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Views of a Day

By *THE EDITORS*

Reflections from five Happy Days contributors on the events of Sept. 11, 2001, eight years on.

Nathan Schneider, writer

Tim Kreider, cartoonist

Eric Weiner, writer

Michele Madigan Somerville, poet

Pico Iyer, travel writer

A Solemn Game

Raised up by parents and teachers of the 1960s, and grandparents who brushed against World War II, I always wondered what crisis and heroism would define my generation after its childhood in the in-between simmer of the '90s. When my answer came, I was 17, at the start of my last year in high school, and close enough to the Pentagon to see the smoke towering out from it.

What my friends and I did that night, more quiet and focused than ever, was play our usual game of tag in the dark, on the comfortable fields around our school. That night, as on others, a police car came down into the parking lot. I won't ever forget the image of us standing under a light, talking with the officer in stunted phrases, hushed in deference to the state of exception that had come and left the ordinary rules in question.

He didn't make us leave, as the cops normally did. He drove away. Perhaps he recognized the mystery at work in us, which we ourselves couldn't be sure of, by which we were somehow, in playing, planning our next move as a generation, planning the future of the world, and we should not be bothered.

— *Nathan Schneider*

'You Are Alive'

I experienced 9/11 the same way almost all Americans did — on TV. And I reacted the same way a lot of them did — by going temporarily insane.

I like to think that most people who got caught up in that bellicose hysteria experienced the attacks as a spectatorial event, as unreal, and so their reaction was also unreal — like the “payback-time” montage in an action film or the impotent revenge scenarios we play out in our heads. It wasn’t until I actually went to New York City a week after the attacks that I understood how empty and inappropriate an emotion anger was to bring to the circumstances; it was like picking fights at a wake. New Yorkers, who had been so profoundly wounded, hadn’t given in to rage; what they were, mostly, was sad.

I hesitate to say this, but that was not only a ghastly time; it was also it was a beautiful time, in the same way that a friend’s funeral can be beautiful. New Yorkers seemed to have had their shells torn off, the gelid stuff of their inner selves exposed and flinching at the air. Jealously tended hierarchies temporarily evaporated, and the worthless currency of human decency reacquired street value. Strangers made eye contact and got too choked up to speak. I heard about a wave of tender and desperate spontaneous sex — it would be the opposite of the truth to call it “casual.” Graffiti appeared that actually spoke instead of just marking territory, like the overheard murmurs of a city talking to itself or fitfully dreaming. I saw a spray-painted message that would’ve seemed trite or sentimental a week before: YOU ARE ALIVE.

Sept. 11 came at the end of an idyllic but somehow flaccid decade when a half-century’s threat of mass immolation seemed suspended, and the single biggest news story in the U.S. was not Kosovo or Rwanda but an act of fellatio. Suddenly seeing the same people we sit in traffic or ride mass transit with dying horribly may have made some of us take leave of our reason, but it also restored things to a truer perspective. It reminded us, briefly, that life is real. —*Tim Kreider*

Some Comfort

My reactions to 9/11 included shock and sorrow, of course, but also an unfamiliar, and not entirely unpleasant sensation: belonging. My wife and I were vacationing in Yellowstone National Park. We were staying at a lodge whose appeals included a “media free” environment. The rooms had no televisions or radios, and cell phone service was spotty. For a couple of hyper-connected people like ourselves, this was pure bliss.

On the last morning of our stay, I was enjoying a breakfast of blueberry pancakes when the waitress asked, nonchalantly, if we would be flying or driving later. Driving, I said. Good, she replied, because every airport in the country was closed. Something about a couple of planes hitting the World Trade Center in New York. More coffee?

Within minutes, the unbelievable, unfathomable, details broke through our self-imposed information blackout. The hotel staff found a television, somewhere, and hooked it up in the lobby. A few dozen of us gathered around, as if the Sony Trinitron were a fireplace on

a cold January night, the flickering light conveying not only news but, oddly, comfort as well. We experienced those horrible events together, much more so than if we were sequestered in our rooms. Nobody said much (What was there to say after all?) but that didn't matter. Suffering shared is suffering diminished, a quirk of human nature for which I remain deeply grateful.

— *Eric Weiner*

Hell, No

At about 8 a.m. on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, my 6-year-old son, Jack, and his father, Max, left our home on Union Street in Brooklyn and headed for Jack's new school in Manhattan. Shortly after, I left with my daughters — Maria, Jack's twin, and 3-year-old Grace — to deliver Maria to her own first grade class in Brooklyn.

It was about 8:30 when Jack and Max changed trains at the World Trade Center subway station.

Just before 10:00 Grace and I returned to sign Maria out of school.

At about 10:30 we paused on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Union Street to watch the black plume ascend in a rush two miles away. This image burned itself into my memory. I prayed.

By 11:00 I knew my husband and son were safe. We sat in my church for a short while and saw many unfamiliar faces there.

On the way home, we saw the straggling head of the procession of those who'd fled the financial district on foot via the Brooklyn Bridge. Beige with ash, lost-looking and spent, they filed down Seventh Avenue under the brilliant sun. Once home, I sealed our windows, fielded calls, gave the girls lunch, and set them down on the floor by my desk to color.

Each year as 9/11 approaches, my children ask about the day. Recently I mentioned a conversation I had two weeks after the event with a relative who seemed to suggest we should move out of New York. Grace, now 10, was slightly appalled. As she sees it, her parents' choice to rear a family in one of the great cities of the world is a gift.

New York City has always been an experiment in hope. Somehow my children, like many of their friends who lived through and remember 9/11, see their hometown as a kind of holy city worth fighting for, a Promised Land, whose strength, courage and resilience nourishes them. Young as they are, they feel it belongs to them. They know they have inherited it, even as they grow into it, and someday, embody it.

— *Michele Madigan Somerville*

Foundations

Six weeks before Sept. 11, 2001, a local was leading me around the cemetery in Aden, in southern Yemen. In sad truth, the whole town looked like a set of gravestones: few shops, no playgrounds, goats foraging in the main street, old women knocking at the windows of the occasional car. It was hard to believe that, when I'd visited at the age of two, Aden was the busiest port in the world outside Manhattan, buzzing with activity until a series of wars brought it down. Harder still to put it into the same sentence as Santa Barbara, where I returned from Yemen to hear about planes, apparently overseen by Osama bin Laden (whose home village is not far from Aden), flying into the World Trade Center.

Eight years on, Santa Barbara — like most places in the U.S.— is a lot closer to Yemen than it was then: less sure of everything, fearful of disturbances from abroad, even in places in economic ruins. No feeling person would ever say that senseless murder, the inciting of fear or loss of confidence are good things. But perhaps they ask us what the foundations of our happiness are and on what we base our rosier hopes.

I met cheerful souls among the headstones in Aden, and I know a few in Santa Barbara. But if that cheer is genuine, I'm not sure if they'd be feeling better or worse now than they were on Sept. 11, 2001. Only more compassionate, perhaps. Looking to our circumstances for strength, solace or support is like dancing at the edge of a very deep grave.

— *Pico Iyer*