

Jim Dwyer,  
A soothing cup of water,  
a vessel of plain kindness

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Before strangers decided to bring cups of water to other strangers, the very air had become an accomplice to the hijackers. "It was like ground-up glass going down your throat as you were trying to catch your breath," Norma Hessian said.

"Like burning embers from a fireplace, it was big chunks," John Cerqueira said. "I couldn't even close my mouth. It was literally stuffed in every orifice. In your ears, your eye sockets."

"You couldn't see in front of you," Jeff Meisel said.

"It was black," Dee Howard said. "All I could do was pray and run."

For one infernal moment that morning, only the cold laws of physics ruled. The trade center towers, traveling at 50 miles per hour in powder form, chased thousands of people through the streets of Lower Manhattan, whipping into the soft tissues of their throats, trying to crush them from the inside out.

In the next instant, men and women emerged from shops and doorways, with cups of water, gauze, flashlights. Life was shoving back, seeking its own equilibrium.

Ms. Howard stood on the corner of Chambers and Centre Streets, a few blocks from the trade center, clutching Imez Graham, a friend from work. They had lost their building. They had lost their way home. They had lost their shoes.

Linda Mauro, leaving work at the Municipal Building, saw the two women powdered in white from their heads to their bare feet. She found some water and made them drink. They would not go into any building, so she walked with them, buying two pairs of slippers in Chinatown.

The Chinese shopkeepers opened spigots in their sinks, found some cups and passed drinks to Ms. Howard, Ms. Graham and thousands of others streaming past.

Norma Hessian stood on Church Street, near the Millennium Hotel, screaming in the darkness. "Someone stuck his hand out at me. He said, 'Take my hand and don't let go,'" she remembered. "He took me three or four blocks, to an abandoned food cart; there was water and juice there. My throat was burning up."

Jeff Meisel fled along Broadway to Nassau Street, where Chino Chaudhary, the owner of an Indian restaurant called Diwan-E-Khaas, was pulling down his rolling gates. Mr. Chaudhary stopped and grabbed people stumbling past. "He dragged us into the store," Mr. Meisel said. "Made everyone go downstairs, to big slop sinks, to wash off. He gave you bottles of water. He wouldn't let you leave until it had cleared outside. He wouldn't hear about money. I never was in there before."

As John Cerqueira and a friend, Mike Benfante, descended from the 81st floor of the north tower, they saw Tina Hansen in a wheelchair, behind a glass door on 68. Mr. Cerqueira, 22, and Mr. Benfante, 36, carried her down 68 floors, out to an ambulance. No more than five minutes later, the building collapsed, all but suffocating them.

They staggered onto West Street, where someone handed them water. "I think it was the Jewish ambulance guys," Mr. Cerqueira said. "They gave me oxygen. We were sharing it."

The refugees streamed north. Aniko and John Delaney collected their daughter, Sophie, 2, at the Trinity Church day care center, two blocks from the trade center. Covered with soot, the family rolled Sophie up Sixth Avenue, then spotted an outdoor food station, staffed by people from Da Silvano restaurant at Houston Street. As fast as the workers could make sandwiches, they were handing them away. The owner, Silvano Marchetto, brought his cordless phones outside so the escapees could call home.

"We were parched," Mrs. Delaney said. "Water was the No. 1 thing we were looking for. He had it all out on the tables outside. Right on the path of all the people heading north."

With little Sophie fretting and crying, Mr. Marchetto sent the Delaneys from his restaurant to his apartment so they could wash up and Sophie could take a nap.

All this, and much more like it, happened anonymously in the minutes and hours right after the attack, without a word of instruction or a second of preparation.

None of those who helped felt they were special. "Just a tiny microcosm of what was going on," said Linda Mauro, who found water and slippers in Chinatown for Dee Howard and Imez Graham. "They wanted to hug me, then stopped because of the ashes. I said, 'Don't even worry about it.' We hugged."

"Not just us was helping," said Chino Chaudhary, who dragged Jeff Meisel and others into his Indian restaurant on Nassau Street. "Everybody was. From the Duane Reade, anyone with a shop."

"Nobody complained about nothing," said Silvano Marchetto, the Florentine with the restaurant in Greenwich Village, who fed perhaps a thousand people that day.

The moment a war begins is chiseled into history. Acts of grace linger only in the memory of small things.

After Theresa Leone escaped from the north tower, she made her way home to Morris Park in the Bronx.

That night, in her bag, she found a plastic cup that had been full of water when someone—a stranger, she doesn't know who—handed it to her as she passed the restaurant supply district along the Bowery.

"I'm going to hold onto it," Mrs. Leone said. "I don't know why. The whole thing means so much. I was privileged."