

(And where are you now?) □ By Margaret Evans, Editor



Last Saturday night, I was sitting with some friends on our second-story office porch overlooking Waterfront Park. The air was thick with August, but the sun had finally dipped behind the river and the breeze was rising and we had wine. Muted laughter wafted up from below – people strolling past restaurants and bars – and somewhere down the block, a band was just starting sound check. Life was good.

“Can you believe it’s been ten years since 9/11?” somebody asked.

With that, our conversation turned to that recurring question: “Where were you when the Twin Towers fell?” It’s a question we come back to, again and again – some kind of tribal bonding ritual? – in much the same way our parents came back to the JFK question: “Where were you when you heard the news? What were you doing?”

Like everyone else, I remember exactly where I was when the Twin Towers fell... and exactly what I was doing. I was curled up on the sofa in our little rental on Depot Road – we lived there briefly after we married – nursing my brand new baby girl, born six weeks earlier. I was

watching The Today Show, like always, and Matt Lauer was interviewing... somebody. (I can't believe I've forgotten!) Suddenly, Matt interrupted the interview for "breaking news," going straight to live pictures of the World Trade Center, which, he said, "appears to have been hit by a plane." The rest, of course, is history. The unthinkable unfolded – and continued to unfold in horrific detail – right there on live television. I'd never seen anything like it. Nobody had. To this day, I wish I could un-see it.

I remember walking to my office on Bay Street later that morning in a strange sort of daze. I was pushing Amelia in her stroller – still taking home to work back then, instead of vice versa – and I recall clutching the handle for dear life, as if that stroller might suddenly slip from my hands and careen into the street... or fly away on a cloud.... or simply vanish. Anything could happen now, couldn't it? Nothing was safe. If the images I'd just seen on TV were real – and somehow, they still didn't seem quite real – then all bets were off. The world as we knew it no longer existed. Worse yet, it never really had. It was all an illusion.

I remember stopping in the middle of the sidewalk, across the street from the bluff – how could the river look so peaceful and the live oaks, so sturdy? – and picking up my baby from her carriage, and holding her. Just to make sure she was still there... that her heart was still beating... that her forehead still smelled of lavender shampoo.

In the days and weeks that followed, a lot was written about 9/11, about how it had "changed us" as a country. Many believed it had changed us for the better – had brought us together, healed our divisions, redefined our values, clarified our priorities. *Time* magazine famously conjectured that The Age of Irony had come to an end. Roger Rosenblatt explained with great feeling and eloquence in the September 24, 2001 issue:

"For some 30 years--roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright--the good folks in charge of America's intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real. With a giggle and a smirk, our chattering classes – our columnists and pop culture makers – declared that detachment and personal whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh-so-cool life. Who but a slobbering bumpkin would think, "I feel your pain"? The ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything. The consequence of thinking that nothing is real – apart from prancing around in an air of vain stupidity – is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace.... No more. The planes that plowed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were real. The flames, smoke, sirens – real. The chalky landscape, the silence of the streets – all real. I feel your pain – really."

The end of the Age of Irony. And we believed it. For a while, anyway. The persistently hip unleashed long-hidden stores of sincerity... the wisecrackers stopped cracking wise... the mockers stopped mocking and the sneerers lost their sneers. Even the late night comics were giving serious, heart-rending monologues. The Age of Irony was over, and we were glad to let it go.

Looking back now, it seems a little... ironic. Because, of course, "the end" didn't last. If anything, we are now more irony-crazed than ever. Ten years later, we Americans love our sarcastic, satirical smart-assery even more than we did before 9/11. We hail our Jon Stewarts and our Stephen Colberts, our Conan O'Briens and our Tina Feys. Irreverence is back with a vengeance; almost like it never left.

And you know what? That's okay. Innocence is not something you get back once it's lost, and irony isn't something you lose, once you've got it. Though I sometimes wish it weren't so, modern man cannot live by sincerity alone. Sometimes, modern man needs a good, sardonic

laugh. Sometimes we need to make fun of ourselves, and even each other, and especially – *especially*

– the human condition, just to keep ourselves from succumbing to tears. The fact that we can still muster up hearty laughter is something to celebrate, I think. Is that laughter more bitter, now, than it was before? I think maybe it is. But we've seen things, now, that we hadn't seen before. We know now that

life

is more bitter than we'd imagined... and more bittersweet.

So, what about those other so-called "changes?" Did they last? Is America better since 9/11? Depends on how you judge, I suppose. Many would answer with a resounding 'no'! After all, our economy's in the crapper... we're engaged in wars that hardly anybody understands... our political discourse is even more rancid than it was ten years ago... our popular culture even more decadent. Some say the American century is well and truly over, and they may well and truly be right.

But... that's just the "big picture." For most of us, it's the little picture that matters most... and all the vivid snapshots that make up our days and nights. For me, it's the baby girl who grew up to be a delightful ten-year-old... the small family business that's still chugging along, a decade later. It's the house that became a warm and loving home, the flowering plants that fill the once-empty yard, the local art that covers the once-blank walls and the photos that dot the fridge. It's the stubborn oaks that keep growing on the bluff and the inscrutable river that keeps rolling into the sea and the school plays and the dance recitals and the church suppers... and the friends on the porch on a Saturday night in August.

These things, for me, are America. These are my snapshots... the freeze-frames that make up my own "little picture." And in spite of the big picture – the wars and the economy and the politics and the culture – that little picture fills my heart to overflowing.

And this, I think, is what America is and always has been: Millions of little pictures, each free to develop at its own rate, in its own time, in its own way... and each more precious, and far more valuable, than the “big picture” can possibly convey.

On this melancholy anniversary, I am thankful for my country and all that she has been to the world... and all that, I hope, she'll continue to be. The big picture may not look so bright at the moment, but there are millions of little pictures out there, like stars in a darkening sky, and they tell a different story.

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