

Grief and Sorrow: When Pictures are Worth More Than a Thousand Words

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To say that the events of Sept. 11, 2001 were life changing is clearly an understatement. At our university, panic and disbelief and a sense of uncertainty prevailed. Everyone seemed to know someone from New York or Boston. Students were calling home. Professors didn't know if they should hold class or not. The world suddenly seemed quiet.

On the ground floor of our building, a large cluster of students immediately gathered in near silence in front of a new high-definition flat screen monitor. With only closed captioning available to read, students watched intently as CNN displayed the latest video coverage. Of course, the news got worse before it got better. The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center crumbled to the ground, and by noon the university began closing down.

But because news is our business in the College of Journalism and Communications, many students knew the opportunity was ripe to practice what professors teach. Armed with both film and digital cameras, advanced photojournalism majors set out to document our city's reactions. Some began immediately while others shot pictures only days later after absorbing the same stomach-wrenching emotions felt by their subjects. Some photographed in a near-cathartic matter. Some photographed to fulfill course assignments.

I was floored with the work they produced. Many of these students had just returned from summer break and were starting to settle into new fall courses. Most of them had only one semester of photojournalism under their belts - my introductory class that ended back in April. But somehow they churned out good story - telling picture after picture almost entirely on their own.

I still remember feeling goose-bumps when I saw the photo by Courtney Harris in the morning paper. Courtney's interest had always been in sports photography. But in the crunch, she came through with a fine image of a policeman's family at a memorial service. From Courtney and others, I learned that different personalities can come to life in a crisis. Like proud parents who revel in the accomplishments of their children, I was extremely proud of the way the class documented what they should have without being told.



Photograph by Rob Witzel.

Rob Witzel, a senior working part-time for the city's daily newspaper, was one of the first to hit the street. "Amidst the mayhem of hundreds of students watching in terror," he later wrote for class, "I decided the best thing I could do was shoot pictures. The biggest crowds revolve around the University so I parked my car on campus and went out on foot. I ended up walking for miles and miles just shooting photos and getting updates as I went. As the hours passed I realized I was running on adrenaline because I hadn't eaten all day. Finally around 11 that evening I headed home and during that drive I realized that I would have to deal with the day's events just like everyone else did hours before. It's easy to hide behind the camera when duty calls, but at some point you have to put it down."



Photograph by Rob Witzel.

Classes miraculously resumed the following day and I was met with a slow stream of students with questions. “Do we need permission to photograph inside a church?” someone asked. I had to pause and think about that one. Churches are generally open to the public, but cameras might seem intrusive. “Are you going to a scheduled prayer session, or just poking your head in the door?” I asked. “If that’s the case, try to shoot from behind people. Whatever you do, avoid using flash -- it’ll bother people.”

In the days that followed, my students accumulated an amazing set of photographs that reflected their sensitivity to the situation while also demonstrating their talents. Many fulfilled a semester-long assignment to add a “news” photograph to their portfolio. Some were able to apply their coverage to a QuarkXPress layout assignment called “the two-picture combo.” Several students who worked for the school newspaper or the city daily had their work published. Despite the tragic circumstances of the Sept. 11 crisis, most were able to apply lessons learned in the classroom to the real world.

During the final weeks of the semester, I asked the advanced class of mostly 20-year-old photojournalism majors to reflect on the crisis and describe their feelings while documenting the aftermath of Sept. 11.

What follows is a compilation of the best photographs, accompanied by words written from the heart.



Photograph by Courtney Harris.

When the Sept. 11th tragedy took place, I never could have imagined the amount of sorrow and compassion that I would record with my camera. For the first time in my short photojournalism career I realized the true power we hold in capturing moments in time. Even thousands of miles away from Ground Zero, I found myself fully immersed in a community

whose tears shed the same amount of pain. Many times I asked myself if I should take the picture, and in those many moments I found the answers. (Courtney Harris)



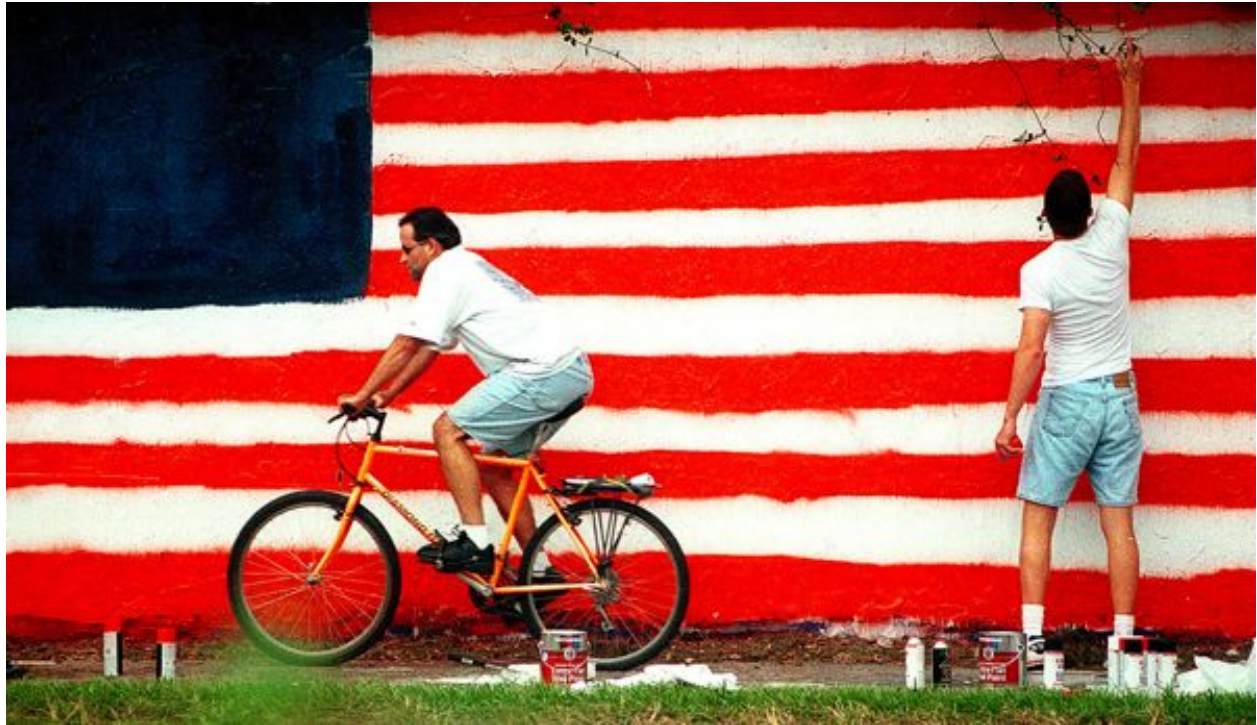
Photograph by Trisha Siddens.

I took the picture on my way home from the Salty Dog on Sept. 13, 2001. I had not shot any photos related to the attack until that night. I guess it was just time. My brother and sister-in-law and two of our close friends were overseas on a cruise in the Mediterranean Sea. They were on their way to Turkey, which didn't seem like a great place for anyone to be. I had gotten word that morning (Sept. 13) that they were all okay, but had no idea when they were coming home - - but at least they were okay. I look back now and think about why I didn't shoot anything until then, and I guess it took that huge peace sign to make it okay. (Trisha Siddens)



Photograph by Rob Witzel.

While attending a funeral (shortly after Sept. 11th), I spotted an old friend named Adam sporting what looked like a patriotic Mohawk. I knew he had been working as a tattoo artist but I was surprised to see he was covered in tattoos, piercings and various oddities. As I was catching up with him it hit me, I had to photograph him. The photojournalism class I am taking this semester requires you to always be looking for the unusual moments that happen every day in virtually every place. Because this was a portrait I was able to really tweak all the variables, even having him stick a flag through the gigantic hole in his ear. Fortunately, I had a digital camera that I had checked out from the college so I could really perfect the light. (Rob Witzel)



Photograph by Jen Sens.



Photograph by Jen Sens.

September 11th was a defining day for everyone, and for journalists a time to excel. People who come into this field deal with tragedy best by doing their jobs. Representing people's stories in

photographs and words is my life's passion. So when anything tremendous happens the only thing I can do is photograph. It was a kind of therapy for me to go out and make pictures of vigils, prayer meetings and people painting murals on September 11th. (Jen Sens)



Photograph by Roberto Westbrook.

Upon learning about the event I was stunned and could do nothing. Soon, in the mob of people that gathered near the TVs, I noticed the same emotions of sadness and anger that I felt inside. I knew immediately that I had to rush home, grab my camera and return to document the reactions of students, and in a way myself. I had heard of a few violent acts across the nation against Muslims, especially women, so I knew I wanted a photograph that portrayed Muslims in a positive light. I've learned that photos aren't just a record, they can also be change agents.... Leaving the core of a march, I stepped out of the mosque and into the center of where Muslims and organizers stood. When two women bowed their heads for a moment of silence I was in the right place. It was a great lesson on forethought, patience and luck. I am a much better photographer now because I understand the importance of empathizing with my subject. After September 11, I believe it's possible to go beyond empathy into sympathy. (Roberto Westbrook)



Photograph by Michael Weimar

Working as a stringer for the local paper while finishing my last semester of college, Tuesday was my usual day off. My phone rang shortly after 9 a.m. In a dazed, half-asleep state, my boss was telling me a plane had flown into the World Trade Center. I thought I was dreaming -- I now wish I was. We still thought it was an accident until I was crowded on the couch with my roommates drinking coffee and watching television. When the footage of the second plane hitting was shown, I knew it was going to be a long day. I told my editor I would look for reaction images on campus and took my laptop with me to transmit. The faces of students are still burned into my mind. The ones who had heard the news were walking around in a stupor, blankly staring ahead as they moved throughout campus. It was hard to point my camera at them. I felt like I was looking into a mirror, trying to make sense of something I was just beginning to comprehend. (Michael Weimar)



Photograph by Jason Braverman.

As soon as I heard the news, I drove over to my office where everyone was freaking out. As the news broke, we decided to come out with a special issue on Wednesday instead of our usual Thursday issue. I went onto campus and shot a lot of people's reactions. It was difficult because I was in shock as well. Candlelight vigils and prayer services were held that night as well as for the next couple days. At times I felt as if I were barging in on someone's privacy as they were trying to reflect on the events and say a prayer, but I knew that it was my job to get the best picture. The emotions and feelings were felt by the subject just as much as they were the photographer in this case. (Jason Braverman)

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