

"It may seem presumptuous on my part, but I personally believe we need to think seriously whether a violent action is the right thing to do and in the greater interest of the nation and people in the long run. I believe violence will only increase the cycle of violence. But how do we deal with hatred and anger, which are often the root causes of such senseless violence?"

--His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in his recent letter to President Bush

Subject: Namaste- From Gotham Chopra

My name is Gotham Chopra and I am Deepak's son. I work with Channel One News, an educational news broadcast that is seen in an estimated 12.5 thousand secondary schools, as a TV reporter.

On Tuesday September 11th 2001, at 8 am I boarded a flight in New York headed for Los Angeles. Shortly we rolled out onto the runway, lurched back, fired down the runway, and soared into the sky. It must have been almost 8:30 AM when I looked over my shoulder and gazed out at the New York skyline noting the clear view from Columbia University, my alma mater, all the way down to the World Trade Center. "What a beautiful day," I thought to myself. "I wish I wasn't leaving." I then closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

A little over 90 minutes later I awoke when the pilot's voice came over the loudspeaker. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announced in a calm voice, "we are making an emergency landing in Cincinnati because of an apparent terrorist attack in the New York Area. Please stay calm."

There was a nervous murmur throughout the cabin. The journalist in me demanded immediate information and I reached for the phone. I quickly ran my credit card through the phone, waited for the dial tone, and dialed our News Desk in Los Angeles. The phone cackled but when the other line picked up, there was no mistaking the panicked tone in one of my colleagues.

"Are you okay?" She asked.

"I am." I asked for further information.

"Two planes crashed into the World Trade Center. They've come down. They've come down."

The phone cut off and went dead. I frantically redialed.

No luck.

I tried my sister in Los Angeles.

No luck.

I slowly sat back in my chair and began to panic. I knew my father had flown out of New York on a different flight about an hour before me. I knew my mother was on a flight originating in London destined for San Diego. I tried to meditate and tell myself that everyone would be okay. Tears burned my eyes.

When we touched down twenty minutes later, the pilot instructed us not to turn on our cell phones. He gave us instructions to immediately evacuate the plane and follow the instructions of security personnel. We did.

Finally in the terminal, I reached for my phone and turned it on. There I stood huddled with hundreds of other interrupted passengers and gazed up at the television. The fresh images of two smoldering stumps - the remains of the towers of the world trade center - played on the screen. Finally I got in touch with my sister, Mallika, who was sobbing on the other end of the phone.

"I'm okay.where's papa.where's mom?"

Mallika supplied all of the answers - everyone was safe. I placed my next call again to the office. I knew that there was work at hand. Sure enough, I already had a car reserved and was destined back for New York. At the rental agency, there was a great shortage of cars. People in line started shouting out their destinations and everyone began carpooling. I joined two other men from the New York area and we were off. Over the next 12 hours we listened closely to the radio as details of the terrorist attack emerged. Every five minutes the name of another family member or friend popped into my head and I dialed the number frantically. Most New York numbers were jammed or out of service. One friend I was able to contact informed that a he was unable to contact a mutual friend of ours. He worked in the 105th floor of one of the towers. He was scheduled to attend an 8:30 meeting. Someone from the meeting had called to say they had survived the initial attack and were waiting for a rescue team. No one had heard from any of them since.

Finally just after midnight we made it just to the edge of New York City, in Fort Lee New Jersey. There would be no crossing into Manhattan Island - all the bridges and tunnels had been sealed. I spent the night in New Jersey unable to sleep much and by 6 am, I was dressed and ready to get in. The only way to get across was via the commuter train which was offering limited services. As we pulled toward the station in Hoboken NJ, the trains slowed to a stop. There on the other side of the river they stood, like ashen smoking gravestones, the ruins of the twin towers. The train car was silent and as everyone stood hushed and gazed out the window. A young woman beside me began to whimper. Another man lowered his head into his hands and muffled his sobs.

Back in the city, people walked around in a daze. The streets were empty of cars but full of wandering pedestrians, walking directly down the middle of

Broadway and Fifth Avenue. As we made our way downtown (I had already hooked up with a TV crew) we noticed small cafes open and people filling the outside sidewalk seats. People sat mostly in silence gazing upwards at the thick plume of white smoke still snaking its way westward. At west 4th street, a group of kids played basketball. At one point the ball rolled out of play. A young shirtless boy ran after the ball and bent down to pick it up. When he lifted his head he looked up at the air at the same thick trail of smoke. He shook his head and wiped away something from his eyes - either sweat or tears - and turned away.

Walking home, I stopped and talked to a police officer. After chatting a few minutes, the officer asked me if I would like to see ground zero. I agreed to stay just at the edge away from the workers. The pictures on television of the devastation caused by Tuesday's attack do the scene of the crime absolutely no justice. In real life it appears as if an asteroid has hit the lower part of Manhattan. There are charred, twisting slabs of metal and concrete in every direction. It is unfathomable, unspeakable, incomprehensible. The tragedy today is in its infancy. For the thousand who lost their lives, there are thousands more - friends and family - who will never sleep a restful night. There are parents, children, siblings, friends, and neighbors who walked out of their buildings one morning and have not returned. This is a national tragedy but also a very personal one.

On Wednesday night while in cab returning from work to my apartment, I noticed the Muslim name of my driver. He noticed the tone of my skin in the rear view mirror. He nodded at me. On the radio, the commentator was relaying a warning to all men of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent - to be wary of unwarranted violent reprisals from agitated residents of the city.

The taxi driver again looked at me through the mirror and smiled ironically, "We love America. It is our home." He shook his head, "but I think we're fucked."

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About a month ago, I rode up with two colleagues to the Northwest Frontier region of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan. We were covering a story on Islamic militancy training grounds based in Pakistani religious schools. In the west they have widely been reported to be ground zero for the grooming of young Muslim boys into hostile anti-western terrorists. In Pakistan, both the government and the men at the school hotly contested these claims, castigating the west for generating such racist propaganda. I traveled to this lost area with as little bias as possible - but with a certain and undeniable fear in my heart.

In the school itself, the chancellor was most kind and hospitable. He had us tour the grounds of the school, meet teachers and some of the boys - though at first we weren't allowed to talk to them. We were then escorted into his private residence. The first thing I noticed on the center table was a bowl

of big yellow mangoes and a picture. The picture was of our host - an older Muslim Mullah wearing a traditional white turban and a stained orange beard and his friend - Osama Bin Laden, the number one man on the FBI's list of Most Wanted. I asked our host if we could interview him. He agreed but insisted first that we share mangoes with him. I agreed and he took out a long knife and proceeded to slice the fruit for me. We slurped and chatted for a while and finally were permitted to turn on the camera.

I asked the Mullah a wide array of questions. "Did he hate the US? Why is there such Anti-Americanism in this part of the world? Should Americans be afraid?"

He answered them all eloquently and without hostility. He talked about the history of the US and Afghanistan, how during the Cold War, they were allies, united fighting a war against the Soviets.

"You gave us weapons and trained our men. You built our roads, fed our people. Do you realize young man that your government helps to create and to fund the Taliban because it was their interest to use Guerilla warfare and terrorist tactics against the Russians? You made us your friend."

"But then your Cold War ended and you deserted us." At this point, there was a hint of animosity in his voice. " Because it was no longer in your selfish interest to have us as your allies, you abandoned us, left our people, hungry, and hateful. You turned your friends into foes because you used us like whores."

There was a silence between us.

Finally I asked him about the picture, about the nature of his relationship with Mr. Bin Laden.

"He's an old friend. And a good man."

I shook my head. "Is he a terrorist?"

"We don't call him that here." The Mullah made it clear he was not interested in talking any more. We shook hands. I thanked him for his hospitality.

On the way out I thought about that hospitality. I knew that the Mullah himself had endorsed a fatwa, or religious order, by Bin Laden several years ago urging Muslims to kill American civilians. But here was this man cutting mangoes for us and being very gracious.

"Today you are our guest. If we were not hospitable, we would be very ashamed. But in times of war, yes you would be an enemy and we may kill you. Today a friend, tomorrow, inshallah (God willing), there will not be one."

* * * * * Today Friday September 14, 2001, four days since the terrorist

attack, it appears we may be on the threshold of war. Our President has called it the First World War of the 21st century. I am not sure whom we will be fighting. I would like to go to my favorite café in the city - a small Egyptian place on the Lower East Side that I have been going to since college. The waiters - mostly young Middle Eastern guys who like to talk about basketball and soccer, who come and sit at your table and share a puff on the sweet tobacco hookas they serve there - they are my friends. But I'm not sure when it will open again, if it will open again. There's a Mosque next door that has been closed since the attack.

The weeks and months and perhaps even years ahead promise to be complex and wary. Hopefully our leaders will be judicious, precise, and compassionate in the difficult decisions that lay ahead. But it is each of us that now must rise up and be the true warriors in this difficult time. Does that mean seizing weapons and braving the threat of death out on a battlefield?

Precisely not. Because the battlefield is invisible. The enemy is elusive. The web of evil too complex. Today there are no answers. It is too early for solutions for remedies. For now we each have our stories - where we were on the day that the twin towers toppled. Each one is dramatic; each one is tragic. From this day forward, everyday I shall observe a quiet remembrance for the victims of this calamity. Each one of us may choose our own way how to memorialize this moment but I believe we are all obligated to reflect for a moment, to care about our neighbor, to meditate for peace and tolerance because ultimately the only forces that can defeat such profound evil are compassion and hope.

I ask everyone on this board to join my father and me in prayer for the healing of our wounded civilization (if we can call it that). Let us pray every day to our Gods remembering, as my dad has taught me since childhood, that Christ was not a Christian, Mohammed was not a Mohammeden, Buddha was not a Buddhist, and Krishna was not a Hindu.

Love,

Gotham