Ten Years After 9/11

September 9, 2011 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Anyone alive on September 11, 2001, and old enough to remember the events of that horrible day will never forget it. Everyone has his or her own story to tell about 9/11. My story isn't that different from most people who were south of Central Park in Manhattan on that day, except perhaps for how my HIV played a part.

I was freelancing at the time, so I had a flexible work schedule. I had an appointment that morning with my HIV doctor, but I woke up late. So I called the doctor's office to tell them I would be there late. I was rushing to get the words out, but the person on the other end kept trying to interrupt. He was doing it so much I started to get annoyed.

He finally succeeded in interrupting me. I used to remember what he said next word for word, but my paraphrasing will have to do: "The doctor's not coming in. No doctor's are coming in. Two planes hit the World Trade Center and one hit the Pentagon."

After he caught his breath then he said in the fiercest way possible (picture a wavy finger wag): "You need to turn on the television." Then he hung up. Click.

I couldn't believe what I had just heard, but I did as I was told. The disbelief quickly turned into dread. The two towers were on fire and I was only three miles away. Then my roommate came home and it was my job to tell him. We both sat in silence in front of the television as the towers burned and then fell. And then we rose to our feet.

We were compelled to walk toward the mushroom cloud. Again, disbelief turned into dread. It was no cruel TV trick. It was all too real. Absolute strangers huddled together around radios and people walking away from the towers covered in blood and dust.

A frightened tourist with minimal English skills came up to us and asked: "We at war?" The thought hadn't occurred to me until then, but I said to him, "I guess we are."

The plane crash in Pennsylvania only fueled rampant rumors about a host of other horrors yet to happen. The bridges, the tunnels, the subways. A mass exodus of people from Manhattan kept flowing in fear of not being able to get off the island later. I eventually opted to leave with my boyfriend to his apartment in Queens.

If it weren't for my HIV doctor's appointment, I actually might have been downtown that morning and my 9/11 story would have been much different. I am lucky that I didn't die or get physically hurt or lose a loved one that day. I am lucky that I wasn't one of the people caught in the ash cloud as the towers fell.

That said, I can still summon the immense intensity of the feelings I felt on 9/11 ten years later and I'm sure I will be able to until my dying day.

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