

9/11

This is from an American financial newsletter called The Daily Dirtnap written by Jared Dillian who I've occasionally quoted elsewhere. It's a very personal story which gives a feel of what it was like to be there that day.

It was the best morning of the year.

The summer swelter had disappeared, and with it, the sticky sensation in the back of your undershirt around the small of your back. The late summer armpit smell that pervaded New York and New Jersey at this time of the year had vanished. The sky was blue and unblemished, and there was a sense that the summer was over and it was time to get back to work. Anything was possible. It was the least likely day possible for something catastrophic to happen.

My mood was incongruent with the weather. I had an important interview with the corporate bond trading desk at Lehman Brothers, one that could possibly determine the course of the rest of my life, or at least, the next few years. The Lehman associate class, of which I was a part, was in the midst of desk rotations, trying to determine what trading desk we would end up on for our careers. I could end up in something cool, like corporate bond trading, or something tiresome, like repo. I traveled to lower Manhattan via ferry, standing on the bow of the boat, feeling the breeze in my face. I walked over to Starbucks in the World Financial Center in my business casual uniform, consisting of khaki pants and a blue Brooks Brothers dress shirt, procured a grande coffee, and sat outside to study.

I couldn't concentrate. Either they gave me decaf, or I wasn't fully awake, but I just could not focus on the newspaper in front of me. The Wall Street Journal had a lot of things to say about today's markets, and it wasn't getting through my skull. I was getting pissed; This interview was going to be an unmitigated disaster. My brain was slow. I wouldn't get the job, and I would end up with some low-paying gig in equity finance, where careers went to die. This morning was not off to a good start.

I was sitting outside the World Financial Center, a four-building complex, which was across the street from the World Trade Center. Even people who had never been to New York could identify the World Trade Center from photographs—the two monolithic twelve hundred-foot buildings in lower Manhattan, one with a giant antenna on top. I had never spent much time in the World Trade Center, except for trips up to the observation deck as a child. The elevators allegedly traveled at a speed of 60 miles per hour. But I had spent some time up there recently: the first few weeks of associate training was done at Windows on the World, the restaurant/conference space on the top floor of Tower 1. In fact, I had been there just a week before, to see Myron Scholes speak. Myron Scholes was the father of the Black-Scholes options pricing model, a neat way to calculate the value of options on stocks and other things, which earned him a Nobel Prize in Economics. He also was a proprietor of the failed hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management, which blew up spectacularly in 1998, and required a minor private sector bailout from the major Wall Street banks. I remember thinking to myself that night that it was pretty cool that a poor kid from Southeastern Connecticut had made his way to Wall Street and was sitting at the top of the World Trade Center, listening to a lecture from a Nobel Prize winner, at the age of 27. Life is full of miracles, if your eyes are open.

But all I could think about at the moment was the fact that I couldn't absorb the day's news in my befuddled state, and that I was going to get unceremoniously bounced out of my interview.

BOMB!

There was an enormous crash that sounded like the biggest car accident imaginable. People were running around, running in circles. I sprang to my feet and started running, but I had no idea what I was running from or where I was going. I didn't see a bomb. Then I saw that other people had

stopped running and they were looking up, at the World Trade Center. I looked, too.

The World Trade Center was on fire.

In all the years I spent staring at the World Trade Center, including in my childhood when I lived on Governors Island, when I had a view of lower Manhattan out my living room window, never once did I imagine it on fire.

I was standing in a crowd of about 50 people. I had no idea what the hell was going on. None of us had any answers. Was it a bomb? Then, word began to trickle through the crowd that a plane had flown into the building. Probably some drunk in a single-engine plane with a death wish, I thought. This happened decades ago, with the Empire State Building. Nothing to worry about, just a freak accident. Time to get back to work.

That was a really big fire, though. There was black smoke billowing out of the top of the building. This is serious, I said to myself. People certainly died in that accident. Perhaps a lot.

“People are jumping!”

I heard from the crowd. I was 27 years old, and in the best physical shape of my life. I was running marathons and playing sports and lifting weights. I had just quit the military, and if there was anyone who was in a position to help out, it was me. So I grabbed my bag and jogged off in the direction of the World Trade Center, leaving my coffee stranded on the table. I halted across the street from the second World Trade Center building, which offered me a view of what was going on in the first one. I was standing in a crowd of men, probably with the same idea that I did—we had all rushed to the scene, hoping that we could help. I couldn’t get close to the building—there were huge chunks of debris falling and crashing to the sidewalk. There was a police officer trying to keep people away from the building, but he was in way over his head, and completely unprepared for what was happening. Nothing in his training had covered situations like this. There was a group of women huddled together on the sidewalk that were crying. What were they crying about?

A man in a plaid shirt, untucked, jumped from the top of the World Trade Center, his body tumbling helplessly, accelerating as he approached the earth.

This made the women cry louder.

Another man jumped. He was wearing a suit, without the jacket. And a red tie. When you’re in a crisis, you tend not to realize you’re in a crisis. I would remember these images for the rest of my life—I still remember them to this day—but in the moment, you work the problem. How do you solve this? What next?

At this point in my life, I did not have a cell phone. Some of the men around me were trying to use their cell phones, but they weren’t working—the closest cell phone tower was actually the antenna on top of the World Trade Center, which was now out of commission. There was a man in the crowd who had this fancy phone with a giant antenna, like the Gordon Gekko mobile phone in the movie *Wall Street*. His phone was working, and people were taking turns using it. I asked to borrow his phone, so I could call my wife, who was at home working on her dissertation. I was dialing the number, when suddenly—

Another plane hit the second World Trade Center right over my head.

I had heard a jet engine sound, and looked up, and saw an enormous red fireball billowing out towards me. I sprinted the fastest I had ever sprinted in my life. I ran until my shins hurt. I ran until I finally reached the river—no place to go. I looked down—I was still holding the guy’s phone. I looked up—by some bizarre coincidence, he was standing right next to me. I gave him his phone back.

It was now clear—we were under attack. By who? What building was next? I stayed as close to the Hudson River as I could. I thought about jumping in. How cold was the water?

I have to get out of here.

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My wife was at home on the other side of the river, working on her dissertation when the phone rang. It was my mother. She told her that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center.

She knew that I didn't work in the World Trade Center, but she was still concerned. She knew I had been there recently. But we didn't own a TV at the time. So she walked downstairs from our apartment and headed down towards the river. She saw the two towers with smoke pouring out of them, and she saw a group of women by the river screaming and crying, tearing at their hair and their clothes.

At this point she begins to panic, and starts to sprint back towards our apartment. She goes inside, and the light on the answering machine is flashing. She pushes the button.

The message plays. There are sirens in the background. The man on the message says, "I'm sorry, I'm just wanted to tell you that he's...he's...gone."

She throws herself down on the couch and sobs uncontrollably. For the next hour, she believed I was dead.

It was a wrong number.

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The only way I figure I can get home is the way I came—on the ferry. Hundreds of people are loading onto each ferry. I've taken Nautical Science classes, I know about naval engineering, and I can tell you about something called center of buoyancy. No way these ferries are equipped to take this many people. Well, I thought, I'd rather take my chances with going for a swim than hang around where planes are flying into buildings.

I nervously embark a ferry and take a seat on the top deck. I'm sitting next to Scott, one of my colleagues from Lehman in convertible sales. I knew him well enough to sit next to him. I wanted to talk about what was happening.

I told him I was outside for the whole thing, and what I saw. "We had the lines open with the guys at Cantor Fitzgerald, and they were screaming." Cantor Fitzgerald was a bond broker with its offices near the top of the first building. They were all trapped, and faced certain death. Certainly they were some of the people jumping—being forced to choose between burning alive, or falling to their deaths.

When we got to New Jersey, I walked with Scott for a few blocks, then headed on further into town. The city was mostly deserted—everyone was either down by the water, or watching on TV. I got to my apartment building and went upstairs. When I opened the door, my wife tackled me—the hardest she had hugged me in our entire marriage.

Just then, the phone rings—it's my father. He asks if I'm okay—I told him I just walked through the door.

"The towers collapsed!" he said.

No way. I wasn't around to see it—I got the hell out of there.

Just then, I heard jet engines overhead. Thinking that it was another attack, I dove under the couch. It wasn't—it was Air Force fighter planes patrolling the area, ready to shoot down another jet.

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We spent the rest of the day trying to figure out what to do. I figured as many as 10,000 people had died in the attack. Later, I would see overhead photographs of the site—the first World Trade Center building had actually collapsed onto the World Financial Center, and onto the floors where I would have been having my interview. I hoped everyone evacuated in time. I would learn later that only one Lehman Brothers employee had perished in the attack—he was riding an elevator in the World Trade Center when the plane hit, snapping the cables, sending the elevator plummeting to the earth.

Since we didn't have a TV, we weren't watching any coverage of what happened, which was probably a good thing. I knew that my job was probably over, and that Lehman Brothers would probably cease to exist. I was busy at my computer, answering the emails that were pouring in, asking if I was okay.

Later that night, we decided to leave town, and drive to my mother's house in Connecticut. The George Washington Bridge was closed, so we drove further north, to the Bear Mountain Bridge. There was a sign on the road that read: "Life Is Worth Living." Apparently, it was a popular place to commit suicide.

Is it?

I arrived at my mother's house late in the night—she welcomed us and sent us off to bed. We would end up staying for over a week. The next morning, I watched footage of the attacks on TV. I saw the planes flying into the buildings from all angles. It was exactly how I had remembered it. I turned it off.

Out of ideas, I drove down the hill to my high school. I went to Norwich Free Academy, a public/private hybrid high school with a sprawling campus. I immediately bumped into the baseball coach, who was now an administrator. I told him my story. Crowds gathered around me. I told my story dozens of times that day.

That is why I will never tell this story again.