

Walking to Work on 9/11 : A Glossary

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carolwilder.info

Eric Rothenbuhler the new kid in town, joining The New School Media Studies M.A. Program as Director of Graduate Studies in September 2001. Eric was from the University of Iowa, accustomed to morning meetings. Media Studies was on a later schedule with classes starting at 4pm, but to be welcoming we agreed to his request for a 9 a.m. Fall semester kickoff meeting.

Leaving my apartment on E. 18th Street about 8:30 for the early walk to work, within minutes I rounded the corner of 14th Street and Union Square south onto University Place. Everyone was standing in freeze frame looking up at the Twin Towers, an iconic sight at the end of all the nearby avenues. I raised my eyes to see a jagged smoking hole high on the North Tower. I went blank. Someone said it was a plane. A guy near to me in a green t-shirt said "This is war." My first coherent thought was that it was just a small plane off course.

Still, I had to get muffins for the meeting. Turning west onto 13th Street to stop at the bakery, I remember excitedly babbling "something is happening. . . something is happening" before rushing on. Seconds later I was about to cross Fifth

Avenue when a roar of screams barreled down the canyon. I turned over my left shoulder to see an enormous fireball billowing out of the South Tower.

"This is war," indeed.

Beyond Words

We are speechless in the face of moments that "words can't express. " Words are fragile; they depend on social consensus, a contract woven from threads that create the delicate fabric of culture. It is the work of poets to point beyond the meaning of words and of visual artists to help us see in new ways. As a writer, at best I can design words in a way that draws attention to the disorienting experience of an event that resists description to this day.

"Unbelievable" "larger than life" "visceral" Glimpses of clarity mixed with fragments of burnt paper. A stained-glass image in motion. And then, beyond the blankness and the trauma, pieces begin to fall in place and words once again matter. But what words matter when words have failed?

Words within easy reach used to describe a big event - extraordinary, momentous, spectacular - seem too small. Only meta words that refer to the limits of words seem to come close: ineffable, ineluctable, surreal. Some thinkers help. Guy Debord gave us the society of the spectacle and Jean Baudrillard the simulacrum, writing:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.

I share this meta talk because I am going to do a bit of playing myself in this first pass at memories of 9/11 at 25 by proposing a *glossary of terms* that have come up during and since the event. And what way to present a glossary other than in alphabetical order? This unconventional reframing is proposed as an intervention to reflect an experience that "words can't express" as well to impose order, however unexpected, on a disordering day.

Let's begin.

amplification

The internet was emergent in 2001, but broadcast and cable television still dominated the news space. At 10:28 am the North Tower fell, taking with it broadcast transmitters for multiple television and several radio stations. What little reception remained for the first twenty-four hours was fuzzy but fact-based. Deirdre Boyle was one of several colleagues who mentioned how:

There was something so uncanny about switching between the TV set wheeled down from my office to the room where we were supposed to be meeting -- and the view out of the window that looked on the burning World Trade Center. I remember wondering which

seemed more real. We sat in that small room looking at each other gobsmacked and not knowing what to do. Poor Eric was in massive denial when he suggested we start the meeting. That was something I'll never forget. When the second tower was hit and we watched the plane glide into it as if in slow motion, I knew this was the beginning of the end for me. . . It was the crash of our naive hopes for the new millenium.



From my office 9/11/2001 - c.10:30 a.m.

When transmission resumed and facts were scarce, coverage moved rapidly down the journalistic food chain toward graphics, music and splashy amplification.

breakdown

The morning of 9/11 shattered our habitual expectations of a clear September day into shards. Suddenly, nothing seemed routine or predictable. Eric Rothenbuhler recalls:

I'll never forget feeling responsible and yet helpless sitting across my desk from a student who came to me hearing voices and asking for help and finding that the University's counseling office literally had a line out the door and down the sidewalk of students. . .all of them seeking help where it was in too little supply.

Eric also remembers:

There was the Pentagon and the plane in the field in upstate New York and at one point they said there were five more planes unaccounted for. I tried to calculate the geometry in my head, if the Empire State Building fell on its side, would it hit us here on 13th Street? Magical thinking again.

Magical thinking seemed to meet the moment.



2 W. 13th Street 13th Floor

New School colleague Mary Watson remembers that with the campus in lockdown, one of her students:

Came to the building without shoes, ID, or money - she had escaped one of the towers. I went down to identify her so she could get in. She was covered in dust and had run up to the campus for safety, which she found in the 12th St. courtyard emergency set-up. She had lost her shoes while running.

No hope of normalcy was safe in the early hours following the attack.

burlesque

There is no event so solemn that tele-media cannot transpose it into infotainment. Media amplification turned to burlesque within a day. The NBC peacock sprouted a flag shirt and anchors sported flag ribbons. Hyper-catchy title slides appeared: "Attack on America" "America Rising" "America's New War" (CNN) "Operation Infinite Justice" "Operation Enduring Freedom" "We Shall Overcome" (NBC) "America Fights Back" (CBS) "Sprit of America" (CNN) "America on Alert" (NBC). Musical scores throbbed with drama and urgency. There was no emotion so profound that media production values could not make it big, bigger, biggest.

Overwrought framing continues to this day, with what is left of legacy media news programs introduced by operatic scores. The music that introduces PBS News Hour makes our dog Wag howl in pain.

cinematic

Susan Sontag wrote "something becomes real - to those elsewhere. . . by being photographed. But a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation." She continues that what pre-cinema "felt like a dream" has become "it was like a movie." The enormity of 9/11 - the huge towers, explosions, casualty count, led to hours and days of non-stop imagery. "Like a movie" is a simulacrum often applied to any visual experience that seems outside of our "real life" context. Or

for the hallucinogenically inclined, "like a bad trip." There is something so human about dissociating from an event that breaks the predictability that makes life livable.

communication

By about 11am I thought I should call my Dad, but before I dialed I had an incoming call from my brother Tom, then when I was on the phone with him an incoming call from my brother Chuck, then when I called my Dad I got an incoming call from my daughter Elissa. My son Casey reached me later, very upset because he hadn't been able get through.

A typical crisis communication study will ask how you learned about the event, who you reached out to, and subsequent media usage. I first participated in a crisis communication study as a grad student and research associate after the May 4th 1970 Kent State shootings. Subsequent crisis communication studies I conducted after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and 9/11 are adapted versions of this methodology.

Since there is no cure for curiosity, especially among academics, it was no surprise that in the wake of 9/11 Eric Rothenbuhler and I designed a survey of New Yorkers on their communication behavior following the event. Results are cited throughout this paper. In our study, Rothenbuhler and I interviewed 116 New Yorkers in the days immediately following the attacks. Our 9/11 study suggested that the first person called was "significant other," (26%) followed by Mom (16%),

Mom and Dad (15%), and Dad (3%). Mom also was the most frequently mentioned person who called in, suggesting that Mom serves the role of "communication central" in many family communication networks.

community

New Yorkers are known, fairly or not, for their hardness and self-sufficiency, but feelings of unity and community were widespread after 9/11. In our study, 76% of respondents reported making "more contact with friends and family," and 57% reported increased "talking with strangers in public places." 56 % reported "being more polite to strangers."



Union Square 9/14/01

Bob Kerrey noted:

What I remember most is how our attitudes toward others had changed dramatically. When you said 'It's good to see you,' you meant it. The sight of every police officer, fire department employee, and emergency response personnel brought tears to our eyes. The Yankees were cheered at Fenway. The city became a community. All of us were trying to answer a simple, sincere question: How can I help?

conspiracy

Kerrey also shared that after that rare experience of community, "vengeance rose in our throats and the moment passed." Within hours of the Towers demise, conspiracy theories about the actions and causes leading up to it began to bloom like daisies in springtime. Humans seem to have a natural impulse to explain the unexplainable, to find closure when a wound is open. 9/11 offered a field day for the conspiracy-inclined with its complex and incendiary elixir of elements.

The "9/11 Truth Movement" - Truthers - has spanned a wide range of groups and influencers who believe that 9/11 was an inside-government job, that it was the result of negligent intelligence, a planned demolition, and/or a pretext for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. U.S. Pretexts for war like the sinking of the Maine (Spanish-American War); the Gulf of Tonkin (Vietnam War) - are well documented. The mother of all pretext hypotheses might be the "Pearl Harbor Advance-Knowledge

Conspiracy Theory," which led to ten government investigations, the latest in 1995. And let's face it. Going down the rabbit hole can be its own form of entertainment, not to mention that in the occasional case the rabbit hole may hold as much truth as fiction. Even *South Park* brilliantly took on 9/11 conspiracy theories with an October 6, 2006 episode "Mystery of the Urinal Deuce," ultimately blaming Kyle for the disaster.

At the 9/11 Museum, I was struck by a display that described the process beginning in January 2000 of the 20 hijackers from entry to the U.S. through various flight training missions to their final flights. The brief presentation made me wonder "How the hell did US intelligence not know??" When I posed this to Bob Kerrey, who served on the 9/11 Commission, he countered forcefully about the illusions of 20/20 hindsight. "Of course it looks obvious now. But the hijackers traveled individually to the US dressed in a suit like me." It was predictable that the 9/11 Commission itself came under criticism by 9/11 truthers, and the argument continues to this day.

The dark and complicated history leading up to the attacks, so credibly described in Lawrence Wright's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and The Road to 9/11*, suggests that conspiracy theorizing will be alive as long as memory of the day itself along with the assassinations of JFK and Martin Luther King, Jr., the deaths of Elvis and Princess Diana and the alien secrets of Area 51. At the same time,

some of these examples have not been explained in a way that removes all doubt. The established facts that Wright presents about circumstances and events in the years leading up to 9/11 confirm that no simple answer will ever be forthcoming with enough credibility so satisfy all doubters.

disbelief

Most of the 9/11 stories we collected in our study include reactions of shock, disbelief, numbness, fear and anger. Some of the comments:

When the person told me I didn't believe him, so I went upstairs and looked out the window I was just shocked.

It was unbelievable that the center of New York was attacked in this way.

I could not believe the twin towers were unable to bear the crash.

I couldn't believe and I felt so angry that so many people died.

I sat on the sidewalk and watched in disbelief.

It was just total disbelief, like everybody says. I hate to be the same in my use of language, but it was just total disbelief.

dismediation

Dismediation may be a contested word, but I am using it here to reference a state in which media representations become inadequate to the understanding of the

moment, and corporeal, material, analog experience is sought. In this sense, the intense community bonding following 9/11 can be seen to partially fill that need.

Brian McCormick shared an observation that movingly illustrates this point.

One of the stranger things I remember after was all the 'tourists' who came to see the still-smoking pile shortly after. I remember asking one of them, who was there with a group, why?, and he said something to the effect that they needed to see it for themselves. I think that ties into the Sontag notion, but in this case it had almost been reversed. It wasn't like they needed to see it to believe it, but because it was so 'beyond belief' -- like a movie, like a dream, surreal -- they wanted to witness it with their own eyes, live and direct, not mediated or mediatized.

diffusion of information

Information about the attack spread quickly. 85% of our informants knew about the attacks before 10 a.m. More than 50% first learned from another person. The most frequently cited (36%) piece of data that confirmed the seriousness of the attacks was news that the second tower was hit. My son told me his classmates at Yale recognized the magnitude of the event when fellow student Barbara Bush, daughter of the President, was whisked off by her security detail. In the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake study, the most frequently mentioned data point was hearing about the collapse of the Bay Bridge. Classical persuasion theory suggests that a single message rarely has mind-changing effect, but such epiphanies do, indeed, occur.

existential

My depression the first few years of college was tempered a bit by Sartre's small book *Existentialism and Human Emotion*, where alienation may be eased by engagement. Praxis, action, doing. By way of contrast to propositions like society of the spectacle, hyperreality and simulacrum, where cultural beliefs reframe a lived material existence, 9/11 forced naked confrontation with a life or death existential moment. No constructed narrative could hold the power of the sensory assault of witnessing. If engagement is indeed the existential antidote to alienation, 9/11 witnessing opens a door to action, as exemplified a few years later by the global millions who protested the US invasion of Iraq.

While the denial of death may be the "chains we forge in life," Ernest Becker has told us:

The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity - designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man. . . To live fully is to live with an awareness of the rumble of terror that underlies everything

In that sense, notwithstanding the horror of 9/11, at the same time it offered a terrible moment to be more fully alive.

first responders

Barry Salmon recalled standing with his partner at the corner of Eighth Avenue and 48th Street as a firetruck pulled out of the Eighth Avenue FDNY station, American flag proudly waving, horn honking.

We both set down our bags and stood and wept, knowing we had lost thirteen men interred in the still smoking rubble that was the World Trade Center. These were folks we knew, if not by name, through their already heroic actions. This was after all Hell's Kitchen, and they were always there to take care of us.

One measure of the catastrophic toll of 9/11 is that more people have died from illnesses caused by the toxic aftermath than died in the attacks. More than 2500 contaminants resulted in a long list of gruesome effects from pulmonary fibrosis to various cancers, and stress disorders. Estimates of health effects over the decades since 9/11 vary widely depending upon who is counted, but by any estimate casualties are in the tens of thousands. As of September 2008 over 33,000 police officers, firefighters, responders, and community members had been treated for injuries and

sickness related to the 9/11 attacks. It is said that more cops have died of illness linked to the attack than had perished in it.

ineluctable

In graduate school I took a seminar from Phil Tompkins on "The Rhetoric of Non-Oratorical Works." Tompkins was a Joyce scholar who had published a highly original essay of the same title. I wrote my final paper - please forgive me it was 1971 - on "The Ineluctable Modality of the Sensual," arguing that Molly Bloom's monologue was a reasonable extension of Joyce's ineluctable modalities of the audible and visual. I remember spending an inordinate amount of time pondering "ineluctable." Joyce may have taken this notion from Aristotle's discussion of the inescapability of the material world in *De Anima*. Whatever the case, the inescapable sensory experience of 9/11 qualifies it as ineluctable in the deepest sense. The widespread feeling that "words cannot express" the experience of that event makes it all the more tempting for alternative modes of expression that meet the moment.

jumpers

One of the horrors of 9/11 was the number of people who jumped or fell to their death as the towers burned. Most estimates put the number at around 200. The most famous image of "Falling Man" was shot by AP photographer Richard Drew. It appeared in the *New York Times*, Sept. 12, 2001, angering readers. Print and broadcast

media quickly pulled the image from public view, though it is now widely available and the original print was purchased by Elton John, who deemed it "the most beautiful image of something so tragic."

A week after 9/11, my daughter Elissa walked up from the subway at 21st and Park Avenue to witness a woman wearing a yellow prom dress and sneakers jump from a fifth-floor window. "People in the crowd became so hysterical half of them dropped to their knees." She was hysterical, too, which gives some idea of the "New York state of mind" for weeks after 9/11.

posters

One of the 9/11 Museum exhibits is a wall of posters with pictures of missing loved ones, reflecting the ubiquity of missing person posters in the days immediately following the event. Thousands were plastered on every flat service at Union Square. Hundreds were carried by loved ones lining up at hospitals. The idea that there were no survivors was incomprehensible until all of the emergency rooms on high alert

slowly realized there was no one to save.



Union Square Posters



9/11 Museum Poster Display

print media

USA Today reporter David Lieberman, now a New School professor, was getting a haircut on 54th Street and Madison Avenue in preparation for an interview with General Electric's Jack Welch, who had just retired and published his first book.

Someone said that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. A few minutes later someone else said the same thing. I said we had heard that. Then the person said 'No. this is a second one'. . . I told the barber I had to leave right away. This was no accident, and I wouldn't be interviewing Welch.

When Lieberman arrived at the bureau he was given an "unusual assignment." "They wanted me to report, and lead a team of artists to prepare a centerpiece graphic showing exactly what happened to the Twin Towers - where the planes hit and the mechanics of what led them to collapse." Lieberman began working the phones, calling graphic artists, architects, and structural engineers. He eventually got in touch with an engineer who off the record told him about the "pancaking effect," built in as a protection against catastrophic collapse." Lieberman's breaking news and detailed original reporting is included here as an appendix, but here is a small piece of his story:



radio

On October 17, 1989 I was in class at San Francisco State when the building shook and the concrete walls seemed to breathe. It was the 6.9 magnitude Loma Prieta Earthquake. We joined others leaving the building for 19th Avenue, where pre-cell phones we stood in confusion and silence until over a small portable radio we heard that the Bay Bridge had collapsed.

A dozen years later, about 10 am on September 11th, Media Studies faculty had gathered for a scheduled meeting, enough in shock that none of these media professionals were documenting the spectacle unfolding down Fifth Avenue. TV reception had gone down with the transmitters on top of the towers and we huddled around Eric's radio as a last communication resort. A look out the window of the 13th floor revealed groups of people on the ground huddled around cars to listen to the radio. Broadcast radio is the medium of last resort in a crisis that takes down other media. I have been so convinced by these direct experiences that I joined my local rural NPR board of directors to see that our crisis communication systems are firmly in place. And I always have a portable radio nearby.

representation

Hearing the news, my daughter left her home on the Lower East Side to make her way to my office. She stopped at a bodega to buy a ten-dollar instant camera,

marked up to \$35 to exploit the moment. Her dozen images, some of which appear in this essay, are priceless mementos that imbed Roland Barthes' "rather terrible thing that is there in any photograph: the return of the dead."

In a broader sense, I was shocked to find that *Wikipedia* has a twenty-page entry on hundreds of cultural references to the 9/11 attack: film, video, television, literature and poetry, web sites, theatre, art and design. Hundreds of expressions in every medium possible that made me ask "Why the hell am I doing this little paper???" In a heartbeat I knew I was doing this for my own healing and the healing of those with whom I shared those days. And I realized beyond the films I recognized - *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *United 93*, *The Looming Tower* - there was one mention that filled me with delight: *The Concert for New York City* on October 20th, a five-hour benefit love fest organized by Paul McCartney and held at Madison Square Garden.

I got a rare ticket due to a small world touch from a former San Francisco State student who had worked for Bill Graham. It was in a nose bleed section, but heaven on earth for a music fan: The Who, David Bowie, Eric Clapton, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, Bon Jovi, James Taylor, John Mellencamp, Back Street Boys, Billy Joel. Okay, enough? I almost felt guilty about having so much fun in the wake of a great tragedy. It made me flash on the 1970 Cleveland concert for Kent State I attended featuring Blood Sweat and Tears and Neil Young. Life has its moments and it has stayed with me how tragedy can create the space for unexpected joy.

I had not visited the 9/11 memorial or museum until 2025. Never had any desire to until I decided to write this paper. Last Fall during a visit to New York I made my way downtown on a sunny day not unlike the morning of 9/11. It is a magnificent memorial. The museum design leads the way through dark and somber exhibits, carefully spaced and exquisitely curated. Why did I feel so uneasy? I didn't feel sad. I didn't feel anything. Even the most wrecked of things like Ladder 3 were clean. Immaculate, really.



Ladder 3 9/11 Museum

There was something dissonant between the original circumstances of their destruction and this resting in place. I figured the exhibits had been designed to discourage the pathos that might be too much for some visitors. The difference in tone in the images earlier in this paper of posters at Union Square and in the 9/11

Museum illustrate the disjunction between "real life" and its simulacrum. It was all incredibly quiet, though hundreds of people were making their way through. There was something cold and clinical about the stillness of remnants from a cataclysmic event. I am glad I went, and it is strange that I am feeling more emotion writing about it than I did at the time.

silence

New York City is a neighborhood kind of town. Harlem, Astoria, Tribeca, Greenwich Village (East and West), Chinatown, Times Square Park Slope, Bushwick, Dumbo, Gramercy. Neighborhoods as different as different can be. My quarter for 25 years was genteel Gramercy Park, a healthy walk to work with all the amenities one could ask for including the National Arts Club, the center of my personal life. It is easy to understand why many longtime New Yorkers rarely leave their immediate surroundings unless they have to.

Still, the sonic landscape of New York City has a steady buzz, a mix of people in a hurry, traffic, sirens and the occasional birdsong if you are lucky. That all changed in the weeks after 9/11 when an eerie silence fell upon the streets. Even the hundreds who gathered at Union Square milled around in muted tones. A mist of solemnity

hung in the air. I felt the silence most deeply when Casey and I visited the Central Park John Lennon memorial *Strawberry Fields* at 2 a.m. when he finally made it into the city from college. For our first year in New York in 1975, we had lived at the Oliver Cromwell apartments on W. 72nd Street, kitty-corner from the Dakota, where John Lennon was shot and killed. Tour busses lined up on the street, and we frequently visited Strawberry Fields to honor his loss and join the slowly milling crowds of mourners, musicians and flower bearers. The shock of 9/11 was only slightly greater than Lennon's death, and both signaled the end of an era.

Casey and I were alone at the *Imagine* medallion, relighting dozens of extinguished candles. Grieving John Lennon and the then-unknown number of 9/11 victims in the soft light with my son at my side was a moment of perfect love and loss.

The silence of the streets slowly gave way to the din of daily life. Eric remembers that:

Mid-October, on a Sunday in the Village, a guy with friends was getting a slice of pizza, with his head tipped back laughing out loud and I thought how rude. Then I thought: What? Why's that? And I realized I had not heard anyone laugh in public in five or six weeks.

smell

For weeks after 9/11 when I would step outside the door of my apartment on E. 18th Street the sickly sweet smell of burnt flesh seared my nose, and I was more than a mile from the site that had filled the air for blocks around with toxic dust and smoke from pulverized concrete, plastic, electronics, asbestos, jet fuel and contaminants from virtually every material known to exist in the modern world.

A decade after 9/11, *Scientific American* reported:

The smell cannot be forgotten. Any smoky mix of burnt plastic and other smolderings can instantly bring back memories for locals of the aftermath of the collapse of the two towers. . . The acrid miasma of 91,000 liters of jet fuel and the 10,000,000 tons of building materials and contents burning at temperatures above 1,000 degrees Celsius extended from lower Manhattan across the East River into Brooklyn and beyond to the sea.

storytelling

Our department office was on the 12th floor on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 13th Street, with a birds-eye view of the Towers. We sat at the window looking back and forth between the Towers and a blurry television. The transmitters had been hit and we had no cable. One of the uncanny things in the early hours was that our diverse faculty of media production experts made almost no move to document the

event. The hours and days following are seared on our memories. 14th Street was closed off, and The New School became a center of local gathering and comfort.

Much post-9/11 communication involved storytelling. On average, those interviewed in our 9/11 study reported telling their "9/11 story" twenty-four times, with several claiming one hundred tellings. A similar study with a larger sample following San Francisco's 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake found an average of twenty-two story tellings.

One-third of those interviewed after 9/11 were eye-witnesses to the events, while the rest observed them, like most Americans, on television. In either case, the sharing of war stories can serve cathartic, therapeutic, and community building functions in the wake of an experience as catastrophic as 9/11, especially for those living closest to the events.

In 2021 I wrote to my New School colleagues asking for reflections at the twenty-year mark. Some of their thoughts:

Bob Kerrey: I was living on 19th between 9th and 10th nine months into my time at The New School. Most mornings I would run from home to the WTC and back at 7 am, but this morning (which was startling beautiful) my wife had ordered a rocking chair that was being delivered. She had delivered our son the previous day in a Hackensack hospital. The

first plane hit the North Tower when I arrived and the second when I came into her room.

We watched the Towers collapse from her room.

Dawnja Burris: *We had a view of the towers from our floor and I'll never forget Peter reacting to the second hit viewed from there. He nearly collapsed.*

Eric: *Peter Haratonik was answering someone's query about his daughter, whose school was near the towers. 'Oh, she's okay.' and I thought there's the epitome of a tough New Yorker. A few minutes later the first tower fell and he wheeled on his heel and said 'I'm out of here.' Gone like a shot to find his daughter.*

Eric: *Like Deirdre's memory, positioning myself in the door of the conference room I could watch the TV and the towers out the window at the same time. There was a strange 45 seconds or so when anyone watching the TV could see the towers crumble, but the announcers just chattered away, clearly not watching their own monitors.*

Deirdre Boyle: *Thank the lord I was wearing sensible shoes that day. . . By the time I got home there were still live news reports featuring jumpers. The networks pulled the plug on that soon, but there was something sacred about being a witness to that act of desperation, or was it a heroic decision to meet death head-on?*

surreal

"Reality" may be contested, but our default belief in it makes daily life possible.

Surrealism often refers to the post WW1 movement that featured unexpected and

contradictory juxtapositions of ordinary things, an unsurprising reaction to a catastrophic war. Dali's clocks are not really melting. Magritte's "*n'est pas une pipe*" does indeed appear to be a pipe.

Like WW1, 9/11 evoked feelings of surrealism. At the NYC 9/11 Museum where the towers once stood, the first installation consists of a series of tall narrow

shapes with world maps covered by audible and visual fragments of comments from witnesses.

I just had this feeling is this real?

Is this actually happening?

It was surreal. . .it was like this surreal reality.

It was surreal. . .pretty surreal.



9/11 Installation

The comments from our 9/11 study informants about "disbelief" cited earlier echo this. Cross-reference Baudrillard's "hyperreality," which he applied to all of American culture.

trauma

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, earlier known as shell shock or battle fatigue, was officially identified in 1980 by the Veterans Administration in response to the traumas facing U.S. soldiers who served in Viet Nam. It has since been used widely to identify the results of trauma of all kinds. One of the most striking results of our 9/11 interviews was the extent to which respondents reported PTSD symptoms "some" "a lot" or "all the time" : Heightened Response to Noise (71%), Difficulty Concentrating (68%), feeling angry (67%), feeling exhausted (64%).

Other behaviors reported include "Communicating More (41%), and the obvious "Watched TV" (89%). CNN was overwhelmingly the network of choice. My own words shortly after 9/11 surprise me today with their open pain.

We are covered with media. I experience it as a second skin, particularly in a high stimulus environment like New York City where you've got 40 foot Cindy Crawfords. So you develop this second skin of media . . . September 11th sort of ripped this skin off. Everyone's clothes were ripped off by some sort of wind or something and everybody felt very raw." We shed our second skin and for a minute became real, like the Velveteen Rabbit.

Union Square

Union Square, named in 1832 for the union of two intersecting roads - has a rich residential, commercial and recreational history. A heroic statue of George

Washington was installed in 1856, followed by statues of Lincoln (1870) and Lafayette (1876).

Union Square Park bloomed into the central gathering place after 9/11, when traffic below 14th street to Lower Manhattan was closed for several weeks. Thousands from the city and beyond came slowly through in the weeks following, holding vigils, lighting candles and posting photographs of lost loved ones. A South African florist donated a thirty-foot arrangement of the twin towers. Day and night, mourners shared what felt like a safe space. Even George Washington and his horse were covered with peace graffiti and flags with a world flag flying high in the breeze. Public spaces were reclaimed.



Union Square 9/15/2001

For communication theorist James Carey, "September 11 was as close to the day of the Kennedy assassination as I have experienced."

I have things I believe and I have emotions I feel. But in the days since September I have come to believe they are not stable. They're not fixed. They're not reliable. I'm as emotionally and intellectually at sea as anyone else. I can pretend for you. I can launch into a very systematic lecture about all this that shows that I have the world very firmly in command. But I don't have the world in command. I don't even have myself in command. I find my imagination vagrantly wandering across this landscape of what's going on in an absolute random sequence.

Jim Carey died in 2006, five years after he wrote this, and I like to think he spoke for all of us in that moment.

As a quintessential media event, 9/11, at least for a moment, reframed America's understanding of itself. As an attack on U.S. soil, from a political network and not a nation state, aimed at civilians and not military, from an adversary run like a multinational corporation and not a government; an 11th century enemy with a satellite dish who can take down state-of-the-art weaponry with a box cutter and is willing to die for the cause. Taken together, these media innovations and reversals of expectation created a fusion that in a single day took us through the looking glass into an unknown future.



Elissa at Union Square

A quarter century later, following hundreds of thousands of retributive casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, steeply rising inequality in an attention economy of unfettered capitalism and environmental and education degradation, 9/11 stands as a harbinger for the madness and uncertainty in which we find ourselves in its long wake.

Carol Wilder is Emeritus Professor at San Francisco State University and The New School, New York, and Honorary Faculty at Hanoi University.

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Appendix

- A. Wilder and Rothenbuhler 9/11 Communication Survey
- B. Lieberman *USA Today* pages