



# New York: Meaning and Memory

## Around Every Corner

By DILIP D'SOUZA

**F**irst time in the City? A day trip, from which my abiding memories are: first, yawning through the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and second, shoehorning my rusting '72 Dodge Colt into a heaven-sent parking spot. You start off doing the “usual” New York thing, a visit to the Met, for us City novices.

But New York is such a gold mine of sight and experience that even the mundane, even parking, becomes a delight.

So that first time, I drove around forever, searching for a spot to leave my light blue Colt. When I finally found one on a lane near the Met, I actually got out and stepped it off. The car was shorter by half the length of my foot. Or wait, was it the other way around? Next 20 minutes, I nudged into that space, one hard-fought inch at a time.

Only in New York. Museums never did much for me. But parking? Ah, the thrill.

Next visit, two more New York things.

First, a frantic subway ride down to Coney Island, followed by more frantic rides there. I screamed and wept as we pelted up,

down and every which way—and then we reached the amusement park. On one roller coaster, a sudden drop tore my glasses off my face and I grabbed for them as they fell through space. But so violent was my grab that the arms broke off, and being a poor grad student, I couldn't afford a new frame and so spent the next few months taping armless glasses to my nose every morning. (I even played cricket like that in Rhode Island.)

That frantic? Never again on a roller coaster, thank you very much.

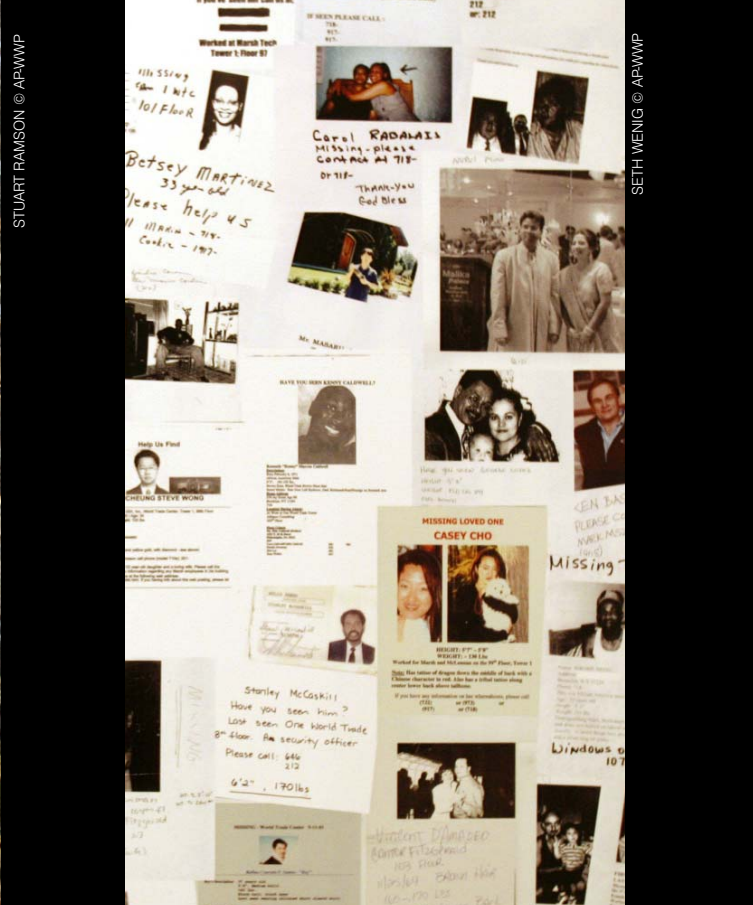
Second, a leisurely cruise around Manhattan, the elegant way to appreciate the city's skyline. Glimpses of the graceful Chrysler and Empire State Buildings—do they make them like that any more?—then the sun-bathed glory of the World Trade Center towers. Hardly graceful, those two, but arresting and spectacular. Who knew then, or when we stood atop one a day later, that they would one day give tragic meaning to the phrase “nine-eleven”?

Years later, sitting on a bench overlooking the Hudson River, I remember that view and cruise. The Statue of Liberty is off in the distance to my left. Gorgeous orange and wispy clouds light up the wakening morning sky; helicopters mutter overhead; the waves go peacefully by, and across the water are the lights of the New Jersey shore. Two joggers glide synchronously past.

It's a quiet morning, yet a head-spinning feeling being in this humming city once more, this throbbing ode to humanity. And it's impossible not to think of the void only blocks behind me. That vast pit, now cleaned and tidied up, but once filled and smoking with a terrifying, indescribable pile of rubble. Rubble that used to make up what was previously on that spot: those same two soaring silver towers that once stood solid under me.

How long will it be before a casual visitor can spend a day in this city without a thought of what happened that September morning?





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Here and now, it's impossible not to be aware. Had I been here that 9/11 morning instead of this, I might have looked over at Liberty, then at the Jersey shore, then at the joggers, then heard some unusual sounds, turned my head to catch my own vision of apocalypse. The thought is inescapable: had I been here that morning, I may not have lived. Freedom symbolized by the Lady to my left; terrorism falling out of the sky behind me. What does it take to get used to that idea, as this city and country must?

New York is a sensory overload, and you've heard that before. For years, I thought that phrase meant sights and smells, sounds and people, parking thrills and roller coaster grabs. That sort of thing.

Today, I know it's also memories of fear, thoughts of terror.

Nearby are more memories, in a marker of a history I would never have expected here.

From one angle, it's a nondescript if pleasant hillock that takes up half a city block. Not enough to stop the tourist in her tracks. If you do wonder what it's about, you might wander around the structure, up the street on the side, up the gentle slope heading toward the Hudson River, then turn the corner...

...to come upon a yawning cave-like

Above left: An aerial view of the World Trade Center site with the Hudson River on the left. Above: A wall of photographs at the September 11 Tribute Center showing victims who perished in the terror attacks. Right: A man stands within the rolls of grassland made to represent the Irish countryside, but set in downtown New York at the Irish Hunger Memorial.

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entrance lit with tubelights, strips of backlit inscriptions along the walls. Two miles—no typo, they add up to two miles—of backlit inscriptions: quotes from letters, recipes, autobiographies and much more. Here in the built-up heart of Lower Manhattan at the corner of Vesey Street and North End Avenue, this strange little hill with its tubelights and words. What is this place anyway?

It's the Irish Hunger Memorial.

It remembers the victims of the Irish potato famine of the mid-19th century. Takes its name from the Irish name for that calamity, "An Gorta Mor," or "The Great Hunger." An epic tragedy, and it left a mark on the psyche of the Irish that, over a century and a half later, they still bear. Ireland was a booming country when the Great Hunger struck, population and economy expanding in tandem. But the famine killed the Irish in droves, pushed many to emigrate, most to the United States, through New York City.

Dedicating the Memorial in July 2002, when 9/11 must still have been a raw wound, New York state's then-Governor George Pataki referred to this "great harbor and city that welcomed so many survivors of the famine to new life, new hope and a new day for themselves and our country."

That "our country" moved me greatly. In this city of immigrants, at a time when suspicion of the foreigner must have come easily, what a thing to say about immigrants—that they brought new life and hope to a country.

Yet, how true a thing to say.

It's no tourist attraction, the Hunger Memorial. Yet, how do I tell you how essentially New York it is, thus deserving of a visit? Especially because as you stroll through and read those quotes, you think once more of apocalypse. That pit still only a few blocks away, this little memorial: reminders of incomprehensible tragedy both. In its time, the potato famine must have seemed just as arbitrary and cruel as 9/11 did. It killed more slowly than the jets of 9/11 did, yes, but on a wider canvas, a vaster scale.

New York: thought at every turn, meaning wafting around every corner.

Is that the lasting legacy of 9/11?



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