



Rosh Hashanah 2006

Fifth Anniversary Memorial to the World Trade Center Tragedy

Reflections by John Kastan

Good Morning. I'm the Vice President of Behavioral Health Services at St. Vincent's Hospital, in charge of mental health and chemical dependence services. I'm not a psychiatrist. I arrived at this career via a circuitous route - I was a jazz musician, teacher and sociologist. But here I am, and I love what I do, stressful as it is. I'm honored that Peter asked me to say a few words about my experience.

On 9-11-01, I was at work at St. Vincent's, which because of its location, as many of you know, became known as the "Ground Zero" hospital. Like most hospitals, St. Vincent's had a relatively well-oiled disaster response plan that we'd used after the 1993 WTC bombing. We were prepared for seriously physically injured individuals, with doctors and stretchers lined up outside the hospital, just minutes after the first plane hit the Towers. However, as most of you also know, no one came to us with physical injuries.

Instead, those who came included vast numbers of individuals seeking emotional support, information about loved ones, and a place to come to publicly express sadness, fear and anger. Others came to help, whether through giving blood or companionship. People yearned to affirm their sense of connectedness. This was amplified through the media attention we received, resulting in close to 10,000 phone calls offering assistance and requesting information and support, in just the first 72 hours.

I, and many of my colleagues, worked feverishly to set up systems to manage this, and to respond to individual needs with competence and compassion. At the same time, I, and my colleagues, had all the same needs and all the same concerns about our loved ones. Janice and I, living close to St. Vincent's, and not all that far from WTC, were apart most of those first two weeks after the attack, since I was at the hospital virtually 24/7. She and I did without the support we usually give each other, and that was difficult.

Here's what we did at the hospital on 9-11: We provided information and counseling. We responded to calls for assistance from rescue and public safety workers, as well as schools. We sent therapists and psychiatrists to locations throughout lower Manhattan. Through the media, we dispersed information more broadly to encourage emotional self-care.

That winter, I, and my colleagues, recognized the need for a formal emotional trauma program, so we established the World Trade Center Healing Services. We received funding from a number of sources: philanthropies; Project Liberty, which was funded by FEMA; and, more recently, the American Red Cross. We continue to provide 9-11 related mental health services to tens of thousands of individuals.

We do a lot of work in non-traditional settings: trailers at Ground Zero; fire stations; coffee shops near work sites; and inside schools, with children, faculty and staff. Often, we work with people who aren't used to talking about feelings - police and firefighters, for instance -- and who are experiencing symptoms because of their heroism, self-sacrifice, and allegiance.

Some of the conventions and "props" that allow therapists to deal with transference and counter-transference aren't available, and this can be very stressful for the therapists. Some of our therapists have experienced what's called "compassion fatigue," where they become overwhelmed, and experience symptoms not unlike their clients': problems with sleep; anxiety; depression.

On the other hand, our unconventional work allows therapists to exercise great innovation and "out of the box" thinking, which provides professional satisfaction. At two of the schools closest to Ground Zero, we organized Hope for the Future art projects on the 9/11 anniversaries, producing not only beautiful and unique representations of this theme, but also a tremendous sense of community, which amplified the students' own resilience.

There was a lot of money available initially - from the federal government, corporate philanthropies, and foundations. But, now, five years later, most of that is gone, and our ability to respond the next time may be compromised, and this is unconscionable.

So, how has all this ongoing and intense work dealing with 9-11 affected me personally? As you've already heard from Janice, it was a major contributor to a decision that changed my life - the decision to become a parent.

It's also changed my perception of what there is to fear - more than I'd ever understood.

It's given me first hand experience with the type of event that I always associated with a previous generation or another place - massive death and physical destruction.

It has also reinforced my core values of humanism - in particular realism and the search for knowledge and understanding through human reason and emotional intelligence.