

ISTSS: The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies  
ISTSS Conference 2007  
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## Discussion of 9/12: From Chaos To Community

It has been estimated that more than 90,000 workers and volunteers were directly involved in the post-9/11 efforts that are the background of this film. Phases of this process came to have specific names with very human implications. First was the *rescue* effort—the hopeful, frantic search for survivors that lasted only a few days—then the *recovery* effort—referring to the search to recover body parts or other belongings of those murdered in the attack—followed by the clean-up.

9/11 is the best researched large-scale disaster in the world to date. The WTC Registry, which follows 70,000 at risk persons in NYC including 9,000 volunteers, found that, of all workers at the site, the volunteers were the most likely to develop chronic, 9/11-related PTSD, at a rate of more than 21%. And of course, PTSD is just one of many ways that people suffer after trauma and disaster.

So we know that volunteers were taking risks by being there, exposing themselves to horrific sights and experiences with little or no preparation or training, often making major financial and personal sacrifices to help with this effort. I am completely convinced that the volunteers did make a logistically critical and profoundly humanitarian contribution, and I expect you are too after watching this film. They were absolutely needed there. But how can we understand what purpose they were serving there, and how these particular people survived and benefited from the experience?

This is more than just people helping out in a crisis. Helping out is sending in a check after Katrina, or bringing canned goods to school at Thanksgiving, or maybe even working a soup kitchen at Christmas. But these volunteers devoted themselves to working on the sidelines, in freezing tents and in toxic air, with no recognition or pay, to help the heroes do the primary rescue and recovery work. What we see here was not just a wish to be helpful. It was a *driven need* with emotional depth and meaning, like the need to take care of one's children, or to help those you love when they are suffering. In these remarkable people, we see something not just admirable, even beautiful in the human capacity for altruism; we see something that is incredibly *interesting* about human beings. How at least some of us are especially sensitive to the needs of the larger system, the greater community, the greater good.

Now, this wouldn't be surprising to any of us if this were a town of 10,000 people after a tornado had torn up some houses and killed a family, and now the neighbors are helping to rebuild the house. But this is a city of 8 million people. These people were strangers before 9/11. They became a community on 9/12.

The twin towers were essentially, in themselves, a small city of 50,000 people who worked together every day, passed each other in the halls, ate in the same restaurants for lunch, used the same dry cleaners nearby. The suburbs of this town were the surrounding businesses that fed, clothed, and, yes, pampered the people of this city. Beyond this, Fullilove and Saul point out that the WTC was a cultural and iconic "keystone" in the city of New York and nationwide, a keystone defined as an "entity that gives stability to a complex system" as in architecture. In urban ecology, a keystone neighborhood has far-reaching influence throughout a city and region. Its destruction set off a cascade of collapse,

economically, socially, psychologically. Collective recovery after such an event, the destruction of a keystone neighborhood—that is, recovery not simply of the individual members of a city but of the meta-systems within which they live—depends on restoring or creating new routines, places to be and work, and new social ties within which people can feel secure and at home again. Collective recovery of communities affected by the distant reverberation of the keystone neighborhood’s destruction is not as well understood, and it seems obvious to me, given the way the 9/11 has entered the political and historical narrative of the U.S., that this recovery is still underway.

Anthropologists also have written about the *psychology of place*: which, in Dr. Fullilove’s words, arise from the *processes* of familiarity, attachment, and identity. The sense of what is familiar about our surroundings; of what we are attached to (and will feel a sense of loss if it is destroyed), and the way we identify with this place (I’m a New Yorker; I live in Tribeca)—these psychological processes come together in our feeling of home, of belonging. And while the rest of the city was in chaotic panic, the volunteers had already found a clear, action-oriented response to 9/11 that shielded them psychologically within a new community. As Liz said, “It felt safer in here than it did on the outside.”

So what we see here among the volunteers is an ingenious, spontaneous creation of a new, strange, and temporary home, both for themselves and for the workers they were supporting. We see this in dramatic testimonies about the importance of simple routines in the “Hard Hat Café,” the importance of a “familiar” face every day, and the healing capacity of human touch as an antidote to working in the greasy ash (tainted with human remains), steel, and garbage that surrounded workers on the site. As in any community, there were also rivalries and family conflicts, often related to who belonged and who did not. It destroyed marriages, partnerships, friendships, business relationships. Outsiders didn’t understand the complexity and intensity of these relationships, and insiders were often too tired to try to explain—and often unreasonably resentful of the fact that outsiders “didn’t understand.” This tension arose in part from the nature of 9/11 as both a highly public event with national and international ramifications, and an intimately private event for the families, WTC employees, and people of the neighborhood. As the man said, “they attacked our neighborhood; this was personal.” Steve doesn’t handle this public/private tension well, as he admits himself, and can’t understand why people from all around the world would also be drawn to the site to try to understand what had happened. To him, it feels exactly like strangers traipsing over a cemetery of unmarked graves.

Anthropologists and other disaster experts think of the individual’s belonging to systems and networks of other people as integral to psychological health, well-being, and purposeful existence. Urban neighborhoods in particular are characterized by very visible, often ritualized “weak ties” between people that, taken together, create the experience of “being home.” Weak ties are social connections between relative strangers. From my own life I can think of many examples of this. The man at the dry cleaners whose son, I know, just finished dental school; the deli owner around the corner who complains about how low he has to keep his prices to compete, and how small his profit is; the garage attendant who grins broadly every time he sees my daughters and asks about them when they aren’t there. The common purpose at Ground Zero among everyone there created a kind of “instant community” that protected and shielded its members from the work itself—as one man said, “you saw 400-500 people you knew every day.”

I have never seen a more striking example of the positive effects of trauma and disaster than in this film. Although Ground Zero was a toxic, dangerous, exhausting, guilt-ridden, place—it was also the site of deeply altruistic, life-changing experiences for these and thousands of others. There was survivor guilt—

walking over the site feeling like “you are stepping on somebody, I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry”—but also there was the “life is too short” experience, a radical re-assessment and affirmation of values and priorities. Although there were tensions among people, there was also a camaraderie that everyone found remarkable. People fell in love.

The most pressing question for me after seeing this [film] several times is still: how did these particular people fair so well? The answer, again, has to be rooted in the intensity of the loyalties and attachments within this community, as a protection against the grating effect of these stark encounters with grief, despair, exhaustion, and guilt. There is a beauty to their survival instincts—the way the women would ignore Steve’s bad mood day after day, and keep coming back to him; the can-can dance that diffused potential rivalries within the group, as well as sexual tensions; the somber respect accorded to retired firefighters whose sons’ bodies were crushed or vaporized in the attack, which created a kind of social hierarchy established “elders” in the community. The community we saw here was built of powerful ties between people, deep attachments forged under great duress—what non-clinicians—normal people—might call “love.”

One community was destroyed; another community filled the vacuum. But this was not a normal community. This community’s reason for being was to make the site inhabitable again for yet another neighborhood to come. So once again, we see a community displaced, dispersed, and the loss their inhabitants felt. “I’m not going to see that guy tomorrow.” Of course, it was inevitable that there would be mixed feelings when the work was done, because of the nature of this community, as well as its reason for existence. As Paul says with a sad smile, his arms around two of his friends, “I *kinda* wish we never met.” And the word “kinda” makes all the difference.