

## THE INFERNO

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Victoria Baines, CPA, was at the support group reunion. It was her turn to describe what exactly happened to her on September 11, 2001. The person in charge, himself a psychiatrist, coaxed her in the following terms, “We want to help you, but help us help you. Give us your take on what happened.” She had a major psychological trauma that day and needed closure, as it were. She focused on the event that day. She racked her brain hard and haltingly gave the following testimony in between bursts of tears:

*I was 15 minutes late for work that day, and as soon as I came out of the subway station, I had the eeriest feeling ever because I smelled a funny odor that I can't exactly describe other than to say it was a mixture of flesh and molten metal. It made me feel nauseated at first, not knowing if it was real or imagined. It is a nauseous sensation to describe in granular mode the events that happened then, but I have come to the conclusion that the first step of my therapy is to face those facts. Even though they occurred a while back, when I take the time to focus on that day, the pictures return as if they took place yesterday with uncanny and vivid accuracy to make it seem like a real-time movie. Whatever the case may be, and however much pain I do go through in reciting the events, I shall proceed. The funny smell was the tip of the iceberg, and in quick succession, I saw and lived through some gory scenes. I saw a couple of people fall to the ground, and their bodies smashed into smithereens, splattering blood, shattering people's peaceful routine, spreading a spooky revulsion, and sending goose bumps all over my numb body as I say this. I can only wonder what kind of intense heat, if not an inferno, that could have prompted a human to drop to his death rather than face that calamity? What about those left behind? What kind of torture did they endure by exposure to this sickening brazier? Beads of sweat pearl my forehead whenever I contemplate these horrible scenes. This was bad enough. Out of nowhere, a mixture of thick dust and smoke from here to eternity in duration, hither to yon in extension, blacking out the sun, moving in slow motion, covering every inch of space, billowing with forcefulness with the appearance of end of the world cataclysm scared the bejesus out of me and everybody else. Panic set in. People were screaming, bellowing high-pitched sounds unheard of before. In a cacophonous uproar, a thundering medley of tones, from explosions, hollers, sirens, and whatnot, drowned out any meaningful ability to converse. Adding insult to injury, cell phone service went kaput. The single most crucial interhuman interaction, communication, was decapitated. Facing probable demise without the reassuring voice of a loved one or the inability to be contacted by a dear person in this moment of distress exacerbated the feeling of doom. The closest description of this calvary is the sensation of being buried alive amid Armageddon, but slowly and atrociously. That thick, dark grey glob was*

*intolerable, like a blend of fog, soot, and sand. When mixed with water from the fire truck, it had the consistency of wet ash or maybe mud. A mud that soils anything it comes into contact with : the clothes, the skin literally, and the soul figuratively. That mud perniciously defiled decency with its foul odor and its indelible stickiness. This mucking of coquetry and wounding of vanity evinces a raw demonstration of the evil way of nastiness. Everyone felt the choking and irritation of the eyes, wiping out visibility and disrupting spatial orientation. No visibility and no phone communication spelled a maelstrom demonstration of fatal mayhem. One was left with few options about the next step. Out of sheer habit, I finally guessed where the subway entrance was. Of course, it was not working. It was at least a place of respite and update on the news. The truth didn't liberate the soul on that day. Learning we were under terrorist attack didn't make me feel any better. Armageddon was indeed happening in one form or another. An employee of the Transit Authority took it upon herself to inform us that the best way was to use a different exit and reach the Brooklyn Bridge to escape this mess. She also indicated that some people are walking up uptown. "Either way, crouch low to the ground and try to get out." I indeed followed the crowd and reached the Brooklyn Bridge. All along, people were talking about what they knew. Some were lucky to get the news from functioning radio shows, but nothing that day sounded good. The destruction of the Twin Towers, and the foiling of a third attempt of a kamikaze mission on the Pentagon all seemed so surreal and an unfathomable significant intelligence failure. The real damage was not so much the material loss, but the psychological toll wrought on the innocent bystanders, the relatives of the dead, and most of all, those unaccounted for. I was an innocent bystander, and I wouldn't wish my experience on my worst enemy. Even now, I am not sure how I was able to survive this trauma that day. I did walk on the Brooklyn Bridge, not knowing where I was going from where I was coming, fretting about being unable to call my daughter, who must have been worried sick. Getting back home was such an ordeal! As I see it, we value human life so much that the sight of a body falling on the ground and causing such maiming of limbs and other parts still haunts me. I don't know how to get rid of the recurring flashbacks reminding me of the bloody scenes. I don't know how to erase from memory the scale and scope of human suffering. I certainly don't know how to burrow my way out of this tunnel of darkness and negative narrative. I do need help for sure, but closure seems ever so elusive. Depending on the day of the week, the despair takes on a different face or notion. On Monday, I may find myself battling a boomerang; I try to shed an experience off my being, but it keeps coming back. On Tuesday, I am reminded every step of the way by the loss of close friends who went to work on time*

*and faced the demon, friends who are widows, widowers. On Wednesday, I may feel that I am not quite the shards of a broken glass, but I do feel damaged, like a concrete wall now riddled with pockmarks or a now pliant but once rigid piece of stainless steel. On Thursday, I reckon with the idea that all of this boils down to an initial inferno capable of withering away steel, concrete, and humans like never before. It happened so fast, and yet the consequences are lasting so long. On Friday, all these thoughts may circle in my head like a vulture waiting to swoon down and pick a prey apart. Except that the ideas are the vulture and the prey is my well-being.*

A mortuary silence followed. The other participants were drying their eyes off tears and trying to come to terms with this raw, soul-shattering testimony. A man stood up and said:

*Inferno is the exact word, for nothing else comes close. I was in one of the towers, and I can tell you that I saw a giant ball of fire turn into different colors and emit such heat that it was an experience I don't ever want to go through again. The flame gained a dark gray tint from orange, alternating with black depending on what was burning. The searing heat released was numbing. I was lucky to escape because I went down the stairs quickly, but I missed an inevitable melting of my flesh by a wisp of time. The stench of rotten flesh made this a no man's land for the longest time, but this piece of history is unforgettable.*

A frank discussion began in earnest about closure, and quite a few of the participants added a piece of their own experience of that dreadful day, the aftermath of the whipsaw that vaulted their lives into a stratospheric level of mental suffering and physical ailments because of the inhaled particles. What was an initial exposure to a raging inferno has left behind slow-burning embers of psychological misery and seething torment. The support group, over time did help as talk therapy, and the sharing of coping mechanisms offered some salve to aid in healing an open wound. In the end, Father Time was the most critical factor in soothing sore and bruised souls, bringing warmth to broken hearts, and splaying a therapeutic cold air, snuffing out any lit fire that was charring hope, glee, and positive disposition from the vocabulary.