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By Rebecca Solnit. September 11, 2009

How 9/11 Should Be Remembered

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Eight years ago, 2,600 people lost their lives in Manhattan, and then several million people lost their story. The Al Qaeda attack on the Twin Towers did not defeat New Yorkers. It destroyed the buildings, contaminated the region, killed thousands, and disrupted the global economy, but it most assuredly did not conquer the citizenry. They were only defeated when their resilience was stolen from them by cliches, by the invisibility of what they accomplished that extraordinary morning, and by the very word "terrorism," which suggests that they, or we, were all terrified. The distortion, even obliteration, of what actually happened was a necessary precursor to launching the obscene response that culminated in a war on Iraq, a war we lost (even if some of us don't know that yet), and the loss of civil liberties and democratic principles that went with it.

Only We Can Terrorize Ourselves

For this eighth anniversary of that terrible day, the first post-Bush-era anniversary, let's remember what actually happened:

When the planes became missiles and the towers became torches and then shards and clouds of dust, many were afraid, but few if any panicked, other than the President who was far away from danger. The military failed to respond promptly, even though the Pentagon itself was attacked, and the only direct resistance that day came from inside Flight 93, which went down in a field in Pennsylvania on its way to Washington.

Flights 11 and 175 struck the towers. Hundreds of thousands of people rescued each other and themselves, evacuating the buildings and the area, helped in the first minutes, then hours, by those around them. Both PS 150, an elementary school, and the High School for Leadership and Public Service were successfully evacuated â€” without casualties. In many cases, teachers took students home with them.

A spontaneously assembled flotilla of boats, ranging from a yacht appropriated by policemen to a historic fireboat, evacuated 300,000 to 500,000 people from lower Manhattan, a nautical feat on the scale of the British evacuation of an army from Dunkirk in the early days of World War II; the fleet, that is, rescued in a few hours as many people as the British fleet rescued in days (under German fire admittedly, but then New York's ferry operators and pleasure-boat captains were steering into that toxic cloud on a day when many thought more violence was to come).

Adam Mayblum, who walked down from the 87th floor of the north tower with some of his coworkers, wrote on the Internet immediately afterward:

"They failed in terrorizing us. We were calm. If you want to kill us, leave us alone because we will do it by ourselves. If you want to make us stronger, attack and we unite. This is the ultimate failure of terrorism against the United States."

We failed, however, when we let our own government and media do what that small band from the other side of the Earth could not. Some of us failed, that is, for there were many kinds of response, and some became more radical, more committed, more educated. Mark Fichtel, the president of the New York Coffee, Sugar, and Cocoa Exchange, who scraped his knees badly that morning of September 11th when he was knocked over in a fleeing crowd, was helped to his feet by "a little old lady." He nonetheless had his Exchange up and running the next day, and six months later quit his job, began studying Islam, and then teaching about it.

Tom Engelhardt, the editor of this piece, began to circulate emails to counter the crummy post-9/11 media coverage and his no-name informal listserv grew into the website Tomdispatch.com, which has circulated more than 1,000 essays since that day and made it possible for me to become a different kind of writer. Principal Ada Rosario-Dolch, who on the morning of September 11th set aside concern for her sister Wendy Alice Rosario Wakeford (who died in the towers) to evacuate her high school two blocks away, went to Afghanistan in 2004 to dedicate a school in Herat, Afghanistan, that included a garden memorializing Wakeford.

In a Dust Storm of Altruism

Hollywood movies and too many government pandemic plans still presume that most of us are cowards or brutes, that we panic, trample each other, rampage, or freeze helplessly in moments of crisis and chaos. Most of us believe this, even though it is a slander against the species, an obliteration of what actually happens, and a crippling blow to our ability to prepare for disasters.

Hollywood likes this view because it paves the way for movies starring Will Smith and hordes of stampeding, screaming extras. Without stupid, helpless people to save, heroes become unnecessary. Or rather, without them, it turns out that we are all heroes, even if distinctly unstereotypical ones like that elderly woman who got Fichtel back on his feet. Governments like the grim view for a similar reason: it justifies their existence as repressive, controlling, hostile forces, rather than collaborators with brave and powerful citizenries.

Far more people could have died on September 11th if New Yorkers had not remained calm, had not helped each other out of the endangered buildings and the devastated area, had not reached out to pull people from the collapsing buildings and the dust cloud. The population of the towers was lower than usual that morning, because it was an election day and many were voting before heading to work; it seems emblematic that so many were spared because they were exercising their democratic powers. Others exercised their empathy and altruism. In the evacuation of the towers, John Abruzzo, a paraplegic accountant, was carried down 69 flights of stairs by his coworkers.

Here's how John Guilfoy, a young man who'd been a college athlete, recalled the 9/11 moment:

> "I remember looking back as I started running, and the thickest smoke was right where it was, you know, a few blocks away, and thinking that, like, whoever's going to be in that is just going to die. There's no way you could â€" you're going to suffocate, and it was coming at us. I remember just running, people screaming. I was somewhat calm, and I was little bit faster than my colleagues, so I had to stop and slow up a little bit and wait for them to make sure we didn't lose each other."

Had he been in a disaster movie, he would have been struggling in some selfish, social-darwinist way to survive at others' expense, or he would simply have panicked, as we are all supposed to do in disaster. In the reality of September 11th, in a moment of supreme danger, he slowed down out of solidarity.

Many New Yorkers that day committed similar feats of solidarity at great risk. In fact, in all the hundreds of oral histories I read and the many interviews I conducted to research my book, A Paradise Built in Hell, I could find no one saying he or she was abandoned or attacked in that great exodus. People were frightened and moving fast, but not in a panic. Careful research has led disaster sociologists to the discovery â€" one of their many counter-stereotypical conclusions â€" that panic is a vanishingly rare phenomenon in disasters, part of an elaborate mythology of our weakness.

A young man from Pakistan, Usman Farman, told of how he fell down and a Hasidic Jewish man stopped, looked at his pendant's Arabic inscription and then, "with a deep Brooklyn accent he said 'Brother if you don't mind, there is a cloud of glass coming at us. Grab my hand, let's get the hell out of here.' He was the last person I would ever have thought to help me. If it weren't for him I probably would have been engulfed in shattered glass and debris." A blind newspaper vendor was walked to safety by two women, and a third escorted her to her home in the Bronx.

Errol Anderson, a recruiter with the fire department, was caught outside in that dust storm.

"For a couple of minutes I heard nothing. I thought I was either dead and was in another world, or I was the only one alive. I became nervous and panicky, not knowing what to do, because I couldn't see... About four or five minutes later, while I was still trying to find my way around, I heard the voice of a young lady. She was crying and saying, 'Please, Lord, don't let me die. Don't let me die.' I was so happy to hear this lady's voice. I said, 'Keep talking, keep talking, I'm a firefighter, I'll find you by the response of where you are.' Eventually we met up with each other and basically we ran into each other's arms without even knowing it."

She held onto his belt and eventually several other people joined them to form a human chain. He helped get them to the Brooklyn Bridge before returning to the site of the collapsed buildings. That bridge became a pedestrian escape route for tens of thousands. For hours, a river of people poured across it. On the far side, Hasidic Jews handed out bottles of water to the refugees. Hordes of volunteers from the region, and within days the nation, converged on lower Manhattan, offering to weld, dig, nurse, cook, clean, hear confessions, listen â€” and did all of those things.

New Yorkers triumphed on that day eight years ago. They triumphed in calm, in strength, in generosity, in improvisation, in kindness. Nor was this something specific to that time or place: San Franciscans during the great earthquake of 1906, Londoners during the Blitz in World War II, the great majority of New Orleanians after Hurricane Katrina hit, in fact most people in most disasters in most places have behaved with just this sort of grace and dignity.

It Could Have Been Different

Imagine what else could have sprung from that morning eight years ago. Imagine if the collapse of those towers had not been followed by such a blast of stereotypes, lies, distortions, and fear propaganda that served the agenda of the Bush administration while harming the rest of us â€” Americans, Iraqis, Afghans, and so many others, for people from 90 nations died in the attacks that day and probably those from many more nations survived at what came to be called Ground Zero.

Not long ago I talked to Roberto Sifuentes, a Chicano performance artist who was then living in New York. Like many New Yorkers, he still marvels at that brief, almost utopian moment of opening in the midst of tragedy, when everyone wanted to talk about meaning, about foreign policy, about history, and did so in public with strangers. It was a moment of passionate engagement with the biggest questions and with one another. On a few occasions, Sifuentes was threatened and nearly attacked for having approximately the same skin tone as an Arab, but he was also moved by the tremendous opening of that moment, the great public dialogue that had begun, and he took part in it with joy.

In five years of investigation and in my own encounter with the San Francisco Bay Area's Loma Prieta earthquake 20 years ago, I've found that disasters are often moments of strange joy. My friend Kate Joyce, then a 19-year-old living in New Mexico, had landed in New York on the very morning of September 11, 2001, and spent the next several days in Union Square, the park-like plaza at 14th Street that became a regular gathering point.

She relished the astonishing forum that Union Square became in those

days when we had a more perfect union: "We spoke passionately of the contemporary and historical conflicts, contradictions and connections affecting our lives," she wrote me later. "We stayed for hours, through the night, and into the week riveted and expressive, in mourning and humbled, and in the ecstasy of a transformative present." Such conversations took place everywhere.

We had that more perfect union, and then we let them steal it.

Perhaps Barack Obama, the candidate who delivered that address on race, pain, and nuance entitled "A More Perfect Union" some 18 months ago, could have catalyzed us to remain open-minded in the face of horror, to rethink our foreign policy, to try to grasp the real nature of the attack by that small band which was so obviously not an act of war, and to make of it an opportunity to change, profoundly. Such a response would have had to recognize that many were killed or widowed or orphaned on that September 11th , but none were defeated. Not that day. It would have had to recognize that such events are immeasurably terrible, but neither so rare as we Americans like to imagine, nor insurmountable. (Since 9/11, far more have been killed in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, the 2008 Burma typhoon, and of course the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Congo, among other events. More in this country have, in fact, died of domestic violence since that day.)

Obama, the candidate, might have been capable of that; of President Obama I'm not so sure. He has, after all, expanded the war in Afghanistan that was the first monstrous outcome of that day in New York. But he's had his moments, too, and it may be that another set of disasters â€” the social disasters of racism, poverty, and government failure laid bare during and after Hurricane Katrina â€” helped make it possible for him to become our president.

After the 9/11 storm struck, the affected civilians in New York were seen as victims; after Katrina, those in New Orleans were portrayed as brutes. In both cities, the great majority of affected people were actually neither helpless nor savage; they were something else â€” they were citizens, if by that word we mean civic engagement rather than citizenship status. In both places ordinary people were extraordinarily resourceful, generous, and kind, as were some police officers, firefighters, rescue workers, and a very few politicians. In both cases, the majority of politicians led us astray. All I would have wanted in that September moment, though, was politicians who stayed out of the way, and people who were more suspicious of the news and the newsmakers.

The media, too, stepped between us and the event, failing us with their stock of clichés about war and heroes, their ready adoption of the delusional notion of a "war on terror," their refusal to challenge the administration as it claimed that somehow the Saudi-spawned,

fundamentalist al-Qaeda was linked to the secularist Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein and that we should fear mythical Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction." Rarely did they mention that we had, in fact, been bombing Iraq without interruption since 1991.

After 9/11, it could all have been different, profoundly different. And if it had, there would have been no children imprisoned without charges or release dates in our gulag in Cuba; there would have been no unmanned drones slaughtering wedding parties in the rural backlands of Afghanistan or the Iraqi desert; there would have been no soldiers returning to the U.S. with two or three limbs missing or their heads and minds grievously damaged (there were already 320,000 traumatic brain injuries to soldiers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan by early 2008, according to the RAND Corporation); there would not have been a next round of American deaths â€” 4,334 in Iraq, 786 in Afghanistan to date; there would have been no trillion dollars taken from constructive projects to fatten the corporations of war; no extreme corrosion of the Bill of Rights, no usurpation of powers by the executive branch. Perhaps.

We Are the Monument

It could all have been different. It's too late now, but not too late, never too late, to change how we remember and commemorate this event and that other great landmark of the Bush era, Hurricane Katrina, and so prepare for disasters to come.

For the 99 years before that hurricane hit the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, the biggest urban disaster in American history was in my city, San Francisco. Half the city, including more than 28,000 buildings, was destroyed, and about 3,000 people probably died. The earthquake early on the morning of April 18, 1906, did a lot of damage, but the fires did more. Some were started by collapsed buildings and broken gas mains, others by the army troops who streamed in from the Presidio at the northern tip of the city and ineptly built firebreaks that instead actually spread the fires.

The presiding officer, Brigadier General Frederick Funston, presumed that the public would immediately revert to chaos and that his task was restoring order. In the first days after the disaster, the truth was more or less the other way around, as the Army and the National Guard prevented citizens from fighting the fires and collecting their property, shot people as looters (including rescuers and bystanders), and generally regarded the public as the enemy (as did some of the officials presiding over the post-Katrina "rescue"). As with many disasters, a calamity that came from outside was magnified by elite fears and institutional failures within. Still, on their own, San Franciscans organized themselves remarkably, fought fires when they could, created a plethora of community kitchens, helped reconnect separated families, and began to rebuild.

Every year we still celebrate the anniversary of the earthquake at Lotta's Fountain, which, like Union Square after 9/11, became a meeting place for San Franciscans in the largely ruined downtown. That gathering brings hundreds of people together before dawn to sing the silly song "San Francisco," get free whistles from the Red Cross, and pay homage to the dwindling group of survivors. (Two, who'd been babies in 1906, arrived this year in the backseat of a magnificent 1931 Lincoln touring car.)

Some of us then go on to the fire hydrant at 20th and Church that saved the Mission District, the hydrant that miraculously had water when most of the water mains were broken and the men who had already been fighting the fire by hand for days were exhausted beyond belief. The oldest person at the gathering always begins an annual repainting of the hydrant with a can of gold spray paint, and then some kids get to wield the spray can.

San Francisco now uses the anniversary to put out the message that we should be prepared for the next disaster â€" not the version the Department of Homeland Security spread in the years after 9/11 with the notion that preparation consists of fear, duct tape, deference, and more fear, but practical stuff about supplies and strategies. My city even trains anyone who wants to become a certified NERT â€" for the nerdy-sounding Neighborhood Emergency Response Team â€" member, and about 17,000 of us are badge-carrying, hard-hat owning NERT members (including me).

Every city that has had, or will have, a disaster should have such a carnival of remembrance and preparation. For one thing, it commemorates all the ways that San Franciscans were not defeated and are not helpless; for another, it reminds us that, in disaster, we are often at our best, however briefly, that in those hours and days many have their best taste of community, purposefulness, and power. (Reason enough for many of those who are supposed to be in charge to shudder.) For the fourth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleanians were invited to ring bells, lay wreaths, pray, encircle the Superdome, that miserable shelter of last resort for those stranded in the hurricane and flood, and of course listen to music and dance in the streets to second-line parades, but also to keep volunteering and rebuilding. (Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of that disaster is the vast army of citizen-volunteers who came to the city's aid, when the government didn't, and are still doing so.)

New York has its pillars of light and readings of names for the anniversary of 9/11, but it seems to lack any invitation to the citizenry to feel its own power and prepare for the next calamity. For there will be next times for San Francisco, New York, New Orleans, and possibly â€" in this era of extreme and turbulent weather, and economic upheaval â€" a great many other cities and towns in this country and elsewhere.

That hydrant on a quiet residential corner of San Francisco is about the only monument to the 1906 earthquake and fire. The rebuilt city, the eventual rise of disaster preparedness, the people who go on with their everyday lives â€" these are the monument San Francisco needed and every city needs to transcend its calamities. New Yorkers could gather in Union Square and elsewhere to remember what happened, really remember, remember that the heroes weren't necessarily men, or in uniform, but were almost everyone everywhere that day.

They could open their hearts and minds to discuss mourning, joy, death, violence, power, weakness, truth and lies, as they did that week. They could consider what constitutes safety and security, what else this country could be, and what its foreign and energy policies have to do with these things. They could walk the streets together to demonstrate that New York is still a great city, whose people were not frightened into going into hiding or flight from public and urban life. They could more consciously and ceremoniously do what New Yorkers, perhaps best of all Americans, do every day: coexist boldly and openly in a great mixture of colors, nationalities, classes, and opinions, daring to speak to strangers and to live in public.

The dead must be remembered, but the living are the monument, the living who coexist in peace in ordinary times and who save one another in extraordinary times. Civil society triumphed that morning in full glory. Look at it: remember that this is who we were and can be.