

**On American Soil:
Preferred and Residual Narratives in Oklahoma City**

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We have taken this place and made it beautiful, but it is still a scar.
—Peter Markston, OKC bombing first responder

At 9:02 on the morning of April 19, 1995, a yellow Ryder truck exploded next to the Murrah Federal Office Building in downtown Oklahoma City. The blast killed 168 people, including nineteen children who had just been dropped off at a second-floor day care center. It so severely mutilated the nine-story structure that it had to be demolished a month later. And it sent shock waves of an arguably even more devastating nature throughout a heartland which, until that day, many had considered a safety zone of American innocence.

In his study of the tragedy's aftermath, *The Unfinished Bombing*, Edward Linenthal writes that the event—the first major terrorist attack on U.S. soil—was a “fall into history,” triggering a “crisis of identity” in which “convictions of innocence” had to confront the memory that, in activist Rap Brown's famous phrase, “Violence is American as apple pie.” The anguish was exacerbated by the discovery, days later, that the bomber had not been a foreign terrorist, as was originally thought, but “one of our own,” a trim Gulf War veteran with a fierce, unconscionable hatred of his own government.

How do people deal with an event of such virulence? To folklorists, the answer is obvious: They tell stories. Or, in folkloristic jargon, they construct narratives: arcs of signification designed to encompass the horror, fix it by definition, and invest it with some kind of meaning. In the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, Linenthal argues, three distinct narratives competed for prominence.

In a progressive narrative, civic leaders stressed Oklahomans' resilience, as well as a tradition of neighborliness. With nods to the state's pioneer heritage, and to its

survival of the Dust Bowl, this narrative stressed the goodness of ordinary people, forced by extraordinary circumstances to become extraordinary themselves. Proof that this was the correct narrative was the so-called Oklahoma Standard of volunteer response. Its promise, in Linenthal's words, was "a revitalized civic life in the collective energies of citizens inspired by their own deeds." (53)

In a redemptive narrative, religious leaders and their flocks worked through the most troubling of theological questions: If God is both good and omnipotent, why does evil exist? They asked themselves, often publicly, "Where was God at 9:02?" For those who embraced this second narrative, the terror of the bombing was transmuted into an opportunity for spiritual renewal. Visible symbols of this response were the frequent invocation of angels who were said to have carried the dead, especially the children, to heaven; and the construction of a "Weeping Jesus" statue across the street from the Memorial.

A third reading of the event, which Linenthal calls the toxic narrative, was less an attempt at resolution than a kaleidoscope of regrets and irresolution. According to this reading, the bombing remained unfinished, its meaning unresolved, as survivors wrestled with "senselessness" and post-traumatic stress. I'll speak about toxicity, and about "unresolved" issues, in a moment; and I'll try to show how some less comforting, readings of the event—what Stuart Hall might call residual readings—continue to haunt the Murrah Building site. But first I want to stress how the story of civic renewal and the story of spiritual challenge have recently begun to coalesce into a new preferred narrative: one that enlists public memory in the service of hope. "A Decade of Hope," in fact, was the theme of ceremonies marking the tenth-year remembrance of the bombing.

You see this coalescence clearly at the Memorial site. It has been spectacularly transformed from a ravaged moonscape into a reverential space which includes a reflecting pool; two austere Gates of Time; a field of empty chairs, one for each victim; a building remnant known as the Survivor Wall; a children's area; an orchard dedicated to rescuers; and a large American elm, nearly destroyed by the blast, which has been nursed back to health and dubbed the Survivor Tree.

(A small clarification. I'm speaking here of the outside space. The Memorial also includes an excellent museum, where visitors experience a semblance of the bombing's

horror; and a chain link fence bordering the site that is decorated with a vast array of teddy bears, license plates, key chains, poems, and other memorial offerings—to create what Jack Santino has called a spontaneous shrine. Analyses of both the museum and this votive array certainly belong in any comprehensive study of the site; but in this paper I concentrate on the outside space—the National Memorial’s main public face.)

I want to suggest that this entire outside space—it was designed by local architects Hans and Torrey Butzer—is structured to elicit certain emotional responses. These responses were themselves designed, by a committee of survivors who spent several weeks in 1996 carefully, and sometimes contentiously, drafting a Memorial mission statement. (Linenthal 183) Its preamble, which is etched into the granite faces of the Gates of Time, reads as follows:

We come here to remember those who were killed,
Those who survived and those changed forever.
May all who leave here know the impact of violence.
May this memorial offer comfort,
Strength, peace, hope and serenity.

This announces eloquently what has become accepted as the preferred response to the 1995 tragedy. The proffered lessons are clear. Visitors are exhorted to remember, to understand, and to leave the site uplifted, perhaps even heartened, by their pilgrimage. Conspicuously absent from the statement, and indeed from the outdoor space as a whole, is any mention of hatred, revenge, anger, bewilderment, grief—or Timothy McVeigh. All such unresolved emotions are meant to be subsumed, by the logic of the space, in an appreciation for the good that has come out of evil. The only exception is a message from “Team 5” rescuers, spray-painted on a wall and claiming that the courts, the victims, and God demand “truth” and “justice.” Apart from this one concession, the site evokes the serenity that the statement promises.

This does not happen by accident. I hope I will not be thought cynical or disrespectful if I say that the comforting response the Memorial wants to elicit is conditioned rather than natural: appropriate and dignified, to be sure, but also constrained and prescribed.

Do visitors to the site respect the prescription? Are their emotional responses in accord with the “hope” and “serenity” that the statement calls for? To answer these questions, I’ve visited the Memorial several times over the past few months, and I spent a full day there on April 19, 2005, to witness ceremonies on the bombing’s tenth anniversary. Here I offer some preliminary reflections on what fellow visitors have told me.

For many, the site does elicit a respectful and somewhat stunned reaction. A couple from Maryland finds it “beautiful,” “unbelievable,” and praises its designers for having done “a great job.” Two Missouri businessmen, standing near the field of chairs, admit a dominant feeling of “eerie calm.” An Illinois mother, visiting with her two teenage daughters, says first “I’m in awe to be here,” then corrects herself: “Maybe awe’s not the right word...devastating loss is how I feel.” An EMT from Atlantic City, in town for a paralegal conference, struggles to verbalize his “upsetting” feeling, and settles for the German word *verklemmt* (repressed). All of this is in accordance with the prescription.

When I asked people whether the Memorial holds any lesson for us, though, their responses were more complicated. Recall the mission statement’s hope that “all who come here” may “know the impact of violence.” But to know that impact isn’t identical with knowing what to do with it—that is, with drawing a worthwhile lesson from the knowledge. What lessons about violence do visitors take away from the Memorial?

The one I heard most often is that “Violence solves nothing” or (more teleologically), “Violence gets you nothing.” Emotionally, this may be compelling, but it’s patently untrue. Violence does “get” people things. Without violence, there would be no United States of America, no state of Oklahoma, and no Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms against which folks like Timothy McVeigh seek to vent their hatred. We console each other, in our mutual grief, that in the world we wish to inhabit, violence bears no fruit. But in the world we do inhabit, violence is bearing, in Billie Holiday’s chilling phrase, strange fruit all the time.

A different perspective comes from those visitors who wonder aloud how hatred—one man’s hatred, as many of them put it—could have such a deadly impact. It’s

amazing to think, the New Jersey EMT tells me, “how one man’s thoughts and efforts could wreak such destruction for so many lives.” “It’s hard to believe,” another visitor says, “what one guy can do. For good and bad.” “You hear how there’s so much hatred in the world,” a Kansas woman says, “and then you see the devastation that it actually did, the hatred, and it’s just awful, what it can do, one person’s hate.”

This reading is more accurate than the observation that violence gets you nothing, but it’s just as abstract. It expresses almost a revulsion at the illogic of the event. “To think that so many people lost their lives just because of hatred...how one man can do such an act and it...168 families, their lives changed forever.” Notice that the name McVeigh does not come up here; nor does any reflection on the “one person’s” hatred. Rather, hatred, like violence, is presented as unanchored and miasmatic—something that is so self-evidently wrong that it need not be contextualized to be understood.

Also decontextualized are the responses of those few visitors who draw an existential lesson from the event. “You realize how quickly you can come and go,” one man tells me. “That’s life,” another says. “What more can you say? You live and you die. People come to work and then...what can you do?”

What can you do? This seemingly resigned comment actually echoes an activist theme of the site’s preferred narrative. Not just what can you do, but what will you do? Having taken away the lesson that “Violence solves nothing,” how will you amend your life to promote human charity? You read this lesson on a placard inside the museum. It’s one of the last things you see before you exit:

Hope. It is the one word ... that really challenges us.... We can find comfort, strength, peace, and serenity in the memorial grounds, but hope? In the end you are the answer to the question of hope. Will you leave here changed by what you see and learn? Will you take those lessons to heart? Will you teach by example others around you? If so, then the hope of this memorial is closer to realization. It is our hope that nothing like the tragedy in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 ever happens again anywhere. Will you help?

This lesson is not lost on visitors. Listen to Rod Holden, a first responder with whom I spoke during the tenth-anniversary celebration.

The lesson is that all our days are numbered and we have to live life to the fullest and come together as a society, pull together, do good works, help others that need help. It's great that they've got help for the families and scholarships for the victims' children. One lesson you learn is that, even during the worst of times and worst of days, you can see good in people, people coming together. But there are a lot of scars that will never heal for those people.

In this somber comment, you can hear an uneasy tangle of the residual and the preferred. Certainly it reflects the official hopefulness of the site. But just as palpably, it gives a sense of the wounds that have yet to close.

So toxicity lives. It's important to remember this, lest we fall prey to what Ana Alonso calls "departicularization," and begin to remove this shattered space from history, suppress the memory of what caused the explosion, and transform the site into a merely instrumental location, created to advance our moral education. Yet if we're honest, I think we acknowledge that this distancing is already happening. Only ten years down the line, there are emotional reactions that must not be referenced—wisps of irresolution that, while they may not be exactly toxic, are still too painful or problematic to be allowed expression.

Let me mention only a few of these wisps, and ask you to think about what they might tell us about how we organize memory.

I think first of the time 9:02, and of how often visitors voice their amazement that a symbolic attack was carried out at that hour. "If you want to blow up a building," says one of the Missouri businessmen, "do it when nobody's there. I don't see how you'd think blowing up a building with innocent people and children is a good way to make your statement. What did these people have to do with anything?" The implication is that, in a rational society, even Timothy McVeigh should have applied a utilitarian calculus, and acted in the interests of the greatest number. What we see here—and this man is expressing a common frustration—is an unwillingness to confront the awful fact that it was precisely its "irrationality," its "extremity," that made the hour of 9:02 a "rational" choice.

I think of a police officer, Peter Markston, a first responder who now serves as a Memorial volunteer. When I asked him why, he recalled his worst moment on that day ten years before:

I was sent down here about 45 minutes after the bombing, and we were trying to set up a Red Cross site, and about an hour and a half later someone came over and said never mind, we're not going to need it. There weren't going to be any more survivors. So for me, this is just a way to say, I'm sorry. Sorry that as a police officer I wasn't able to prevent something like this. So coming here now, I don't want to say it's a healing process, because I don't think anybody will ever really heal...but it was a process which it helped me get over some of the bad feelings I had about the area.

Many local people share these residual bad feelings. "We see a lot of people from out of state," Markston told me, "but the only time we get people from the metro area is when they're bringing relatives. To people from Oklahoma City, this is a hallowed place and it's somewhere they don't want to be.... This is the scar that terrorism leaves."

I think of a local poet, with whom I spoke at the tenth anniversary. He sees the offerings on the fence as evidence of Christian love—of what he refers to in New Testament Greek as *agape*. "They wouldn't take the time to put something on that fence if they didn't have it in their heart," he tells me. Then, without missing a beat, he explains what he would have done to the bombers, had it been in his power to pronounce their sentence:

They should have brought McVeigh down here, Fortier and Nichols, and tied them out there where they were going to drop the building and said, take all of the survivors and give every one of them a [device to trigger the blast] and then one-two-three, the building would fall on them, and then take the [devices] and put them in a pile, cover them with gasoline, burn them all so you wouldn't know which frequency had actually triggered it. [like a firing squad with one gun loaded blank]."

In the immediate wake of the bombing, Linenthal reports, there had been some talk of turning the Murrah space into "an execution site, a torture site, or a trophy site, a place for the display of the remains of the perpetrators." That similar thoughts of revenge can

still be entertained ten years later—by a Bible-quoting Christian, no less—speaks again to the durability of the toxic.

I think of a grim-looking Vietnam veteran whom I meet in a nearby deli during the anniversary. He's wearing a black tee shirt with white letters HERO that stand for "humanitarian emergency rescue operation." He had lost two friends in the explosion, and had been back to the site only twice in the previous ten years. He's not talkative, but the few thoughts he shares suggest anything but serenity.

They're trying to forgive Nichols now, to defend his rights. They're forgetting the link between Oklahoma City and Waco. The politicians ought to get the hell out of here—this is a site for Oklahomans, not the national media. Three of them hit on me, I got rid of them quick.

He is clearly not at peace about the site, and ready to say so. "It's a beautiful place," he says. "Until you remember what it's about." And most people, he finishes bitterly, are all too ready to forget.

I think finally of other grim-faced attendees to the anniversary, a group of people carrying videocams and wearing other black shirts, these suggesting that the "truth" about the Oklahoma City bombing has yet to be revealed. I encounter them just outside the Memorial space, in a crowd that is listening to Vice-President Dick Cheney over a loudspeaker. About half way through his speech, they are ushered away by local policemen—no permits, I later discover. I meet one of them later that afternoon, and he points me to his organization's website: www.okctruth.com.

The site is devoted to uncovering what its members believe to be the repressed truth about April 19. The conspirators here are not McVeigh and his comrades, but the very federal agents that they sought to punish for Waco. Attacking the preferred narrative as government propaganda, the website claims, "The citizens of this country deserve ALL of the answers regarding what took place that fateful day. We must continue to ask why full disclosure of all pertinent evidence has never been forthcoming."

Such conspiracy responses may be the most toxic, certainly least resolved, of contemporary reactions. And for good reason they remain officially marginalized. Not only would acknowledging these ongoing doubts undercut a preferred narrative ("Evil attacks innocence"). It would open the disturbing possibility that, on a gruesomely

twisted level, McVeigh was on to something. We may dismiss his hatred as an aspect of what Bill Ellis calls “subversion mythology,” but we also know that governments do lie, they do manipulate and control. You needn’t endorse McVeigh’s violent response to recognize that his hatred of centralized power is shared by thousands. Yet this recognition—a recognition of history—is effectively marginalized by the stories of hope and resolve.

Let me suggest, then, that the preferred narrative invites us to translate a specific “social malignancy” (Jack Santino’s term) into an abstraction called Evil, while it disinvites us from considering political particulars. Instead of fostering discussion about government power, or militia power, public memory about Oklahoma City skitters between lamentation and a kind of morality play in which “the Oklahoma Standard” battles the “forces of darkness.” It’s encouraging that at least some visitors reject this departicularized script and foreground more tortured reactions that the site (and the press) typically ignore.

I do not mean to say that the Memorial is somehow dishonest or “untrue” to people’s reality. On the contrary. Every time I visit it, I’m struck by its dignity, its ability to evoke contemplation. I even share the common reaction that it is architecturally “beautiful” and “serene.” Yet the scar remains, no matter how eloquently the space may shroud it. And I think that in this space, as on the sites of other memorials to tragedy, we do well to acknowledge both our residual and preferred emotions—the scar as well as the healing—in an appropriately complex response to a national dislocation.

It is that complexity that I think visitors are struggling toward as they gaze silently at the field of chairs, or place a stuffed animal on the fence, or throw a coin into the reflecting pool, or allow their children to place handprints on the Gates of Time. The studied serenity of the outside Memorial is one factor, but only one factor, in helping them to do so.