

ChangeSeekers

In many ways both days felt the same, though the circumstances could not have been more different. In one case the world was burning, and my walls were crumbling down around me. In another, I felt my soul burning, any semblance of reason overtaking my feelings of anger and resentment. One could separate both experiences by years (12) or life events (going from single to married with two kids); one could even separate both days by maturity (age 25 versus 36, with travel, another degree, and a depth of professional experiences some could only dream of under my belt). The reality is that both experiences stemmed from the same realization about what makes people tick, the voracious hunger for truth, and an almost divine-like sense that an immediate change was the only way forward. Both days, September 11, 2001, and October 25, 2013, would be my ‘diving off the deep end’ points of inflection towards a path of personal and professional fulfillment based only on an instinct that each day shall be more meaningful than the last, and that the world is waiting for us to leave our mark.

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At 1:46 p.m. on September 11, 2001, the “City” in London was bustling with bankers, flitting about like clones grabbing lunch before the New York financial markets opened just 15 minutes later. It was a perfectly crystal clear day in both London and New York, like an ocean of opportunity for the taking. I sat down at my desk and shoveled a few bites of my favorite curry into my mouth before sending my U.S. team the day’s bond pricing.

I heard some news coming across the squawk box about a plane hitting the World Trade Center. I assumed a propjet clipped the top antenna of the building. I caught a quick glimpse of the gaping hole in the North Tower from

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the one television in our Managing Director's office, and my stomach churned. My desk mate grabbed my arm as he saw me turn white. "Are you okay?" he asked. My brain froze, and my first inclination was to call Dave. No answer. I started to panic as soon as the South Tower was hit. Our New York office couldn't be reached. I received an email from my Dad: "World Trade Center has been hit by a plane. Are you ok?" Then a second one: "Another plane has hit the Pentagon." I thought about everyone I knew in D.C. and New York and immediately shot emails off, checking on their whereabouts. My brain could not process what was happening, nor could I have imagined the reality of it all at that moment. Those of us in banking knew that Cantor Fitzgerald, with whom we had priced countless bond transactions, held offices at the top of the World Trade Center. There were others in our business who would surely be caught in the throngs of these attacks. It was impossible not to think the worst. The next half hour was a fury of email updates, Bloomberg news alerts, and frantic calls trying to reach family and close friends. I was blessed by the fact that my close friends and family were all safe and accounted for. Dave was on his way to class, but would return home when the city of Chicago thought it was being threatened too. So many were in worse shape than me.

That afternoon I sat in our Managing Director's crowded office to watch the towers fall on television. I still feel sick thinking about the helpless men and women who I saw jumping from the falling structures. I was the lone American in the room, and everyone treated me with kid gloves, knowing this day would transform my country and the future of our sanctity. I cried unabashedly.

As I sat there in complete shock over what was happening in my country,

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realizing that we were officially under attack by an unknown enemy, my office was evacuated. We heard that a plane had been hijacked in Amsterdam and was heading for the City of London. Fear ravaged me. I sprinted out of the office and found an overcrowded Tube with frantic Londoners. I spent the next few hours walking home from London City to my flat in South Kensington, where I hibernated for the next three days until my office reopened and the financial markets were up and running again. I felt shaken to the core for weeks, for months really. The days that followed made me numb. I had been shaken so badly by a sense that my land of liberty was now shrouded in a darkness I had never seen, nor could have imagined. September 11, for me, was like an awakening to the potential for evil, for fear, for an unbalanced world and a future unhinged. That day upended everything I had planned for my future, my success, my sense of hierarchy, and what impact I could have. Change was needed. This could never, ever happen again.