

SURVIVING FIREFIGHTERS

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In this narrative, the son of a firefighter reflects on the future of the FDNY in the aftermath of 9/11. He concludes with his own personal tribute to these heroes.



Photo courtesy of ABC News

My dad retired from the FDNY in 1985. He had been assigned for 15 of his 20 years on the job to Engine 40, on the Upper West Side. Engine 40 and Ladder 35 responded on 9/11. Thirteen men went to the World Trade Center and only one came back. Their story has been well documented in the New York City daily newspapers, and more recently in the March 2002 issue of *Vanity Fair*, so I won't reiterate the personal stories of these men; rather I will attempt to tell a story

of a son's response to the loss, grief, and coping demonstrated by surviving firefighters.

One evening after a horrible fire in Manhattan that he was involved with, my dad confided to me that he was "a professional hero, but, nobody knows that, and I kinda like it that way." I was probably 17 or 18 years old, and at that point in my life, like so many adolescents, struggling in my relationship with my dad. I dismissed his comments as bravado, probably tainted by his consumption

of alcohol. It was only after 9/11, seeing the firefighters being inundated with gifts of art, tickets to shows and cruises, hanging out with celebrities, and being wholly embraced by America as heroes that his words came back to me. I clearly remember thinking, "These guys are in over their heads."

As a social worker, trained in and experienced with crisis intervention and having worked clinically with children and families, I knew some about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. As a trained hospice volunteer who has lost both parents to cancer and as the only one in my family of seven children to have gone to college, I knew something about grief and survivor's guilt. As a volunteer firefighter in up-state New York's capital region, I have responded to calls with a new humility and with pride since 9/11. But I was in no way prepared for the gut-wrenching experiences of being at a funeral service for a fallen FDNY captain.

With a couple of buddies, we ended up after the funeral at the home of a firefighter who had worked in the same firehouse and knew my dad before he passed away in 1989. Suffice it to say that this fourth generation Irishman sang dirges into the wee hours. And, I left the next morning with an E40/L35 T-shirt off the back of firefighter Teddy McVey, a gift from him to me after we had spent some hours together. I wear this t-shirt, and now new and other FDNY merchandise, with a pride I can't begin really to explain as I cannot pretend to understand it all. But more importantly, I left that morning with an impression that has haunted me since. The surviving FDNY firefighters really are in over their heads. Not just on the job, but off the job.

Firefighters long have maintained a brand of machismo that is validated every day, supported in the firehouse, expected at the fire scene, and managed through a brotherhood that exceeds definition of normal bonding. They carry a cynicism and a sense of irony that is manifested by a sarcastic wit by some,

a brooding silence by others; still others express a point-blank gruffness well documented about all New Yorkers and epitomized by the NYC firefighter. A few bear it all with a grace and humility that will bring tears to your eyes. Actually, all the forms of expression can bring you to tears, either through laughter or sadness. The opportunity to be immersed in this atmosphere has come to me at funerals and during visits to my dad's old firehouse on 66th and Amsterdam. I feel blessed to have had this experience since 9/11.

However, the impression, though washed by time and despite my best efforts to forget it all, comes to me again and again as I read articles about the cleanup efforts at WTC, hear about recovered remains, watch again with horror the taped events of that day, and recount in storytelling with friends and family where we were when the planes hit, what we have witnessed and experienced since. I am obsessively worried about these guys. It seems to me it is a matter of time before we read that a firefighter got killed in the line of duty taking some unnecessary risk, or that a firefighter has killed himself while off duty. And if Oklahoma City is any sort of predictor, then soon, clustering on anniversary dates of 9/11, the emergency responders from New York City will begin to crumple. The machismo, a fine coping mechanism day in and day out, ain't gonna carry these folks through the grief reaction, post traumatic effects, and guilt they feel simply for being alive when so many of the brothers have died. Risks will be taken on the job, and risky behavior after their tour of duty, when their unwillingness to talk about it with each other and pact to not discuss it at home catches up with them. Spiritually and emotionally these guys are on a diet that will lead them to a kind of anorexia that we know can and does kill otherwise healthy people.

The loss sustained by the FDNY includes leaders on the job. As any firefighter arrives

on a fire scene, he looks around to see who else is there. When he spots that one fireman, (the firefighter's firefighter) who, for him, epitomizes the guts and skill and experience on the job that he thirsts for, he relaxes, comforted by the presence. It is like a sandbar in very deep water; you set your toes on the sandbar and you feel safe. Many of these guys are gone. Guys are getting off their rigs at the scene and seeing ghosts, or seeing only reflections of themselves in the eyes of their buddies, fleeting images and certainly not comforting.

New leaders have emerged. Some of the new leaders are qualified and gifted and over time (and even some right now) will convey the same comfort. Some are newly minted lieutenants or captains, promoted after 9/11 to fill voids; some are in over their heads. And most all feel an associated guilt for being promoted in the wake of the losses. Acting decisively and with determination takes confidence, and confidence on this job is everything! A team coordinated by a command structure is able to mitigate an event, even a small trash fire, but the command structure of the FDNY has been compromised. The effects of this compromise on a larger scale can be death. It is unspoken in most firehouses; one can almost touch it, but it is too slippery to hold onto... this new reality in the FDNY. Guys no longer love their job. Guys know now, in a way never before presented to them, that this job can be fatal.

Off duty, a firefighter works a part-time job, coaches a little league team, golfs, fishes, and generally enjoys leisure activities like any other blue-collar worker in America. Off duty, a firefighter with a family goes home and tends to the children; inevitably, because he is occasionally off duty during normal business hours, his children will be with him. As a kid, I spent a lot of time at a bar stool drinking Shirley Temples. In most communities, the firefighter is known. My dad was "Danny the Firefighter," and as I got older when I was

looking for him, I'd stop in his local haunts and be greeted by the bartender as "Danny the Firefighter's boy." Casting aside for the moment all allusions to alcoholism, its etiology, diagnosis, and treatment, the reason why any firefighter is in a bar off duty is that there, among men, he can talk a bit about the job. The typical firefighter does not go home and talk to his wife about the fire he has fought. The typical firefighter does not go home and process his feelings about the job, its command structure, or its pitfalls. The typical firefighter will cajole, jab, poke fun at, or otherwise tease another firefighter who slips and mentions that he was talking about this or that with his wife. I'm not passing judgment here; I'm just stating how it is. It creates an unwritten pact among the firefighters about acceptable behavior regarding their ability to talk about their experiences. It is a very rare firefighter who can tell you that he has talked with his family about 9/11. A firefighter's wife will tell you that most of what she knows about what happened on 9/11 and since has come to her from listening in while her husband talks to another firefighter.

Off duty, the firefighters are at great risk for substance abuse. Their unwillingness to process 9/11 and the effects on their souls and psyches since will become manifest later as liver disease and other medical complications due to such abuse. Ironically, they have bottled up their grief, and it will kill them if they don't find a way to put down the bottle and start talking to their loved ones.

At the change of shift, a firefighter going off duty faces a bit of a dilemma. With parallels to a post war experience for veterans, the firefighter returning to the normalcy of the home environment meets it with a kind of silence. At the firehouse, they do stuff that matters. On duty, they are available at the drop of a bell to rescue, save property, and perhaps do something that really counts in their minds toward this credit America has bestowed on them as heroes. Since 9/11, the

heroes of the FDNY may feel the need to do something to justify their new acclaim. Many times, rather than struggle with that silence in their families, they will stay at the firehouse, go off on some job with a buddy, or go to the bar. And rather than deal with the guilt associated with surviving the WTC incident and the lavish donations to their company, they will find a place to be that is other than their home. These places are as numerous as the firefighters themselves. In their loss, they seem to be lost. It seems to me that they are kind of drifting through their off-duty experiences till they can get back to the firehouse where they matter.

The good news is that there are programs, professional clinical services, and spiritual retreats for the FDNY and their families. And some firefighters participate and have benefited. It is a great sense of relief to me to know that this is so. Additionally, some firefighters are coping very well, having been able to dialogue as a matter of course with the people in their lives who matter. And I imagine that most, like all the FDNY before them, will manage just fine, thank you, without all this clinical mumbo-jumbo; they'll "do their 20 [years on the job]", and retire. They'll carry with a fierce determination the fact that they worked the best job in the world, but I'm clearly seeing that they will be scarred from the events in ways that no one ever imagined. Perhaps, rather than a pride that all this adoration we are bestowing on them is intended to create, they are carrying a shame that cannot be uttered.

The FDNY believed that if you sent them to hell, they'd put it out, but on 9/11 they got their asses kicked. Can you imagine, as a kid, witnessing your dad getting beat up on the street by another guy? What can you say after the fact that would in any way make your dad feel like he is still okay in your eyes? We witnessed them get beat up, and we have responded by giving them the key to the city. This, I think is what the FDNY is dealing with.

The firefighters' silence is grounded in a shame they feel; they have no idea what to say, so they say nothing. If only, somehow, the pride and the love of the job could be restored, I could sleep better at night. I guess I know that there will be no miracle cure, that time will take its course and eventually heal the wounds of the organization. It won't come quickly enough for me.



This image was stenciled on an electrical box near Ground Zero

My friend and therapist told me about a woman who went to Hiroshima recently and sat down wearing a sign that read: "I'm American, and I'm willing to Listen." People came to her and talked to her. I have written a ballad to the FDNY. I have had occasion to sing it before some small crowds and gatherings of friends. I have a fantasy of being able to sing this ballad at each firehouse in New York City, and afterwards, as a son of a firefighter and a clinician and a chaplain in my volunteer fire company, have a talk with the guys about taking care of themselves. Naturally, in my fantasy, everyone is okay, and no one gets killed in the line of duty, and the guys begin to talk with their families about what they are going through. Until then, I'll just have to trust that my dad (dead since 1989) helped me write this ballad to the FDNY.

Three-Forty-Three

*Now lest we forget, we'd do well to remember
The horrors of Tuesday, eleven September
In New York City the Bravest did run
In response to the call at tower two, and tower one
Tuesday September eleventh in New York City*

*It was change of shift so there were more to enter
When the alarm dispatched of the terror
Two planes had slammed right into the center
Of the icons for the city, twin treasures
Two planes into the towers at World Trade Center*

*Close your eyes you'll see them taking their paces
Running upwards as those running down,
Had their tears and their years and their fears in a frown
Frozen on soot covered faces
Brave lads into the towers that fateful day*

*Now there's no soul left to tell if there was a call
They didn't know, no one thought both towers would fall
And there leave, with a heave upon all this great city
Such a grief unimagined, such a sorrow, oh, what a pity
A fall, a grief and a great nation's pity*

*But please, the Bravest will do, and no we can't tell you why
Now we're humbled, and yes we are proud, we are the FDNY*

*What a firefighter knows and takes to his heart,
Is what others only think or theorize
That the needs of the one outweigh at times,
The needs of the few or the many
So they rescued, and yes ran in
But we didn't begin to realize
Such a cost would be taken to bring us to our knees
And there to wipe our wet eyes
On our knees we wipe our wet eyes*

*But please, the Bravest will do, and no we can't tell you why
Now we're humbled, and yes we are proud, we are the FDNY*

*The squads and the engines, the ladders all
Are the company of men first responders to the call
Not a siren, a horn, or even a bell
Doesn't sound now and not bring to mind what I tell
But please, the Bravest will do, and no we can't tell you why
Now we're humbled, and yes we are proud, we are the FDNY*

*Stand in my boots I'm sure you'll agree,
Oh, there is trouble in being called a hero
We'd give it all back to have the three forty three,
The lads lost in the rubble of ground zero
But please, the bravest will do, and no we can't tell you why
Now we're humbled, and yes we are proud, we are the FDNY
Still fourteen thousand strong, we are the FDNY*

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