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Flood Time

By **Sandy Asirvatham** (</index.php?category=author&s=Sandy Asirvatham>) | Oct. 3, 2001

Somewhere in that irretrievably pacific mental space known as "Before," I'd been considering a column on the current state of U.S. abortion laws, specifically on how the tyrannical, right-wing-sponsored gag rules are endangering family-planning clinics in desperately poor countries. I was pondering a piece on Oakland, Calif.'s controversial new military-style public school. I thought about inquiring at homeless shelters and soup kitchens as to whether they're registering the signs of a worsening economy. Then there was that piece I'd been meaning to write for a while, about my attempts to contact my long-lost, half-African-American cousins, a follow-up to a column I did last year on my family's racist past.

But the events of Sept. 11 reorganized my sense of narrative priority, along with everyone else's. Who knows how many formerly "current topics," from the critical to the trivial, from the global to the intensely personal, have been tabled indefinitely? Who knows how many hitherto genuinely important issues will be forgotten, how many kinds of suffering unrelated to the attacks will go unnoticed? For the moment, and for the foreseeable future, there is only one story.

I really don't know what I can add to this singular flood of narrative, and yet I feel much too weak to ford any alternative streams, or to disembark from the flow altogether. Every three seconds, my feelings and thoughts change. A million years ago, on Sept. 14, I remember growing uneasy as I watched President Bush stand

atop that crushed hook-and-ladder, addressing by bullhorn the cops and firefighters at ground zero. This man, who is normally so stiff, so inarticulate, so tightly scripted by his justifiably gaffe-fearing handlers, seemed liberated--if that's not too absurd to say--by the horror of what he was seeing and the necessarily simple response that the event demanded. "I hear you, the world hears you," he said to those brave but grieving rescuers, with more resolve than he has probably ever said anything in his life.

Although I recognized his humanness in that moment--catastrophe has the power to reduce the world's complexities into very stark, easily spoken truths--I was also a bit scared. Never mind, for the moment, that this leader of ours was ostensibly the same man he was on Sept. 10, the jingoistic cowboy who spurns global environmental treaties and missile bans; who harbors no moral qualms about the death penalty even in the face of mounting evidence that it sometimes kills innocents; who is quite possibly the illegitimate victor of a corrupted electoral process. Never mind all that. I was scared because Bush had apparently arrived in a place where everything seemed cartoonishly simple to him, and the next day We, the good guys, would go out and start a war of retaliation and justice willy-nilly against Them, the bad guys.

But things have not gone as I predicted. Although the rhetoric from the top resonates cowboyish at times, Bush seems to be heeding the advice of relatively levelheaded folks like Secretary of State Colin Powell. He has not yet fulfilled my image of him as an unreflective hawk. The extremists in his own party are calling him a wimp. For the moment, I remain chastened and grateful.

I used to consider myself, only half-jokingly, to be more a citizen of New York City than a citizen of the United States--even when I was still a teenager living in New Jersey and only dreaming of moving across the river. A journey to Atlanta or Maine or Dallas seemed nearly as long, culturally speaking, as a trip to Italy or India. I think we all harbor some resolutely provincial connection to "home," be it the place we were born and raised or the place that best shelters our personalities, values, tastes--our idea of ourselves. Though I'm fond of Baltimore and grateful

that no loved ones were lost in the World Trade Center conflagration, I've been feeling guilty for being down here while so many of my friends and former neighbors are up there, still mired in mourning.

Here are two tiny, trivial, personal droplets I can add to the singular stream of narrative, the "Before" chapter. In 1980 or so, my friend Tracey Zinn celebrated her sweet 16 at Windows on the World at One World Trade Center. It was the first and only time I ever made it all the way up to the top of that building. Also the first time I ever ate lox. In late August 2001, my sister and I met up with an old grad-school friend of mine, Ed Nawotka, to go hear the avant-jazz singer Nora York at the Knitting Factory. We weren't sure which way to walk when we got off the No. 1 subway train, but we knew we had to go east and, like all knowledgeable New Yorkers, we used the Twin Towers to orient ourselves. They were our big, gleaming, arrogantly capitalistic, unabashedly phallic breadcrumbs.

Ed works for *Publishers Weekly*, a magazine owned by the business publisher Cahnners and headquartered in Chelsea. On Sept. 11, he and his colleagues watched in horror and disbelief, as did so many New Yorkers, as the jetliners crashed into the towers and caused them to collapse. Only much later did Ed learn that two of Cahnners' top executives had been in the plane that hit the north tower. People die every day in all sorts of horrible unseen ways. But rarely, if ever, have so many thousands of deaths been witnessed by so many utterly helpless, and helplessly connected, millions.