

EXPERIENCE—NED ROBINSON, LONG ISLAND, N.Y. A SEPT. 11 SURVIVOR'S TALE

After surviving the attack on the World Trade Center, Ned Robinson has a refreshed resolve to work for a peaceful society.

For the last few months, I have been doing software development for a financial services software company located at 2 World Trade Center on the 77th floor. Since I get in the office at 7:30 a.m., by 8:40 a.m., Sept. 11, I was already well into my day and thinking about getting a second cup of coffee. We heard the explosion but didn't know what it was.

Eight years ago, in 1993, I was working across the street from the World Trade Center when an explosion took place from a car bomb in the garage. My first reaction then was that the building's furnace had just kicked in. On Sept. 11, I heard a very similar sound and said to myself: "I guess today is going to be hotter than the past few days. They must have turned up the air conditioning."

My co-worker in the next cubicle and I went to the window and saw a large plume of fire shoot up and then debris fell down from the sky. This wasn't the sound of the air conditioner. Another co-worker said, "Let's just leave," and four of us grabbed what we could, heading down the fire escape within minutes.

When we got to the fire escape, people were already there. It was very calm, all the lights were on and there was no smoke. Nobody knew what had happened: we just kept walking down. I was chanting quietly the entire time. When we got down to the 50th floor, an announcement was made that our building was safe and that the problem was in Building 1. They also told us that we should return to our offices. I have chanted a lot of daimoku for the person who made the announcement to be safe and not to feel guilt. There is no way that anyone could have known that a plane was going to hit our building.

A co-worker and I decided that we would be better off outside the building, no matter what they said, even if it was just to get a cup of coffee. It is amazing how the split-second decisions you make have so many repercussions.

After the announcement, many people left the stairs to go to the elevators and return to their offices. With the stairs empty, we continued down at a pretty fast rate and had gotten to the 42nd floor when there was a loud boom and the stairs shook and swayed about six feet, like a pendulum. We thought there must have been another explosion in the first building. When the building stopped shaking, there was no damage, no cracks, nothing falling on us. The lights stayed on, and there was no smoke, just a faint smell of gas. The second plane had just hit our building.

I was told later by some co-workers who had remained until the second plane hit our building (out of 175 people in our office, 171 made it out safely) that the area where my desk was had been completely destroyed. My desk was on the southwest side, the side where the plane hit.

We continued down the stairs, and I kept chanting. Eventually, more people entered the stairs and it took another 20 minutes to exit the building. When we got to the lobby, there were about a dozen or so police officers directing us out of the building. The lobby of the World Trade Center was quite extensive and it took another five minutes or so before we were outside.

I chanted the entire time. I think that the fact that we did not know what had happened helped us. We did not know about the planes, the fires, the people jumping out of the windows in a desperate attempt to save themselves. We had light and air. We stayed calm. We kept moving.

As we exited, the police told us not to look up. Well, I did peek for a second. I saw fire and a tremendous amount of smoke billowing out from about halfway up the tower. However, in my mind, I could not connect what I was looking at with where I had just been. We were out. My co-worker and I kept walking east. I wanted to get as far away from the building as possible.

As we made our way east and then north past the entrance to the Manhattan Bridge, every intersection was jammed with cars and pedestrians, trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening. We didn't stop to look. We just kept walking. I did stop at one point to call my wife and family to let them know I was OK. My wife was not home, so I left a message that I was out of the building, safe and on my way to the SGI-USA New York Culture Center.

That morning, my wife, Cathy, who has been practicing Buddhism for more than 30 years, was chanting with a couple of friends. (Cathy and another member were visiting someone who was about to begin a round of chemotherapy and wanted to learn how to chant.) It was the daughter of one of her friends that told them that the World Trade Center had been bombed. After their initial shock, Cathy said that they decided to first chant 10 minutes of strong daimoku before doing anything else. This was right around the time when the plane hit my building and I was on the 42nd floor walking down the stairs.

After they were done chanting, Cathy, with one of her friends following in her car, drove home, where she was able to hear my message.

When I arrived at the Culture Center, I walked up to one of the staff members, Ethan Gelbaum, waiting outside, hugged him and began to cry. I felt like I had finally made it through this surreal ordeal to a safe haven.

I went up to the fourth-floor Gohonzon room and started to chant. I pulled out *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* and opened to the selection "Questions and Answers about Embracing the Lotus Sutra." Two particular passages stayed with me: "Life lasts no longer than the time the exhaling of one breath awaits the drawing of another. At what time, what moment, should we ever allow ourselves to forget the compassionate vow of the Buddha, who declared, 'At all times I think to myself: [How can I cause living beings to gain entry into the unsurpassed way and quickly acquire the body of a Buddha]?' (WND, 62). "I pray that you will embrace the Mystic Law, which guarantees that people 'will enjoy peace and security in their present existence and good circumstances in future existences.' This is the only glory that you need seek in your present lifetime, and is the action that will draw you toward Buddhahood in your next existence. Single-mindedly chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and urge others to do the same; that will remain as the only memory of your present life in this human world" (WND, 64).

Also, SGI President Ikeda recently wrote: "Peace is not something to be left to others in distant places. It is something we create day to day in our efforts to cultivate care and consideration for others, forging bonds of friendship and trust in our respective communities through our own actions and example" (*For the Sake of Peace*, p. 212). I have never found these words more true than now.

Having survived this horrific tragedy, and having had the chance to reflect on how many lives have been lost, I am determined to do whatever I can for the sake of creating a peaceful society here and now.