

MIND TO MIND

Creative writing that explores the abstract side of our profession and our lives

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The Coming Age

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On the morning of September 11th, 2001, I was a 17-year-old college student on my way to class. I got to campus just in time to hear announcements that all classes for the day had been cancelled. I didn't understand why, all I knew was that I had time to sit in the library and study. From the window I could see it across the East River, smoke billowed, the faces of dozens of my classmates stared first in disbelief then in horror as the south tower collapsed, followed 29 minutes later by the north tower. Little did we know, we were witnessing the birth of a new age.

Gone would be the days of arriving at the airport 30 minutes before a flight. Preflight security procedures would become longer and more invasive as its administration transitioned from private companies to the newly created governmental juggernaut known as the Transportation Security Administration. Young children would no longer know the pleasure of being invited to visit the pilot in the cockpit to "help fly the plane." Their parents would remember fondly the ease with which scissors and bottles of water were once carried on to planes.

A massive social upheaval followed as notions of "us" and "them" became pervasive in every aspect of our lives. Anti-immigrant sentiments and violence surged. Innocent brown-skinned people were incorrectly identified, and at times attacked, as conspirators against freedom and democracy. On a national level our country became embroiled in its longest running war to date as Operations Enduring Freedom and Freedom's Sentinel took thousands of our fighting men and women to Afghanistan

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Accepted for publication August 4, 2020. Published online first on August 17, 2020.

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and beyond. Americans learned that the dangers of distant lands could be brought home in an instant. Pop culture evolved in radical directions as Hollywood gained a new archetype in the Middle Eastern terrorist. Our lexicon has been forever changed as phrases such as “ground zero,” “jihad,” and “sleeper cell” became household terms.

Today, as I walk the corridors of our designated COVID intensive care unit, I once again see the smoke rising. I see it in every hypoxic patient we cannot oxygenate and every case of sepsis whose hemodynamics we cannot improve. I see it in every memo we receive regarding the next drug shortage or the next backorder of personal protective equipment. As the surge of cases continues, I see the smoke and wonder when will the collapse come and what will the coming age bring once the dust settles? Will “social distancing” be the new word of the year? Will we see a surge of movies and TV shows about global pandemics? Maybe crowd control will become a new focus of national security. But through these dark times, I see a light ahead.

The tragedy of 19 years ago was met with fear and mistrust; in today’s crisis I see solidarity. I see hundreds of millions of Americans sacrificing jobs and income to help curb the spread of this illness. I see delivery drivers, grocery store clerks, and my fellow physicians step up in droves to face the enemy head on so the rest of our neighbors can make it through this crisis. Those stuck at home are learning to sew masks for healthcare workers on the front lines while chefs are cooking for soup kitchens and homeless shelters. I see a world primed for change. New opportunities to work, socialize, and learn from a distance abound. Work-from-home policies, webcam parties, and virtual classrooms are quickly becoming the new norm. And after years of watching social media personalities argue against vaccines, I am seeing a call for evidence-based, medically sound recommendations on staying safe during this crisis.

I must now return to my patients, but as I do I wonder how this pandemic will define us. As I do I am filled with hope that years from now our children will look back on this crisis from a world of amply stocked emergency supplies, robust online classrooms, and a media landscape filled with sound medical advice.