

# New York State of Mind

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It has been almost three weeks since the huge gaping hole appeared in the World Trade Center, and yet the black clouds of smoke have seemed too unreal to let me grasp the events immediately. Almost three weeks since the frightening sight of the collapse of the north tower brought me to my knees. Three weeks and yet smoke is still rising from the rubble. Smoke that smells like burnt plastic. Smoke that tastes like steel.

Naturally, these three weeks have changed everything and yet everything has remained the same. It seems as if this is the constant state of New York: The more things change, the more they stay the same. Or is it that here more than anywhere else things are just absorbed more quickly, incorporated into everyday life so that it appears they always had been what they are becoming: New York?

The sudden shock in the days immediately after the attacks made the deserted streets devoid of traffic even more ghostly, knowing as I did that it reflected a more gruesome standstill. But the next day you could already feel that the city had started to brush itself off, get back on its feet. The garbage trucks came and the mail was delivered, just like any other day. The people walking the streets on that Wednesday seemed vexed – of course – but brave and proud at the same time. Sad, but not helpless. On this September 12th you saw and felt a lot of what is so typical of New York; something that usually takes a long time to put your finger on, yet you constantly breathe it in subconsciously, enjoy it and possibly exhibit it yourself: honesty.

Tolerance, the other typical virtue of New York, the result of millions of people from such different backgrounds and heritages living together in such a small space is much more obvious and a mere matter of course. Maybe this is why it is pointed out so often as a main characteristic of the city – yet, the essence of the real New Yorkers it is not.

It is the same, seemingly brutal or cold pragmatism with which they (we) rush

past the homeless people in the streets, or with which we give a few coins or bills to another. It was this sentiment of simply doing what needs to be done that made so many New Yorkers go to the hospitals and patiently stand in line to give blood, to donate money and clothes. It is the honesty with which the bartender asks you where you have been if you missed Happy Hour for a few days. The honesty with which people do not always excuse themselves if they accidentally bump into you. But it is exactly this honesty that made each and every person on the streets on the evening of September 12th demonstrate their pride, their sadness, their solidarity, their desire to help in their anger and grief.

It is an honesty that exhibits patriotism. Patriotism for New York, this atypical city which is so often held up as a symbol of the United States, while it is at the same time unlike the rest of the country. As a German, patriotism is something that always left a bitter taste with me; a term every so often bent by brainless racists using it as a shield. Yet patriotism has various roots, as has been pointed out before: on the one hand it is often misinterpreted to sanction one's deeds due to one's heritage; on the other, it represents the pride to be a member of a greater community and the desire to help it succeed.

Like many, I never consciously realized what an important part of the city the twin towers were. I accepted them, barely recognizing them, as a point of orientation, much like the Empire State Building is a fixture of the skyline. And yet, during the three years I've lived here in New York, I must have seen them every single day, both as a part of daily life, or as a tourist-guide for friends and family. Each time I returned from visiting Germany or from any vacation, they signaled to me – already visible from the airport – that I was back where I belonged.

When I emerge from the tunnel in Manhattan and I feel the pulsating life, driving down the familiar streets, I always feel like I'm coming home. But there is this one special moment, this one instance when you leave the Turnpike in New Jersey to enter the Holland Tunnel, and suddenly, right after the underpass you see (saw!) majestically and elegantly these two immense towers looming before you. How often did I experience this, how often it made me smile. From now on, this will be a bitter moment.

I admired Manhattan's skyline for three years every day from Hoboken, where I went to school and where I now work. The city seems calm from over there; calm, but alive. Soothing and exciting. Every day over the last few weeks, and every day from now on when I look over the Hudson, I look painfully towards the missing World Trade Center, recognize the smoking hole.

But when I return home in the evening, get out of the Path, and feel the vibrating life in my neighborhood, when I see the flowers and candles in front of

every fire station; when I see people go on living their lives; this is the moment when, for the first time in my life, I begin to understand this special patriotism. Sometimes I even feel it myself.