
HOME >> UNDERWHELMED

Unforgettable

By **Sandy Asirvatham** (</index.php?category=author&s=Sandy Asirvatham>) | Sep. 11, 2002

I don't really want to contribute to this week's juggernaut of verbiage marking the first anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, but I also can't come up with a strong enough reason to resist doing so. Somehow I would feel I was being disrespectful and selfish to use this space today for any other topic. At the same time, I find myself sensing the inadequacy of words, their ultimate failure to encapsulate all the complex and contradictory sensations and thoughts generated by our year-old collective trauma. In the past few weeks, I've seen very few editorials or articles that have anything truly significant, new, or insightful to say about Sept. 11 or the war, but maybe that's not the point anyway. Maybe it's just the act of saying *something* that feels somberly necessary.

We happened to be in New York this weekend to commemorate a very happy personal event--our fifth wedding anniversary. On Saturday afternoon we went to one of my old neighborhood haunts, the Old Town Café (the bar made nationally famous when David Letterman had his cameras pan through it for the opening of his show), where we drank beers, ate fried calamari, and watched Andre Agassi whip Lleyton Hewitt in the U.S. Open semifinals.

That evening we got dolled up and attended a prix fixe dinner and cabaret show at the famous Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel, a fancy-schmancy event made all the more special by the fact that the performer was Stacey Kent, a fabulous old-

school-style singer who happens to be my childhood friend. After the first set, we sat in the Algonquin's lobby chatting with Stacey, her father, her stepmother, and her saxophone-playing husband, Jim, and got to feel like celebrity hangers-on as the singer's fans came up to her to request autographs.

It was midnight on a warm Saturday in Manhattan, and there seemed to be hundreds of beautiful, giddy 23-year-olds of both sexes exploding out of the bars and into the streets. So to bask in all that drunken lust and energy, we skipped the cab ride and instead walked the 25 blocks down Third Avenue to our cute, cheap little European-style hotel.

We woke up early on Sunday morning and, while waiting to catch a subway out to Fort Greene, Brooklyn, to meet some old friends for brunch at a South African restaurant (bacon and banana sandwiches, yum), we walked the streets around Union Square Park. Restaurant workers whistled as they hosed down sidewalks, homeless men sat on brownstone stoops in pairs chatting with one another, and the city seemed gorgeously quiet, calm, and unpopulated in the way that only one of the noisiest, most frenetic, crowded places on earth can be.

In the park itself, we came across a neighborhood display marking Sept. 11: Three large metal bulletin boards covered with squares of colored paper, on which people had written individual messages in felt-tip pen. There were probably a couple hundred in all. The abundance of cliché and tiresome catch phrase in messages like these is always a little astounding, but also deeply saddening, since it demonstrates how tough it is for people to articulate their thoughts and feelings, or to come up with a truly fresh response to the age-old horror of war.

I found myself equally bewildered--or maybe I mean equally unimpressed--by the messages of doves and hawks. An anonymous writer had inscribed that old saw, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind," and I must admit that made me roll my eyes. Someone else had written, "Learn to listen: Learn to solve problems by listening." A child, probably--a true innocent and idealist. Someone who still believes in simple solutions to complicated problems, in the ultimate reasonableness of all human beings. I vaguely remember being a child like that.

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[view=cm&fs=1&tf=1&to=HOWARD_NYC@YAHOO.COM](https://mail.google.com/mail/?view=cm&fs=1&tf=1&to=HOWARD_NYC@YAHOO.COM)) wrote, "No mercy was given, no mercy will be granted. mad dogs and bullies be warned." A certain Bonnie Kaufman had quoted John Lennon, "All we are saying is give peace a chance," while right next to that a certain T. Davis had responded, "All we are saying is give war a chance." Neither end of that seesaw inspired me to jump aboard and ride. It occurred to me that, even in times like these, people probably generally stick to whatever war-mongering or peacenik tendencies they already harbored, that even the enormity of the crimes of Sept. 11 is not enough to "convert" most of us to a whole new attitude or philosophy. For better or worse, we are still whoever we were.

There were other, more ambiguous messages that didn't seem to participate in the peace/war dialectic at all: Wendy P. had written, "This world is all we have," while Marina had written, "Stop listening to the government and start listening to your heart." OK, whatever. Someone calling himself Hesh from L.A. made an even stranger statement, an inappropriate grasping for sports metaphor and wordplay: "First Al Queda hits a hole in one, & now one (1) year later we are one (1) of a whole." OK, whatever.

Somehow, amid all these words, there was only one message that really made me stop and have to catch my breath. "I MISS YOU PAUL," wrote Tim, in big block letters. Then, in a tiny script underneath that: "I will never forget you."