



9-11 Ten Years After - A Neighborhood Waits

Benedetta Grasso (September 11, 2011)



A personal reflection of a 23 year old blogger. A narrative essay. The Financial District and the Ground 0 area preparing for the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

9-11 ten years after - A Neighborhood Waits

It was a matter of a few hours and just like that the towers were gone.

As New York changed shape physically, the whole country and the whole world felt something missing and acquired a new awareness: a cynical moment of self-revaluation mixed with patriotic love, pride and a concrete new energy of change, that only those who rise from the ashes have.



Greenwich Street - where I live - Trinity Church, Liberty Street, Cedar Street, Vesey Street and obviously the World Trade Center were completely covered in grey dust, the smell of corpses filled the air, the entire world stopped breathing for a moment, as we caught a glimpse of the desperation of those who even went as far as jumping out of the towers.

Everything was so dirty, heavy, and it felt as if the sky was pressing downwards with all its strength, making you feel as if walking down a never-ending subway stair crowded with people.

Ten years later those same streets are the heart of a renewed neighborhood, where sometimes it's easier to see more strollers than men in suits; where Battery park in the summer looks like a Mediterranean sea-town, with cafes, beach volley and tanned young people; where the real estate market has invested in more fun-loving tenants and owners; where the buildings and historical streets leading up to City Hall look are more institutional but never lose that New York pulse and are always surrounded by people who walk fast, excited with that typical Manhattanite sense of purpose; where the stores surrounding Ground 0 have managed to preserve that typically American sense of remembrance and overwhelming idolization of the recent past and yet have never crossed the line. Everything - even the little souvenirs store - that sells American flags looks respectful, not like the Hard Rock café of 9/11.

Everything is so clean, bright and the light breeze lifts you up and brings the smell of the Ocean, leads to the wooden bridges near the North Cove where fishermen, couples, preppy sailing instructors and children stare at the sunset.

Monday September 5th

"Where were you when the world stopped turning on that September day?"

The slow guitar riff, the smooth deep voice fill my head through my i-Pod as I walk down Cedar Street and turn right where Ground 0 stands. This country melody filled with melancholic sadness gives me chill. Especially now, especially here.

Nothing seems to have changed that much from last year. A few things have grown but the overall sense of emptiness and restlessness of the place is the same.

I keep looking. The news, the web everyone says that the reconstruction is almost complete and yet behind that wooden barrier I see the same workers with their orange and yellow helmets I saw last year; I hear the same noise of trucks and cranes I hear all day and all I see is that empty whole that I cannot help but fill with music and images that are only in my head.

Did you shout out in anger, in fear for your neighbor Or did you just sit down and cry?

I found this Alan Jackson's song somewhat randomly on i-Tunes a few months ago. At first I was surprised, a little taken back by some of its message but then I could not stop listening to it, over and over, in the same way ten years ago, I would sit home with my remote watching those planes crashing in a loop...

Rarely there are songs that speak of an event happened in my generation's time. I know it's no The Times they are a' changing, no Sunday Bloody Sunday, no We shall Overcome, it's no anthem, but it's something that perfectly captured what all of us had thought and felt that day, when History actually changed.

I suddenly realize that all the tourists peeking at that same corner or trying to figure out why there isn't much commotion or many people around the Memorial or at the Museum yet have those images imprinted in their minds and like Alan Jackson are silently or loudly asking to each other: Did you stand there in shock at the sight of that black smoke Risin' against that blue sky?

And yet nothing is really happening and we all literally have to stop turning, because you still can't go across the construction.



What's going to happen in a week? How can you commemorate or relive what is now an emptiness filled by music and images?

Tuesday September 6th

Did you feel guilty 'cause you're a survivor? In a crowded room did you feel alone?

For the past days the recurring "game", the recurring journalistic idea has been "where were you that day? What was your experience?"

It seems like most people who watched the event on TV remember being in a crowd of people, either at school, at work, at an event, in the subway and in those stories everything is amplified by the collectiveness of the shared experience. We were all there. We all jumped, shouted, screamed, cried. Like for JFK's funeral, like for Diana's.

And then there were none. Or better there were those who were left completely alone: the widows, the orphans, the relatives, the New Yorkers living in the area paralyzed by fear.

And then there was a smaller crowd: the loved ones, the family, the only place to turn to.

I was in a crowd too...a crowd of kids. And there's one line in the song that stands out for me.

I watch CNN but I'm not sure I can tell you the difference in Iraq and Iran.

My first day of high-school was September 11 2001.

I was 13 years old and truly, CNN, Iraq, Iran were just words without a meaning. Before 9/11 I watched and discussed the news as a child relaxing with my parents at home, after I felt like I had lived the news and I had grown; my world imploded and exploded at the same time, teaching me new things about foreign cultures, politics, the power of media...

My first day of high school divided a generation in two and made us feel like we were part of history, in a passive and yet heartfelt way. We were escorted out of school in silence while the PA announced what just happened in New York. We were told to go home, watch the news, call everyone we knew in the Big Apple, lay low to see what was going to happen in the next days, if a war was about to start.

I felt defeated, as if my entire world had been turned upside down. Maybe it was because that's the closest to which, in the most indirect way (but we are a virtual generation) my generation has come to a war, but it was also about something else.

It wasn't a political statement, but a state of mind, and even when some of my own friends started to spread theories and ideas about how 9/11 might have been an inside job or seeking for the terrorists motifs, I didn't know how to fully criticize their views but I was hurt. I knew they could think whatever they wanted, even if I disagreed as long as they defended their ideas rationally. Critical thinking for me was an essential factor and I didn't want to be as superficial as some of their slogans. I suddenly started, in fact, to be bothered by the shallowness of certain judgments that came from general assumptions of people who confused all Americans with Bush and shouted that it was the worst country in the world because everyone supported war and it was an imperialistic super power. Or claiming that every American was ignorant and they didn't know where Iraq was (but try to ask an Italian high-schooler where Kansas is or South Korea and most of them would probably be a little confused too...)

And when I discovered prejudices, conspiracies, different point of views and mortality, just like that... on 9/11/2001... I was no longer a child.

Wednesday September 7th



Suddenly I look closer at Ground 0. Was I blind for the past two days? There are changes! The area has been bustling and developing non-stop...and somehow the rhythm is picking up.

I notice that there are even trees and objects of every kind being slowly lifted by cranes and placed inside.

The workers keep passing things to one another and piece by piece in a matter of hours have completely changed the space surrounding them. I notice for the first time that the Liberty Tower, the skyscraper that a few weeks ago I thought it would take years to build is done. It's even lit up.

For some reason it makes me think of a movie-set. Not to say that anything is fake, the opposite. It actually reinforces my feeling that Manhattan and the cinematic image we have of it are one and the same thing.

And it's a movie-set built by the entire neighborhood. It seems almost like the end of an uplifting Hollywood movie, where there is the final grand gesture and some big plan unfolds in front of our eyes and it's set in motion.

And this larger than life Lego-model gets more and more new parts, patiently placed by a team of diligent Play-mobles. And no one stops. And then someone goes and gets a sandwich and then some faces change...and then it's night...and it's already 3am, then 4, then 5 and then at sunrise the movement has never ceased for a second.

Thursday September 8th

The giant blue beams of light cut through the clouds like an alien space-ship in a 70s movie. They are surrounded by a halo and they spread their light all over downtown.

I live too close to them to see their entirety. I just see the ends against the grey night.

From Soho or the Village you can clearly see the entire picture. Or if you go up on the terrace, they are an exciting pyrotechnic novelty. It's like the 4th of July in September.

Lights are New York. New York is its lights. If one closes his eyes and thinks of the skyline, the first image is going to be of indefinite spots of lights, like a modern impressionistic painting made through electrical wires.

Did you burst out in pride for the red, white and blue And the heroes who died just doin' what they do?

The giant skyscraper now at the center of the so-called Ground 0 is red, white and blue.

Patriotism has always been a factor that made me love America. Being part of a club, living things with the same intensity. Yet ...while I watched my neighbors argue over a mosque, cheering for the death of men far away, debating on The Freedom tower or if there really needs to be a celebration...I thought of something: personally speaking, I find that everybody should just forget everything about monuments, towers or mosques and look up to those beams of light. On that day my generation has learned what a cultural shock is, what a tragedy can mean. I can't speak for everyone but we are not a generation who likes monuments. We like things like the web, that are less tangible but that have the power to reach everyone in the world. These beams of light are something like that.

They also remind me of stars, of constellations that can be seen from everywhere in the planet, no matter where you are. They represent our history and make of the universe an open air museum, an explosion of memories glimpsing right above us.

Friday September 9th

Did you open your eyes, hope it never happened, Close your eyes and not go to sleep?



It's a bright sunny day. This oxymoronic peaceful restlessness of the past days continues. The thuds, the vibrations, the constant rumbling of the constructions are not even noise anymore.

On Broadway and on every sidewalk around the area, big white blocks of concrete have appeared. They are piled up on the sides and the NYPD logo is stamped on them. Next to them dozens of grey street barriers seem to be waiting patiently in line at the corners, not ready for the action yet.

Planning is about seeing what it's not there yet, visualizing in one's head preventive measures, thinking of what could happen, closing your eyes in order to actually see the things that the normal passerby doesn't notice, like a corner where the crowd could get too crammed, or traffic intersection that could potentially be dangerous or how far the speakers will be heard.

Every color seems to be brighter today, emphasized, heightened. That's why maybe for the first time in days I notice a flash of white blinding me. The sun beats on the thousands of white ribbons, tied at the gates of Saint Paul's chapel. Blown by the wind, they are like small little flags, with messages on them.

It reminds me of the Kottel, the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, and every written note becomes a prayer. It reminds me of a wall filled with pinpoints, and every note becomes a mark, a physical way of saying: "I was there too, I feel like I was there, I wanna be part of this too because it makes me feel something."

It reminds me of a door with a ribbon for a newborn baby, and the fact that they are so small and light give an impression of happiness and not despair.

I see another white sea of flags, this time taller than me, at Battery Park. All the greenery is completely covered by a cemetery of Flags of Honor, American flags that instead of the stripes have the names of the victims. There is one for every victim, so there are thousands of them.

Somehow this looks much more like an actual graveyard than the famous Trinity church's one. The latter is a masterpiece, a romanticized Spoon-river like group of ancient, spooky looking graves, with old-timey language engraved on it in a funny Gothic font.

This sea of flags instead is much more real, bleak and hopeless. You can't see where it ends and from afar it almost feels as if the American flags have lost their color, like after a bad washing or after decades of being in the garage, ruined by time...

Saturday September 10th

Did you turn off that violent old movie you're watchin' And turn on "I Love Lucy" reruns?

We don't want to think about it anymore. We are ready to move on. Everyone is eager to get it over with because the anxiety is replacing the amazement.

In the morning Broadway after Canal Street started to look more and more like a suburban town: street fairs, cake-baking stands, smiling women and children selling cookies, preachers and street singers.

In the afternoon, though, it has suddenly turned into Eastern Berlin, as if Houston street and Soho are the checkpoint after which everything becomes a war-zone...

At night the Police blocks every corner, to walk past Tribeca is like going through a Kafkian maze, answering questions, sometimes showing ID papers to prove your residence.

Under my house there are more than a hundred Policemen. Above, dozens of helicopters go round and round and round...

As I enter my building in the middle of night, I feel suddenly safer. I didn't want to be on the street.



What is the sense of this celebration? Because in a way it's not only about remembering those who died, but trying to make us relive some of that ordeal.

Should we be happy or sad? 10 years ago in the months after the events everyone felt guilty.

Even movies had to "change" to edit parts, shots with the Twin Towers, or censor what seemed too violent, inciting more violence. Like the Great Depression brought us the Wizard of Oz, 9/11 brought us Up or Avatar.

These things coexisted, in the same way today a need to celebrate and yet we don't.

I can hear in my head the voice of a rabbi who in a famous synagogue of the Upper East Side this morning gave a d'var Torah, a comment, a sermon about the word "oxymoron". The deepest moments in life are oxymorons.

"Remember in order to obliterate" he said. "Remember in order to obliterate"

Sunday September 11th

Did you notice the sunset the first time in ages or speak to some stranger on the street?

There we go. The walls have come down. The sound of water is as loud as the sound of the people standing all together in the crowd.

Then silence. The first moment of silence after a week of noise, in the loudest city in the world.

Everyone stares at each other. The open space with all this green and water is unreal. It wasn't there seven days ago. I swear it wasn't there.

It's unreal to think we will be able to walk where we haven't been able even to look for years.

The stories of the relatives of the victims are moving. The fact that people are so quiet and collected is moving.

People "freaking out" all over the world forgot what this is: a memorial. Not a concert, not a rally, not a celebration. This is for the families, not the tourist, not the passerby. The families are close and allowed inside, not the crowd who wants to say "I was there".

Yes, it's very American and very media-age to turn this into an event, a ritual; yet the speeches are so real, the people are real. The anthem, the music are all part of a pace, a rhythm that we must give to our lives when things get so irrational.

In 2001 celebrities came together to organize a concert that played in my house for years and years. All the "gods" of music were there from Eric Clapton, to Bruce Springsteen to Paul McCartney.

When these things are organized controversy follows. Yet as Paul McCartney said, the world wouldn't be what it is today if after the despair of War World II a few men didn't meet and started playing the guitar or the piano and creativity became not only a response, a celebration of life, but a state of mind.

Paul Simon plays.

Six moments of silence and on every TV, in every country "it echoes the sound of silence..."

Then some awkward stares and warm smiles.

Then New York keeps moving. As usual, with purpose.



Source URL: <http://108.61.128.93/magazine/focus/life-people/article/9-11-ten-years-after-neighborhood-waits>

Links

[1] <http://108.61.128.93/files/where-were-you-when-world-stopped-turning>