

Visiting The New York World Trade Center Site, November 9, 2003

It is nighttime. The sky above New York is perfectly clear. A bright moon, one day past full, looks coldly and impersonally down on me adding to the extreme chill I feel, both from the icy early November night and from the place where I am standing. I am on Church Street at the perimeter of The World Trade Center site. A business trip had taken me to New York, the city where I grew up. I am not alone on Church Street, which bustles with activity, tourists, souvenir hawkers, the curious, and disinterested persons going about their evening daily business. At eight PM I would have expected more quiet, more solitude, more dignity. I am disappointed. This is not a good place to relive the grief of two years past. What did I expect? A recollection of horror and sadness? A few tears for those who perished? An urge to say a few word of comfort for those who jumped from bombed-out windows, who died at their desks, or who perished while doing their public duty? Their names are displayed every 30 feet or so, six panels of eleven columns of names, neatly alphabetized for quick reference.

But I feel nothing. The pit is antiseptic, protected by a tall and robust barrier of bars and mesh. The site glares in the spotlights. I cannot get close. I do not taste the soot of destruction. I cannot see any tangled steel. Why is this now such an empty place? It should be sacred, a memorial to a national agony. But for me it is not. I realize that what might have been, what should have been, has been transformed in my mind to a symbol of abuse. Today it is not sacred although two years ago it was the holiest of places. Our government and leaders had used this tragedy as an excuse for the wholesale trampling of human rights and for the justification for an ill-advised war. What was at first an outpouring of a global sympathy has been turned into loathing and distrust. America as the source of high ideals had been replaced by America of the diplomatic blunder and of the shock and awe mentality. When before, we truly believed in the right to speak one's mind, we now reluctant to utter anything that isn't a flag-wrapped platitude punctuated by a "God Bless America" or two. Innocent people are detained, interrogated, falsely accused, ruined. The openness of our society had been replaced by Gestapo tactics, unaccountable police action, searches, probes, suspicion. Somewhere supercomputers are abuzz with our everyday activities, supermarket purchases, airline flights, and cell phone voices. Our pictures, life histories, income taxes are all being compiled to find the unclean among us. Our courts have not made a stand. The civil libertarians are silent in this time of our most urgent need.

Thus, my pilgrimage to the World Trade Center does not provide closure. Rather, it serves to remind me that our country is in great peril and the danger comes from within

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