Delayering - Walkway

Friday, September 21st, 2001

Overnight rain faded before seven. Acrid air, again. Odors of electrical fire, burnt flesh and hair were discernible in the thin wet smoke. The aroma of tragedy. No silver lining. No sweetness.

Fall begins today. Even the equinox feels unimportant at this point. Last night, President George Bush (the younger) spoke. Probably the most praised speech a president has given in my adult life, but insipid to my ears. He touched on some "key points" but without really saying anything.

More than 76,000 tons of debris have been trucked out of the site. Six thousand DNA samples have been gathered from the remains of an estimated 2,100 people. As of today, 252 individuals have been confirmed dead, which is to say, "identified." Relatives of those people can take a step toward closure; they will receive a death certificate allowing them to approach insurance, legal, and financial matters that others can only worry about. According to the International Red Cross, "Proper recovery and identification of human remains is a fundamental part of the healing process for families and even whole communities." I wonder how healing or closure begins for people who did not directly lose anyone?

A "notice to the neighborhood" taped to a lamppost attracted my eye while I was locking my bike on 14th Street this morning. "Five people missing from our local firehouse." Words on the orange paper described each one: "married with kids," "engaged," "would chase you down the street to tell you another joke." The humanness gets inside our armor. Tear-off tabs along the bottom provided an address for donations, like with fliers for house painting or piano lessons.

Tonight marks the return of professional sports to New York City for the first time in ten days. The evening will begin with a 21-gun salute. Diana Ross will sing either the National Anthem or "America the Beautiful" before a Mets game at Shea stadium. At Yankee Stadium a large prayer service is planned. I imagine such a dearth of professional sports is unprecedented.

Today, it was more firmly stated that the plane which went down in Pennsylvania was headed for the White House. No secret that the president was not there, but along with the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon, the White House would have completed a tidy trifecta.

George W. Bush was in Florida promoting his education agenda. On the morning of September 11th, he was reading a story to kids. I've heard that he reads the same passage from the same book at each school, regardless of the students' ages.

The hijackers didn't need a classroom; their education was through practice. They repeatedly flew as passengers on the exact flights they would take on September 11th. They monitored passenger loads, noted how the flight crews operated, and tested security measures. Little was left to chance.

Downtown is still smoldering. Some people are wearing masks. Three fires are reported to be burning at the site. It is unclear who is permitted to cross the police blockade along Canal Street. Many police blockades in America seem almost casual—but not this one. High-level clearance is required. It is easier to cross the blockade at Houston Street – a few blocks north.

Network TV spawned inspirational jargon to "meet this moment:"

"America's on Alert" – NBC
"America's New War" – CNN
"A Nation Challenged" – ABC
"America Stands United" – Fox

This kind of branding began during the Gulf War with special soundtracks and, of course, logos.

An idea to provide a way for people to see the site popped into my head, seemingly out of nowhere, or wherever ideas come from. To this day, I make things so I can see them—not in my mind, but with my eyes. The cycle of ideas followed by making has never stopped for me. My ideas often relate to where I am—to a sense of place. In the late 1970s, along the coast of Cornwall, England, I was drawn to arrange rocks, found wood, and other debris washed up

beyond the high tide line. In 1984, on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, an idea relating to exactly where I was arose in an instant; minutes later, I was establishing a line of pine cones along a red earth road leading toward a remote military base. The line extended nearly a quarter-mile, the distance between the cones increased gradually as it continued downhill. In the mid-1990s, the terrain and feeling of the San Gabriel Mountains outside of LA called for circles. For no distinct reason, I assembled the abundance of fallen ponderosa pine cones into perfectly concentric rings on a rocky terrace just below the tree line.

During decades of intermittently working with natural objects in their own environments, I learned to manage large intricate construction projects. So, it might not have been surprising that my ideas, ten days after the attack, were complicated and architectural—and that they would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars or more .

We all have ideas, even if we only act on a few of them. Putting ideas into action is more important to some than others; perhaps we are defined by the ones we act on. Ideas unfold in relation to where you are physically and internally. Every idea is tempered by all that has come before. An idea is a sort of cocktail—an unequal blend of thought, knowledge, sensation, inspiration, and magic. What to cook or paint, how to approach designing anything, how to disrupt the perfect reflection of a still pond, or how to build a better mousetrap? Ideas relate to wonder. They hold power.

My idea was a walkway suspended above Ground Zero—a way for people to see what remained. I wanted to offer the experience of being present with what is, even if it would be uncomfortable.

A viewing platform set back from the perimeter did not feel adequate. I wanted the experience to be real, like being in a rainforest when it's pouring, listening to live music in a small venue, speeding down a ski slope or plunging into icy water. What would it be like to really see what is there?

Seeing things for ourselves may be a basic human desire. I remember first learning the term "rubbernecking" from my grandfather. The concept instantly intrigued me. From the back seat of

the family car, it was easy to notice slowdowns in distant lanes of traffic near accidents. What was the attraction? Simple curiosity, a fascination with misfortune, or an instinctual desire? Whatever it is, it is nearly universal.

Things change with major events, whether natural or man-made. Scale matters: multiple deaths, the displacement of hundreds, excessive brutality—all influence the amount of short or long-term media coverage an event receives. As the initial shock diminishes, curiosity expands toward the sensational. People gather at fires, fights, and crime scenes. They want to see what is happening or what happened. Direct experience is a kind of truth, and truth helps with understanding, with our ability to move on instead of remaining stuck. Beholding truth is the opposite of avoidance.

The same grandfather who taught me about rubbernecking died when I was eight. That was my first encounter with death. I don't remember his funeral, but I remember the open casket on the second floor of an Upper West Side funeral home. That was truth. Disturbing. There he was, dead. That experience helped me understand something. Maybe a glimpse toward impermanence, even though that concept wouldn't appear in my life for decades; an early lesson in learning to be comfortable with the uncomfortable.

The place where the towers stood holds a lot of power—locally, internationally, politically, and emotionally. That has become evident. What is that power? What is its origin? It feels related to the attraction of peeking into an open coffin, what you see is both familiar and not.

An elevated walkway would provide a direct, unfiltered, visceral way for people to connect to what is still there. Like many ideas, it came quickly. For more than an hour, sitting at my small walnut Formica-topped table, all my juices poured into figuring out the details. I ricocheted from one aspect to the next until the outlines of the project felt resolved, feasible, buildable.

The single-lane, one-way path would slowly ramp up from street level north of the site, then swing eastward, well out of the way of cranes and other equipment. The long curves of the route would offer no protection from the aroma. Walkers would be high enough (probably three to four

stories) to have an all-encompassing view of the steaming black wreckage and its surroundings; close enough to feel the heat.

The walkway would provide a chance to taste what remains with sensory inputs that cannot be transmitted from a screen. Each person's step, however tentative, would initiate a motion, a ripple, or a wave which would emanate to anyone in front or behind them, establishing an awareness that they are not alone. This direct physical connection does not happen on pavement or at the beach. While the walkway would be safe by any standards, the steel cable would sway and flex in a way that would feel neither safe nor stable.

Handrails made of natural fiber, probably sisal or hemp, positioned just above waist level would be worn smooth by the constant contact of each visitor clinging to both rails for most or all of the journey. Perpendicular wood slats, each less than 30" long, would provide more secure footing than a traditional vine or woven branch suspension bridge in the Himalayas or South American mountains.

The path would angle more steeply back down to earth, south of the site. I visualized the wire walkway as industrial with a strong sense of design and proportion. Economical, modern, and minimal. Given the mood of the country, I was confident that I could get engineering help to spec the details, sizes, and connections, as well as get the components donated—and fast. The construction would primarily consist of planting premade support towers like those used to support ski lifts and electrical transmission lines; the path would be strung between them. The assembly could be done with a blend of professional and volunteer help.

But that was as far as I got.

As the project unfolded in my head, I realized, "I can't do this." Hype, especially on art projects, is not my thing. I imagined the project would become a significant tourist draw, bringing people and dollars to New York—just what the mayor is pleading for. My anonymity would not serve me with this project.

Convincing people to take a specific action is not something I know how to do, or even believe in. People call me out of the blue, to do this or that. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, on the other hand, made their life's work by convincing large and small governments around the world to allow their art projects to come to life. Their projects, which included wonderful large pieces like "Valley Curtain" and "Running Fence" along with wrapping buildings, bridges, and islands, had timelines of years or decades. In contrast to those grand spectacles, my elevated walkway would simply provide a way for people to see what is already there; the structure would be a vehicle, not a primary point of admiration. As worthwhile as it might be, I saw how unlikely it was, at least as directed by me. Sadly, and with relief not to be adding another project to my lists, I put it aside.

Thinking back to my burst of activity, the rapid cycling through ideas, details, designs, and logistics, I realized that an aspect of emergency work that I have always liked is the suspension of standard protocols. Whether forgotten or consciously overlooked, many constraints vanish in the face of urgent need. Action is required, and quickly. You take help where you can get it and it is readily offered. Need is the driving force; marketing is not necessary. Most marketing is to create a sense of need. Need and desire are frequently confused in our culture.

My first encounter with a relatively urgent community need was in 1972, in the aftermath of Hurricane Agnes in Harrisburg. The storm stalled over the mountains of Pennsylvania and western New York, dropping up to 18" of rain over several days. The rivers swelled, overflowing their banks beyond all previous records. By the time we reached the initial Red Cross field headquarters, most high water had retreated. The two small, dimly-lit basement rooms could not have been less impressive, especially as they were in the grand state capital modeled after St. Peters in Rome.

National Guard troops directed the few moving cars because all power was out. Almost no one was around. Luckily for me, the National Guard, not the Red Cross, had been assigned the task of reburying the dead after several cemeteries flooded.

The first afternoon there was not much to do; solutions had yet to be identified or organized. The next day, after cursory training, I became a caseworker, interviewing people who trickled in. We sat at folding tables and gave out vouchers to meet the immediate needs of those whose houses had been flooded. Four or six feet of water in the first floor was a common occurrence after the Susquehanna overflowed its low banks. Beds, bedding, clothing, and tools for tradespeople were the primary needs. The flow of locals increased by the hour.

By day three, there was quite a queue. Everything was fresh, fast-moving, fascinating. The damage, fear, and shock were raw; however, that open state of being does not last long before the former reality reemerges.

I rose to these new challenges, worked hard, and tried to do well with the quickly changing conditions. With an opportunity and a need, everything made sense, felt balanced and grounded.

Back at my little round table a mile north of Ground Zero, tangential thoughts about the elevated walkway continued to bounce around in my head, but I was past working out additional details. Before dusk, I was outside again. American flags were everywhere, in apartment building doorways and shop windows. How had this trend started and expanded so suddenly?

In Soho, a crowd gathered informally outside an ivy-covered firehouse—a scene replicated in other downtown stations for no particular reason I could discern. Abundant fresh flowers created an alive and gentle feeling. Dozens of candles flickered with tentative energy. The juxtaposition of flames inside a firehouse was perplexing, but no more unusual than the palpable gentleness in the air—the feeling of people ready to help, to engage. Rules get broken in emergencies. Things change quickly.