



THE PICTURES I COULD NOT TAKE

Or, We Have to be Able to Imagine What We Know

I LIVE IN DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN, AND ON THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 11, while I was making coffee, I happened to look out the kitchen window and saw a woman across Greenwich Street looking out of her window with an expression of terror on her face. I opened my own window, stuck my head out, and saw a tower of the World Trade Center with a hole at its top and flames leaping out. I said to my husband, “What am I looking at, Jack? What am I looking at?” because although I could see the building in flames, I couldn’t fathom what I was seeing. I couldn’t believe that the flames I saw leaping from the top of a skyscraper were real. Of course I knew they were real, but I couldn’t take it in. How could this be? And with no idea of what was going on, I ran out into the street and down toward the World Trade Center to find out.

At first it never occurred to me to make photographs because this is not the kind of photographer I am—I don’t usually document real life events—and I was so busy looking that to start shooting photographs would have taken me out of the moment and into something else. And several times afterwards in those first few hours of September 11, as I was watching everything that was happening before me, I thought again about taking pictures, but I couldn’t figure out how to do it. It was too gigantic, too momentous, too hard to understand.

At one point, when I had gone inside, I answered a phone call from the photo department of *The New Yorker* asking me if I was photographing downtown. They called me, I suppose, because the photo department knew I lived in Tribeca, along with many other photographers, and because the police by that time were no longer letting anyone cross south of Canal Street. I did consider the “work” angle of it, and even thought this could be my opportunity to try my hand at photographing something happening quickly before my eyes, as opposed to my usual still and carefully composed photographs, but even then I did not take any photos.

I now wish I had, if only for one reason—it would have helped to make it real to me and perhaps initiated some kind of understanding. Even though there are a million photographs of that day, and even though I have pored over them all with great interest, and even though at the time I didn’t understand why everyone was photographing it, I now realize that the act of photographing makes something real, stops it, records it, says it really happened. “Bears witness,” as the expression goes. So this is an account of a photograph that I didn’t take but wish I had, as it might have helped me personally understand the reality of a momentous event that I witnessed.

I’ve never understood why people on vacation take so many pictures of tourist sites, in a world that is filled with so many pictures. Or why someone needs to photograph a work of art hanging in a museum. I have often felt irritated at people who do that—taking pictures of pictures. Why more photos, and why more photos of things that have already been photographed a million times? But I now understand, in a deeper way, that the act of taking the picture is often more important than the image itself. The act says, “I have witnessed this.” An especially important declaration when it is something outside one’s own normal experience—not only the World Trade Tower’s destruction, but also, for example, the Roman Coliseum’s endurance—that one feels a desire to understand more completely.

Even now when I look at the pit where the towers used to be, and know that I watched the entire thing unfold—buildings standing, plane crashing, buildings falling—it is hard for me to believe it really happened. Of course, I know it happened, but because it was such a monstrous event, it is still hard for me to comprehend. I think it would help me now if I had photographed that day, an act I would have comprehended. c

This essay will appear in The Photographs Not Taken, edited by Will Steacy.