

Letter from New York - September 18, 2001

Dear Friends,

Its hard to describe the last few days except that they've been traumatic and difficult - yet also strangely life-affirming.

Last Tuesday I was having breakfast with my Australian friend Irene who has an apartment on the lower east side - about 2 kilometres from the World Trade Center when we heard two distinct 'thuds' - some 18 minutes apart. We assumed it was something to do with water, or gas pressure blowing off a manhole cover which often happens in this area. Suddenly we heard people running up the stairs - we opened our doors and joined others scrambling to get to the roof. We were agog. Both WTC towers - monuments to American capitalism - were on fire. A surreal sight - incomprehensible.

We ran downstairs to check the television. Ironically, we needed validation - some voice of 'authority' to tell us what was going on! We were 'seeing', but not 'believing'. The voice of the television had just stopped using the word 'accident' - and began to use the word 'terrorism'. Then the phone started ringing - first from a downstairs apartment where a disabled painter lived. People were calling us from Sydney, but we ourselves could hardly get through to the other side of Manhattan! Total overload.....chaos.

I immediately wondered where my 16 year old son Sam was. He had spent the first night with his foster parents (he's an exchange student here for 4 months, for those that don't know) just a few blocks away, and he would by now be on his way to school. I called them but the lines were dead. Then I called the school but 'no', he hadn't turned-up yet. I panicked, sitting nervously by the phone totally mesmerised by the TV - revolted but and fascinated at the same time. Half an hour later the school rang. Yes he had arrived! The subway had stopped but he had walked the remaining 40 blocks.

Like parents all over the city I left for the school to pick him up. It was hard to leave the television - there was a need to know more and there seemed to be no other source. At First Avenue I saw hundreds of downtown workers - some covered head to toe with a weird brown dust - making their way uptown. Half the people seemed to be calling on mobiles - otherwise it was quiet and orderly. I joined the throng, and then decided to catch a bus. The first one came, people made an orderly queue - there was no panic. People wanted to get on and pay, but the driver told them it wasn't necessary - 'just get on the bus'! A woman started to sob and tell others she had seen people jumping from the higher floors. 10 minutes we had still only gone one block. Many of us got off, because the road was choked, but I think the real reason was because the stories we were hearing were much more real and shocking than we'd seen on television. I began to walk.

20 blocks up - at Bellevue hospital - at least a dozen medical teams were standing-by in green surgical outfits waiting for the victims who never arrived. Further up the road the UN was closed so we headed into a mid-town crush. Pretzel sellers were doing a roaring trade and above the canyons of high rise the sky was brilliant blue. What a difference it would have made had the wind been blowing up-town, rather than across to Brooklyn!

Eventually I arrived at the school - Sam was the last one waiting to leave surrounded by a group of anxious teachers also wanting to depart. He complained he'd run out of film. I asked him what he meant. Apparently he'd waited for the train and then was told the subway was closed. From the street he'd taken a shot of the burning towers (less than 2 kms away) and then calmly caught a bus to school!

By evening Irene and I estimated that all the Australians we knew were safe. More people called from Sydney - Julia rang. I mumbled a few things - we were safe, we'd survived. I was incoherent. We were all in delayed shock! Down in the street the East Village - usually packed with people going to bars and clubs - was like a ghost town - the air was thick with an eerie silence split only from time to time by sirens.

Next day was also quiet. The area above 14th street had been cordoned-off. By late morning people started to emerge and fill the few cafes that opened. People became television-weary - the endless repetition of that iconic image of the plane hitting the tower. The written text gave the illusion that we were at a safer distance from the events. However, it was impossible to find a *New York Times*. It had sold-out everywhere. Outside one of the cafes I overheard a conversation one man was having on his mobile phone. We spoke later. He told me he worked at the Center but that he had been late for work. His office was a few levels above the point where the first tower was hit - he had only been able to contact two of his workmates - the rest he presumed had died. Dissolute, he had no idea what to do next.

Back in our apartment the television blared - everybody seemed in a stupor. New tapes had arrived overnight in television offices overnight. Now it was possible to see the event from almost every angle. The amateur digi-cam images seemed to convey a much greater power through their hand-held immediacy than the static shots of the towers burning. To me it appeared as if every network was competing for the most shocking image.

Late in the day Sam and I went for a walk. A band of Hare Krishnas broke the silence - normally their noise would be drowned by the passing traffic. That day they claimed the streets. Yet there was something sinister about them!

For the next few nights sleep became impossible as sirens of police and

rescue vehicles screamed down the empty streets (as they are still doing now as I write this letter). Sam went back to school while I searched for newspapers and internet cafes. I returned to the house - everyone was still gloomily watching the box. Then we made a collective decision and switched to the movie channel (the only one that was not covering the disaster). It was John Ford's "The Searchers" - what a time to renew one's acquaintance with this classic! The old-fashioned American values it portrayed were strangely comforting.

Thursday after school we stopped into an up-town diner. There New Yorkers were tucking-in - raucous and replete. It felt almost obscene - especially given it was the low-paid workers downtown who were doing the 'mopping-up' for the rich. That night candles started appearing on apartment steps and street corners. Leaflets with names and photos of the missing were taped to lampposts. I began to feel less gloomy - inextricably part of the neighbourhood - we had all gone through this apocalypse together. On Friday we went to a jazz concert at the Blue Note given by a legendary musician Charles Lloyd. The session finished with a moving, haunting elegy - something I'll never forget. The club announced it was donating the entire evenings takings to the families of the missing firemen.

On Saturday things started to take a different turn. American flags started appearing - on car wireless aerials, draped across whole streets, hanging from windows, plastering shop-fronts and restaurants. Bush dressed in battle fatigues was blazing away on the television - his jaw set in a vicious sneer. Suddenly there was a feeling of 'an eye for an eye ' and I became an outsider again repulsed by this brazen nationalism.

On Sunday we walked to Washington Square Park in Greenwich village. More candles - more flyers - but also a 50 metre wall of canvas fixed to a fence. On the canvas people had left various messages - it was like a graffiti wall. One person had written "Don't turn the other cheek - fight back, protect your own". Another said "Let us not magnify this terrible tragedy 100-fold by going to war". A vigil last night at Union Square echoed the same sentiments. A war cry of "U-S-A" was answered with another "Peace Now". Seems America is already split 50-50 over a protracted conflict. Its even dividing old leftie families like the one Sam's staying with. David, his foster father, is worried that greater surveillance powers will mean civil liberties being severely compromised for many years to come, while Lyn wants an immediate firm response. But what's also frightening are the attacks on Mosques and Arab-Americans - even a Polish tax-driver with a thick accent tells me he has been abused. "I can't understand it - we're all immigrants in this country" - he says.

Monday. More people in the streets - East village is returning to 'normal' (or at least half-way there). The video-shop is doing a roaring trade. All the conversations are of 'the coming war' and 'what will happen next'- even the Haitian who works in the laundromat claims its 'written in the bible'! But now

New York is an impregnable fortress - with an aircraft carrier off shore and jets patrolling the skies..... Sam's in high spirits, settling into his new school, taking trumpet lessons from top players and looking forward to seeing more of his jazz legends in coming weeks. Meanwhile I return to Sydney on Wednesday. I feel guilty about leaving him here, but he has fantastic guardians and many people to look out for him. I admire him. Its something at 16 I would never have dared to do!

It will also be hard to leave the East Village. This can be a very tough area – yuppies and artists mixing it with the desperate homeless and the families on welfare. September 11 brought us all together – locals, visitors and strangers – I feel inextricably part of the neighbourhood now. It will be hard to leave.

Thinking of you all.

TOM
September 18 2001