

The Day That Changed Everything

Escape from the 84th floor: a personal memoir of September 11

By Steven Salovitch

September 11

8 a.m.

It was a clear day on the shores of Henderson Harbor, N.Y., which rests a comfortable 300 miles from the heart of downtown New York City. Virginia Burdick was beginning her day by departing her seasonal cottage on the way to her permanent home in Watertown, N.Y. For some inexplicable reason, she began chanting a prayer to St. Joseph: "St. Joseph, in this hour, show us your power."

After 40 iterations of this phrase, Virginia questioned herself as to what would require her this day to use her most potent personal force—her chanting prayer to St. Joseph, which requires 40 recitations to have its full effect. St. Joseph, it is presumed, springs into action only after being prodded by use of this repetitious entreaty. The question stuck in her head because she only used this chanting prayer in dire emergencies, most recently after the collapse of her husband, Charlie, who subsequently survived.

After the 30-minute drive to town, the need for her prayer soon became manifest as she witnessed the terrorist act committed on the World Trade Center.

Virginia Burdick is my wife's maternal aunt who shares the harbor with my family during our summer vacations at a cottage along that same shoreline. Her voice, which recited a prayer she had previously employed only four other times in her life, was the voice of one of my angels that day—the day I walked away from the most diabolical act of terrorism ever committed upon the United States. It truly was the day that changed everything.

5:40 a.m.

I awoke to some pop song playing on the radio. Life's routine played itself out: a shower and shave, then off to the Chatham, N.J., train station. My commuting buddy, John, and I ride the 6:15 a.m. train to Hoboken, N.J., each day, where we catch the PATH train to the World Trade Center. Barry Bonds' home run tally was the talk of the sports pages—63 and counting. We shared a comment or two with each other on the PATH train and went our separate ways on entering the concourse area of the towers.

The first important choice I make at the beginning of each day is the coffee. This day's selection was hazelnut. Then, my ride into the clouds: a five-minute one-stop elevator excursion to the 84th floor of Two World Trade Center. At about the 50th floor, my ears pop. The time is 7:15 a.m. as I arrive at my desk in Euro Brokers, Inc.

Something Was Wrong

8:45 a.m.

The typical morning routine at the trading desk is disturbed. I sensed something was wrong as I turned toward the north side of our building (which faces the east side of Tower One in the World Trade Center). The windows are about 30 to 40 yards from where I sit, so my view of the other tower was occluded. People were running toward that northern side of the building. Having experienced a stunt man parachute onto the Statue of Liberty a few weeks before, I was about to shrug off this activity as just another waste of time when I witnessed a sight that signaled the start of a surreal series of events that seem frozen in time. What I saw flying through the air was paper, lots of paper, floating in the wind.

Events proceeded swiftly from this point on. Jose Marrero, one of our support personnel, came bursting into the trading floor armed with his two-way radio. He announced that there was a fire in Tower One and that we were to proceed into the hallway to begin an evacuation of our floor. I had gone possibly 50 feet when the thought occurred to me that I had left my cell phone at my desk. "My wife will need to hear from me" was my thinking as I went to retrieve it. Later, I was to learn that going back cost me five floors when the plane hit our building. Upon returning to my desk, I heard the voice of Thommisina Choi on our direct line to Mizuho Capital Markets—one of the firm's customers who worked on the 80th floor of Tower Two. She was warning us to "Get out; get out of the building now!" That message resonated in my head throughout my descent and kept me thinking clearly all the way down. Those words, shouted at me by a friend and colleague, were the voice of my second angel that day.

The Descent

8:50 to 9:03 a.m.

The stairwell in which I evacuated happened to be on the northwestern side of the tower. The mood of the occupants of our stairwell was lighthearted. It reminded me of a high school fire drill. Clearly, our information was incomplete about what had happened in Tower One, and, as Wall Street brokers commonly do, we made light of the situation. Those who lived through the 1993 bombing were making humorous comparisons. The pace of our evacuation was steady but not swift.

At the 60th floor, my cell phone rang with its familiar chime (the so-called sports song my sons had picked out). The panicked voice of my wife, Janet, was on the other end. She informed me of the fire in the other building as she was seeing it on CNN.

Believe it or not, I tried to calm her down as I told of my progress down the stairwell. Hearing her voice and the horror of what she was observing gave me pause. Something serious was happening, although with our purview, we were not able to comprehend just how serious. A colleague of mine borrowed my phone directly afterward to speak to one of his customers. His face began to change as he listened to an account of what was being portrayed by the news networks. Instinctively, I grabbed for my phone, as I thought he would interrupt our descent by giving us a play-by-play of outside events.

At the 55th floor, we paused for an emergency announcement by the Port Authority. We were told that a plane had struck Tower One and that there was a fire in that building. The message continued to state that the situation in Tower Two was stable—and we were safe to proceed down or return to our offices if we chose to go back to work. These instructions were tragically ambiguous and proved fatal for those who chose to return or who had not continued evacuating.

At this point, I found myself reflecting on the announcement with two of my colleagues—Andy Soloway and Dennis Coughlin. We discussed whether to continue our descent or head back to the office. Our momentary equivocation probably saved our lives.

The Second Plane

9:03 to 9:32 a.m.

As the three of us pondered our options, we experienced the concussion that occurred when the second plane hit our building. I was nearly thrown off my feet as the building absorbed the shock. It immediately registered: Something just moved our entire building!

The next moment proved most miraculous as the entire assembly of people in our stairway immediately continued with the evacuation in an expeditious manner. There was absolutely no sense of panic. It was as if a high-speed assembly line was thrust into motion from a flat start.

Andy and I found ourselves next to two women who needed assistance. Andy was speaking calming words to a Latino woman who was suffering a panic attack, while I grabbed the briefcase and the arm of an overweight Caucasian woman who was not likely to make it down on her own.

The evacuation proceeded in an orderly and determined fashion. The pace was quick but was never panicked. We each did what was necessary to keep the line moving.

At the 40th floor, my cell phone chimed. It was Janet again. She had seen something explode into Tower Two—CNN's early coverage showed a northerly view of Tower One, which occluded much of Tower Two—and immediately started dialing my number. I heard her tell me that my building had just "exploded." My response was "I felt it," and I told her of my progress before I ended the conversation by saying I'd call as soon as I was outside.

The line of people in Stairwell A of Tower Two marched steadily downward. Andy and I barked words of encouragement to our charges and to those within earshot of us. I even remember making a bad joke: "30th floor, people, it's all downhill from here!" The woman I was assisting—I never did get her name— informed me she had two children. Knowing this helped me to motivate her to make it down.

The line kept moving: 30, 25, and 20. It was in the teens that we encountered the first of three pauses in our egress. Those ahead of us reported up each time that there was no need for concern, as the interruptions were due to the influx caused by lower floors evacuating.

The last floors were counted down as we exited the stairwell at the mezzanine section. For those who have stood on line to get to the observation deck at the World Trade Center or who have purchased half-priced theater tickets at the TKTS booth, this was the place I now found myself. There were police officers and Port Authority employees directing us at this point.

We were shepherded to two narrow escalators that descended to the concourse level. These escalators directly faced two-story windows that proved to be our first view of the carnage that had been inflicted. Our view was of the central atrium between the two towers. Where once-countless tourists snapped photographs and outdoor concert series were performed was now a vision of war's destructive fury.

At the top of the escalators, an African-American woman was overcome by what she was witnessing and started to scream out her Lord's name. She was immediately pulled out of line and was calmed by a police officer. Other officers were directing our attention forward by telling us not to look out the windows and to proceed down the escalators. At the foot of the escalators, more rescue workers served as a gauntlet of encouragement and kept our pace brisk.

At the concourse level, I gave the woman I had accompanied down her bag and wished her well as I looked around for my colleagues. Emergency personnel kept us moving through the concourse, however, and we were directed to the

easternmost exit of the World Trade Center, where the Krispy Kreme Doughnuts franchise was located—a popular place for us to send trainees to fetch an afternoon nosh.

As I walked into the exit foyer, I got my first full view of the chaos of activity that was encircling the Trade Center. Emergency personnel were there in force to move us out into the street and directed us to keep our eyes forward—away from the towers—and to move swiftly uptown to clear the area. As I exited through the doorway that led to the street, I happened to look at my watch. It read 9:32 a.m. It had taken approximately 45 minutes to evacuate from the 84th floor. I proceeded up to Broadway and turned north, where I began my walk to midtown.

March to Midtown

Two items were on my mind. One was to get word to my wife that I was out of the building. As soon as I was on Broadway, I kept speed-dialing my home, to no avail. My cell phone was unable to get a signal. Pay phones along the way had long lines of people waiting. I did not stop to wait.

The second thought that passed through my mind was that something terrible had happened and that I needed to be clear of the area—I still did not know what had caused the explosion. I remembered seeing a woman who was charred and whose skin was peeling off in sections being led to the triage area by a fireman. I saw the look on all the emergency workers' faces as they ushered us away: It was fear.

With great haste, I quick-marched up Broadway. At City Hall, I came upon a fellow named David, who was just finishing a cell call. I asked him to let me phone my wife, and he agreed. It was approximately 9:40 a.m. when Janet informed me of the events of the day: that two jetliners had been flown into the World Trade Center and that the Pentagon had also been hit. I told her I was walking clear of the area and was headed to Central Park. It was at this point that I looked back at the twin towers, which were now fully ablaze and spewing sickeningly dark plumes of smoke. This brief glimpse back was the last time I was to see the towers standing.

Along the way, David and I came upon my chief financial officer, Steve Vigliotti, who was also walking to Midtown. Steve was headed toward his old offices at 330 Madison Avenue to start a phone chain to account for our firm's employees. I accompanied him to these offices, where I said my good-byes to David. His wife was nine months pregnant, and he was eager to be by her side. I never did get his last name.

The next three hours were spent calling our London offices, developing calling lists, and implementing the beginnings of our emergency phone chain to check

on the status of our employees. I spoke to a few wives that day who had not yet heard from their husbands and who now are presumed dead. It was a heartbreaking duty.

At 3:30 p.m., I met a friend of mine who had offered to drive me home earlier. We began what became a four-hour drive shortly after 4:30. It was 8:26 p.m. when he delivered me back to my doorstep and to the waiting arms of Janet and my two sons. I cannot imagine a happier homecoming.

October 1

The Aftermath

I learned later that evening that our firm lost 60 of our 288 employees that day—5 from my department alone. My sons have classmates and friends who no longer have fathers. Eleven residents of Chatham did not come home that night. Friends and colleagues from firms in both buildings are now lost.

Most of us who worked in the World Trade Center survived the day. This was due to a degree of courage few of our generation will ever witness again. The men and women of New York City's fire, police, and emergency services departments walked into certain death in order to expedite the evacuation of both towers. Hundreds of them died so that many thousands would live.

I am one of those thousands.