

Too many words about 9/11.

All Talk

By HANNA ROSIN

IN THE DAYS leading up to this September 11, CNN's commemorative tribute "America Remembers" occasionally cut to footage of a reporter on that day last year, blank faced, hair covered in soot. The reporter would force out the plain facts, insofar as they were known—"We hear another plane has crashed"—then fall silent, forgetting the usual first-name banter with the anchors. Sometimes the stunned reporter even got the day wrong—"Here, this Wednesday morning . . ." But most of the time "America Remembers" simply showed CNN's reporters, polished and composed, reminiscing in the studio about their experiences that day. "It was a regular, schmegular day," said one, "my pager just went off." "I was eating roasted nuts," offered another. Then came the "terrible, terrible tragedy" or the "very emotional day"— clichés that on the day itself felt like the products of minds shocked out of artifice but which now just thud like the false solemnity of politicians.

One year later, September 11 has been ribboned into "September 11" or "9/11"—"The Day America Will Never Forget" or the "The Day America Changed" or "The Day A Nation Changed," depending on which station you watch. The aim of these retrospectives is ostensibly the same as the aim of a grieving widow: to weave some comforting narrative out of the chaos. The difference is, the widow's tidy story has desperation just below the surface and usually falls apart in that big empty bed. But Connie Chung's and Diane Sawyer's renditions always end in a heartwarming wrap. These human-interest tableaux borrow the narrative arc of VH1's "Behind the Music." Like Stevie Nicks or Cher, the stories of September 11 in broadcast and print move from success to disaster and back up to triumph again. *People* magazine offers "Stories of Hope": "Love Among the Ruins," about a fireman and a masseuse, both broken, who met at ground zero and married at a nearby memorial; "A Legacy of Love," about a gay man's reunion with his dead partner's mother; "Stronger By the Day," about empowered widows who vow that this tragedy did not happen "in vain." You could read the whole issue without understanding how unbelievably grim that day was, much less that we live in Code Orange days and are contemplating war with Iraq.

Nor is it just the tabloids and their ilk. "To mark the first anniversary of that awful day, we've looked for hope amid the horror," reads the introduction to *Newsweek's* commemorative issue. "Let's not forget how blessed we still are." The collective message is the same as that of the Boston priest who decided to shelve his relics from ground zero on the anniversary "because we need to move on." It is commemoration as closure, as a way to forget. There's the parade of heroes: fire-

fighters sitting on the truck, leaning against the truck, framed in the blinding sun or at dusk. And not only firefighters: "In fact you are the real heroes," Paula Zahn told one of the cameramen who shot ground zero for days on end. She then added that his daughter, too, is a hero, because she managed to survive her daddy's coming home late every night.

Then, of course, there are the children. In "63 Reasons to Hope," Diane Sawyer gathered 63 children born to women whose husbands died in the attacks. As they cooed and slept, she smiled warmly. "This is an uplifting type of edge," explained producer Jessica Velmans. "You can't be sad when you look at a gurgling, smiling baby."

One would hope that collections of news photos shot at that time would stand as the purest memorial of the attacks; but even those have been tarnished by the Happy Anniversary packaging. *Life* magazine's collection of haunting photos has been turned into an heirloom edition—"accented with pure 22 kt gold and crafted to last for generations"—complete with its own satin-ribbon page marker. September 11 as coffee-table book, a display piece to help you "share" such moments again and again "with your children and grandchildren."

The worst hopeful stories are the ones ostensibly about "chance"—the missed bus or sick kid or lost key that kept one person from dying—that quietly convey the opposite conviction, that God or some guiding force had a hand in all this. Michael Lomonaco, head chef at Windows on the World, went to get his eyeglasses fixed that morning, and so he was on the shopping concourse in the basement instead of on the 106th floor when the planes hit the north tower. "Why did you decide at that critical moment that you were going to try and get your eyeglasses fixed?" Chung asked him, eyebrows raised. "Why do you think you were saved?" The implication is that Lomonaco, and others like him, were somehow protected, chosen—a repulsive idea when one considers what it says about the thousands who died. Chung doesn't consider the simplest explanation: Being the boss that day, Lomonaco had the privilege of arriving at work half an hour late.

The September 11 stories take their cue from pop religion, the God of the best-seller list who is always there with an aloe-coated tissue. When cult-watcher types complain about religious groups exploiting September 11, they usually mean someone like Robert Tilton, the televangelist who published a book with a cover photo of the burning towers titled, *Fear No Evil: What You Need to Know and Do During these Turbulent Times of Fear and Terror*. But at least Tilton uses the words "fear," "terror," and "evil." The rest of the gurus just lug them away. Take, for example, Father Thomas Keating, the Trappist monk and expert on meditation, who in his new book explains why watching people jump from the towers "opens up the possibility of a universal experience of the redemptive force of love and transformation."

This thirst for a happy ending, a valuable lesson, a useful moral, only makes the rare, serious efforts unveiled this week stand out all the more. In PBS's "Frontline" documentary "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero," written and produced by Helen Whitney, a woman named Marian Fontana grieves, "I couldn't believe that this God that I'd talked to in my own way

for thirty-five years turned this loving man into bones. And now I can't bring myself to speak to Him anymore." None of the imams or rabbis or priests or widows interviewed goes so far as to deny the existence of God or even to say anything terribly original about the question. But at least they are in the realm of the sacred, with silent, eerie footage to match. Then there is HBO's "In Memoriam: New York City, 9/11/01"—a diary of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's day and a near-perfect record of what took place, the shock and the frenzy.

There are of course reported narratives that help us make sense of September 11, but they are not comforting. These are the re-creations based on new information running in various newspapers this week or in the book *Out of the Blue* by *The New York Times*' Richard Bernstein. They tell the story of Mohammed Atta's transformation from awkward son to steely radical and the rise of the extremist mosques that supported him and the intelligence community that failed to pick up on all of this. The stories, woven together, create a sense of momentum, of near inevitability. They leave you more terrified than hopeful: Are we in a war or not? Are we safe here or not?

Of all the faces of September 11, perhaps the most memorable is that of Stacey Staub, profiled in *U.S. News & World Report*. Staub has never managed the winning, wholesome smile of a Lisa Beamer. The 31-year-old lost her husband eleven days before giving birth to their first child, Juliette. Staub showed up at a bereavement group looking like a heroin addict, skeletal and drawn. And while the group's leader said the therapy has "softened the edges of grief," those edges are still sharp. A year later Staub still sounds like a stranger to closure: "I'd live in a shack with no plumbing and no TV and no cell phones just to have him back," she told *U.S. News & World Report*, before explaining how she grimly teaches her little girl to say "Dada" over and over while pointing to an image of her father on the TV screen. ■

Gay marriages don't change the Gray Lady.

Society Page

By LAUREN SANDLER

IF YOU REGULARLY scan the M.B.A.-cum-M.R.S. highlights of *The New York Times*' Sunday Styles, you probably saw the following recent nuptial: Goldstein (summa cum laude Brandeis, Harvard master's, Columbia master's and law degree, and founder of a Manhattan public affairs consulting firm) gets hitched to Gross (cum laude Yale, Yale B-school, Fulbright scholar, and a vice president of GE Capital). The buttoned-down cou-

ple met in Washington when Goldstein answered an ad Gross placed in the *Washington City Paper*: "Nice Jewish boy, 5 feet 8 inches, 22, funny, well-read, dilettantish, self-deprecating, Ivy League, the kind of boy Mom fantasized about." Sunrise, sunset. A perfect *Times* match.

What might have caught you by surprise was the accompanying photograph: Gross and Goldstein are both men. The announcement of Daniel and Steven's union (or as they refer to it in their listing, the "ceremony" to "affirm their partnership") last week represents the integration of same-sex couples into the section. It also marks the renaming of the "Weddings" pages as the (inclusive and legally correct) "Weddings/Celebrations" pages. A long overdue victory, sure. But a revolutionary one? Hardly. Daniel Gross and Steven Goldstein have far more in common with their colistees than with most of the world: They're full-fledged members of the same elite that has always peopled the *Times*' weddings listings. Sexuality isn't the key here. It's class. Which is why, orientation aside, the Gross-Goldstein partnership reads like old news.

To be listed in what some readers snidely call the "Mergers and Acquisitions" pages, a couple needs to pass through a screening process that functions as a class sieve. A written application requires the following information about the couple: "addresses, schooling, and occupations. Also any noteworthy awards that the couple may have received, as well as charitable activities and/or special achievements. . . . We also require information on the residences and occupations of the couple's parents." According to Dalton Conley, a New York University sociologist, the application nearly mirrors a three-pronged test that academics use to determine class: education (not just how much you've had but where you got it), occupation, and income. Since it's socially incorrect to list income, Conley explains, it can be neatly substituted with wealth. This, he explains, is measured by the inclusion of "charitable activities" in the *Times*' required fields. "Charitable activity is just . . . a polite way of seeing if you have enough accumulated assets, to see if you can give them away," he says. "It's not like they're asking if you do community service." And to Conley, the inclusion of information about the couple's parents' class is the icing on the cake. "We [sociologists] think of class as an intergenerational thing," he says.

Every week the *Times*' weddings announcements follow these criteria to the exclusion of the poor and the working class. Let's take a sampling of the past two issues, September 1 and September 8, in which 130 people (65 couples) were listed in the *Times*' Weddings/Celebrations pages. Of those, very nearly all have high-status jobs—law-firm associate, investment banker, neurologist, White House staff member—but not even one working-class occupation is represented. Indeed, over the past *year* you'll find only four listings for "administrative assistant": One works at a law firm and married an investment banker; one plays the French horn and holds a degree from the Royal Academy of Music; one is the daughter of the assistant head of medicine at a New York hospital; and one wed a *Times* employee. You

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