

Delaying - Emergency Shelter

Friday, September 14, 2001

End of Part 1: It hadn't dawned on me that the driver, whose face I never saw, might be new to his job. Instead, I was thinking about what was ahead for me and what had I gotten myself into. Barely four minutes after exiting the secure zone, we reached the shelter: a public school in Chinatown.

Part 2

The entrance to middle school 131 was set back a long way from the curb. The 1970s beige brick building served as one of six or seven temporary shelters the Red Cross had set up to house displaced residents from lower Manhattan — people who had lost power and gas or had been ordered to evacuate their homes.

The outgoing shelter manager appeared exhausted. The car that brought me was her ticket home, so we had no time to linger or chat. As she gave me a cursory tour, the tension in her body broadcast her need be out. I thanked her and said good-bye. With substantial relief, she walked out toward the white wagon.

The shelter was not busy, and there was time before lunch—the first planned event I would be in charge of. Within ten minutes, I discovered a ham radio operator at the shelter—not something I had not anticipated in Manhattan, especially since the phones were working. Or, at least the phones a mile or two north. More than twelve hours passed before I fully recalled that American Red Cross shelters always have a short-wave radio person, an old and practical tradition to provide communication with the outside world—usually helpful and not always easy in disaster situations.

I was the new boss. And I knew nothing. I wondered how often this happens in the professional world. There were a few volunteer staffers and a constant stream of people coming in to offer help. “What should we tell these prospective volunteers?” I was asked. I really didn't know. “Thank them and say there is nothing to do right now. And encourage them to come back later.”

The shelter community included a variety of city workers, including public school employees. Two tough, short, and stout ladies who rarely got up from their folding chairs, guarded the door. I assumed they were school guards who now provided a small unarmed police force for our little village. They kept their eyes on things, which turned out to be helpful. Two cafeteria workers offered no food to shelter residents; perhaps they were there to protect the facility or as part of their union contract. The shelter had its own food—the usual emergency fare, almost entirely junk. Cookies, old sandwiches on white bread, coffee, faux juice, fruit, water, little boxes of raisins, crackers—nothing that required cooking. For a table full of free food, the spread was astonishingly unappealing.

I passed some routine paperwork onto a volunteer and, while pondering my next task, overheard a teacher passing through the lobby area saying something about homeless people outside. I had no idea who she was talking to since hardly anyone was around.

I went to investigate but didn't see anyone outside where I had entered. Down a narrow side alley, I came upon four or five guys hanging out in an open area alongside the school. They had a rough and scruffy look and were surely used to living on the street. They'd probably had a few drinks and appeared to be enjoying themselves. I talked with them for a while, trying to get a sense of their situation. It was hard to know what parts of their stories to believe. My story was not coherent either; I was still in the first hour of my new career. I sensed that at least a few of them had been "displaced," albeit from one street corner to another. Maybe whatever you call home is home, though I don't imagine many homeless people call even their favorite doorway home. I invited them to come for lunch, which I said would be in about an hour. It made sense to offer a bed to anyone who wanted one since there were empty beds in the large gymnasium. I called "mass care" using the phone number Amber had handed me as I set off from headquarters. I had no idea of mass care's role but asked about admitting "homeless" people to the shelter; no rules, guidelines, or advice was offered.

No one told me the number of residents in the shelter; there was likely no more than twelve, and nearly all of them were out. I took my job to be an ambassador keeping the impromptu community together more than a host for individual residents.

Rather than offer the usual shelter spread for lunch, I easily turned the local generosity into an impressive hot buffet. Many local Chinese restaurants had brought over food during

the first hour I was in charge. I had accepted all the offerings (though probably against Red Cross donations rules); refusing them was beyond me.

The feast was self-serve from styrofoam containers to paper plates and eaten with plastic cutlery; the steaming platters of food on a cold rainy day pleased everyone. We had plenty to go around. I was looking for people to feed. The guys from the back alley came, although it was not exactly the same group I had spoken with barely an hour earlier. I offered them beds, explaining the shelter rules, including the sign-in procedures and curfew. “We will take it under advisement,” one of them said, as they headed back out into the street after a full hot meal.

Inviting them in turned out to be controversial. I had not fully wrestled with the range of issues that might arise by mixing people living on the street with those who did not have current access to their bed, locked door, toilet, and shower. No one except for the tough guards told me that directly. Their comments were spoken primarily with the look in their eyes and a few dismissive words: “I wouldn’t do that.”

The current residents probably had never stayed in a shelter before and possibly already felt uneasy about it. Aside from providing food and shelter, creating a comfortable environment felt important. A sudden influx of several obviously homeless men in the crowd could have a negative effect on the atmosphere.

Working in disaster situations presents an endless variety of unexpected situations and encounters. Typically, the work is done side-by-side with people you’ve only known for minutes or hours. The immediate dynamic lasts only a few days. There is no time to befriend anyone—far from a normal workplace environment.

The shelter had a nurse and a social worker. The nurses all worked for the city government. The social worker’s employers varied: at least some of them were volunteers, probably arranged through larger not-for-profit organizations. This “professional” staff wasn’t critically needed, but their presence was beneficial to me and the residents. The radio man was great; he had an informed but distant perspective on all issues. He never offered direct advice about shelter affairs, but the basic information he provided—mostly about other shelters or an arrival of social worker or shipment—allowed me not to panic, to believe that everything would be alright and perhaps do a better job than I could have done without him. Being a ham radio operator is almost like being a Morse code operator or a flagman. They are translators of sorts, in this case, using a familiar spoken language, but retelling the tale in their own words.

Without meaning to, they come to be "in the know" about the comings and goings of the shelter and the outside world.

Radio guys, like union workers, are replaced on more precise intervals than shelter managers or social workers, even though they too are volunteers. When Harvey, the replacement radio guy, arrived at about 6:30 p.m., I had him put in a call for a replacement shelter manager for me. I had been working for more than eight hours by that point, and clearly replacement managers did not turn up quickly.

Earlier, during an afternoon lull, I had called to retrieve my personal phone messages. An old friend had called to give me "a tip." He heard a rumor from a "source" in DC that more attacks were coming. He and his family were leaving the city, and he offered my wife and me the option of leaving with them. I thought about it, but thanked him and said no. I felt like I had work to do.

Throughout the day, donations of all sorts poured in. A volunteer would come and say, "Someone just brought twelve cases of water"—or boxes of canned food, or a folding cot. People continued to show up offering help, and when we told them that there was nothing to do, they often became distraught. One Asian lady was so disappointed that she rifled in her handbag and thrust a ten-dollar bill at me. I took it. Later, I remembered that it is totally against Red Cross protocol to accept cash donations, but I just couldn't say no to this lady another time. I kept the folded bill in my pocket, not my wallet, to remind me to get it to the right place.

Nearly everything we couldn't use (most anything but good food) was sent around the corner to the fire station. Typically, I asked one or two of the younger volunteers to go over with our modest donated treasures. Long after dark, and after one or two more calls for my replacement, I decided to walk over to the firehouse with two college-aged women volunteers (one from Long Island, one from New Jersey). It provided a good excuse to be outside, and most of the shelter residents headed into the gymnasium for the night.

A few firemen lingered on the sidewalk in front of the firehouse, likely serving as both welcome committee and security. By way of introduction, I explained that we had personal hygiene kits to donate; we had ten times what we needed at the shelter. These junky little zippered pouches each held a toothbrush, toothpaste, a razor, a small tube of shave cream, and a tiny bar of soap. They seemed to be left over from the 1970s and would be useful only

for an unexpected sleepover. “Come in,” one of the lieutenants said appreciatively, accepting the donation.

I imagined that many of the guys at the firehouse were from other parts of the city and may not have toiletries. But, after entering the firehouse, I could see how much they had collected. The young women knew exactly where to put the boxes, as both of them had already been deep inside the firehouse. I followed them past the lone remaining ladder truck. The unpainted grey cement block walls were lined with enormous stacks of bottled water and canned food. Flowers were everywhere. The bounty included significantly more desirable items than what regularly arrived at our schoolhouse shelter.

Partway back on the right, off the large garage, was a long rectangular room which might serve as the firehouse’s lounge or dining room in normal times. The open area without a single beam, cornice, or architectural feature and filled with reclining men, was the locus of what little activity there was.

Most of them wore fire department tee-shirts. I assumed they were all male, but it was hard to see. A large television mounted high in the far corner dominated the space. No one had much to say. The TV screen held nearly everyone’s gaze; the glow appeared to attract attention. The same short reports aired over and over without a shred of new news; yet, the TV served as a sort of high priest. The steady drone of well-dressed talking heads seemed normal, and a feeling of normalcy was clearly desirable.

Though the firehouse’s atmosphere was welcoming, the large dimly lit room felt like their space. I didn’t enter. From the wide doorway, I could see a long central table strewn with food and gently bathed in a flickering blue light from the TV. The scene was reminiscent of a huge painting depicting the aftermath of a grand medieval feast, one that went on for a very long time. This was not such a bacchanal, these guys could have to rush out to fight a fire or to save lives, just as they lifted a fork to their mouth. They needed to have all their wits about them.

I stood still, taking it all in. My eyes moved around the room trying to absorb, if not comprehend, where I was and what was happening. I became keenly aware that my gaze continually drifted back to the screen, just like everyone else’s. We all had the gnawing need to know—to learn something, anything, even though there continued to be nothing. Perhaps we all hoped something would be revealed, explained. The attraction was strong, addictive, numbing. It gave the sense of nourishment without providing any.

The college women easily struck up lite conversation with the firemen. Feeling a bit out of place, I melted into the adjacent kitchen area. To be in the kitchen of a real firehouse was exciting. I'd heard about these mythical places where firemen cook huge meals for the company. A gigantic stainless steel sink overflowing with pots, pans, and dirty plates abutted the south wall. A large round table, adjacent to the sink, was pushed into the southwest corner of the room, its wood top was entirely covered with plates of food. Picked-over serving plates had been stacked on the mostly empty platters below—a geological layering. This was gourmet nourishment provided by some of New York's finest downtown restaurants: Bouley Bakery, Tribeca Grill, the Union Square Café, and other places—an entirely different galaxy than our Red Cross shelter sandwiches.

Just as I had become familiar with the available food, one of the young women came in. I asked what she wanted to eat and assembled an assortment of dark foods with sauces. Her body relaxed as I handed her the hearty plate of food. The comforting feeling of being an insider was eclipsed by a sense of being alone. After a short time, I headed back to the shelter.

Being outdoors was a pleasure—the stillness striking, the air and open space a relief. As I walked toward the shelter, rats darted across the empty street at different angles. Oddly, they provided comfort, a reminder that life goes on.

Thankfully, there had been no crisis in my absence. I encouraged the person I had left in charge to get some air. I toured the facility. Everything was calm. The new radio person was doing his thing. Two uniformed replacement guards were sitting in the usual chairs near the main entrance. We exchanged hellos. They had no idea who I was, though my official blue shirt, which I had forgotten I was wearing, likely provided a clue. Our nurse had gone to bed. The new social worker, a fit 45-year-old man from Australia, and I chatted for a while as I filled out paperwork about the comings and goings of the shelter. Suddenly, I remembered a guy who had stopped by in the mid-afternoon to ask if he could come to the shelter in the evening to play music for the residents. “Sure,” I had said. But he never turned up. Was it just an idea, or had he gotten sidetracked at other places?

By around 2:30 am, the quiet deepened. I started to think about getting some rest. The main sleeping area, the gymnasium, somehow felt like a private space. As ridiculous as I knew that to be, I chose a spot to bed down near my little desk. Maybe I would be more easily found if something came up. It took nearly half an hour of wandering around trying different locked doors to finally get most of the lights in the huge school to turn off. A donated

tarp folded over five or six times provided surprisingly little cushioning from the cold terrazzo floor. My backpack, still filled with tools and other gear, served as a pillow. I may have slept a little, but I was vertical again by 5 am. Some of the residents were up early — particularly the transient population whom I had admitted to use the open beds. There had been no incidents or problems overnight.

I drifted through the morning wondering what the day would bring and if I would ever be replaced. A slender unshaven guy with dark hair checked out. He had become tired of waiting and repeatedly hearing that he could get back into his place in “one more day.” He was heading to Long Island to stay with a family member. Another guy thought he would be allowed into his home south of Frankfort Street, close to the Brooklyn Bridge. He checked out next.

The radio guy called in my morning shelter’s status report over the shortwave system—a customary practice once or twice per shift. He told me that there was talk of consolidating the shelters, probably because they were depopulating. Every four or five hours through the evening and night, I had asked the radio operator to keep plugging for a replacement manager. A few times, he told me they were sending someone. A while later, a new radio guy would arrive, but not a shelter manager.

I had been there about twenty-four hours when my replacement showed up in a late morning convoy. I understood that his arrival was also my ride back. I briefly toured the new manager around; he had been in another shelter a few days earlier, so there was not much I needed to pass on. I let the waiting van go, taking the volunteers back to headquarters. After a few good-byes, I set off—on foot. I did not want to climb back into that car or be in any kind of familiar, confined space. I wanted out, to be in the open.

Despite my exhaustion, being outside was exhilarating. Setting out from an unknown place felt like getting out of a car as a hitchhiker. The ride was over. Suddenly, one adventure ended, another was beginning.

I guessed at the general direction to go since I was not in a part of town that I knew well, and my route there from the Upper West Side had been anything but normal or repeatable. Before long, I crossed from Chinatown into Little Italy, silently walking through rows of abandoned wooden stalls. The booths for games and food sellers of the San Gennaro festival were fully set up. But like frozen blossoms before unfurling, they had never opened. I felt like I was looking at a ruin, even if the scene was only a few days old.

I walked and walked. Basic locomotion was settling. I reflected on my time at the shelter, which already seemed long ago. I was left with a mostly hollow feeling. Like the towers, it was now in the past. As I continued north on Fifth Avenue, in a fog of my own thoughts, the Empire State Building appeared.

I stopped, stood perfectly still, and looked at it carefully. It appeared like a jewel or an honored elder. Somehow, its existence in the sky, in the city space, seemed tentative, and that shocked me.

This new awareness, that this fixture could vanish in a moment, made it precious in an utterly unexpected way.

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