

I watched the giant twins die

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

It is a little after nine in the morning of September 11, 2001. My daughter calls me at my 16th floor Manhattan apartment from Queens. "Abba!," her voice barely manages to come through. "Turn on your TV set! Something dreadful is happening at the World Trade Center!" I do not need to turn on the television set. Instead, I race to the second bedroom of the apartment. There, in front of the large window, I freeze. Enormous billows of smoke are swirling out of huge gashes that have mutilated the top floors of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Infernal fire is raging through the devastation.

The image of the burning towers was instantly etched on my consciousness and is likely to remain so for the rest of my life. I was transfixed. Yet, almost instinctively, I reached for my camera. Among frantic telephone calls, and almost simultaneously flipping through television channels for news that both towers had been hit by hijacked aircraft, I took six photographs of a scene that was fast moving from the shocking to the apocalyptic.

From the window of my apartment on the East River at East 25th Street, looking south-west, the twin towers were two and a half miles away, as the crow flies. Because of their great height they seemed much nearer. In the present photographs, with the top of a row of fifteen-storey red brick apartment blocks near my apartment in the foreground, they look only a short distance away. The first photograph - the hurry behind the snapshot evident in the shade on the lower right corner - was taken soon after the South Tower (2 World Trade Center, on the left in the picture) was hit at

These, in brief, are my personal reflections on that fateful day. They would pale before an account of the human tragedy that the attacks on the towers entailed. Three thousand human beings lost their lives in that atrocity. Their bodies were blown to smithereens. Most of them could not even get a decent burial. Tens of thousands mourned their loss. Among the dead were not only Americans, but people from dozens of other countries, including my own. They embraced diverse faiths: among those who perished were Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews -- and Muslims.

9.02 a.m. The North Tower (1 World Trade Center, with a communications antenna on top) had been hit earlier at 8.46 a.m. The next photograph was taken only a couple of minutes later and gives a closer view of the wounded towers. For perspective, some of the buildings clustering around the twin towers are fifty to over seventy storeys high. The third picture was taken minutes after the South Tower had collapsed. Hit after the North Tower, the South Tower collapsed first. A volcano of smoke and dust is seen rising past the top of the tallest buildings. In the next photograph the smoke has almost blotted out the tall buildings to the east and south of the Center, and was rushing west towards the World Financial Center. The fifth picture shows the North Tower in a veritable inferno moments before it collapsed. The final photograph is a scene of indescribable desolation.

People have asked me why did I not photograph the towers as they were falling. I have asked myself the same question. The answer is that I did not

believe the towers would fall. Even after the fall of the South Tower, I could not get round to the idea that the other tower too would die. The towers were far too familiar to me for the idea of their imminent death to sink in.

For over twenty-five years I have watched the giant towers from the window of my apartment. I have also visited them many times over those years and enjoyed the miles of magnificent sight that they presented. But to me best of all was the view from my window. Looming over a crowd of some of the tallest skyscrapers that dot the southern tip of Manhattan, the twin towers dominated, and defined, a skyline I came to love over the years. During the day it was impossible to look at the horizon framed by my window and not be struck by the sight of the two silver columns rising towards the blue sky, the tallest of the other skyscrapers rising only to half their height. The skyline was beautiful in the evenings and it owed that beauty largely to the twin towers. There they stood: wafer after wafer of brilliant light stacked 110 floors high in two slim columns, towering over

the constellation of a million lights that lit lower Manhattan. On many a sleepless night I walked to the window to gaze at those towers of light, as they stood against a dark Manhattan sky like ever-wakeful sentinels to a slumbering city. Little did I realize how vulnerable they themselves would turn out to be.

In the spring of 2002, two faint beams of light rose every evening for several weeks, in an eerie recreation of the dead towers, a device installed by the city of New York, at the spot where the two towers once stood. This was a wistful effort to fill a void. The ghostly shafts would rise a few thousand feet towards the heaven and then vanish into it. I could not bear to look at them and was relieved when they were withdrawn.

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The attacks on the twin towers were made in the name of Islam. The attackers aspired to go directly to Heaven. It is far more likely that the God of all mankind will grant the perpetrators of the atrocity, and those who rejoiced in it, only eternal damnation. And may He not let anyone repeat it ever again.

The author is a former United Nations economist and lives in New York.



The photos were taken by the author from his apartment window.

Heart of the problem

M SHAHIDUZZAMAN

I was one of those who saw the second plane crash into the Twin Towers live on CNN, just moments after I had switched on that channel around 6 pm local time. I was puzzled when the regular news was interrupted by a roving crew displaying live pictures following the first plane's deadly crash into the top section of one of the Towers.

As I watched a second plane cruise by from the side of my TV screen, my instinctive response was -- how come the commentator was not talking right then, regarding the movement of a second plane so close to the Towers and why would such a plane be allowed to come so close to a location over the city -- skies, when already more than ten minutes had lapsed since the first plane had crashed.

And as a huge ball of golden fire mushroomed out of the second Tower just a moment later, I screamed out in utter horror and disbelief, that this was no accident but an actual act of the most nerve-wracking piece of unprecedented misadventure which had been unfolding, right at the moment as I frantically tried to read further through it. Even before the second plane had crashed, I found enough time to call up a close friend and ask him to turn on CNN to share the ordeal that made no sense to me at all at first glance.

Today, as I look back at those moments, it seems hardly possible to reconcile with the fact that since those moments, many of us had remained glued to the TV screen for days and even months together, trying to comprehend the magnitude of what was to come to our lives and those of millions, as a consequence, living or sharing the unpredictable implications. A year has passed by since those events and we now live in a clearly defined global divide, which can hardly offer any promise of resolution without a resort to the conclusive means of physical destruction. American leaders appear unwilling to shift their traditional affections within their political culture and take lessons from their earlier ineptitude in handling foreign policy or to duly recognise the depth of resentment created by their inept, simplistic and unethical bias on very crucial issues of human rights. Not only the question of Palestine, but even their commitment to destroy Iraq while preserving their stooges in Saudi Arabia appear to reflect a deliberate benign neglect of the fact that 15 out of the 19 WTC crashers were Saudi nationals and not even a single Iraqi was even remotely involved.

But as impending realities obviously indicate, the lessons of September 11 have been unlearned by the Republican leadership in the USA and distorted to the extent that powerful vested interests fail to go into the heart of the real disease. The Americans are clearly inviting more troubles for themselves as well as the rest of the world.

The memories of September 11 will arouse powerful passions of misun-

derstanding for many years to come both within the USA and the non-Islamic part of the world, where Muslims had been dwelling for years as peace-loving citizens and had also been able to undertake a quiet expansion of their religious faith in terms of sheer numbers. Now, such a process faces dire threats of coercion, repressive corrective measures and even a potential prospect of deportation in the name of state security in the western world. Moderate states like Bangladesh now face totally irrational and severe levels of manpower-export inhibitions to the western world, notably the USA despite the fact that people over here and specially expatriates have most sincerely abhorred such a heinous and cowardly act of terrorism like September 11. Its amazing that moderate Muslims have to end up paying such an undue price for acts by people, whose mother states continue to thrive with repressive regimes, totally undemocratic and being, as irony would have it, patronised and preserved with outright support from the Americans themselves.

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All along a tale of tragedy: Terror-stricken Americans; war-torn Afghans



One year later: A dangerous poverty

ESAM SOHAIL writes from Kansas, USA

I had barely poured the first cup of coffee at my office that Tuesday when the programming on the wall televisions suddenly went blank to brink breaking news from New York. The breaking news was itself interrupted when a live feed was hooked to downtown Manhattan. In front of my eyes on television, I saw the second plane plunge into the World Trade Center. That cup of coffee was not finished. In the ensuing days, the mammoth tragedy took on some extra personal dimensions for me: over a hundred Bangladeshis had been killed there. Also murdered were several employees of my company's New York operations.

In fact, that coffee was drained down the drain in the office sink. Also down the drain, as I look in retrospect, was the powerful myth that impoverishment, economic and social, triggers terrorism. For as long as I recall, well meaning liberals had defended acts of random violence by suggesting that poverty, disenfranchisement, and social marginalization are the primary factors causing the resentment that spills into violence and, *inter alia*, terrorism. Lost on these intellectuals have been mounds of contrary evidence

from all times and climes. The poorest rebels in the world, Bangladesh's freedom fighters of 1971, did not ram PLA planes into the Habib Bank Plaza in Karachi, did they? No, they did not because they were fighting for a noble cause that transcended the dislike or hatred of any particular kind of people.

Not too much is known yet about the 19 men who hijacked the tranquility of America and the world on September 11, 2001. What is known, however, is enough to put the myth of the poverty/terrorism equation to rest. All of those young men were born into privilege and reared in comfort. Some were scions of billionaires, others the pedigree of mere millionaires. Like their ideological icon, Osama bin Laden, they came from one of the wealthiest countries in the world and belonged to a class that routinely sent its sons to study in the United States and vacation in Europe. These were men who lacked nothing in life.

Except, that is, the rationality of thought which leads men and women to appreciate the wide ranging diversity, ethnic and political, that is inherent in humanity. Rationality is a by-product of vigorous intellectual exercise, wholesome debate, and vibrant social discourse. Such concepts, by definition, are alien to societies where pluralism and openness are scoffed at, if not squelched. The fact of the matter is that each and everyone of the men involved in the conceptualization, planning, and execution of the 9/11 plot hailed from closed, insular, suffocating societies. As bacteria finds dark, swampy marshes very hospitable, extremism finds a similar haven amidst the wholesale intolerance of closed societies. In such a place there is no sunlight, in the form of a free media or assembly debates, to cleanse the arteries of the mind from the prejudices and superstitions fed into it since childhood. Here, unaccountable tyrants and dogmatic clergy mutually support each other in keeping a firm grip on the bodies, hearts, and minds of lesser mortals. The material wealth at hand, often bestowed as a stipend for conformity, becomes not a barrier but sometimes a tool for the evil of extremist minds.

The developed world has spent over fifty years of money and rhetoric in attempting to tackle material poverty in places like Mali, Bangladesh, and India. That same attention and commitment should now be turned to addressing the far more dangerous issue of intellectual poverty prevalent in some of the wealthiest kingdoms not too far from our shores. The promotion of pluralism, tolerance, and openness, and ultimately democracy, in those ultra-rich countries must be taken up by the World Bank and the European Union with the same zeal with which rural health programmes and low-income housing have been championed in the impoverished poverty.

One year ago, beyond the shadow of a doubt, intellectual poverty again proved itself to be the progenitor of moral poverty. By arranging for the murder of people from 80 different countries on one single Tuesday, it left no doubt that it is a clear and present danger to the security of the international community in ways that material poverty never can be.

Nine/eleven snap-shots

ARETHA WILLIAMS, writes from New York

ONE year has passed since I was trapped in New York City on September 11. The nightmare sprang to life with a dust cloud rolling quietly past the window. For the next few days, amidst the bomb threats, toxic winds, and failed attempts to cross the Verazzano Bridge, my friends and I would talk about death for the first time. We were sick with grief for the thousands of people destroyed just a breath away from us. We were alternately grateful to have been spared, and wondering why. The one question usually pushed aside by the pace of life rose above all others. "Am I ready to die?" One friend said "Yes." She felt she had lived a full life. I knew my answer right away. "Please God, not yet." There's still so much I want to do. I realized that day that I'm not afraid of death; I'm afraid of dying without having lived.

The shockwaves of 9-11 washed over me like a heavy stone dropped in a still pond. All inertia was stripped away in the process. Never have I more clearly understood that the present is our only guarantee. A new energy came over me, and a powerful thirst for information. I, like many of my fellow Americans felt I had been thrust upon the world stage naked- ill informed on international issues, and unprepared to sort out the ensuing chaos. Numbers thrown at me by the media whirled about my head. Over 3,000 were killed at the World Trade Center (CNN). 5,000 Iraqi children die each month under the U.S. blockade of food and medicine (UNICEF). 30% of Israeli teens suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Washington Times). I was determined to better acquaint myself with the state of the world. The plague of numbers only wracked me further. 13 million Africans and 3 million Palestinians are facing starvation (Oxfam and Daily Presb. News). 2.6 million Afghans are refugees, and 150 Trade Center fathers will never see their newborn babies (BBC and Independent Womens Forum). In the end, the numbers lost their meaning because just

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as my own life had become infinitely precious to me, so too had every life on the planet.

In one day, I became defined by everything I'm not. A casualty of 9-11 brutality, a young soldier who will meet his end fighting "the war on terror," an Afghan child orphaned by falling bombs, a Muslim American afraid to leave her home, a New York widow lighting a candle. I have never felt so fortunate. I became determined to use every privilege this great country has afforded me to become a responsible member of the global village. My college education, my health, my right to freedom of expression, all of these set me apart from so many people in the world. They also form the cornerstone of a great debt owed. The wave of patriotism that swept the land caused me to take American ideals to heart. "With Liberty and Justice for All" rang in my ears as I watched Arab men being "disappeared" and held in solitary confinement with no right to an attorney. "You are your brother's keeper" came back to me as the nation pulled together in the aftermath of 9-11.

I decided to take charge of my dreams and obligations. In less than a year I have radically refashioned my life, changing homes and careers. I know that each of us has a talent that can be used in the service of our future. Mine is writing, and I have devoted myself to it full time. Witnessing

destruction first-hand has caused me to realize that change can happen at any time. It is this principle that has allowed me to change my life. It also gives me hope that the human imagination will one day rise above the senseless cycle of attack and retaliation. People of conscience will then demand non-violent solutions to the world's problems. The past year has crystallized the choice facing us today. As so eloquently stated by Martin Luther King Jr. "We must learn to live together as brothers, or perish together as fools." Surviving 9-11 has pushed me to work for the former.

IT has been one year since I was trapped in New York City on September 11. Just hours earlier seeing Michael Jackson in concert had acquainted me with the innocence of my childhood. We were now unceremoniously parted by a dust cloud rolling quietly past the window. I heard my name being called in a cold panic from the living room; and the nightmare sprang to life.

Like a heavy stone dropped in a still pond, the tragedy of September 11 sent out shockwaves across the city, the nation, the world, and my life. These waves have washed over me, and stripped away all inertia.

Being confronted by my own mortality has caused me to take responsibility for my dreams. In less than a year I have radically refashioned my

life, changing homes and careers. I am now a freelance writer, what many have said I was born to do.

Witnessing destruction first-hand has caused me to realize that reality can shift at any time. The norms we take for granted can be wiped away in an instant. It is this principle that has allowed me to re-chart the course of my life. It also brings me hope that the human imagination will one day rise above the senseless cycle of attack and retaliation. People of conscience will then demand non-violent solutions to the world's conflicts. I pray that as September 11 reorganized my priorities, so too will we come to value life over nationalism, wealth or religious differences.

FOR me, 9-11 didn't begin on television. It began in a New York apartment. Just hours earlier seeing Michael Jackson in concert had reacquainted me with the innocence of my childhood. I was now more concerned with surviving the day. I heard my name being called in a cold panic from the living room. Buildings had fallen, and who knew what else was on its way.

I was one of the lucky ones. I got out of the city alive, but I returned from New York a changed woman. I felt a new urgency to make every day count. In the time that has since passed, I have drawn closer to my loved ones, and closer to my true calling in life. I've also been challenged to add my voice to the millions worldwide who are calling for innovative ways to settle conflict. It is clear that without fresh thinking on the issue, none of us will ever be safe. 9-11 taught me that reality can shift at any time. The norms we take for granted can be wiped away in an instant. It is this realization that has allowed me to re-chart the course of my life. The tragedy of that day was a reminder of the need for a reorganization of priorities. I honor the thousands who died by renewing my commitment to peace and justice. More than ever, I am moved to accept Ghandi's challenge to "become the change you wish to see in the world."