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**Communication, Liminality, and Hope:
The September 11th Missing Person Posters**

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Communication, Liminality, and Hope: The September 11th Missing Person Posters

Immediately following the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, family and friends of victims missing in the towers began placing “Missing Person Posters” of their loved ones around New York City. In this paper, we argue that the posters represent a powerful response to a traumatic and in some ways unprecedented situation, a response that transformed the death of loved ones from a reality or future certainty into a probability made possible by the searchers’ desire, emotions, or imagination. We demonstrate how the posters, operating in the “subjunctive” voice, transformed the “liminal” space between life and death and “haunted” onlookers, so that survivors and spectators alike could ponder the possibilities of a world that would “hopefully” turn out for the best. We also consider the implications of the posters for those who were unable to acknowledge the loss of their loved ones.

Key Words: Liminality, Visual rhetoric, Grief, Freezing Time, Missing Person Posters, September 11th, Hope

“Which Hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast.”

Hebrews: 19:6
The Bible KJV

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11th 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC), the cacophony of events overtaxed official agencies of relief, making it literally impossible for clear communication concerning who escaped from the towers and who did not. Spectators who watched the towers crumble initially received sketchy news regarding the status of survivors. False rumors spread that “thousands” of victims lay unconscious and unidentified in hospital beds and that hundreds of others were walking around the city dazed or suffering from amnesia. As it turned out, few of the missing persons were rescued from the carnage. However, without accurate information to demonstrate for sure what had happened to their loved ones, many relatives and friends assumed their loved ones were still alive. They composed Missing Person Posters (MPPs) and displayed them prominently on utility poles, walls, cars, fences, and the entrances to subways. The MPPs appeared first around Ground Zero and slowly radiated out over all of Manhattan and even to distant city boroughs. They clustered around key areas of the

city, such as the New York City Armory building and Bellevue and St. Vincent's hospitals. Places such as Bellevue, located on the lower eastside of Manhattan, began receiving victims of the attack. As family and friends arrived at Bellevue to look for their loved ones, they showed up with MPPs in hand. A large blue construction wall outside quickly became covered with the posters. In just a matter of hours, hospital employee Evelyn Borges placed several banners at the top of the wall naming it the "Wall of Prayers." The "Wall" quickly grew to several hundred feet in length, with thousands of posters hung over its surface (see Photo A). The posters also clustered around popular eating and drinking establishments frequented by some of the missing. When the Armory was set up as a central location for information and filing paperwork for missing people, its walls were covered with posters just like the construction wall outside Bellevue. Wherever the posters were clustered, people began to leave flowers, candles, stuffed animals, letters, notes, poems, gifts and other memorial paraphernalia. These were places where many people who gathered to hang posters inquired of anyone around them, "Have you seen my uncle, husband, brother, sister, or wife?"¹

The MPPs elicited a number of powerful responses. As one eyewitness said, "The posters were incredibly striking because of the photographs used and the level of content used to describe each person. The posters made you feel a part of their life. The photographs involving daily activities made you feel that this person was very much alive, a wonderful person who could not possibly have been taken from this planet before their time."² Yet another eyewitness wrote of his reaction: "I wept on the train, reading the daily profiles of the missing, the ones who loved salsa music or tinkering with motorcycles or who lived for nephews. I knew

¹ Statement made by Jennifer Lopez in a personal interview conducted with Ms. Lopez and her staff at Bellevue Hospital on June 21, 2002. Ms. Lopez was responsible for public and media relations for Bellevue Hospital and was directly involved in the MPPs being hung on a construction wall outside of Bellevue called the Wall of Prayers.

² Personal interview conducted with Ms. Lopez and her staff at Bellevue Hospital on June 21, 2002.

none of the missing but they were all exactly like the people with whom I had lived and worked my whole life” (quoted in Wallace, 2001). And Grider (2002), writing about the lasting impact of the shrines that grew up around Ground Zero, said of the photographs attached to the MPPs that they brought “these ‘missing’ people together randomly, much as they were in life and ultimately at the moment of their deaths. As long as the pictures are on view, the people are not ...lost.”

In this paper, we argue that the MPPs represent a powerful rhetorical response to a traumatic and in some ways unprecedented situation. This response transformed the death of loved ones from a reality or future certainty into a probability made possible by the searchers’ desire, emotions, or imagination. Scholars have shown how vernacular shrines and memorials appearing after sudden and devastating death operate rhetorically by maintaining continuity with the deceased and fulfilling the “formulaic pattern of symbolic action for ordering or controlling relatively disorderly or uncontrollable situations” (Turner, 1977 61-62; see also Van Gennep 1960; Carlson & Hocking 1988; Bodnar 1992; Savage, 1994; Browne, 1995; Winter, 1995; Haney, Leimer, & Lowery, 1997; Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti, 1998; Blair, Jeppeson & Pucci 1999; Grider, 2002; Kennerly, 2002). However, while memorials and shrines respond to an exigency of “he/she is dead and gone and I grieve,” the MPPs were a rhetorical response to an exigency of “I don’t know for certain if he/she is dead or not.” They were not so much commemorating the dead as they were creating a space in which the relatives and friends could keep hoping that the missing were alive.

More specifically, the posters functioned rhetorically in three ways: First, survivors of the missing understandably could have turned the uncertainty of the period immediately after September 11th – what we call a “liminal” space between the moment when a missing person was last known to be alive and before that person was acknowledged to be dead -- into

paralyzing grief and despair, particularly given horrific scenes of smoldering buildings around Ground Zero and of individuals who had jumped out of them to certain death.³ Instead, the posters operated in or invoked what Zelizer (2004) calls the “subjunctive” voice of photography, which creates an “as if” “space of possibility, hope ...through which spectators might relate to images” (163).⁴ The subjunctive voice of the MPPs imaged hypothetical, “as if” encounters with the missing persons, who, presumably, had *not* died in the rubble. They “froze” time and transformed the liminal period so that people looking for their lost loved ones could keep hoping, avoid shock, and resist the urge to dwell on the very distinct possibility that the missing person was already dead, already vanished into the past.

Second, while the subjunctive voice may have enabled poster-carriers to better cope with individualized trauma, the MPPs also reminded everyone who saw them of the urgency and desperation of the situation. Rhetorically, they called forth the presence of the missing in a form that transcended the chaos of the moment and enlisted others to join the search – i.e., the posters “haunted” the places where they were hung. In their study of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who showed photographs of their missing children to protest the Argentinean government’s refusal to account for their children’s whereabouts, Foss and Domenici (2001) define “haunting” as “an experiencing of the presence of a disembodied spirit in a form that transcends boundaries of time and space” (240). As we will illustrate, the MPP photographs “haunted” the areas around Ground Zero by featuring the missing in lively poses and juxtaposing the visual discourse used for shrines and memorials with the discourse of active acknowledgement and affirmation. These repeated images, which momentarily replaced the material absence of the missing with a visual, material presence, held the possibility for a future of more, new and

³ For analysis of other coping mechanisms utilized to ward off the shock of trauma, see Prend (1997).

⁴ See also Barthes (1981) and Sontag (1979) for additional analyses of the relationship between photographs and time.

similar (if different) connections, relationships, loves. In this sense, the missing persons were rhetorically situated in a past simultaneously, prophetically, flowing into an imagined present and an incomplete future, a time frame frozen off from the terrible reality of September 11th. The everydayness of the snapshots lent them a sense of perpetual contemporary status, which allowed for flow between past and present and into a future loaded with possibility.

Finally, the composition and displaying of MPPs also allowed the searchers to do as much as possible as a parent, a spouse, a sibling, or a friend to redress the trauma, to connect with the missing loved one, and to form new relationships with those perfect strangers who also sought to help. In this manner, the making and showing of MPPs and the subsequent offers of assistance also constituted a cultural performance -- the performance of interpersonal relationship in the absence of a loved one.

In what follows, we begin with a discussion of the subjunctive voice and haunting and then turn our attention to the MPPs as relational performance. We conclude by considering the ways in which rhetoric like the MPPs alters cityscapes and may hinder closure or disrupt the grieving process.

The Subjunctive Voice of the MPPs and Haunting

Zelizer (2004) describes “the subjunctive voice” as “the relationship developed between the spectator and the image – involving state of mind, attitude, temporal and sequential positioning – and to those aspects of the image that help the spectator develop that relationship” (p. 163). In the “subjunctive voice” of September 11th photo-journalism, viewers came to question the taken-for-granted authority of visual representation. Images that might not be inherently uncertain, hypothetical, or emotional became so in the mind of spectators once these images were viewed through the subjunctive voice. The subjunctive voice allowed viewers to

sort out or move through the “as if” of visual representation and memory and to “undermine and negate” the original use value of a piece of visual culture (p. 163). “In the subjunctive voice ... Spectators begin to ask not ‘What are we looking at?’ but ‘What does this remind me of?’ and ‘What possibilities does this raise?’” (p. 163).

Images of people on the way to their death in the WTC provided particularly horrific moments that could only be coped with through the subjunctive voice. Such images forced spectators to recognize the “finality” of death while at the same time “facilitating the inclusion of possibility, contingency, and even the illogical conclusion of its postponement. Visual images using the subjunctive voice to address death are thus possibly easier to view” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 165). These images also “purport to delay death’s progression” by freezing a sequence of action midway between life and death, as photographs of people tumbling from the burning towers seemed to do (p. 165). These photographs revealed action at “the ‘about to’ moment, the moment at which an individual or group is going to die, but not after they are already dead” (p. 165). Freezing the representation of death immediately before people actually perish creates an important liminal period for survivors, marking “the moment *before* death, rather than after, as the most powerful and memorable moment of representation in the sequencing of events surrounding human demise” (p. 165). As spectators are drawn into liminal time and the consequent “as if” narrative, they “are left to wonder how things might have looked different had death not occurred.... The “as if” is what gets recycled – on posters, collectors’ volumes, photographic yearbooks. Subjunctivity ... becomes a voice or trope through which we remember. (p. 167)

This explains why, after the September 11th attacks, substituting burning buildings for people jumping out of them eventually became the preferred photo-journalistic mode of

representation of the “about-to-die moment.” Viewing the raw horror of bodies falling to their death was problematic because their severe depiction overwhelmed the subjunctive possibility of muting the finality of death for viewers. The subjunctive voice of photography picturing the smoldering buildings froze events, opening a liminal space between life and death in which spectators could ponder the possibilities of a world that might have turned out differently, where the victims might somehow have survived. Images of the buildings prolonged this subjunctive response, “softening the reality of the response with the improbable – but comforting – sense that time might have thwarted death’s intention” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 179).

Whereas Zelizer claims that images of traumatic events ease one into acknowledging death in liminality, the surviving family members and friends who displayed MPPs did not consider what *could have been* the case if only their loved ones had not died; rather, they portrayed their MPPs *as if* the missing were in fact still living, as a hint of what might yet be. As improbable as finding the lost loves one was, the posters expressed a need to delay acknowledgment of grief and death in order to initiate a search and maintain continuity with the presumed living. The posters insisted on the possibility of a different picture or outcome. The MPPs created an “as if,” liminal space in which a powerful sense of hopefulness could emerge and where the searchers could enact relational bonds that the crumbling towers had in an important sense threatened to extinguish. In this respect, the poster-carriers were also akin to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who used images of their lost children to “haunt” the Plaza and the sites of government, commerce and religion that surrounded it. The Mothers, like the poster-carriers, did not know for sure what had happened to their loved ones, so they employed their photographs to make “real the people who had disappeared as well as the fact of the

disappearances themselves. Their effectiveness lay in their ability “to access a different reality, to repossess what had been taken away” (Foss & Domenici, 2001, p. 250).

Thus, the subjunctive language used to describe the subjects on the MPPs helped to “haunt” the areas around Ground Zero, to give the missing an observable, physical identity, a presence that transcended the chaos of the immediate scene. The missing might have been dead and therefore “disembodied,” but they were not acknowledged as such by the MPPs. Generally, the words “Missing” or “Have You Seen” sat atop every poster, typically followed by a person’s name and a photograph. Most of the posters contained some kind of personal, physical description, providing such details as height, weight, eye and hair color, physical markings such as tattoos or body piercing, and often the name of the company, the tower, and the floor the missing person was known to have been working on before the attack. The bold type face and the continual repetition of the word “Missing” also reasserted the existence of these individuals, reminding spectators of their status as not yet confirmed dead. These linguistic markings suggested people with names, places of work, and contacts to whom they were personally related, “as if” these people would be located and eventually return to their family and to their profession. The language played off the uncertainty of the liminal period, opening a space where there *was* a door that the missing persons had always walked through, and would yet do so again.

In addition, the subjunctive language situated the missing mostly in the present -- he or she “*works* on the 89th Floor,” “*has* a tattoo,” “*Wears* a gold cross,” “*Has* brown eyes,” “*Carries* a blue bag,” and “*is* very good looking.” Many posters made emotional pleas for help in the search: “Have you seen my Daddy?” And they made personal references to the missing individual such as “Loving Father,” “Devoted Husband,” or “Outgoing, caring person.” Such inquiries, posed in the active, subjunctive language of “seeing” the missing person, anticipated

an affirmative response while framing relationships with the living as existing in present space and time, as “loving” fathers, as “devoted” husbands, and as “outgoing, caring” persons. In yet another life-affirming gesture, each poster generally provided contact information such as an address or tear-away telephone number slips to call if anyone viewing the poster had any information about the location of the missing person on the poster. Creators of such posters expected people to tear off the phone number and call them *when* a loved one was seen. This contact information, again almost always phrased in the present tense, created a subjunctive mood, reflecting hope that the missing person was alive in the here-and-now, haunting the various sites around Ground Zero.

The photographs on the posters invoked hope and haunted the poster sites in ways that discursive language perhaps could not. Many of the snapshots, for instance, depicted the missing person located centrally next to a significant other (e.g. a spouse, children, a friend, a parent, even a pet). There were several photographs of people from a wedding ceremony and of someone in a moment of reflection at a desk with a co-worker nearby. Sometimes the missing person appeared next to the poster carrier. Several posters were decorated with personal artifacts belonging to the loved ones. Photo B reveals that one searcher taped an image of a crucifix next to a snapshot of the missing loved one, with the accompanying text: “Always wears gold cross.”

In almost every case, the photographs repossessed “what had been taken away” and, by doing so, “softened” the reality of the trauma – that is, the photos transformed the uncertainty of the liminal period through an “improbable” yet “comforting” sense that “time might have thwarted death’s intention.” The subjunctive mood of the images situated the missing person in a real space and time, despite the probability that he or she was dead, by carrying the implicit plea that “this person shown here lives somewhere in this city and will return home to that place and

to these activities, sometime. Help this missing person find his or her way home.” In this manner, the pictured subject was recognized for who he or she was, “as if” the person survived, via personal photos and subsequent thoughts about him or her that represented the person as being alive, haunting this very time and space. These were missing persons who, like Alan Patrick Linton Jr., from photo B, had *visible* faces and names, worked at companies such as “Sandler O’Neil,” lived in a home, and would presumably do all of these things again. Indeed, by revealing that fundamental sites of meaning had been fractured, the references to home (where many of the missing were photographed or mentioned directly in the subjects’ biographies) intensified the sense of “haunting” and therefore the urgency with which strangers were hailed to join in the search. As Foss and Domenici (2001) put it, “The lack of resolution ... contains the imagery of home but also its disruption. The home has become a site of unsettled and contested meanings, each of which functions as ghosts do, as a reminder of what is still in flux and unresolved” (p. 241).

Many of these texts “hoped” against the death of the missing by displaying the subjects in the same ordinary activities engaged in by those who looked at them, revealing their “missing” status almost as inconsequential. The missing were photographed playing with children, hugging spouses or friends, cradling pets, attending family gatherings, or just plain sitting for an everyday portrait. The constancy of family and personal photography acted like a salve in the midst of disaster. Put another way, the searchers “haunted” the places where the posters were hung by means of what Foss and Domenici (2001) call “synecdoche.” That is, they displayed images of small, conventional moments in the lives of the missing persons to stand for the greater whole of these lives as they might yet play out once the trauma of September 11th passed. By turning to conventional imagery, the poster-carriers could remember how the loved one had once lived a

normal life and hope that he or she would do so again. Meanwhile, spectators could easily think about how the missing persons conducted their lives in the past, as it was suggested in the photos. Or they could consider the “as if” moment when the missing were reunited with their searching relatives and friends or what it would be like to meet the missing person at some future date.

The memory through synecdoche of a missing person’s past, along with the projection of hope into the future, provided “structure and cultural rationale to chaos” (Jorgenson-Earp and Lanzilotti, 1998, p. 154). Even the oblique allusion to roommates, which drew upon the form of common advertisements, imbued the missing person with a familiar presence in the face of absence. This reemphasized the possibility of having that person meet someone on a date or some similar activity at some distant time. This striking juxtaposition of real trauma with a casual reference to the missing alleviated the severity of the moment and thereby increased the likelihood that, against all odds, the missing person survived into the present.

Some posters using a photograph of the missing persons featured in a pose that showed them alone (such as the husband pictured in the poster in Photo C) communicated a sense of desperation, of the urgent need to find them. Yet, these posters also were remarkably similar-looking to “wanted” person posters. Images of criminals frozen in time emphasize the importance of catching them precisely because, as the images convey, they are still alive and ready to do harm to the innocent. The more one looks the more one reads into their countenance malicious intent that will not go away. The subject must be found before they injure the innocent. By the same token, the MPPs suggested that relatives and friends were searching for missing loved ones who were suspended in the photographs, but nevertheless who were every bit alive as criminals in wanted posters. The “wanted” nature enhanced the liminality of the moment of

looking; it revealed the expediency and the desperation of sharing with others some sort of affirmation about the safety, survival, or location of the missing persons, *before* harm actually came to them. Here the posters signaled less “conventionality,” although the poster-carriers were still seeking identification and acknowledgment.

Another set of posters, mostly downtown on Wall Street and connecting roads, hung on seemingly every available wall for blocks, some walled up behind sheets of glassine or plexi as if to better curate and preserve them from the effects of time, bore the identities of Wall Street brokers, financiers, and investment bankers, just about all of whom worked in the towers. Nobody on these posters looked common or ordinary, in the sense that they were shown vacationing in some tropical island resort, eating at an upscale New York City restaurant, partying at an exclusive Long Island Club or company function. Nearly all those pictured were youthful and nearly all of the posters identified the missing by what job they held and with what prominent investment or banking firm. These pictures and the carefully desk-top published “missing” hand-bills that made up the majority of these posters captured loved ones in the prime of their lives; the posters said that of all the tragic losses, these missing could not possibly be dead. These were the new captains of industry, the most gifted and gainfully-employed of the New York City financial elite, too young, successful, and rich to die. The vitality of the subjects, frozen for all to see, belied the persons’ possible status as deceased -- they looked too alive to be dead. They were simply not the sorts of people who perished in tragic mass murders and they could not afford to be lost for long. Yet these posters also suggested that, in a liminal period, everyone is someone else’s sibling, spouse, relative, or friend and, therefore, called upon to hope for if not rescue the lost, regardless of the missing persons’ social standing.

In sum, the MPPs “haunted” people who saw them because they urged onlookers to refuse to see the absence of the missing as a sign of their demise. The linguistic cues and the personal snapshots, all posed in the subjunctive voice, pressed home the haunting metaphor: *The missing exist and are living with us, will do things to us, are calling for us to help them, scaring us, driving us from our fear or complacency to help the survivors engage the search.* Thus the missing were given a voice and remembered while the community was reminded that no one can write off victims of tragedy. The MPPs provided a means for strangers to connect with previously anonymous faces in a “personal” way -- to witness who these subjects were before they died and the social roles to which the missing would “hopefully” return after they were found. The MPPs reaffirmed for spectators that victims, alive or dead, were not lost completely and that some people – the spectators themselves, perhaps – might claim them.

The MPPs as Relational Performance

The making and placement of posters also confirmed for the searching survivor that he or she was being pro-active. Foss and Domenici (2001) observe that, when “important sites of meaning” such as family and friends have disappeared or been “ripped away” (p. 241), their whereabouts unknown, survivors “are subject to negative attributions and the accompanying guilt about their performance of” family and friendship roles (p. 241). Kennerly (2002) argues that the ritual of composing and displaying shrines reconstitutes the relationship between the bereaved and the dead, even after the loved one has perished. By being active, in effect going through the motions of a living relationship, the person touched by tragedy experiences a sense of “doing something” for the dead. However, as a response to uncertainty regarding the status of the loved ones, the MPPs represented the affirmative performative enactment of uncertainty. They maintained continuity, only with a presumed-to-be living person, in liminal space. These

vernacular expressions revealed what was out of place, but also what the authors "missed" and sought desperately to reestablish. MPPs constituted an act of making a claim on another individual, a relational performance of caring to the point of exhaustion. There was a double valence to the "missing" title of these texts. There was first, the instrumental or functional layer: "This poster is a tool for finding a missing person, please help me find her." There was also the second, expressive layer of communication operating: "I am missing this person, I miss him or her and this poster constitutes the relational *act of missing* that person." This second layer affirmed the relationship, the incompleteness of the survivor, who was missing a part of his/her life. This public performance of *relational* rather than individual ways of being is perhaps what enabled survivors to sustain hope while also speaking to a larger audience, building a sense of community with curious and sympathetic onlookers. As Jones' (2002) described the relational power of the MPPs, "These simple messages, usually with little more than a photo, a description and contact information, had the power to stop busy New Yorkers on the street because they speak to our most basic human needs--love and companionship."

So, for example, unlike mug shots, family and personal photos that featured a missing person alone were uniquely "relational" images to the extent that they showed an intimate connection between the photographer and the photographed. Displaying the poster with the single person became yet another way in which the searching family member or friend could enact relational bonds and maintain continuity with the missing loved one. The posters may have carried descriptions of the missing as "Loving Fathers," "Devoted Husbands," and "caring friends." But the act of publicly displaying images of these "fathers," "husbands," and "friends" also enacted what it meant for the searcher to return that love and devotion, if only in liminal space. This was a performance of love and companionship without the other being present,

where survivors illustrated the proper emotional temperament for coping with such a tragedy, a combination of hopefulness, relational affiliation, and urgency. In fact the absence of the “missing” must have made these displays all the more powerful. This was an emotional connection the searchers sought, through primarily visual means, to share with onlookers as well, perhaps as a way of enlisting them in the search. Nevaer found something similar when he referred to the public meetings at poster sites as “a democratic outpouring” of emotion (quoted in Snel, 2003) among total strangers.

At the same time, all of the activity centering on the posters suggested that the lost persons captured in some solitary stance were not alone. Their relatives, friends, and fellow citizens were doing all they could to find them, “as if” the reconstitution of these relational connections would also re-instantiate the material aspects of the violated family relationships. As Zelizer (2002) might argue, the personal snapshots provided a sense of security, as though by displaying them publicly the private and protected familial context could insulate the missing person from the devastation of the attacks. The poster for Alan Patrick Linton Jr., seen in Photo B, with its taped image of the “gold cross” he “always” wore, was most poignant in this respect. The picture not only shared a vital detail about Linton’s dress; it also invoked a religious presence to help keep him safe, a personal incantation probably meant to calm the searcher as much as it was included to comfort Linton himself.

As Foss and Dominici (2001) point out, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo circled the Plaza every Thursday at 3:30 in an attempt “to maintain the limbo or haunted state first experienced by the women when their children were disappeared. The circle is a reminder that the craziness is not over” (p. 249). The Mothers were obviously trying to radically alter the “liminal” state by urging the government to supply them with information about their missing

children.⁵ In contrast, the September 11th poster-carriers were not so much attempting to dramatically alter the status quo, as it existed before the attacks, as they were desperately trying to revive some “relational” form of it. As Zelizer (2002) argues, by displaying personal snapshots “at the time of a traumatic event’s unfolding, people move toward recovery, and they use the images in ritualized ways that in turn help reinstate the boundaries of the collective” (p. 711). The rituals surrounding the posters, while they certainly reminded viewers of the continued state of liminality, also tried to reestablish “normality.”

The story of one searcher illustrates the deep desire for normality. His coming back to the wall at Bellevue late on the evening of September 11th, to hang yet another poster and check the survivor-list, took on the appearance of a self-affirming ritual whereby its continued performance guaranteed a semblance of normality of the sort he had experienced before the attacks. Clearly exhausted and worn from his wandering around Manhattan all day and now into the evening, hospital personnel asked him if he wanted to come inside, rest, and get some food. The man refused, replying: “I just want to find my sister.”⁶ This man’s tired musing, not to mention the way in which he displayed posters over and over again, probably helped him cope with his tragic loss. It also reminds us that the status quo norms of personal relationships are (re)constituted as much by what occurs face-to-face between family members and friends as they are in the realm of liminal space.

Implications and Conclusions

⁵ Turner’s (1969; 1974) notion of “liminality” is a transitional state in which individuals find themselves “betwixt and between” – not belonging to society and not yet reincorporated into another social structure. Turner maintains that during liminal situations people from all levels of society and walks of life may form strong bonds, liberated from the structures that normally separate them. Not only can a state of liminality free persons from the constraints of their designated social roles, but it can also contain the possibilities for an alternative future. In a way, a “new” community of loss emerged after September 11th, one bound by a sense of responsibility for preventing future terrorist attacks. Possibly, the liminal space we have described gave them time to ponder how this more secure future might unfold. In addition, no longer constrained by designated social roles, individuals who had not previously developed strong relational commitments with fellow urban dwellers “bonded” in unprecedented ways.

⁶ Description of this event was taken from the interview with Jennifer Lopez.

Public rhetoric like the MPPs is about “managing the present in a new way by bringing to bear the insights and illuminations of history that the ghost offers” (Foss and Domineci, p. 252). In other words, this discourse empowers survivors, providing them with an opportunity to overcome the state of powerlessness they might experience while being trapped at home. It moves them into the streets near where their loved ones disappeared. By haunting walls, lampposts, and other sites away from or nearby a disaster, enhancing and transforming these sites in curious ways, the survivors and their posters remind passers-by that every aspect of daily living is fundamentally altered by tragedy. Public spaces become haunted by the absence of the “missing” people who ordinarily walk or rest there even as these missing are brought back to life by relational performances that exist outside the bounds of normal relational contact. As Foss and Domineci (2001) might explain, MPPs “jarr” survivors into “self-awareness” so that they can no longer think of themselves as simply family members and friends sealed off from tragedy. The moment they “perform” their relational loss they also create awareness of “options” that previously had not been salient for them and of possible relationships with perfect strangers who can aid them. These performances and the material objects to which they are connected turn public places into points of urgency, potential safe houses for the newly discovered missing, aid stations, and visual arguments that every person has a responsibility to relinquish his or her ordinary duties in order to reestablish control.

In this sense, the spontaneous gatherings prompted by the MPPs illustrates that by being in the presence of others who also desire to find hope, even the simple act of sharing of information can lead to hope being fulfilled -- the fulfillment of substantive social relationships and of community, if nothing else. The relational performances that accompany activities like making and displaying MPPs invite others into a much larger cultural performance with civic

implications. As Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998) argue, vernacular expressions “transcend the private grief of immediate family and community” and “blur any concept of a boundary between ...the public and private spheres” (p. 151). This discourse contains the potential to bring together individuals who, especially in heavily urbanized areas, might otherwise maintain a guarded emotional distance from their neighbors and avoid attachments with strangers (see Mumford, 1972). “Official” shrines and memorials articulate abstract, status quo interpretations of violent events as they affect communities at large. But vernacular discourse of the MPP variety elucidates the more personal effects of tragedy, inviting onlookers to imagine how such tragedy might impact them and to see disaster in terms of civic pride rather than in terms of nationalism. MPPs and other vernacular expressions strip away all artifice and external concerns and identify the most elemental facets of human relationships – life, death, survivorship, community. As Jones (2002) observed of those who studied the MPPs, “Strangers cried for people whom they would never meet. People hugged and prayed in the streets. The flyers impressed an intimate sense of community upon the largest city in America.”

On the other hand, as Foss and Domenici (2001) suggest, such discourse also makes “public the hidden dimensions of the act of disappearance – that it is a public kind of secret that haunts the population into submission by the very fact of its fear. The Mothers’ actions...revealed that the ghosts remain from such a process cannot be ‘completely managed’” (p. 251). MPPs and similar “missing” person flyers are troublesome, then, because even in the best of moments and in the seemingly safest of public places they underscore the vulnerability of every person to tragedy, to the fact that everyone can become a victim.

Finally, as the days and months after September 11th mounted and the liminal period receded, searchers made other choices to cope with their evident loss. For them, the connection

generated by the posters became a link to what were now recognized as the dead, as many of the “missing” posters turned to “In Memory of” posters indicating a connection with the person through more traditional forms of commemoration. Here the posters took on the power of shrines and memorials and moved the grief-stricken toward the future, beyond the trauma (see Grider, 2002; Keohane, 2002). For many other searchers, however, the vehicle for connection could not move outside of the liminal to recovery in the future. Apparently, grief from trauma can be so severe that closure and abandonment of hope and shifting connections is not an option. More than nine months after the attack, for example, MPPs were still being hung around Ground Zero. Photo B, in fact, is of a freshly mounted poster taken from a utility pole on June 22, 2002. This inability to move into the future was echoed sixteen days after the attack by Tony Gazzuto, whose wife was still missing. He stated that he would “continue to hope no matter how many years go by” (Watson 2001).

Why did many survivors react this way? One possibility is that, as the community of survivors used their posters to filter through the crowd in order to find the one person who was essential, anyone might have been the missing person, but anyone who was not the missing person in a sense was a disappointment. The fact that the missing loved ones displayed on the posters were not found, especially after the massive effort put into the search, made the inevitable rupture this absence announced that much sadder, more poignant and difficult to accept. Thus, the posters may have encouraged what Taylor (2003) has called “perseveration” or “bodily stuttering,” an inability to accept what had already been understood unconsciously as the arrival of death. Gunn (2005) calls this a melancholic “haunting” or a refusal to move on toward closure and healing, since the grief-stricken are continually haunted by traces of the missing other and work desperately, through whatever sensual means available, to make the absent

present once again. Foss and Domenici (2001) argue that, in the case of the Mothers, their dependence on synecdoche to manage the trauma of the disappeared “makes even more difficult such an escape because of what a haunting is: it is a limbo, a stasis, a standing still between materiality and intangibility, presence and absence, poised in eternity.... there is movement between endpoints but little emphasis on moving above or out” (p. 253). Zoroya (2001) describes the situation after September 11th this way: “New Yorkers are riveted by the hasty but intimate details that families scribbled on these photocopies, those particulars that might – just might – identify a loved one who in their minds’ eye is still wandering and confused, or pinned and buried – but still alive”(p. C8).

However the posters were employed, they remind us that, in tragic circumstances, every living survivor has a duty to the missing to remain hopeful and exhaust the search. The posters, wherever they were displayed, underscored the many ways in which people can communicate in order to cope with, to perform, and to alter the most extreme uncertainties. Thus, they represent the triumph of optimism in a culture that experiences tragedy, death, and violence as a matter of course. The mostly modest pictures and descriptions of loved ones reflect belief in progress and in the possibility of survivorship for all. As Taylor (1994) suggests, these posters insist on the creation of “happy memories” that might turn out to become realities yet again (p. 141).

Photograph A



MISSING

Since September 11, 2001
New York, NY

Alan Patrick Linton Jr.



Height: 5'8"
Hair: Brown
Scar on chin

Weight: 240 lbs.
Eyes: Blue
Always wears gold cross.

Circumstances: Alan Patrick Linton Jr. was last seen on September 11, 2001.
Alan worked for Sandler O'Neill on the 104th Floor of the World Trade Center Tower 2.

ANYONE WHO HAS INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT

IIS INVESTIGATIONS AT 1-866-505-1550

www.iisinvestigations.com

Photograph C



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