. Jerry Falwell.

As the world knows by now, Mr. Falwell said after the bombings in New York and Washington that God gave the terrorists his green light because he was angry with America for tolerating the American Civil Liberties Union, People for the American Way, advocates of abortion rights, feminists, gays, lesbians and other examples of secular life.

"I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen' " said Mr. Falwell, who later tried to apologize. His original remarks read like a memo to New York: God let suicide bombers kill what could turn out to be more than 5,600 people in the World Trade Center alone because he disapproved of Sin City.

That was enough to make the blood boil. Then a friend called to say that neighbors of her parents in Bayside, Queens, may have lost their son, Mohammad Salman Hamdani, in the buildings' collapse.

Mr. Hamdani, a June graduate of Queens College with plans to be a doctor, must have gone to the trade center complex to help. He had driven an ambulance to earn money for school, so he knew how to function in an emergency, said his mother, Talat Hamdani. "He went to volunteer, he's that kind of a person," said Mrs. Hamdani, a teacher at a middle school in Jamaica, Queens.

Mrs. Hamdani thinks that her son, 23, was on his way to work as a research assistant at Rockefeller University on Tuesday morning when he saw the attack and headed downtown. He takes the elevated No. 7 line — yes, the same line condemned for its diversity by that other lover of New York, John Rocker.

Now the Hamdanis, Pakistani Muslims who emigrated from Karachi 22 years ago, are numb. So is their neighbor, Naomi Fuchs. "Such a wonderful family, such wonderful boys, they wouldn't ever let me shovel the snow," Mrs. Fuchs said late Monday afternoon, as she prepared to observe Rosh Hashana.

This is just one of so many wrenching stories of lives destroyed and families traumatized on Sept. 11, but it somehow crystallizes the elements of the whole awful tragedy, because it is a reminder of what gives the city its soul. What makes New York distinct is not so much its size or glamor or audacity, but its daily tribute to difference, racial, religious, political. New Yorkers live with their differences as a matter of routine.

> The Rev. Jerry Falwell's theory, set off by the acts of a hero.

It occurred to me this week that the city's everyday reality is precisely what unnerves the Falwells and infuriates the terrorists. It's a big part of what normally makes the country so dislike the city that it now purports to admire (surely not for long).

NEW Yorkers do not all love each other. The city has endured riots and racial tensions over the years; since the bombings, Muslims and those who appear to be from the Middle East have been victims of slurs, threats and some attacks, though other parts of the country have reported more, and more-violent, hate crimes.

The fact is, while New Yorkers are no strangers to bigotry, most people tolerate each other. Some celebrate diversity, others just live with it, if only as a survival mechanism. People are thrown together on subways, in buses, on the streets, instead of being isolated in cars. New Yorkers are so used to seeing people in black coats or turbans or dreadlocks that it takes a lot to make them blink.

The day after the bombing, the acrid smell of disaster still heavy in the air, thousands of people visited the memorial that sprang up spontaneously in Union Square Park. Some were crying and lighting candles, others praying, still others arguing intensely. "War is not the answer," a young man was saying, to which another answered, "Political systems are changing."

Posters covering the ground like cardboard carpeting were decorated with peace signs and slogans: "Only violence will stop the violence," said one. "Peace and love," said another, next to "Never again." The people drawn to the park were as different as the political sentiments they expressed: balding hippies, college students in jeans, lawyers in business suits and stiletto heels, women in veils.

The scene was at once sad and encouraging. It said that New York was still New York. The country will again resent New York. Jerry Falwell will again damn it. John Rocker may even ridicule it again.

The sooner the better.

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REGARDS French President Jacques Chirac speaks to Mayor Giuliani after touring Ground Zero yesterday. Headlines in France, according to Chirac, have referred to Giuliani as "Rudy the Rock." Chirac said, "I have special thoughts for the firemen. So many of them paid with their lives."

AMERICA NEWS POOL PHOTO

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