

The World Trade Center
Surviving the Fall: One Architect's Survival Story

By Laurie Balbo
The World Trade Center

I am not a writer, I am an architect who was on the 82nd floor of Tower One when the first plane hit the Trade Center. I wrote the attached at the urging of a trauma counselor who advised survivors in my department. The latter part was written in attempt to clear my head so I could sleep.

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One World Trade Center, 82nd Floor, Southwest

Arguably the most spectacular weather of the year: crispy cool, blindingly blue sky. It's well past 8 a.m. I'm at my desk, blowing time before a 9:30 meeting.

WOMP! More a feeling than a sound, I'm knocked from my seat as my west-window office veers three or four yards towards the Hudson River. Clear sensation of a three-dimensional wiggle as the blow is absorbed down the tower. I stand to surf the waves in the concrete floor. Books and pictures drop to take my place.

The 82nd floor is an open field of low cubicles. Heads pop up over the partitions like prairie dogs in the Bronx Zoo. We look to our manager, Peter, standing in the southwest corner, "What the hell was that?" Peter looks surprised, flaming shrapnel floating in the sky beyond his office window.

"Let's get out of here!" I grab my jacket, briefcase and purse and join the conga line heading to a stairwell, between two project managers, Jim and Jose. These guys, like most of the engineering department, are veterans of the 1993 bomb. "Here we go again".

We skip down about seven flights as they tell me about that day. (I was working out of Newark Airport then; I watched it unfold on TV.) In '93 the lights went out. They climbed down 70 stories in blackness and thickening smoke. This time the stairs are bright with emergency lighting. Thick stripes of fluorescent paint outline the route in case the lights fail. They warn me, "Man, your legs are going to hurt tomorrow."

We reach somewhere in the 70s and voices below yell, "It's blocked, it's blocked!" Hard to panic in this friendly crowd. Smoke is building and it's hot. We choreograph an about face and climb back to 78 and enter an extremely soothing office space--cool air, smiling staffers. "Have some water." "Make some phone calls." "Please take a seat in our conference rooms and keep the aisles clear."

And we do! I drop my things in a conference room and come back to the main office to find a phone. I call my husband, the facility manager at Newark Airport. His secretary is saying something about an airport emergency, he can't take my call. I'm floored, "But this is an emergency!" I leave word that I'm all right, and call my mother in south Jersey. "Ma, something's happened here. I'm okay, turn on the TV and maybe see if you can find out if Jamie's in the building." (My younger brother Jamie has an office in the same tower.)

I return to the conference room and see that someone has flipped on a television. There's an aerial view of the Trade Center. The top corner of Tower One is chopped off and blanketed in black smoke and flames. A coworker, Fred, standing next to the TV looks pie-eyed at me and says, "Go, go, go!" We pick up our things and race back to the main office. Another coworker, Greg, is in a far corner waving us to run, run, run his way. All of us from 82 trot to an open stair. The people from that nice office lagged behind.

In a vertical corridor within that stairwell, we run past an exploded freight elevator, while two project managers hold the flames back with a fire hose. Down the steps, down the steps, orderly and calm. It's very hot. In the 70s, injured people from higher floors begin to pass by, bloodied and crying, clothes torn.

In the 60s, smoke is building, movement slows, and water starts to flow down the steps. We open doors at each landing, looking for fresh air. People stop to rest. Many floors are on fire. Disabled staffers enter the line. A blind man climbs down by holding the shoulders of another man, someone else leads his guide dog. A paraplegic in a special carrier is screaming, screaming, that the four men holding the frame are going to drop her. They abandon the frame and just pick her up. Two shirtless young businessmen lug her electric wheelchair down in front, yelling for relief from other men in the stairwell. They struggle with the chair, clogging traffic, and finally abandon it on an open floor.

More and more injured from the mid-80s pass by. Stay to the left, injured coming. A few are hysterical, but mostly we are calm. The stairwell is rocking, "Did you feel that?" But everyone appears to pretend that it isn't happening. "It's just your nerves."

More and more smoke, water splashes down the steps, cell phones don't work. Lots of jokes about the bombing in '93. "How many times do we have to do this?" In the 50s, someone gets paged--a plane hit the building? The guys in my vicinity, all engineers and architects, start arguing about whether that's true. "Must have been a news helicopter. Or some yahoo in a tour plane." "So how do you explain the missing roof?" "Must have been a small business jet."

We start arguing about whether we'll rebuild the tower, debating constructability. "How the hell can you get steel up 110 floors without closing building operations?" Joke how we'll be able to say, "We remember when both buildings were the same size!" (We didn't know both towers were hit.) Still climbing down, still moving forward.

The 40s get very crowded. Movement slows. I am drenched with sweat and breathing fast. Someone says it was a bomb, that the plane hit Tower Two, and we were bombed. The air is really gritty, and people take off shirts and shoes, trip and slip in puddles, wrap clothes around their heads, coughing, crying. Still no firemen or emergency people in sight. So how bad can it be?

We see the firemen in the 30s in full gear slowly climbing, using axes as walking sticks, hollow clunk, clunk, clunk on each step. People cheer, "Go get them! God bless you!" They throw them water bottles; hand them wet shirts to wipe down sweaty faces.

Women are taking off their heels. I am tempted but keep my shoes on. Throughout the 20's firemen are camped on some floors. They don't say what's happening only chant, "Keep moving, keep moving." The stairwell is so hot. The steps feel like they're moving. In the teens, I look in faces as they pass by. They look tense, exhausted and no one makes eye contact. I look at these men and say to Jose, "But they are crying! Look they are crying." Jose says, "No they are just sweating, it's the smoke and they're sweating."

The air is stifling and there are hugely overweight people sitting on the landings gasping, crying, refusing to move. People can't breathe. Some man starts saying at every landing "Floor 18, can we make a 180 foot jump? Floor 12, can we make 120 feet?" until a woman slaps him and he stops speaking.

At Floor Six it suddenly feels cool, and we are herded to an open floor area--the mezzanine! The street level plaza between the two towers! Everyone starts smiling, speeding up, till we see the row of men in jackets with giant letters on them, FBI, and with guns. Were they wearing helmets too? Some with masks are yelling, "Run, run, run! Don't look up," routing us down a stopped escalator.

Of course I look up and it is staggering: the glass walls are gone, steel is splintered, the plaza is covered with mounds of ashen powder and smoking, what, airplane pieces? Fires all about. "Don't look! Don't look!" Bodies, bits, and we run down the escalator, still carrying my jacket and briefcase and purse, and stand on the concourse, the shopping mall beneath the towers, and stop dead in our tracks.

The wall of revolving glass doors has been blown out, the steel header above crumpled and dipping. Fireman stand beyond in dim emergency lighting, sprinklers bursting, six inches of water on the floor. They beckon, "Come on! Come on!" So Jose and I look at one another and he says, "The worst is yet to come," and we run into the dark space, run, run, run. Then the loudest thunder rumble roar I ever heard, I mean felt, and a blast of wind and smoke and grit throws me down. Glass shop walls explode and the ceilings fall down and I feel big things fly past my head and it becomes utterly black and still except for screams, screams, and crying.

I think I am blind. I sit in the water and take off my glasses and open and shut my eyes and there is no difference. Dunk my glasses in the water and try them on again. Am I blind? The air was chewy with grit and when I open my mouth to say--to say what?--I choke. Cup a bit of the floor water into my mouth and spit out grit and mud. Is there asbestos in that?

Calm down. Calm down and breathe. My heartbeat is terrifying me. Someone will come get you. No one is coming to get me. Oh Christ, Balbo, you are so fucking inept! How many times have you walked this damned concourse and still you have no idea where to exit? I pull off my sweater and dunk it in the water, wrap it around my head my nose, and think, "All those steps down for this?"

People are screaming and screaming and groping in the dark. Hands tentatively touch my arms, my back. It is so still but for the screaming. People start lighting cigarette lighters, others scream, "Gas, gas!" and splash water at the flames. Women on the floor near me yell to hold onto their ankles and crawl forward. I pull away. I feel them splash past. A crying man next to me takes my hand and I say something like, "I think we have to move," and we stand up. Three small sobbing women speaking Japanese? Chinese? grab onto us and we drag toward this grayish light that turns out to be a subway entrance. When I see that it isn't a way out I think again, "This is really bad. You are so not prepared to deal with this." And then in the murk appears a short man with a red jacket who says, "What's your name?" and tells me he is Eddie Rojas, and he grabs my hand (I am twitching like a marionette) and says, "So, Laurie, let's get out of here," and pulls me through the dark I don't know how far.

We reach two firemen who are chopping things in the blackness, a collapsed wall, standing in a spray of water, and they point their flashlights and shout they just led 50 people out this way. And Eddie pulls me and another woman through broken, what is this?, up steps and pushes us to the street. Huge hug. "You're an angel an angel, but where are your damned wings, man?" "Run, run, run!" And he goes back into the concourse.

The outside light stings. The street is covered in calf-deep ash, computer printouts, photographs, bits of metal, glass, a bus, rows of cars with no windows and no drivers, all deeply covered in this gray ash. "Run, run, run north," scream the people in hardhats or fire hats. It's so loud. They scream, "Run north! Run north!"

People are pulled into emergency medical vans. They empty bottles of cold saline on our faces and push us northward. "Run, run, run!" I have no idea what is happening. About three, maybe four, blocks away people scream, "It's falling!" and I turn and watch as Tower One buckles, steel flies off like silver toothpicks, the sky is so damned blue, people jumping and jumping in an arc out of the black hole and hanging on to the peeling window wall, and then it drops.

I fall down. I must be twitching like a hooked fish because three women smoking cigarettes, also covered in ash, come up and sit close around me and say, "It's okay, it's okay. We just did that too. It'll stop. Just go with it."

A photographer comes and shoots our picture and I sit up and scream, "Leave me alone!" She drops her camera. It sobers me. The smokers say their law office was in Tower One and that their cell phones are dead, so they are walking to their firm's uptown offices. They heard the city was being bombed and we can't go south or east or west. There is grit and smoke everywhere and sirens. We keep walking north.

In Soho, a clean man in a red sport-utility vehicle stops and puts us in his car. He says he was taking a shower in his Broome Street apartment and his wife saw the first plane and pulled him to the window and they watched the second plane hit together. His name is Michael and he is being a Good Samaritan by offering people free rides north. He drives us uptown, past streets full of people--clean people walking dogs and rollerblading and sitting in outdoor cafes. The cigarette ladies and I stare in disbelief. Don't they know what is happening? Why is everyone outside? It was a party, and the sky is so bright blue.

Traffic clogs, traffic stops near Grand Central Station. We get out and keep walking. I realize I had put my top back on sometime before getting out on the street (a good Catholic girl!) and one cigarette lady and I have a howl over that.

We arrive at their uptown offices, somewhere in the high 60s on Park Avenue, and are afraid to get in the elevator. But we do and are met by clean business people who lead us to a conference room full of sandwiches and salads and water bottles. I drink so much water, then make "I'm alive" phone calls. We learn that two planes flew into the towers, that the Pentagon was also hit, and that a fourth plane was unaccounted for. All bridges and tunnels are closed. I swap info with the cigarette ladies (more hysterics as we swap emails and telephone numbers and realize we no longer have offices with emails and telephones), and I walk back out to the street alone.

My feet are cut and bloody and I start to feel pain. I walk west towards the Hudson River-- mostly to get away from buildings, and pass a Duane Reade [pharmacy] near Radio City Music Hall. I'm amazed it is open for business. I go in and pick out some new socks for my torn feet and am awestruck that people are on line buying Doritos and hair spray. Didn't they see what happened? And there I am in line, covered with white ash and bits of debris, torn clothes, bloody feet, and no one seems to see me.

I sleepwalk toward the river, confused and numb, and then onto Eighth Avenue, heading south. Down the street a bit, I spot a dusty six-foot tall woman--one of my best Port Authority friends walking up the street alone. We run to each other like in a slow-motion perfume commercial. "I can't believe you are alive!"

We swap stories and try to get into a corner bar for a drink and access to TV. Every Hell's Kitchen bar is overflowing onto the street. So we go to a bodega and buy water and beer--\$10 for a six of Sam Adams! You've got to be kidding? We continue to walk to the river. A huge line of people formed near the Intrepid [aircraft carrier museum].

Tugboats, ferryboats, restaurant cruisers have been commandeered to ship people off the island. We join the line and stand for hours and hours in the gorgeous sunshine, seeing people we know, meeting others from the towers. We learn what happened; we talk nonstop. Well I'll be damned! As we board the boat we run into the construction manager for the World Trade Center who sat on my floor. Together we sail to Jersey, hanging on the upper deck rail and staring at the smoke billowing thick and dark to Staten Island and the ocean beyond. We stare at the void.

I am home with my husband and children by 8 p.m.

The previous paragraphs were written at the urgings of a trauma counselor who advised survivors in my department; an exercise in which we sit and bang out our stories with no edits or pause. It helped. A bit.

I am an architect, a manager of large-scale capital projects. A month ago, I was assigned to the Port Commerce engineering unit. I moved up another 10 stories in the World Trade Center to 82 West to manage channel-deepening projects for the New York harbor. The view was the same and it was different. Now, 100 feet higher, I found the change unsettling. Helicopters sometimes flew lower than my office on 72, but on 82, they were never above my feet. The gentle oscillation of the towers, palpable in heavy weather on 72, became physically visible 10 stories higher. Wind pushed an occasional plastic bag into view on 72; sirens and street noises were audible. But on 82, things were quiet. We were beyond the realm of airborne trash.

I hated those buildings. They were sterile and ugly and monstrous to navigate. I loved the life within them. I spent most of my career located in the top third, in a slice of real estate dedicated to the engineering department of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

I usually snagged a window office but never one with a "top-three view." North faced uptown, a sampler of American architecture bracketed by Hudson and East Rivers. East offered the Brooklyn Bridge and a bird's eye view of tickertape parades whenever the Yanks nailed the Series. South shimmered in harbor-reflected sunlight. But my West view was not in their league. West looked out to northern Jersey and showcased traffic that fed folks to the city. Ribbons of cars tracing Turnpike traffic, tiny trains in the meadowland swamps. The gargantuan face of the Colgate Clock. Hudson ferries flitting about. All snuggled under a soft yellow blanket of haze. My view; my professional Home Sweet Home.

Tower elevators operated on a hub concept to accommodate both physical constraints (bending shafts) and circulatory needs (movements of 50,000 staff, plus twice that in visitors and messengers and tourists). High-speed cabs rose from the concourse to sky lobbies on 44 and 78, from which additional elevators and escalators fed each floor. Travel between my new and old offices required trips on three elevators. It took two elevators and an escalator just to grab coffee. We could lessen that commute by using a corporate cafeteria on 101. Anyone making that choice Tuesday morning paid for breakfast with his life. (The restaurant and its sponsor, bond traders Cantor-Fitzgerald, were located on 101 through 105. All employees who showed up to work that day were killed, about 700 people).

The Port Authority lost 74 people; I lost 7 friends.

If I suspend human involvement and discount emotion, if I consider just the physical event of the collapse, it is the most astounding experience of my life. Instantaneously transformative; something experienced in an animal state, so raw that sensual boundaries blurred. Sights that made my ears ring, smells that I can taste, sounds that touched my bones.

Before that Tuesday, the benchmark of my life had been childbirth. This experience blew that one away. It was bigger, meaner, louder, and more public. It was raw and it was fast. It defies placement in a natural order, too monstrous to ever digest.

We settle into new offices. We compare notes. Time feels different. There is less on my plate and what remains is all-important. I no longer use profanity as punctuation in my speech; I haven't used my car horn since 9/11. I am quieter, more still. I am watchful. I am so very, very sad.

I see that not everyone is changed. I feel no need to convert them. The attractive soccer mom in a flag-draped Lexus speeds past, annoyed by my driving, and angrily flips me the bird. The well-dressed couple at the next table, bemoaning the fiscal affects on their downtown wine shop, since now only blue collar rescue workers populate their Vesey Street neighborhood and, "Lord knows, they don't drink wine." The loud guy on the train, eyeballing darker passengers, cracks about "real Americans." Perhaps he could go back to the stairwell with me to meet the characters in my story: Chinese Fred, Polish Greg, Greek Jim, and Dominican Jose. He could shake hands with Pakistani Owais, who's manning the fire hose. These are my coworkers: all professionals and taxpayers who almost didn't make it out. I mention to my boss, Peter, that he and I were the only ones in the surrounding stair crowd whose folks were born in America. He laughs and says, "My dad was born in Germany." So what's a real American? So what is the appropriate flag?

Everyone has his story, sees it through his personal screen. I am an architect. I don't live near earthquakes or mudslides or forest fires. It's not in my personal experience that buildings fail. And so I grapple with the fact that these dying buildings killed thousands. My British husband alludes to that great American bumper sticker, "Guns Don't Kill People, Only People Kill People". He appeals to my sense of humor to divert me from my new obsession. But I was there. I saw building parts and people collide. I saw 1,200 feet of concrete and steel do very bad things to flesh and psyche.

A child with a fresh box of Crayolas will eventually draw a house, a box with a triangle to, a crooked door and a window. Houses, buildings, are a mainstay in the lexicon of things sheltering and safe. How now to digest the moving pictures of buildings as a component of mass destruction? And the headline-grabbing uber-architects with their blind proclamations, "Rebuild! No retreat! Take them taller!" I listen and wonder. Will they back up their cheering with chunks of leased offices high in their proposed new towers? Will they then incite employees to take their daughters to work? Have they developed new designs to protect against terror? How do we now design to make people feel safe?

The current talk concerning the architectural, "What next?" is like shopping the personal ads while at your spouse's wake. But this is my personal dilemma, my private obstacle to a good night's sleep.

We resume normal living. New people squeeze back into old lives, finding that nothing quite fits. It's a matter of adjustment. That day tore through our foundations and surely those must be rebuilt. Opportunity grows out of the rubble, a chance to rethink the old designs we've lived by. We might aim not merely to get back to normal, but to make a tiny shift in our ways. To ask some new questions about some old beliefs. What have I learned? What can I teach? Will I ever stop meandering through these disjointed thoughts and feelings?

Hug babies. Read and learn about the world. Be kind to strangers. And know the damned exits.