

Delayering - Introduction

Friday, August 22nd, 2003

I would have thought that a plane flying into a large building would be like an egg thrown at a wall. It hits, the shell cracks, and the contents run down the side. But on that morn-ing, when the planes disappeared into the buildings, they left holes more like bullets than eggs. Speed is what made the difference.

Time changes all things. It is the constant, the great eraser, and the void.

Memory changes with time, and now, nearly two years after that late summer morning when planes smashed into the two tall, faceless towers, people think about what happened on 9/11 differently – we can't help it. We are here now, looking back; not there, then, looking out. At least until today, August 22nd, 2003, the world has not ended. Manhattan remains a vital and important place; people from all around the globe arrive in significant numbers. Buying and renting apartments has continued to increase since a very short time after the 11th. Buildings are being built all over the city, especially downtown. Terrorism is alive and well. Our two great individual enemies of the last two years are also more or less alive and well – or at least they remain beyond our reach. The airline industry and some other industries have not recovered. But the economy, which was not strong on Monday, September 10th, is not worse today.

At the same time that nothing has fallen apart in ways we might have imagined on that day, we are repeatedly cued by the government to remember that we are not safe, that we should expect another “September 11th style” terrorist attack. Where, when, and what it will be is left up to our imaginations.

On the morning of September 11th, 2001, I stopped work on a book about walking around the edge of Manhattan Island. The self styled text, called Perimeter, is about navigating and exploring the absolute edge of the island; it records the line where land meets water at a specific moment in time. One week later, on Tuesday, September 18th, I started to record bits of what was going on around me – all things related to those two planes, those two towers.

I kept recording; not daily, but often. Noticing and writing about the ongoing effects of that day was compelling. With no plan, I kept track of unfolding stories that began so suddenly on that Tuesday morning.

Tuesday, September 18th, 2001

“Delayering” is a word I heard on the radio this morning. I gleaned its meaning instantaneously. It was not a word I had ever heard, and no clues to its meaning were provided. It sent me back to the delicious layer cakes my grandfather brought to my childhood home nearly every Thursday in the 1960s – one layer stacked neatly on top of the other to create a whole – the way a skyscraper is built. As the towers went down, the layers disappeared, each one impacting and compressing the one below. Instead of cake and butter cream, the layers of most buildings are material structure and space. At first, just the space vanished. With no space, no dividers, the layers were no longer distinct; no longer layers. They were delayed – another way of saying “gone.”

Now it is 167 1/2 hours after the first impact, which is to say one week, less a few minutes. I don’t know / can’t tell if that is a short or a long time since I heard the first plane blast past, just on the other side of my half-drawn shades. On sunny mornings, I keep the shades partly down until the sun gains height in the sky to keep out the intense low-angle, late summer glare.

Newspapers are filled with full-page ads expressing sadness, grief, and often true kindness. Every imaginable big corporation has paid for these ads; their names are visible but far less prominent than one would expect. I heard that a second crane was erected to help to clear the remains of the formerly tall twins. An area of the Hudson River was dredged to get barges in close enough to load outgoing debris.

This morning, I rode downtown along the river. Thirteen large red tractor trailers were lined up headlight to taillight along West Street. Each flatbed truck carried only a single gigantic piece of what was to be a truly huge crane. North of that line was a long row of Sanitation Department dump trucks. I never knew they had so many. Farther south was a media area, a tent village with white trucks – some small, some large, all with satellite dishes. Then, an unusual sight – an unguarded barricade. The police have been everywhere downtown, but not here by the river. I slipped through. Once on the other side, I had an awkward feeling – surprising, as

illegally crossing barricades is something I have done extensively, in New York and beyond – but today, I wanted to honor something. I didn't know what that was, or how to do it. It seemed the rules were different. Disrupting any small bit of order that might exist seemed wrong. Tentatively, I continued past a mountain of donated dog food under a tiny pet-size tent, instantly understanding it was fuel for the search and rescue dogs.

Now, 169 hours after impact, people from within New York City have started to call, to check in, to reconnect. Before that, the calls or emails had been almost entirely from people who were far away, starting with those overseas. The first outside contact I received on September 11th was a morning email from China.

James Boorstein

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