By early afternoon on September 11, New York was a different city than it had been just hours before, and lower Manhattan was a different world. A thick cloud of smoke from the devastation at the World Trade Center filled the sky and could be seen from almost every corner of the city. Sidewalks were filled with stunned throngs of people who had been directed to walk north. The shrill sirens of fire trucks and ambulances could be heard blaring as they raced in the opposite direction. Lines formed around hospitals and other facilities where blood donations were being collected, and rescue volunteers assembled in front of armories where armed guards in full combat gear were stationed.

For me, the day had started out like most others. I had planned on a full schedule of elective surgery in the morning, new patients and follow-ups to see in the office in the afternoon. Instead, I was on my way to a large hospital in the vicinity of the devastation, as were my colleagues from around the city, many with their anesthesiologists in tow.

Upon entering the physician lounge where we were asked to register, I saw many familiar faces—plastic surgeons in the community whom I seldom run into except at plastic surgery educational meetings. Today we had a much different mission. Instead of comparing notes on our techniques for face lifts, we had gathered here to offer our special expertise in multiple traumas, burns, and lacerations. All of us had left the quiet security of our well-organized offices and operating rooms without hesitation, trading order for chaos, predictability for uncertainty.

At the ambulance receiving entrance to the emergency department, there were hundreds of other volunteers—a virtual sea of white coats and surgical greens as physician assistants, nurses, medical students, and residents from all specialties, along with orderlies and hospital administrators, stood by anxiously waiting to be called into action. Only after many hours on stand-by was it finally clear to all of us, based on news reports and returning emergency rescue teams, that there was nothing for most of the medical volunteers to do.

Only infrequently did a stretcher with a new casualty make its way through the emergency department entrance. It was quickly surrounded by legions of medical personnel eager to administer life-saving treatment. These patients were mostly rescue team members who ran into the disaster while everyone else was trying to run away from it. They were injured as the buildings collapsed.
Most of the manned trauma rooms, with all personnel on disaster alert, remained shockingly empty. Radios blared as hospital personnel, so close to the scene yet with so little news, listened for updated information. It was almost welcome news to learn that the building adjacent to the scene had collapsed, making it possible for rescue workers to begin their search for survivors. Only in the next few days, as search and rescue became search and recovery—as the workers sifting through mountains of rubble found few intact bodies, let alone living, breathing survivors—would the immense human tragedy begin to be fully comprehended.

The sense of helplessness was overwhelming. My colleagues and I were there, ready to assist, ready to put all our years of training to the most sacred of tasks—saving innocent lives. In the end, there was little we could do and not many lives to be saved. At the same time, the heroic efforts of our fellow surgeons at hospitals nearer the disaster scene were able to make a difference for a handful of “lucky” ones who escaped the collapsing towers with treatable injuries.

The nation can never fully express its gratitude to the physicians and rescue workers, to the police and firefighters who lost their lives, and to the people from all walks of life who offered whatever they could to assist those in need. Neither will we ever forget the workers who lost their lives at the Pentagon, and the brave passengers who thwarted yet another attack by crashing their plane in a remote field in Pennsylvania. Their sacrifices are what we must hold close to our hearts during what is sure to be a long and difficult struggle ahead.

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