

EXPERIENCE—LESLIE WINES, NEW YORK CITY THINGS WILL NEVER BE THE SAME

When the recent attacks occurred in New York City, Leslie Wines had a profound realization of the need to fight for peace.

Sept. 11 had all the makings of a truly fine day for me. The weather was beautiful and I was pursuing a personal project, as I was on a one-month sabbatical from my job at a news agency that had an office in the World Trade Center. Around 7:30 a.m., I went outdoors to sit by the marina near my home in Battery Park City, one block west of the twin towers, to enjoy the breeze and skim the newspapers. Shortly after 8:00 a.m., I returned home to begin my day.

Did I believe that my pleasant and convenient existence in my beautiful neighborhood was a sort of birthright, and that life would be a long string of perfect early fall days? Probably, but I was about to find out something very different.

I heard the first jet hit the first tower at 8:48 a.m., but didn't know what had produced the horrible, unearthly, high-decibel sound. I turned on the television and heard the news. Realizing that my colleagues were in our office on the 52nd floor of 1 World Trade Center, I immediately ran out of my building and tried to approach the towers. I was told to go back, so I returned to my apartment, where I chanted for my colleagues' safety and received phone calls from SGI friends concerned about my safety. I could not reach my colleagues by phone.

About 15 minutes later, I saw a group of frightened children and shell-shocked adults, many of them completely covered in ash, run into my building. They had just seen the second jet hit. I went to the lobby to speak with them and then went back to my place to chant more daimoku. Then my phone and television went out of order, so I returned to the lobby, where an emergency worker told me that everyone in my building would have to evacuate immediately. A neighbor named Patricia and I became instant friends as we were led out a side exit. We were told to walk as quickly as we could along the promenade beside the Hudson River.

The air was black and foul, but the relief workers were calm and unbelievably solicitous as they helped us find isolated patches of clean air to breathe. Patricia turned to me and asked a poignant question, highlighting our surreal predicament: "Did you ever in your life think that you would be forced to evacuate your neighborhood by foreign terrorists?"

The relief workers told us not to look back at the burning towers but to look at the river and focus on breathing clean air, and I complied. I heard the towers collapse, but I did not turn around to look. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a group of tug boats appeared to take us to safety in New Jersey. The first boat took children and their mothers, and the second boat took women, including Patricia and myself. We had to scale a high fence, but people in the crowd helped push us over. I am forever grateful for their help and the heroism of the clear-headed tug boat operators. These were truly modest men who would not accept a simple thank you.

After we arrived in New Jersey, we learned that, for our protection, we would not be allowed to return to our neighborhood for some time. I told Patricia I had no relatives in New Jersey. She invited me to stay with her brother and his family, who turned out to be

wonderfully hospitable. Oddly enough, I fit into this family almost as if I belonged to it; Patricia's brother even looked like my brother. I stayed three days and made lifelong friends. While there, to my joy, I received word that my colleagues had all survived. I have received many marvelous benefits from my Buddhist practice in the extraordinary aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, but the news that my colleagues and many other friends survived the events are obviously the most precious. However, I did lose a friend, a brilliant and kind man, who was a frequent source for my news stories, and I think about him often.

As I write this, my apartment building has not been reopened. Because my office burned down, I have been sent on a temporary basis to work out of our agency's offices in other cities, first in Washington, D.C., and then in London. I spend a lot of time looking at television images of my once beautiful neighborhood, now reduced to a hellish war zone. And you know what? I love it more than ever and so do a lot of people. Although the opportunities to work in Washington and London are great benefits, I can't wait to get back. To me, my neighborhood was always the greatest in the world, and I can't wait to see it get back to normal, a process which doubtless will prove long, difficult and painful.

Of course, when I finally am allowed to return, Battery Park City will not be the same. But then again, I won't be the same either. You see, I learned that you actually can be driven from your home by terrorists, and that peace and security, along with beautiful days off, are not givens in this world. It turns out that those who desire peace must work for it. As a Buddhist of the post-World War II generation, I have always given the concept of peace a lot of superficial praise, but I did not understand how precious it was until it was taken from me. Now that I understand something more about the fragility of peace, I yearn for it more, in much the same way that I yearn for my neighborhood because I can't return just yet.

These events have forced me to evaluate my priorities in life. There is a concept in Buddhism of introducing doubts in order to break people of their misguided attachments. For instance, the Sept. 11 attacks have caused many people to question how they wish to spend their time, leading to a general decline in enthusiasm for the more mindless forms of popular entertainment, especially those that feature violence. Suddenly, entertainers and athletes seem less heroic than firefighters and tugboat operators.

If you had asked me on Sept. 10 if I would like to have my office burn down and be evacuated from my home, I would have answered "No!" My newfound awareness of the fragility of peace and life itself was not something I sought, but rather something that was literally forced upon me. This new understanding makes some of my former preoccupations seem a bit shallow and questionable, and is the source of tremendous, but not always pleasant, growth.

When I go home, I will be near the remains of the towers, now a mass underground grave for more than 6,000 persons, including some of the hijackers themselves. In the fifth prayer of gongyo, we pray first for the deceased and then for world peace, a sequence I never quite understood. But these thousands of deaths have helped me perceive a link between prayers for the departed and prayers for peace. I am forever indebted to the victims, and possibly even to the demented and perverted hijackers. If those people had not died in such a tragic, senseless, violent way, I doubt I would ever have fully grasped the need to defend peace.