

Not again

Two months and a day after the apocalyptic attack on the World Trade Centre, New Yorkers were yesterday glued to their TV screens once more, watching plumes of smoke rise from the wreckage of an air crash.



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American Airlines flight 587, bound for Santo Domingo, crashes into Queens. "It is a test," Mayor Giuliani says. I believe him. I just wish I knew who was doing the testing: God or Osama bin Laden? Two months ago, millions of us around the world witnessed things that should never have left the realm of fantasy. But there is a quantum difference between watching an event on television and living through it. Perhaps that is why some journalists in the UK were able to write so cavalierly about America's "bloody nose". When you can smell death, when you see strangers weeping on trains and sidewalks, when you can feel the rumbling of armoured vehicles, you are changed.

Two months ago I would have thought it mawkish to mourn for people who have no connection to me. Not now. Quite the contrary. I feel that one of the ways I must combat the terrorists is in their attempts to deaden my emotions to disaster.

I find myself thinking about the Dominican passengers on flight 587. Their country, Dominican Republic, is among the poorest of the poor in the Caribbean. If yesterday's crash was the result of foul play, their government is not going to declare war on terrorism. No one is going to avenge them. And that, in itself, seems like an injustice to me. But more than that, I can't help believing that if I, and millions like me, accept the tragedy as our own, then somehow the individuality of all 255 people on board is acknowledged.

But while I care more about the fate of others, I no longer worry quite so much about my own. In a funny way, I think most New Yorkers are much more sanguine. For example, the phone has been silent most of the morning because, once again, the lines are jammed. However, two months ago, what telephone conversations we had were much more lengthy and hysterical. This time, I managed to receive one and make one shortly after the plane crash. And in both instances, it was the same message: "Turn on the television." To be honest, I can't say that I am all that familiar with Queens. I drive through it on my way to the airport. But with every New York borough the size of an average city, it is quite easy to leave certain parts of it to the imagination. Yet with the television comes instant familiarity, and a sense of belonging. Just as the outer boroughs embraced us after September 11, now I feel that Queens is my back yard. In fact, none of us here in Manhattan could see anything. The first pictures showed a thick plume of black smoke billowing from over the water. As is usual now, every channel showed the same pictures. From time to time, a talking head appeared to waffle on in a reassuring way, but mostly we saw a bright blue sky and helicopters circling the smoke. Emergency numbers flashed on the screen, and the federal aviation authority made the occasional - conflicting - announcement.

The broadcasters have learned that what viewers want during these moments is pictures. Any time somebody appeared to "interpret" events, I simply switched channels. Moreover, we know the drill now. Establish contact with those you love, and listen to the news. We also know what we can and can't do to help. They don't want volunteers, they want our money. They want us to stay off the roads and, above all, keep calm.

Actually, it is very easy to remain calm. I know that my husband and brother are both safe. My houseguest left from JFK yesterday, so, thank goodness, he was not involved in this. I even went to the gym this morning. The general mood there was not fear, but hunger for information. Walking back to my house, I could see that the look in people's faces was all the same; each of us had frowns, and that look of concentration that connotes furious internal dialogue. Everyone wants to react in the proper way, but that it is not possible without direction from the news. Last time, the events unfolded minute by minute. It was dramavision of the very worst kind. No wonder we watched television for days and days. First, there were the fires and the explosions, then there was the agonising wait for survivors. But today there is no overwhelming need to be a part of an unfolding tragedy. We know what has happened, we just don't know why.

As Giuliani says: "It is a test." But that doesn't resolve the issue of whether we should be concerned about poor aviation maintenance or more terrorism. I know I have changed since September 11 because I no longer know which of the two is worse. And, talking to people in my neighbourhood, everyone seems to agree. We hear that there was an explosion aboard. A TWA-kind of explosion, or a Lockerbie one?

It's not the sort of question I would have worried about before, but now it feels as though this is the crux of the matter. Random acts of God are frightening and make us look to the state of our souls. But deliberate acts of terrorism I know I can fight. If anything, with the latter in mind, my resolve to be vigilant and a good citizen is even greater now than it was yesterday.

Even if it turns out that AA flight 587 was doomed from the start, I still hate the terrorists all the more. I would like to kill the bastards myself. New York is breathing on one lung as it is. Our defenses are so weakened, our nerves so shaken by September 11 and the anthrax attacks, that this feels like another body blow. I worry that the city will gradually lose all its businesses and tourism. The infrastructure, never the best to begin with, will only disintegrate further. What will happen next? Who would have thought that the World Trade Centre attack could be just the beginning?

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