

# Epiphany - epiphmag.com Issue 18

*Where Creativity and Inspiration Evolve!*



***An Unpretentious Publication Where Creativity and Inspiration Evolve!***

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# The Memorial Service

by

Robert Iulo

I was with the Department of Buildings then and after the second plane hit the south tower, was on my way with some inspectors to the Fire Department command post. We were going to offer structural assessment assistance as we would normally do at a high rise fire. This was no normal fire. As we got closer I looked up at the towers. I'd once heard that if a primitive tribesman could suddenly see Times Square at night, not being able to comprehend its commercial messages, would be overwhelmed by its beauty. If I could have separated what I was seeing from the tragedy and destruction it would also have been beautiful. The smoke and flames pouring from the hole caused by the plane were pitch black and Halloween orange. The sky was a perfect clear blue and filled with blowing paper that looked like silver sparkles rising hundreds of feet above the towers.

A policeman was trying to stop a man on a bicycle from getting any closer to the burning buildings. He was crying and saying he had to get to his wife.

As we were helping to gently subdue him one of my inspectors turned back to the towers and very calmly said, "The building is falling."

I turned and saw the upper stories beginning to crumble. It was down in seconds and seemed to turn into smoke and dust spreading in all directions. At first we just got out of the street and crouched along the side of a building away from the falling tower but realized within seconds this probably wouldn't help. The police officers we were with started to run and so did we. One of them told me

to follow him down into a subway station but that didn't seem like a good idea so I just sprinted up Church Street. I was wearing a suit and wing tips but still I managed to almost stay ahead of the dust cloud. I looked over my shoulder and saw it gaining. It was the width of the street and as high as a ten story building. Sharply defined, it was like a billowy cloud you might see in the sky but gray and ominous and moving toward me. On its forward edge were flashes of solid parts of the structure whirling within it. Everyone was running because we were sure we'd be suffocated or hit with these flying objects. The air continued to thicken but I finally outran the worst of it. No one expected the collapse. Fires didn't cause high rise building collapses. That's what all the engineers said. But this time was different.

I got back to the site after the dust settled, but I mean that figuratively because the dust didn't really settle for weeks. I knew the area very well but was completely confused and disoriented. On the ground was a layer of dust, singed paper and ash like a heavy snow fall, hiding the curb line between the sidewalk and street. A haze of dust lit by sunlight made seeing any great distance difficult. A large building seemed to be standing in the middle of Church Street. I knew that couldn't be and as I got closer saw it was a four or five story section of exterior wall from the south tower that landed upright and embedded itself in the street like an axe in wood. There were people and equipment all around me and the noise was deafening. Along with all of the people who were there, the brightly painted heavy machinery, fire trucks and everything else was tinted tones of gray with dust and ash, making me feel like I was a character in a black and white movie. I was on my way on foot to a location south of the site but had to stop with my senses overcome by the cacophony of strange sights, smells and sounds. I forced myself to keep moving and snap out of it.

Suddenly the noise and almost all movement stopped. Someone heard what he thought might indicate a buried survivor and he radioed for silence. Cranes, excavators and grapplers froze. The only digging was then done by hand. Everyone stopped to look and hope as debris was passed from the location of the possible survivor, hand to hand through a long line of fire fighters, National Guard, construction workers and anyone else who was nearby. Suddenly the noise and activity started again. It was a false alarm. This would happen a few times a day, every day until "rescue" officially and sadly became "recovery."

Things went on like this for days and being there every day made it hard to see progress, but we got used to it. At that time we didn't refer to it as Ground Zero. It was simply "The Pile;" a seven-story twisted mass of steel and other unrecognizable debris and it was burning. It would keep burning almost until Christmas.

We were fed with donations from the City's restaurants. It wouldn't be odd to have chicken McNuggets for breakfast and then coq au vin from the Tribeca Grill for lunch. There were makeshift tables heaped with respirators, hardhats and other equipment and volunteers were giving out bottled water, massages and counseling, all on an as needed basis.

About four weeks after 9/11, a memorial service was planned along the east side of the site. I was there the day before with some inspectors to make sure nothing in the immediate vicinity would endanger the attendees. Five thousand were invited. A twenty-story building with lots of broken windows in its upper stories loomed over an area where chairs were to be arranged. If the wind picked up it could dislodge any loose shards and glass can sometimes fall like a leaf in a breeze from those heights and travel great distances. I called for a Fire Department ladder company to get some fire

fighters into the building and remove any dangerous windows. As an inspector and I waited for the ladder truck, a near-by Sanitation Department driver got a call on his radio warning that some smoke, possibly containing toxins our respirators couldn't handle, was blowing our way. It would be best if we got indoors. Sometimes as steel was being lifted from the Pile, fresh air got into voids where debris was smoldering and caused a flare up. You didn't often see flames but there would be plumes of smoke. We never knew what was burning but during those days we saw thick smoke in every color of the rainbow.

The nearest place to go indoors was the entrance of a vacated federal building on Church Street. We went into the lobby and identified ourselves as city emergency workers to a guard at a desk. She was in uniform with a pistol in her holster. We asked if we could stay in the lobby for a while because of the smoke condition outside.

She said, "Great! Now I can finally go out for a cigarette. You guys watch the door for me."

Before we could grasp what she said, she was out on the sidewalk lighting up. It dawned on us that she had turned over the security of a federal building to three strangers and stepped out into what was possibly a toxic cloud. How could anyone want a cigarette that badly? We started to laugh and laugh. We laughed until our eyes teared. After weeks of stress and long hours and being surrounded by catastrophic destruction, we laughed. She came back in and looked at us oddly because we were still giggling like little boys. We thanked her for letting us into the building and when she thanked us for giving her a chance to get out we started to laugh again.

Robert Lulo's work has appeared in the Mississippi Sun Herald: [Mississippi Sun Herald](#)

# ABOUT US

**epiphmag.com - Epiphany was started in 2010, solely to be an on-line venue in which writers and artists can display their works. Epiphany - epiphmag.com publishes 4 issues a year - February, May, August and November .**

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