NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

'Ordinary Things' Help the City Heal

By Nicolaus Mills

"YOU'RE in logistics," Milo Ball, my boss at the Red Cross tells me. Milo is being kind. In the wake of the World Trade Center bombing, I've been working as a Red Cross volunteer, and this day I am using the only skill I have, moving boxes, that is of any use to the Red Cross as it sets up its new disaster headquarters at Cadman Plaza in Brooklyn.

I feel no self-consciousness about doing a job that I could just as easily have done in high school. I am, I feel, in the middle of today's equivalent of the World War II melting-pot movie. Only this time I am not opposite the white guy from Brooklyn and the white guy from Pittsburgh and the white guy from Atlanta. There are to be sure white men and women on all sides of me, but this melting pot — and its is a melting pot, not a mosaic — is one in which the white voices of the Upper West Side and the Deep South have become blended with those from Haiti and Jamaica and Spanish Harlem and a dozen other places that were never on America's World War II map.

In the presence of so many people acting out of instinctive goodness, it is easy feeling anonymous. Being concerned with myself is what would feel out of place.



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In the bright Brooklyn sunshine I am reminded of how clear the sky was last Tuesday morning. It was a friend who called and, in the kind of voice I remember people using when John Kennedy was shot, asked, "Did you hear what happened?"

In the quiet New York neighborhood near Columbia University where I have lived since coming to the city from the Midwest, there were no outward signs that anything unusual had just occurred. From my apartment window I could see that the trash had been picked up and that everything looked as it always did at this hour of the morning when the street has just been cleaned.

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Unaware of the news, people were hurrying off to work. I could hear the rush of traffic from nearby Riverside Drive.

Hours later as I stood less than a mile from where the World Trade Center had been, there was, however, no mistaking the magnitude of what had happened. But what was most striking was the quietness. Except for ambulances, there was little traffic. Except for a pair of fighter jets, there were no planes in the sky. In a city in which people usually have lots to say about lots of things, everyone seemed locked in his or her own world.

I thought of London during the blitz, and then Pearl Harbor. New York seemed a mixture of both. But what was different — and I think accounted for the silence — was the sense of so many New Yorkers that they did not know what was coming next. Fighting the Nazis or going to war with Japan were obvious choices in the 1940s. But terrorism is a different story. It is war on the cheap. It does not require great armies or stockpiles of weapons.

It relies instead on men willing to die and kill innocent people, and it brings with it no clean or easy solutions. By virtue of their isolation, their lack of an identifiable home and face, terrorists are not vulnerable to counterattack in the way that nations are.

This was their finest hour, it was said of England during World War II. Last Tuesday, I thought we will see if that is true of America after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. If the New York I saw last week was any indication, one thing was already true. We knew that as a nation we would not be the same again. We knew we would never feel as safe as we once did, that an age of surveillance and border checks was coming.

The unnatural calm and whispered conversations that came over New York after the towers of the World Trade Center buckled and collapsed were simply indications that in the city we had already begun mourning our losses. As people trekked up the closed West Side Highway to catch the ferries to New Jersey or return home for dinner, they knew better than to complain about the long walk. They knew they were the fortunate ones. By pure chance they had escaped injury.

For me, moving boxes at the new Red Cross headquarters has not made Sept. 11 less awful, but it has pointed up what it will take, if we are lucky, for our present sense of fragility to begin to erode. It will be the shared experiences of the most ordinary sort in which what we and thousands of others have done to be helpful came to matter most because it defined who we were, who we wanted to be.

NEWSDAY, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2001

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