

GROUND ZERO by Frank Morales

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(Dedicated to John Lennon)

To: "Civic Values" <civic-values@civic.net>
Subject: [CIVIC_VALUES] Ground Zero by Frank Morales
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Report by Frank Morales

A few days after the destruction at the World Trade Center I received a call from a staff person at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine who asked me if I, being a priest, would be willing to journey down, through all the militarized checkpoints that had been set up immediately following the bombings, to perform last rites for the dead. "Frank", she said, "we're really not talking bodies here, you know, it's mostly body parts". She said that my name had come up in discussions as somebody who might have the stomach for such an assignment. I instantly accepted, taking the 11pm - 7am shift, feeling, probably like a lot of people, that I could be useful there, that I could help. Little did I realize then that it was I who would be helped, that it was me who would gain so much from the wisdom that was smoldering there.

Walking down Lower Broadway into the heart of darkness I could clearly smell the stench of death, a perfume, I thought later, of a sacrificial fire, a human pyre, deeply sacred in its essence. How was I to know this wisdom locked within that incomprehensible scene? After awhile, I passed through the last of the checkpoints manned by National Guard people at which point I was escorted to a series of tents set up along the Hudson, facing due east, situated in the belly of the monster. I stood along with dozens of fireman, construction and rescue workers within what oft times appeared to be some kind of opera set. In front of me, a full 180 degree semi-circle, floodlit in the dead of night, I could see the entire devastation, spiked remains of the south tower, whose lower portion reminded me of the Parthenon, an earlier testament to a doomed civilization, to the left, a 2000 degree pit, the infernal ruin of the north tower. The entire deathscape cast in front of me, sitting in my directors chair, in a remake of Apocalypse Now, I could see the tiny machines and men traverse the mountains of twisted steel and rich brown earth, the whole picture so large as to defy comprehension.

Standing there I was approached by a fireman, a 40ish football player looking guy from Queens. This fireman, whose name I never got, told me he'd been there since immediately after the catastrophe. Spitting up blood and popping antibiotics, he told me that the wives of his friends buried somewhere beneath the burning toxic earth were calling him everyday and asking him if he'd found their husbands yet. I told him to go home, that he was sick. He looked at me and said, "I know I'm going to lose ten years of my life here, but I can't let my buddies down. I can't go."

Recognizing that I was somewhat overwhelmed by the spectacle of devastation all around us he said to me, "Father, you don't see any chairs or tables, no desks, do you? All you see is steel and earth." "Look at the earth", he said, "the people are in it." As he said this he motioned me to examine the soil that I was standing in. It was rich and moist, enriched with

the ground-up bodies of the dead. My feet inside my boots began to tingle. At this point, recognizing that I had truly arrived in hell, I was moved to utter in his presence, possibly for his benefit, that "hey, if I had somebody in this mess, I'd be pissed as shit, and yeh, I'd wanna get those mother fuckers", at which point he put his hand on my shoulder and whispered, "hey, it's not about that." "You wanna know something" drawing near to my ear, "Bush and Bin laden have the same banker."

And even though I was stunned by his grasp of current events (another fireman would later advise me that the whole situation was one of "rich people fighting over oil with all of us caught in the middle") what I came to recognize slowly was that the message of these men and women who were rubbing shoulders with the dead 24/7 was quite at odds with the then prevailing ethic, and that was that it made no human sense to inflict what was in front of us on anyone else. For beneath the uninformed *m.o.* of the long distance bomber and the long distance arm chair warrior is a lack of appreciation of death up close. Living with the dead, squeezing their bloody acre between your fingers, lifting small bits of fingers from beneath your boots, placing the pieces in red plastic seal up "one pound bags", one loses the ability to replicate the violence, loses the desire to duplicate that which one becomes a kin to, namely the murder of innocent people.

In other words, for the people at ground zero death was real, and hence not to be taken lightly. All night I found no one who was in any kind of mood to inflict that which we were living in on anyone else. It was instinctually not viable. Slowly the lesson of ground zero dawned on me, the lesson that the vicious circle of violence breeding violence was *passee* here, a bad joke hoisted upon a dehumanized complicit public, unsupported by those in the know at the ground zero of moral wisdom. Of course, this explains the documented inability of many soldiers during WW2 to kill another, even the manufactured "evil one", in a direct one-on-one confrontation.* And yet, while we do all in our power not to kill, we are manipulated into pulling the trigger, they kill in our name. Truth is, killing and humanity (who we are) are opposites and the guys at ground zero knew this better than anyone, and this was their message: "Hey Father, tell them out there that they should organize buses for people to come through here, everyone should see this" they said, everyone should get this inoculation against the sheep-like murderous idiocy that was rising like the smoky spirits of the dead from the ruins in front of me.

As dawn approached, men covered in the grey brown soot which was everywhere approached me and as if in a fit of elation mentioning that they had found an intact body of a young girl. Given the circumstances, this was cause for muted celebration. I tagged along with them to the boiling 2000 degree pit which was the north tower, a cherry picker emblazoned with an american flag fitted with the image of a native american with peace pipe lowered in the lonely place of death to retrieve the girl who looked to be a teen, in a striped dress, raised her from the dead, resurrecting her identity and placing her at my feet. We gathered there among the smoke and flames and despite the inescapable stench prayed for her spirit, her family, for one another, for this broken world, in this exiled place.

*See *On Killing*, Dave Grossman, 1995