

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

NORMA IS IN NEW YORK CITY WORKING AS A VOLUNTEER for the Red Cross. She's counseling those who lost their jobs or their homes on September 11. Two months after the terrorist attack, the mountain of rubble that was once the World Trade Center still smolders. "Ground Zero looks like a demolition zone," she writes, "but then you remember it is a different sort of demolition. One survivor of the concentration camps said the acrid smell was horribly familiar to her."

WE'RE LIVING AFTER THE HOLOCAUST. WE'RE LIVING after Hiroshima. The end of the world really is the end of the world. In the ruins, we build again.

SOME PEOPLE ASK: HOW COULD GOD HAVE ALLOWED *this to happen?* I wonder which God they're talking about. During the most war-torn century in history, the one we've just tossed away like a bloody rag, 100 million people were killed. Which God allowed *that* to happen? A woman who narrowly escaped death in the World Trade Center collapse told Norma, "God must have been with me that day." Norma replied that God was with the people who died, too.

JESUS COMES TO ME AS GRIEF, AND I TURN AWAY AND cry. And Jesus comes to me as tears, and my face is wet with Jesus.

WHAT'S CHANGED AFTER THE TERRORIST ATTACK that supposedly changed everything? There's been no change in U.S. policy on global warming. No change in U.S. plans to scrap the antimissile-defense treaty. No change in U.S. arms trafficking, as we continue to sell billions of dollars' worth of weapons every year to any country with a checkbook and a pen. All that's changed is that we're now bombing one of the poorest countries on earth.

WAR: SUCH AN EASY WORD TO UTTER. ONE SYLLABLE. It slices the air like a sword.

I KNOW THAT BOMBING INNOCENT AFGHANS IS wrong. But I can't side with those who reduce the complexity of foreign affairs to a morality play and angrily exhort the U.S. government to "end the cycle of violence." It's one thing to denounce the indiscriminate use of force; it's another to explain how nonviolence can defeat terrorists. The president wants to conquer evil; the demonstrators want to give peace a chance. It's hard to say who's more naive.

AMERICA BRINGS ITS FIST DOWN ON THE TABLE, AND the children jump. *We didn't mean to scare them*, America says. *We just wanted to make a point.*

THE ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST are as old as recorded history. There's nothing new about

brother wrestling brother into the grave, each convinced no one has suffered as much as he has suffered, each insisting only his cause is just. Arab and Jew glare at each other. Each sees, in his brother's face, his own face. Each sees, in his brother's eyes, his brother's blindness.

EVEN BEFORE THE TERRORIST ATTACK, THE UNITED States was spending \$700 million a day to defend itself. Now that we're in a war against evil, we'll need to spend even more. Evil is a formidable foe. Evil always has a few tricks up its sleeve; otherwise it wouldn't be *evil*, would it?

FROM NOW ON, ONLY PATRIOTIC DREAMS. NO MORE sexy Muslim women lowering their veils just for me. No more flying dreams, unless I'm flying an F-15.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD? WITH AN ARMY OF religious fanatics on the one hand, and a government headed by George W. Bush on the other, I imagine there will be a great deal of suffering ahead. The flag manufacturers are sold out. Crowds chant, "U.S.A., U.S.A." A man I know says we should round up all the Arabs in this country and send them home. Still, who can predict the future? Who could have foretold the Soviet Union's collapse? Who knew that Nelson Mandela would one day be elected president of South Africa, instead of spending the rest of his life in jail?

THIS MORNING, I MEASURED THE LITTLE I KNOW against everything I don't know. It was a useful exercise. It didn't take long.

MEANWHILE, HOW MANY OF US HAVE STOPPED NOTICING that the hole in the ozone layer is growing larger, and the ice caps are slowly melting, and the ocean is rising inch by inch? I study a painting of a bygone age. The men look confident. The women look at the men.

I'M ALONE HERE THIS MORNING. AT LEAST, I'M AS alone as I can be with the whole East Coast about to wake up; as alone as I can be in this country more powerful than any other the world has ever known; as alone as I can be remembering that 800 million people went to bed hungry last night. There's food on my table. I'm alone with my vivid imagination, which isn't nearly vivid enough.

TO WHICH GOD SHALL I PRAY TODAY? NOT TO A GOD who wears a GOD BLESS AMERICA T-shirt. I'll pray instead to a God who reminds every Muslim, and every Christian, and every Hindu, and every Buddhist, and every Jew to sit down for a minute and shut up. I'll pray to a God who whispers: *Listen to the rain hitting the sidewalk. Listen to the whistling teapot and the barking dog. Listen to everyone breathing the same air together. Sit down. Listen.* ■