

REMEMBERING TO REBUILD

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In order to have a strong and solid foundation, the ground on which the concrete is poured must be level and packed tightly. It cannot contain craters, potholes, cracks, or bumps. Before pouring the concrete, workers outline the building with wood, and mark the building's area with gridded metal poles. The concrete has to mix for exactly the right amount of time, and the pouring of the concrete must be carefully done. The entire process can be slow and painstaking. Workers spend entire days just on the foundation. A simple mistake can destroy all of the hard work.

Those who construct buildings want everything to be perfect. They want the ground to lie smoothly, and they want every single measurement to be exact. In short, they desire that their plans should be perfect and followed precisely. However, once the building is finished, they do not care what happens. They do not understand that the building's originally constructed perfection is not the whole story, since problems will still arise, regardless of its original foundation.

Oftentimes, a foundation's problems come from something we have no control over: a building cracks and shifts due to time and environment. Sometimes, it must be uprooted entirely to save what has been built. The Cape Hatteras Lighthouse in South Carolina, for instance, had to be relocated in 1999 due to erosion; it had become precariously positioned fifteen feet from the shore. Moving the lighthouse could have easily led to its collapse, but without the move, the lighthouse would have toppled into the ocean (Shelton-Roberts). A change was necessary to save what had been built: to preserve the lighthouse, the foundation had to be altered. Other times, however, especially in the wake of a disaster, foundations crumble entirely, and there is nothing to do but start over and build anew.

New York City lost the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. In order to start over, New York had to rebuild, for the City had lost not only the Towers, but also civil service members, civilians, and a sense of security. Two

months after the tragedy, Colson Whitehead wrote the essay “Lost and Found” as his way of coping with the attack, the aftermath, and the drastic change of New York City’s skyline.

At first, the essay does not reference 9/11; instead, the essay approaches the topic of “your private New York,” and the tragedy is only hinted at by the essay’s charged publication date. Whitehead introduces the idea of a New York that is built upon each step you take, in each place you stay, and through each door you open and close. He takes the vast, ever-changing, often impersonal city of New York and shrinks it. He makes it seem small, familiar, and, in some ways, stagnant. He claims that “everything is still” the same as it was in the 1970s, because that is how *bis* city is.

But then he also reminds readers that New York is not how we imagine it to be. Instead, it is vast and ever-changing, the furthest possible thing from being stagnant and familiar. Whitehead forces readers to consider that there are “eight million naked cities in this naked city” (2). Every part of New York City is different for each individual, he claims, so the City itself is a “different city,” over and over again. But how is the city different? While it changes and rearranges itself every moment of every day, it is still filled with the same streets, the same areas still hold the same memories, and the same places still “haunt” the same people. Yes, the city changes. Yes, the people within it see something different each day. But New York still is what it is, connecting everyone who is here. We interact with different private New Yorks every time we step out into the city. We do not get to escape, to distance ourselves from the city and the people within it, simply because we are not “seeing the same thing” as those around us. By suggesting that each person has a private New York, Whitehead forces readers to realize that we are never truly isolated. We are constantly interacting with other peoples’ private New Yorks without ever realizing it, and every place we visit has a history we never think about, primarily because it is not our history.

What is something now was something else before, and it will be something different in the future. People around the world remember where the Twin Towers stood, as do New Yorkers, but something new now stands where they once did. In addition, while New Yorkers may “cast a wary eye” towards the new building put up in the Towers’ place, they shouldn’t “judge too quickly.”

But how can New Yorkers not judge too quickly? After the violation of their city and the destruction of at least a part of their personal New York, how can New Yorkers look to the skyline and not see grief and destruction? How can we, as vulnerable and remembering human beings, look at anything new that replaces a loss and not see what was once there? How do we learn to rebuild but still remember?

Maybe that is part of what New Yorkers “carry around.” The city exists within them, within their minds, and that means that the ghosts of those Towers will always “haunt” them in the same way that our ghosts might haunt us. We all carry around our histories, and we all see ghosts after a while, wherever we look. Moreover, if we learn to accept change, it is because what was once drastically different is now our new normal. That does not mean we forget: it just means we are rebuilding while keeping our old pieces locked tightly inside ourselves.

For example, when I lost my grandmother, the foundation of my family, I was devastated and suddenly very lonely. My life was shattered, yet I was forced to rebuild it. This loss made me start over, and I unintentionally used the rubble of my old life to create something new. Even though I did not mean to, I know I did it because I still think about her, and I still remember what those days of isolation, newness, and distrust felt like. We hold onto everything that happens to us, and we build what we hold onto into our foundations. Whether we realize it or not, we are shaped and changed by not only people and places, but also our perceptions of them. Simultaneously, the new foundations that we create after drastic change allow us to begin again.

Nonetheless, some things are vivid to us and so ingrained into our minds that we do not easily recognize the change. For example, Whitehead claims he still calls the MetLife building the Pan Am building, “because that’s what it is.” He recognizes the change in the city in his essay, but he resists it in his life, because the new names are not what helped to build him. However, his refusal to see the change is also limiting. He fails to erase the past, the old ideas of what New York *was*, and as a result, he also fails to grasp what New York now *is*. The problem with Whitehead’s idea of the changing City is not his failure to recognize change, but his inability to accept it. He thinks you can only have one version of a “private New York,” not believing you can

revise and rewrite your New York, as your life turns away from what was and towards different plots.

Joan Didion, in her essay “Goodbye to All That,” has a different problem. Her private New York never settles into anything foundational. It is temporary, constantly changing, and always interrupted. While living in the city, she claims she lived in “other people’s apartments,” and she constantly reassures herself that she will remain in the city “just until Christmas” (232; 230). Didion’s New York is founded only on her dreams, her “infinitely romantic notion[s]” of what the City is (231). She is so caught up in her fantasy that she cannot even call New York City home after eight years; it is still merely a dream.

At the same time, Didion begins to feel the isolation of New York itself. She begins “to cherish the loneliness” of the city, even as it is also a city that you can never be alone in (235). We cannot be isolated in the New York because it is not a city that lends itself to solitude. Every building has a story, and at least one person knows or knew a part of that story. When we walk into that building, we are adding to the story, as well as altering other peoples’ stories. There is no room to be really alone in New York City or to remain still in this city. People will sweep you along with them in their crusade for the future, or they will trample you to death. Didion is correct in her view that change must be seen and accepted, even though she leaves New York not wanting to accept it.

Although they approach New York with different methods, both Didion and Whitehead see the City in similar ways, and they build and rebuild their ideas of it on top of foundations that are constantly crumbling. For Whitehead, the city is recognized as fluid but wished for as unchanging, whereas for Didion the City began as something fluid that then became stagnant. What these authors allow us to recognize is that the city is neither fluid nor unchanging. It is both. The city is a concrete thing that can never stay solid. Like glass that settles over time, as Matthew Goulsh reflects in his essay “Criticism,” the city is as structured and solid as the glass panes themselves. The glass itself, however, is slowly shifting inside its constraints. It is both a liquid and a solid—changed and unchanged (558). Glass, moreover, settles differently depending on time and its exposure to light and heat. Most of the change is subtle and can easily go unnoticed. Unless someone stops and

truly looks, he will not notice the duality of glass, and even if he does stop and scrutinize it, others seeing the glass for the first time don't really understand it.

Our perceptions of the city are not a simple thing. There is no "right" way to view New York because, as Whitehead writes, anyone's private New York is more complex than just an array of buildings, and our understandings of our environment are shaped by our life experiences. In addition, sometimes we want the glass through which we see the City to simply settle, as Whitehead does, or we want the glass to transform into an ever-changing liquid, as Didion does. However, those desires are far too simple to truly reflect our complex lives in this City.

A private New York can and should contain things from more than one time period. The Twin Towers can stand with the new World Trade Center in your private New York, for the two do not exist and cannot exist without each other. At the same time, not everything must stay the same as it is when a person first arrives, since not every aspect of our pasts will remain important to us. Because when we are twenty-five, "the place where [we] first kissed so-and-so" seems relevant, but when we are forty and married, we find that the original place no longer carries the same weight (Whitehead). It instead becomes the place where we buy our daughter's bassinet. As we change, our New Yorks do as well.

The foundations of our lives are a fragile and complicated thing. Throughout the course of our lifetimes, we lose people, places, and things, and we look at change with wariness and uncertainty. We topple over. We crack, and we mend. We crumble and rebuild. But in order to mend, or to start over, we must recognize that change has occurred. Otherwise, we are trapped in ourselves and privy only to a destructive cycle.

WORKS CITED

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