

## 9.11 An Odyssey of Pain

By **PATTY REINERT**

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**NEW YORK** – The smell is no longer unbearable, not enough now to hold your nose. But it catches in the throat with the dust, and the mind insists, against all conscious instruction, on identifying its morbid contents.

The din is not excruciating. Still, it grates on the nerves as bulldozers scrape up concrete and steel debris and move it from one pile to another, then from pile to barge to the Fresh Kills landfill across the river where workers in white suits fight off sea gulls to complete their sorting and salvage.

Nearly four months after terrorists attacked America from the skies, the work on the grounds of the destroyed World Trade Center has become routine: Lift, look, haul, sift.

A glorious, warm, dry autumn delayed the bitterness of New York winter – one small mercy for those who have endured day after day of backbreaking work and inconsolable grief in the smoldering rubble.

Somewhere, away from here, someone tracks their progress: hundreds of thousands of tons of debris removed, more than 10,000 body parts found. The city medical examiner's office has confirmed 550 killed; nearly 2,000 more death certificates have been requested by families weary of waiting for their loved ones' remains to be found or identified.

Few speak of how long this might take.

Every New Yorker, and every American, has a story of Sept. 11 – how blue the sky was that morning, where she was when the planes struck the first tower, the second tower; the Pentagon. How he watched it over and over on TV, the planes ripping through the 110-story buildings, the structures falling, the fires burning, the concrete raining, the doomed jumping.

Since that horrific day, when more than 3,000 people were killed in less than an hour, there have been anthrax attacks, massive layoffs and terrifyingly vague homeland security alerts. The nation is at war in the mountains and caves of Afghanistan – an unprecedented, undeclared, possibly never-ending war whose objective, according to President Bush, is nothing short of ridding evil from the face of the earth.

Now, as workers uptown in Times Square prepare for the annual ball drop to mark a new year, thousands of people – New Yorkers and tourists alike – are walking the streets of lower Manhattan, desperate to make their peace with all that has happened. Some cry; others are silent, leaning on the barricades and staring out at the destruction a block away.

Matt Dwyer, a 24-year-old business student from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, stops in his tracks when he sees the skeleton of a huge building jutting at an awkward angle across a dusty sky, an arc of water damping down the smoking wreckage.

Then, he quietly approaches the police line to make his request.

“Can I take a picture with you?” he asks a burly New York cop.

The cop smiles and shrugs his OK, and Dwyer throws an arm around him for a hug.

"I ain't gonna kiss him!" the flustered officer jokes as Dwyer's friend snaps a photo.

"They're famous now," Dwyer says. "That guy's my hero."

In all that was lost Sept. 11, virtually everyone here agrees what was gained – a new respect for working men and women, thanks to the hundreds of police and firefighters who rushed to the Trade Center in hopes of rescuing someone and, instead, died with them.

Those who risk their lives daily to save or protect others are revered now, as are the workers who in the days following the attack wrote their Social Security numbers on their arms in Magic Marker and braved the unstable ruins in a vain attempt to find survivors.

Some have returned every day since, breathing in the dust and searching in the horror for anything that might identify someone, anything that could be cherished or buried by a victim's family.

Whenever the rescue workers are spotted, coming and going, they are cheered on, even serenaded by patriotic carolers. Crowds, consisting of many newly unemployed, also flock to funerals and memorial services for fallen firefighters and police officers, which are listed daily in the *Daily News*, a gritty tabloid whose usual staples are rime stories and celebrity gossip.

"You've got a different kind of hero, post-9/11 – the blue-collar cop, the fireman," says Doug Muzzio, a public affairs professor at Baruch College at City University of New York. "Before, our heroes weren't heroes. They were superb athletes and singers and movie stars, but they weren't real heroes. We have a different notion now of what a hero is."

The worship is evident in the makeshift shrines, filled with candles and flowers and teddy bears and messages, that have sprung up around the city – outside a church that has become a haven for tired and hungry workers, in parts and train stations and outside firehouses that have lost so many.

"Dear fireperson," reads a letter a child posted on the firehouse door at Engine 54, Ladder Co. 4, in midtown. "Thank you for saving my best friend's cousin. I know you are hot in there."

A little girl named Andrea drew a red fire truck putting out the fire on the towers with a rainbow over the smoke.

Mr. Hempel's first-graders from Glassboro, N.J., sent a banner with their tiny handprints in red and blue finger paint.

"I know it sounds kind of corny," says Wayne Haines, a volunteer from Colorado who is handing out pens to passers-by who want to leave notes for rescue workers taking a break at St. Paul's Chapel. "But I see police and firefighters sitting in there in the pews, crying and praying and reading these messages – 'Thank you, from Amanda in Podunkville,' and it really hits them. They look at the kids' drawings, and it keeps them going."

How long can all this public mourning go on?

"Longer than we might think," Muzzio says, "because the scars are deep."

"It's almost perverse that you want to keep experiencing this pain. But you're glad to be reminded. You don't want to forget this, because it was so horrible."

And for those who want to take a reminder home with them, New York entrepreneurs will not disappoint.

Uptown in Times Square, where a glitzy new Toys R Us, complete with a six-story indoor Ferris wheel, is giving FAO Schwartz a run for its money this holiday season, nothing is selling faster than toys and souvenirs honoring New York police and firefighters.

In the stores along Fifth Avenue, and at nearly every street kiosk near the Trade Center, NYPD and FDNY hats, jackets, headbands, T-shirts, sweatshirts and ties are for sale. (So far, there are no boxer shorts, but for those, of course, there is the U.S. flag motif.)

The souvenir shops on Broadway are jammed with NYPD and FDNY key chains, ashtrays, shot glasses and refrigerator magnets. In the windows, couched between the Statue of Liberty nightlights and the Empire State Building statues – with or without King Kong – are inflatable police cars and World Trade Center snow globes sitting atop plaster police cars or fire trucks.

And along with all the kitsch, humor, dark though it may be, is slowly returning to New York.

David Letterman is featuring terrorist jokes in his Top 10 lists, and “Osama, yo mama” T-shirts are waving from street stands.

Outside the Empire State Building, which is now glowing red, white and blue, people look up hopefully.

“Oh, good,” they joke, “still standing.”

And while so much has changed here, there are some things New Yorkers and visitors can still count on. Take the ubiquitous “I (big red heart) New York” T-shirt.

It’s still here.

But like everything post-9/11, it is a little different.

Now it reads: “I (big red heart) New York *more than ever.*”

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