

Commentary

A forum for opinions, reactions, dialogue and disagreement

What to think when a skyline falls?

Humankind cannot bear too much reality. That was T.S. Eliot's line, and now we know what he meant. What's the right thing to think when a skyline falls to earth? What word can be uttered when "tragedy" seems an understatement? How does one cry when the tears won't come?

That was the odd thing — the absence of tears. Oh, there were some: The young wet-eyed woman in Murphy Hall whose uncle in New York couldn't be reached. But most TV-watchers crowded into the University of Minnesota's journalism classroom watched the towers topple in dry silence. They neither wept nor winced at the ceaseless replays. Witnessing the unspeakable, they were speechless.

And when Prof. Tsan-Kuo Chang appeared alongside the screen to cancel the class, several students approached him with a question: "Does that mean there's no quiz?"

"No quiz," said Chang.

Even in horror's shadow, the mind holds fast to its habits. "So we'll have today's quiz on Thursday?" asked a student.

"No quiz," Chang said gently. He turned with the students to watch the towers implode yet again — seeking to comprehend the incomprehensible.

Another heartbreak

Somehow, unaccountably, the autumn sun was shining on Northrop Mall.

Remember the day your loved one died? Remember how the world stopped, but the sun kept shining? It seemed a ridiculous affront — a heaping of insult on injury. All of life's promises were scotched, but the law of gravity still held. And stretching out ahead was a foreign future — one illustrated by absence.

That's how it works with a single death, so why not with thousands? One minute Manhattan collapses and the Pentagon burns, the next it's time to come to grips. A vacancy slashes the landscape and becomes its definition.

It's just another heartbreak to get used to, another loss on its way to becoming a fact of life. There's nothing to be done about it, no lesson to be learned from it, no way to avoid it.

Anyone who scavenges for the story's moral

— who gropes for the could-haves and should-haves — takes the risk of churning up the grief. Anyone who wonders if there are lessons to be drawn from the smoke had best wonder alone.



Kate Stanley

Old words

The bells tolled noon at the university, and the tears came at last on the wings of prayer.

When the mouth can't conjure new words, the heart calls upon the old. So did the hearts of hundreds who gathered at the vigil on the Northrop steps. There was the Lord's Prayer, which beckons God's will to Earth. Psalm 13, which calls out to God in grief. A Muslim prayer, which seeks God's protection. The ancient Mourner's Kaddish, which speaks not of death but of peace.

And an Ojibway prayer, as ancient as the rest, which seemed to weep most freely for human sins:

*Grandfather,
Look at our brokenness.
We know that in all creation
Only the human family
Has strayed from the Sacred Way.*

*We know that we are the ones
Who are divided
And we are the ones
Who must come back together
To walk in the Sacred Way.*

*Grandfather, Sacred One,
Teach us love, compassion, and honor
That we may heal the earth
And heal each other.*

When the prayers were over, a silence shimmered — until the cicada sang. Then the mourners dispersed to bear an unbearable reality. Life carried on.

— *Kate Stanley is a Star Tribune editorial writer. This article appeared in the newspaper on September 12, 2001.*