



MY WEEK

Alvin Hall



Fitting location to remember day that changed our world

“I always remember where I was when I heard the news on... 22 November 1963... 4 April 1968... 31 August 1997... 11 September 2001.” All of us have uttered that sentence using one of these dates or others. The specific tragic event becomes a marker in our lives – some deeply personal, some more communal. The events that occurred on 9/11/2001 were global on a different scale – one that many of us could not imagine ever happening, even while watching the attacks, the ensuing inferno, the collapse. We – and much of the world – watched in real time, glued to televisions in our homes, our offices, even standing on the streets in front of appliance shop windows.

In the days immediately following 9/11, I could see and smell smoke coming from the site. The sounds of sirens were ever-present, except at night when New York City was eerily quiet for months.

People looked dazed, mournful, fearful. I recalled these 9/11 faces and feelings during some of my walks around New York City during the restrictions of the Covid pandemic. I remember thinking then, as I sometimes do now: how does an individual, a family, a city and a country recover?

Twenty years are about to pass since that infamous day. Yet the many horrors remain vivid. Each year, when I’ve been in New York on 9/11, I’ve made a point to take time to look at the two columns of light that are projected upward into the night sky from where the two World Trade Center towers stood. I invariably think of the people who died that day in so many horrifying and tragic ways. I think of the people whose lives were irrevocably damaged, like my friend Philip Godfrey, a maintenance worker for a company located in the WTC. I interviewed him in the weeks before the first remembrance of the 9/11 attack for my BBC Radio 4 documentary *Wall Street: One Year On*. In an article for the BBC website, I wrote that Philip, along with other people at his company, managed to make his way down the narrow stairways from the 55th floor to the lobby of Tower One, just as Tower Two collapsed. Philip is lucky to be alive and finds it hard to even think about the future. He says: “Like that metal was twisted, that’s the way I feel.”

Seeing pieces of metal from the towers and other items on display in the 9/11 Memorial & Museum makes his words profoundly heartbreaking.

Philip and I spoke on the phone a few times after the programme aired. He was still struggling emotionally and psychologically with what he had been through, with what he had survived, with what he was encountering in the bureaucratic aftermath. It was affecting his ability to sustain himself, to find peace. Eventually, almost inevitably, he drifted away. The annual beams of light at the WTC site dissipating upward into the darkness makes me wonder where and how Philip is today. Was he able to find resilience?

When people visit the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, their emotions are undoubtedly on edge from the moment they approach and see the site. For some, just thinking about visiting can feel like too much. Looking at the 9/11 site today, I marvel every time at how much imagination, engineering, negotiation, and yes, the sense of humanity it took to synthesise the powers of resilience and remembrance. The deep scar of burnt earth, twisted metal, lives lost, and lives changed has been transformed into an amazing, affecting, evocative, and appropriately reverential, serene place. To do this took all the elements of resilience – determination, toughness, optimism, and vision. Equally important, it took an elastic, fine-tuned sensitivity to connect the sensory experience of the present with remembrance of the past. The sound of the waterfall, the ability to touch the names stencilled into the metal parapet surrounding, the orderly grid of trees, the view of the sky through the leaves, the places where you stop and quietly reflect – all bring to mind thoughts about the people who died as well as those left to grieve, find their own peace, and remember.

THE TRAGEDY THROUGH YOUNG EYES

Recently I took a friend’s grandson to the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. He had been working in Manhattan for the summer, but had not visited the site, and I thought our going there together would give me an opportunity to talk about and reflect on the tragedy. Knowing that this young man would have been a newborn at the time, I wanted to experience how a person from a different generation sees and feels about 9/11 20 years later.

We stopped at the corner of one of the waterfall pools. I explained that the dimensions are the exact footprint of the tower. I saw his face and body language change. He asked to walk around the entire perimeter of one of the waterfalls. As we completed one side after the other, he was measuring, realising that the dimensions were smaller than he imagined.

The young man then asked how tall the building was. I said 110 floors, adding that each building was a little over a quarter of a mile high. He looked at me, a little quizzically. Then he looked up through the leaves on the site’s grid of trees at the sky and clouds. At that moment I realised the enormity of the tragic events that day will probably remain difficult for future generations to imagine, much less fully absorb – as many of us who lived through 9/11 are still trying to do.