

A Moroccan Driver and the Great Experiment
By David T. Z. Mindich

Days after the terror attacks, I flew from Burlington, Vermont, my adopted home, to New York City, where I spent my first thirty-five years. Although a bit scared to fly, especially with my wife and two small children, I never miss the Jewish New Year with my parents and did not want to give terror even a small victory.

On the way to the city from Kennedy, I started talking with the driver, a Moroccan Muslim. He took pains to show his sorrow at the terror. I took pains to express my abhorrence of the attacks on Muslims and Sikhs in the United States. He told stories of Moroccan Jews; I of being a Jew visiting Morocco. I asked him if he felt worried about being an Arab in America. Not in New York City, he said. His brother, in Seattle was worried, but New York is used to diversity. At the end of the ride, I said goodbye to the driver, feeling fortunate to be in a city in which diversity trumps terror, even fresh, immediate terror.

New York has always had to balance fear and accommodation. In the 1970s, when many families fled the city's violence and escaped to the suburbs, mine and others didn't. Those who stayed behind were faced with a city that was impossibly violent but had an unexplainable hope as well. Those who stayed were driven by a stubborn optimism, sometimes misplaced, that we could all somehow live together. New York was, and continues to be the world's greatest experiment in communal living.

My New York was a city in which my black karate teacher would chat in Mandarin to Chinese delivery men. It was a city in which my best friend, a black Jamaican, and I could watch a pick-up basketball game on West 4th Street involving nine blacks and one Orthodox Jew. It was a city in which everyone mingled together: artists, Brazilians, bankers, Italians, doctors, Puerto Ricans, engineers, Madonna, Indians, construction workers. One of my greatest loves has always been walking down New York streets, wrapped in a throng of people from all over the world.

It would be poetic to say that everyone lived together under the shadow of the World Trade Center, but this is not true. The city is so vast that the Twin Towers were never more than a tiny part of it. The terrorists, in destroying them, did far less and far more than they imagined. Far less because those big dour buildings were shells and will be rebuilt, either there or elsewhere; far more because of the six thousand killed, but also because the terrorists have attacked New York's dream of living together in peace.

During my trip to the city, I lost my wallet. Was it on the street? Was I the victim of a pickpocket? If I left it in the taxi, I told my wife, the driver would return it. The wallet really wasn't a big deal anyway, especially in the face of a city grieving for six thousand. I went to the local precinct to report the lost wallet and saw police officers hunched over desks, reading newspapers. They all looked tired. While filing my report, a policewoman spoke matter-of-factly about her twelve-hour days. She lost two cousins in the Trade Center. Later that night as a subway we were taking into Brooklyn crossed the Manhattan bridge, we peered into the bombsite. Illuminated by rescue lights, the black smoke still pluming out of the rubble looked an iridescent and ghostly gray. Against the normally twinkling New York skyline, the buildings around the rubble were black silhouettes. And under it all were more than 6000 lost. Lost from America, but also lost from Britain and Germany, Israel and Egypt, India and Pakistan, Iran and Iraq. The scene said something terrible and special about New York itself.

The essence of New York is an experiment in getting along with others, regardless of race, creed, or color. True, people haven't always been kind to each other, terrible inequities exist, and the city's civility is often fragile and tenuous. At times the tribalism seems to crowd out everything good in the city: the black mobs in Crown Heights, the white mobs in Howard Beach. But, increasingly, New Yorkers were beginning to recoil from such events and the city's tempests had begun to subside. By the end of the 1990s, the city had become much safer and had cut its murder rate by two thirds. Every day, New Yorkers hurl through the subway tunnels along with representatives of more than a hundred countries; the vast majority get to their destinations unscathed.

What the terrorists will never know is how beautiful it is to rise above tribalism. To be a Czech in a Turkish restaurant. To be a Korean who dates an Irishman. To be a black who loves yoga. To be an Arab who loves bagels and Kafka. To look out from the World Trade Center's observation deck and see in one of the greatest cities in the world, an army of people trying their best to see each other for who they are, not where they're from.

Not that where we're from is unimportant. New Yorkers have all escaped from somewhere. One of my grandfathers escaped from the Cossacks. Another escaped from a Polish shtetl, and then from the Nazis. Whether it's the African American who fled the South in the 1920s, or the Haitian fleeing poverty in the 1980s, they came and they continue to come. They come from Russia for the extra Glasnost of Brooklyn. They come from Oklahoma to be gay in Chelsea. They come as outcasts from ten thousand small towns around the world to reinvent themselves in the Big Town.

Can the terrorists blast away New York's fragile trust and humanism? Will we be a society of roadblocks and security checks and preconceived notions? I don't know.

What I do know is that the cab driver showed up at my parents' building with my wallet. Unclear about my address, he had combed the neighborhood asking doormen if they recognized me. The Muslim Moroccan had found a Christian Dominican who recognized the Jewish American. But that night we were just plain New Yorkers.

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