

September 11, 2006

I am sitting at the bar in a Chinese restaurant that has decided the key to its success will be Japanese food. The sushi chef is Latino. I am watching the Port Authority Memorial Service on a large flat screen TV. The volume is off and it is accompanied by “easy listening” from the radio. Pataki and Bloomberg sniff ceremoniously. Children fidget. The bagpipers march out of the church. This is New York. This is the feeling of now.

The city is unusually quiet, unusually reverent, unusually anxious. As if September 11th is a door into another world, the one time each year when people fall down the rabbit hole, allow themselves to realize how traumatized they really are.

The sky is bright blue, exactly as it was five years ago. People are silent, but they notice. I go to the Firemen’s Memorial on 100th Street. Quietly people come and go. Some sit; some look at the big red carnation arrangement with the number of the local fire precinct. Many leave flowers. An off-duty firefighter comes with his small pink daughter who plays obliviously on the stairs.

It is five years since I sat there and watched people come and go, talked to strangers, tried to light candles as the wind blew them out. A long time and no time. In some ways, New York is still an open wound. Soon it will be ten years. Twenty. One day, if I am old, I will be one of the few people left who remembers New York on September 11th, who can talk about the feeling of the day, and the humanism of the people, and the organic evolution of vigils and shrines and other ancient things before they were subverted into propaganda and kitsch.

The Firemen’s Memorial is a Victorian monument, a neighborhood sleeper. Until 2001 it was practically forgotten. But suddenly, unnervingly, a stone fountain honoring those who fell in the line of duty became all too relevant, a charged space in the middle of a cynical neighborhood with nowhere to focus its mourning. I have come to understand how grief is related to space, how one needs a physical locus for memory and loss. I go there every year because I have to go somewhere, to mark this day by more than simply noticing the color of the sky.

I have seen that space become a living space. A place where people go to think “I am alive today” and to feel how arbitrary that really is. Today is the day when we peel away the surface and let the arbitrariness of what grows and what dies and what evolves and what decays really show through. This is the feeling of now.

Jill Sigman
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