

# Hope

**on  
the  
Fence**



*The Art  
of Healing in  
New York City*

*Story and Photos  
by Ella Rue*

## Pinned to a chain-link fence, a child's drawing of Lady Liberty weeps.

Beside it is another child's drawing, this one a self-portrait of a tearful child holding a MISSING poster with a picture of her father, a police officer. On that same fence are pictures of the World Trade towers engulfed in flames; of firefighters; of everyday people jumping from windows to meet their terrifying end. There are also images of vengeance and vulnerability, yet also of resilience and hope. Poetry and prose poured from thousands—journalists, published poets and writers, novices, and children alike. Inscribed thoughts, fears, and suspicions. Paintings, photographs, collages, assemblage, and rudimentary stick people drawn with whatever mediums were on hand. Color combined with text to portray pieces of our past and fears for our future.

Every day for weeks, I would walk to class, gazing across the river at the damaged horizon and the billows of black smoke. I had a deep-seated need to see, up close, the massive



gap in the landscape. I needed to see first-hand the echoing damage that was done only minutes from where I attended classes, where I worked, where I lived. Something inside me needed to renounce the television broadcasters. I thought somehow, if I were there, maybe, in reality, it wouldn't be quite as dreadful as the media was making it out to be. I had to see, and touch, and be in the spot where once those enormous towers existed.

My hopes were unrealistic. The devastation, destruction, and wreckage was enormous—more than I could handle—more extraordinary to me though were the heartfelt notes, gifts, offerings of love, prayers, and flowers piled high, some with hearts or teddy bears attached, at the foot of those walls which had been collaged with images of the missing and pleas for information. In the midst of such pain hope endured, indeed thrived.

My brother John is a New Yorker. He attends graduate school in



midtown Manhattan. He was missing the day of the terrorist attack. I say "missing" only because, for most of that tragic day we were unsure of his whereabouts. We were terrified. He is fine, and it turned out was only lost among the shaken masses. All day my family worried, trying, to no avail, to reach him via cell phone, via pager, via email. Eventually, late in the day, thankfully, I received an email from him confirming his safety. He had to wait in line for access to the computers. Everyone wanted access; everyone was anxious and restless, wanting desperately to contact their loved ones, to assuage their most horrible fears.

John reacted as many did, by writing; putting pen to paper, or keys to email, as the case was. This was



They say that thousands are dead. Everybody either knows somebody or knows somebody who does. Debris was blown as far as Brooklyn. The World Trade Center, one of the great human accomplishments, is simply gone. We have felt safe for so long—partly because of our geographic isolation, partly out of the knowledge of our own sheer power as a nation, but actually, we are incredibly vulnerable. This could happen again; next week; tomorrow; anytime. I'm afraid I don't like this brave new world. We will be New Yorkers again, and New York will again be New York, but not tonight. Tonight we grieve; we cry for our missing loved ones, and we mourn our lost sense of security. Today, the violence of the world was brought home on us; tonight, we lie broken and bleeding.”

Some were surprised by the interest in visual and literary art in the wake of such a calamity. But the art or writing of someone who has had a loved one unexpectedly torn from their lives, with no explanation, no justification, no rationalization, makes the breath and the view of any observer its medium: this offers

the beginning of healing for John, as the author, as it was to his family and friends as the readers:

“I am still dazed. Manhattan is like a ghost town—people are in a fog. As I walked from Lincoln Center to Columbus Circle this evening, New York was not New York, and New Yorkers were not New Yorkers. We weren't bitching at each other, as we usually do, nor were we “coming together in time of crisis,” as we have also been known to do. We were numb. We couldn't believe that something like this could really happen, that it could happen to us.



an authoritative appeal, heightened at a time when most of us felt unbelievably overdosed, overwhelmed and overwrought by the barrage of images and sound bytes being thrown at us by the mass scaled mass media.

The devastating degree of the disaster itself, the magnitude of the airplanes, the immensity of the Twin Towers, the number not only dead, but not simply gone but vaporized, was communicated, and somehow multiplied by the remarkable reach of the medium of television. The instant irrevocability was captured in a photograph; an ash-covered woman searching for her husband, grasping for hope, holding a tear stained photograph as she implored newscasters to air her plea. Poetry and artwork, by their singular nature, are as personal as all those impromptu memorials honoring victims and survivors that were created with flowers and photographs pinned to the chain-link fences surrounding the devastation.

Art serves countless purposes, but following September 11, none



was more crucial than its therapeutic value. Pain was instantly internalized and then externalized, and then internalized again, an unrelenting cycle that the victims could not prevent. Art as healing happened everywhere, spontaneously and instinctively. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, schoolteachers across the country encouraged children to begin art projects. They knew that the very process of creating prompted people to tell more than they would if they had simply spoken about it.

Healing with art is all about process. The outcome is no longer of any relevance. The important thing is to simply create, to give yourself permission to make “mistakes,” to adopt an attitude of acceptance and of learning—these are things that are important not only to healing, but ultimately to succeeding in life, and moving onward.

Evidence suggests the choice of creative expression is also unimportant. Any type of artistic, creative endeavor can be healing. What matters most is that the individual engages in a form of creative expression that is meaningful to him



or her. Whether it's paint, poetry, prose, sculpture, song, sewing, dance, drawing, carving, gardening...it doesn't matter; it matters only to do it.

Evidence also suggests that using a combination of audio/visual/motor skills is more potent than any one medium used alone. For example, listening to Beethoven while sculpting and reinforcing the experience with visual inspiration such as a book of beautiful photographs or an inspirational video will have a greater healing effect than simply listening to the music alone.

Art therapists say that by reflecting on the creative process and the art itself, we gain control and a deeper understanding of our own emotions. For some, this leads to healing; others may experience, if not a literal recovery, at least a greater sense of well-being. There is a sense of control, conscious or otherwise, in knowing that we can create something, then erase, cover up, rip up, or throw it away. This is a control that is not often felt in most circumstances in our lives.



Recently, designs for a memorial were accepted to honor the memory of the victims of September 11. An artistic, loving tribute to the thousands of lost lives, "Reflecting Absence" (see winning website at [www.wtcsitememorial.org](http://www.wtcsitememorial.org)) intends to resonate the feelings of grief, loss and absence that were caused by the destruction and carnage of that tragic day. Although nothing will heal the hearts of the survivors, the hope is to suggest a tranquil, reflection area respecting the footprints of the towers and memorializing the lives of so many who were lost so suddenly, senselessly and violently. There will be a field of trees that is interrupted by two large voids containing recessed pools. These recessed pools will represent the chasm in the hearts of New Yorkers and Americans as a whole, and will be visible, tangible reminders of what no longer exists, except within our collective memory. The acreage of trees will be an annual cycle of rebirth, reminding us that although so many lives have ended, life does indeed continue. The names of those lost will be arranged haphazardly around the pools. The indiscriminate brutality of the attacks will be reflected in the

arrangement of names, and no attempt will be made to impose order; a concrete reminder of the cruel senselessness of the attack.

In the aftermath of September 11, art sprang up all over the country. On the Web, dozens of organizations have sponsored projects for art concerning 9/11. Galleries, both public and private, showcase artwork, photography, dance, installations. These galleries have become a venue for healing. It has been over two years since the attack. Thousands of children lost parents, men became widowers, women became widows. There was no, nor will there ever be, a legitimate explanation that will justify, defend or validate that violent, massive attack. The only option is to move on, trying to make sense of life after such a large loss. Art may not be the answer, but it does help us to heal.



## What the Experts Say

"The essential process of healing ourselves with creative expression involves our own personal change. When we are faced with physical or emotional challenges, we can aid our healing process with art by opening ourselves up to our inner voices of change."

—Michael Samuels, MD

"At the deepest level, the creative process and the healing process arise from a single source. When you are an artist, you are a healer; a wordless trust of the same mystery is the foundation of your work and its integrity."

—Rachel Naomi Remen, MD  
Clinical Professor of Family and Community  
Medicine at the UCSF School of Medicine



"As doctors we are taught to prescribe tranquilizers for people who are feeling anxious to promote tranquility. We give sleeping pills to people with insomnia. Quantum Healing looks past all the wonder drugs and modern technology to a natural way of healing which speaks to an integration of mind and body."

—Deepak Chopra

"Think about your favorite activity for a moment. When you are really enjoying something you like, how do you feel? As you listen to your favorite music with full attention, other thoughts and desires fade away. You are simply in the moment. There is contentment—peace."

—Joan Borysenko  
Practical Paths to Wholeness



## Design Post 9/11

May 21, 2004

New Jersey City University will be hosting the UCDA Northeast Regional Workshop. Come join us as we investigate the theme Design Post 9/11. We will hear from Doug Eberhard of Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) as he explains the design and implementation of the award-winning website [www.lowermanhattan.info](http://www.lowermanhattan.info). In connection with the ongoing recovery of Lower Manhattan, Company 39, PB's e-media subsidiary, developed an interactive Website and related multimedia and visualization materials. The Website, [www.lowermanhattan.info](http://www.lowermanhattan.info) consolidates thousands of pages of information and images from more than 60 federal, state and local agencies. It provides the public with news on relevant topics such as transit, safety and security, rebuilding plans, assistance, community involvement, cultural facilities and even area history.

Project Manager Doug Eberhard led Company 39 in delivering the project ahead of schedule, compressing what normally would have been six months of work into just two months. The Web site, which sustained over 90 million hits from 81 countries in its first six months, has received several awards for design, content and multimedia innovations and coverage from key U.S. broadcast and print news organizations.

"This is one of the finest Websites that I have seen," said Dan Doctoroff, Deputy Mayor of New York City. "Company 39 has done it in a spectacularly short period of time. It's everything I had possibly hoped for, and more."

Additionally we will hear from Dr. Clyde Coriel of New Jersey City University. Coriel will speak about the role of imagination within the "Age of Design."

Other presentations include: Karen DeLucca, Creative Vice President of Block Advertising, who will speak about the past eras of design, and Tom Volpe, Graphic Designer to Manhattan Boro Community College (MBCC), who will speak from a first-hand perspective about how their college persevered through tragedy. MBCC acted as a triage center immediately after the attack. Their college is located in the immediate proximity of the World Trade Center area.

After which, we will journey to the Statue of Liberty. If you've never taken the opportunity to see this historical landmark, late May will be a perfect time to see it!

Visit [www.ucda.com/events.lasso](http://www.ucda.com/events.lasso) for complete details, more information and registration form.