

9/11/2010: Flashes of Memories and Light

Benedetta Grasso (September 10, 2010)



Where were you on that day? This question is related to a particular date in the "important history". There are few events that are memorable to the point of making you ask: where were you on that day? That Tuesday of September has tragically become one of them. Years have passed by, and I finally realized that this question is even more meaningful today, and that's because that date marks



a turning point in the lives of all of us. I was there, close to those towers on 9/11. Or better, I was almost close... luckily. Just five minutes before the first plane crashed, in fact, I had walked through the World Trade Center to take the Path to go to NJ. I still remember the rays of sun breaking through the skyscrapers' windows, the blue sky shining above me while I walked down the few blocks that separated my apartment from that mall, a place that was so much part of my daily life. I used to buy my morning coffee and my NY Times there. I had the feeling of meeting the same people and faces every day. People with whom I exchanged knowing smiles; people who little by little became part of my life. Those were common faces of common people to whom history played a dirty trick on that day. We forget too often that life is made of simple stories, of common people who often pay in place of others, who are casual victims of a destiny decided by strangers. This is why I decided to publish a special article to commemorate this 9th anniversary. You will read a common story, that is at the same time far and close to the facts of 9/11. Benedetta, a young collaborator of i-Italy, is only 22; on that day she was in Italy, at school. What was she doing? How did those happenings affect her lighthearted life? Read what she has to say, it is worth it. (Letizia Airos, Editor in Chief)

Two beams of blue light visible throughout Lower Manhattan and even from Brooklyn or Jersey City.

We are in 2010 and by now we all should all be familiar with "A Tribute in Light," an artistic installation first conceived in 2002, a year after the infamous attack. We should all be familiar with it, since the lives of all of us drastically changed in big or small ways after that day. I was just starting high school, a moment that represented a turning point for me, I was stepping into a new stage of life, I was beginning to have a sort of a political consciousness, and those terrorist attacks became my closest personal experience to the war or the idea of it. They became an historical event particularly felt by people of my generation, a generation of which values and interests would have been shaped by them.

Nine years have gone by, presidents have changed, just as the culture of this country and its image and popularity. Books, movies, witnesses and popular culture have all analyzed in one way or the other those traumatic events and their consequences.

It's impossible not to say what has already been said. For the victims and their relatives it was a huge tragedy. For America it was a heart-stopping shock and a moment to stop and think; citizens and families bounded together but the society was broken into pieces as opinions became more radical and extremist. At the same time, however, a wide array of debates contributed to the growth of a more sophisticated political debate and the birth of a of a nationally conscious public opinion.

For most of the other countries that was a cathartic moment, a media event that involved you emotionally and have you sympathize with the victims although you had no real connection with them. Today we use expressions or theorize on concepts that exist only because of 9/11

And then there are the beams of light...

A few nights ago they were tested for a few hours, but they will be officially lit only on September 11 at sunset. On that moment I wondered for a few minutes what those glimpses of blue light breaking through my window glasses were and why I could see blue shadows on the white walls of my apartment.

I realized that sometimes we need physical objects or actual rituals to re-think about events we quickly put behind us. Looking at the blue shadows, I remembered a family friend who told me how on the day of the attack the dust invaded his apartment in the World Trade Center area covering every piece of furniture in the house, like if it had snowed inside. Thinking about his recounts I asked myself: what if this light coming in was dust instead? What if it was the smell of corpses? What if the blue light was coming from the siren of a Police car?

Walking around my neighborhood, located a few blocks away from Ground Zero, I noticed that everything and nothing is being done in view of the upcoming anniversary from 9/11.

If a few years ago I walked near Wall Street and saw more men in uniform than men in business suit, I would have probably got scared. Metal barriers everywhere, streets closed, police cars and white



NYPD traffic bars at every corner... I still see all of this today, but now I know that everything is under control: a stage is being set for the Official World Trade Center Site Memorial Ceremony and Remembrance 2010, which will take place on Saturday at 8:45 am at the presence of survivors, victims' families, the Mayor and thousands of people.

As I walk on Greenwich Street and head towards the 9/11 Museum I see a golden plaque featuring the names of the victims. A few tourists are taking pictures or homaging them with fresh flowers. The names are all there, they are Jewish, Arab, Hispanic, Italian... Italian American. Among the others, I find those of Vincent A. Princiotta, Michael P. Ragusa or Leonard J. Ragaglia. Their names are half Italian and half American, and show to my eyes how real the myth of the American melting pot is.

As I keep walking around, I stop before the nearby fire-fighter station. A group of kinder-garden kids is following a fire-fighter inside the building. He is telling them about his job and what it means to him. I look at the children and I notice how deeply they are fascinated by his stories, they follow him just as if they were participating to a game, a treasure hunt maybe. My thoughts go to their peers who in 2001 had to run away from their classrooms after the planes crushed into the towers.

My mind goes back to Milan, to the professors who, right after the attack, escorted my classmates and I out of school as we were told to go back home, watch the news, stay with our parents, and call whoever we knew in the US.

Today the Financial District area is busier than ever. Chinese restaurants, sushi and pizza places at every corner... The neighborhood has become lively and much more exciting than before in the past few years.

Thanks to its wonderful location by the Hudson and the consistent renovations and investments on real estate that have been made in the last few years, the area is attracting more and more young people, including "yuppies" about to start a family and college students. With its greatly improved services, the Financial District is still a classy area but is also filled with a new, growing energy.

Obviously Ground 0 is not empty anymore.... The high rhythms of NY life can't keep you from noticing that the landscape is changing every second. You see a work-in-progress sign one day and a building the other, or a new park near the West Highway with basketball and soccer fields or beautiful gardens. Cranes are constantly working and every day shop-owners enjoy a new sight from their window. The "joke" going around the neighborhood is: it's not ground 0 anymore but ground 2 or 4 or 5 depending on how much of the new World Trade Center has been built already....

People on the street are talking about Terry Jones, the pastor from Florida who is intending to burn the Koran on 9/11 causing a fierce debate worldwide and forcing Obama to intervene. Many are those who gather every day on Broadway to protest against the new Mosque, announcing a great demonstration to be held this September 11.

Public opinion is split into two currents of thought. On one side there are those who fight in favor of the freedom of speech, and of the democratic value of reciprocal acceptance. Among them, Mayor Bloomberg recently underlined the high symbolic importance of allowing the building of an Islamic cultural center in the area.

Those who protest against it, on the other side, fear that the new Islamic center will welcome and support practices that are in contrast with Western values and find it shameful to support the building of a monument related to a religion in the name of which terrorists have caused so much pain to the American people.

Personally speaking, I find that everybody should just forget everything about monuments, towers or mosques and look up to those beams of light.

On that day my generation has learned what a cultural shock is, what a tragedy can mean. We became more cynical, more critical but even more fascinated by other cultures and international politics as well. I can't speak for everyone but we are not a generation who likes monuments. We like things like the web, that are less tangible but that have the power to reach everyone in the world. These beams of light are something like that.

They also remind me of stars, of constellations that can be seen from everywhere in the planet, no matter where you are. They represent our history and make of the universe an open air museum, an



explosion of memories glimpsing right above us.

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