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> -----Original Message-----
> From: Ray C. Dougherty [mailto:rcd2@acf2.nyu.edu]
> Sent: Wednesday, September 12, 2001 12:15 AM
> To: NYU Linguistics Departmental Forum
> Subject: [talkling] What a way to go.
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> To my NYU friends.
> Since I have sent many of my students to work at Morgan Stanley
> and other such companies, it appears logical that some of my oldest
> friends potentially have been severely injured in the WTC accident.
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> Here is a letter that I sent to my alumni mailing list.
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> From: owner-class-62@Dartmouth.EDU on behalf of Ray C. Dougherty
> [rcd2@acf2.nyu.edu]
> Sent: Tuesday, September 11, 2001 11:37 PM
> To: class-62@Dartmouth.EDU
> Subject: A singular tragedy

I was quite moved by Frank Kehl's letter. This is indeed an enormous tragedy.

I live in the New York University Housing on 100 Bleecker Street on the 27th Floor looking south. I am a professor of linguistics. I have an unobstructed view from New Jersey to Brooklyn, and watch planes land at Newark and Kennedy. If the pilot had missed the world trade center, he would have been in my living room.

I heard the boom, and it knocked over a lamp near my window. Shrapnel hit my window. I thought a plane had broken the sonic barrier and knocked the antenna off the roof. I looked over and saw the hole in the WTC and saw the flames. While we watched the burning building (some friends, students, faculty, etc. came by) the second plane hit. We did not see the plane and thought it was an explosion.

The fire spread lower and lower through the WTC building, probably as the jet fuel ran out. Flames came out of every window in both buildings on all sides. The planes hit one building about 1/3 way from the top, the other about 1/4 way from the top. Descent for those above in the WTC was impossible since all floors near the impact were aflame.

People went to the roof and, after 20 minutes or so of increasing heat, jumped off - frequently in pairs holding hands. I saw no jumping triples.

My Thayer School engineering training came back, and I realized that with that intensity of heat in a building in which the steel girders were insulated with asbestos, it had to collapse within one hour. I called the fire department, police, etc. and told them the building was guaranteed to collapse. I was told that 911 was only for emergencies, and I should call somewhere else.

After about 40 minutes, as I saw (I have telescopes, binoculars, etc.) the top segment of the building listing about 3 degrees, I left my apartment and went out to walk in the street. Buildings collapse if they list more than 3 degrees. As I walked down Bleecker Street, people gasped as the building collapsed. Like Lord Jim, my imagination surpasses any reality. I should have stayed and watched. I did for the second tower. It was easier on me.

I bought some milk, water, beans, etc. and went back to the apartment. We watched the second building, and I noticed it was more than 3 degrees, but as the telescope revealed, that was because the beams were buckling on both sides. A building like the WTC does not 'break off in the middle' and fall like a tree. Rather, each floor can support a certain amount of weight, and the floors above are supported by the steel girders. If a top floor collapses onto a lower floor, it must collapse onto the floor below, etc., etc., etc. And the building implodes. All of the people that were in the WTC building are squished into a sort of accordion structure between floors constructed of reinforced concrete. The steel beams flexed like rubber to allow the building to collapse, but they are certain to become rigid when cooled, thereby locking any trapped victims between the immediately adjacent floors

As each building imploded, an immense amount of burning kerosene, Molten aluminum, white hot steel, cement heated into dust, and sundry smoldering flammables spread out in an inverted mushroom cloud - inverted in that it spread along the earth, and unlike an atom bomb did not spread out above.

As each building imploded, this burning cloud of asbestos laden dust spread out from river to river and as high as the original erect World Trade Centers. I imagine that most of the deaths of the rescue workers came from being enveloped in this thousand degree dust cloud. On one ambulance caught up in the cloud, all of the paint was burned off of one side, according to one radio report.

I have never in my English speaking life owned a television set. The goal of the media is to make the world palatable, not comprehensible. I only own a TV in France or Germany, mainly to learn the language. I even watch French and German soap operas to learn basic 'hello, good-bye' type stuff, and of course, the curse words and their tidy use in proper social situations. English speaking TV is abominable. The only thing worth watching are the commercials, and even those are not very good. The news is intolerable.

My friends who have watched the WTC collapse on TV do not grasp the Hiroshima-like horror.

I heeded the call for blood, and began to walk towards the hospital, about a distance from Tuck/Thayer school to the Dartmouth Gym. Freshly showered and in a crisp new white pressed button-down shirt, I arrive at 6th avenue and Houston Street, where I see hundreds of men and women of all ages walking towards the hospital. Badly burned, clothes torn and shredded, bleeding, some with (I am not a doctor) apparently broken or dislocated limbs, they are dragging themselves towards the hospital. One 17-19 year old

boy I tried to help did not seem to even know that I was trying to help him, or perhaps even, that I was there. He was waving his arms trying to keep people away. From his jargon, I think he had been trampled in a stairway.

Crisply and cleanly shirted and powered by newly shined shoes I walked faster than most towards the hospital. Different than I expected. They had the 'sick' people on the sidewalk, and the 'sicker' people were steered off towards something else outside, maybe a truck. Only the 'sickest' people got in. Some advice: If you are ever in such a situation, no matter what your ailment is (broken ribs, crushed whatever) be certain to cut your forehead (with a found shard perhaps) and bleed all over your head and shirt. This will guarantee you get inside the hospital.

There were about 500 people ahead of me donating blood, and they parsed the line. They seemed to want O type, which isn't me. So I will go back tomorrow.

Many of the severely injured people at the hospital seemed to be NYC officials (fire, police, etc.) that were trapped in the collapse of the World Trade Center. The blazing hot inverted mushroom cloud burned off their clothes and damaged their lungs and eyes.

Back home, I looked towards Brooklyn and saw thousands and thousands of people on each of the major bridges (Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Williamsburg) walking out of Manhattan. It was like a hundred marathons, except that everyone was walking slowly. No one seemed to be carrying anything (remember I have an astronomical telescope that can see Jupiter's moons and canyons on our moon). They left Manhattan empty handed, at most, helping some friend to leave. In my life I have never seen anything as moving as this immense exodus of bobbing human heads (they were shoulder to shoulder, back to belly) slowly groping their way across the bridges. It appeared that no one had a laptop.

I was feeding my daughter supper when the third building collapsed (only 50 stories or so). It seems to be (or was) a telephone central, since when it went down my building fire alarm went off, my lights flickered, and my internet connection died.

After supper, I walked around and saw no more burned, bleeding, Crippled people dragging themselves towards the overloaded St. Vincent's Hospital. Only young couples out on hot dates, each on a cell phone talking to someone they presumably would rather be out with.

So. What moved me to write this letter. Well, my intention was tomorrow to jump in my car with my daughters and go to our farm in New Jersey to avoid the mind boggling amount of asbestos that must be floating in the air. (At one time in the 70's - having studied with Noam Chomsky - I was a protestor of sorts, and vigorously protested the spraying of asbestos as fireproofing on steel girder buildings. The WTC were asbestos insulated.) If you live in NYC, particularly Brooklyn where all the smoke went, buy a mask. Avoid the 'gray dust'.

But now I might not be able to leave. On Houston Street, 27 floors below my window, I see enormous numbers of trucks (300?) lined up blocking my driveway. They are from out of state (Conn., NJ, etc.), the National Guard, and various carting companies owned by people whose names end in a vowel. Many of the trucks are empty. Some are huge - like they could carry a tank - but empty. A small number of beat up old trucks are full of lumber, or I thought they were. I went down to ask when the street would be open so I could get my hot 1989 Volvo Station Wagon out of the driveway to speed my family towards the supernatural ecstasy of rural New Jersey. Anytime, it turns out. All streets are blocked below 14th street, but residents can get a pass to escape.

I asked what they were going to build with the lumber I saw neatly stacked in the beat up old trucks. After a bit of a confused discussions (I contributing all the confusion since I saw the trucks from my professorial ivory tower), it turned out that the trucks do not have lumber, they have small, narrow pine coffins into which one apparently places the body bags. Well, the joke was on me.

People who know where I live have been calling me all night.

My feeling is that the TV has made the situation politically palatable so it can fall into the mainstream database and be manipulated into endlessly repeated segments of Hollywood titbits - 15 second plane crashes, 13 second building collapses, etc. My guess is that the same TV newscasters that present this unspeakable situation will be back in another year telling us that there is a plan to evacuate New York City in eight hours if the Hudson River Nuclear Power Plant blows up. Or that a nuclear war isn't really that bad if you prepare for it beforehand and remember to stick your head between your legs at the moment of nuclear detonation.

For me, there were many moving experiences. I was impressed that the blood donation center had more donators than it could handle. The line contained people of all walks of life, all ages, races, religions, genders, and social classes. There were even tourists in the line. I will never forget the tens of thousands of bobbing heads stumbling across the East River bridges. Or, the dazzled tattered bleeding blackened crowd walking north from the scene up Broadway, Green, Mercer, 6th Avenue... - that was moving.

But above and beyond everything, the one thing I will never forget to my dying day, is the view of the people on the roof and higher floors of the World Trade Center lined up in the windows and on railings. You cannot see their expressions, but it is amazing what a 40-power telescope reveals. They often huddled, probably talked about their chances, and sometimes went back into the building, or maybe, just laid on the floor. But then, some went to the edge, and jumped.

Some jumped in pairs, holding hands. I doubt if they were married or lovers. I think it was just two people, alone, desperate, black, white, oriental, who cares - the telescope looking through the heat waves and smoke didn't allow me to distinguish age and race. They would just pair up and jump.

I have thought all day about this. If I were on the roof, and I saw flames on all sides of the building, I would almost certainly jump rather than fry. And if I saw another trembling human alongside of me, I would be much happier holding their hand, and jumping as a pair. Somehow to jump as half of a pair, even if the other half is an ad hoc recent acquaintance, seems to me an infinitely more human way to pass on to the next step, than to take the next step alone. I would wait to the next life to explain to my wife why I held the hand of a strange woman, or to Senator Helms, if my other half were a man.