

A Different Perspective

By Wendy Taylor

Two hours prior to landing at JFK Airport, Delta Flight 149 drops suddenly from 30,000 feet to 20,000 feet and makes a noticeable right turn. Three hundred passengers collectively check their watches. It's too early to land. The cabin is silent. Our captain, in a cautious voice tells us that for FAA reasons, we cannot land in New York and are being diverted. He tells us he is busy in the cockpit, but promises a full explanation once we are on the ground. A few moments prior, I was wondering if I needed lipstick for my lunch in the city with Stephen, now my head is spinning with all the petrifying possibilities. None of us ever imagined the horrible truth.

Our window shades are down, but the man across the aisle opens his. All I can see is water, no land. We're coming in low and still there is no land. Miraculously, we touch down. There is cheering, but only halfheartedly. We're still waiting. The captain's voice returns. This time, it is shaky. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I promised you an explanation and I know you are all anxious for good news. I regret to inform you that I don't have any. It is difficult to tell you what I have to say. Please remain calm." Nervousness permeates throughout the cabin. The next sentence, although brief, contains the worst words I have ever in my life heard. He hesitates, then says, "The United States has been attacked." Brief silence then a rushing of sobs and tears by every American on board, and many non-Americans. The captain perseveres. Two planes have hit the World Trade Center towers, another hit the Pentagon and yet another was missing in Pennsylvania. He wearily says that this was thought to be the work of suicide bombers and terrorists.

Stephen. He works for Solomon. Isn't that building next to the towers? Oh my God. My heart sinks. I am instantly sobbing, and scared, and worried.

The captain continues on. He informs us that we are in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. At the time, this means nothing to me. We are not permitted off the plane. It could be up to 27 hours. Those of us who have cell phones can try to get a signal. There are six. I am not one of them.

We finally leave the plane at two a.m., being permitted to carry nothing but the clothes we are wearing. We are in the eastern most part of North America and I am in a sundress and sandals. But I am alive. We deplane to a host of weapon-clad military, move on to Customs, then a bus, then a stadium where we are processed, then another bus, then a shelter where we are graciously given soup at 4:30 in the morning. We are shown to areas where hundreds of Red Cross blankets and pillows have been placed on floors side by side. No one wants sleep. Most of us still have not contacted families and friends, and have yet to view the devastation. The shelter has access to the Canadian news. The coverage isn't as much as we want, but it is all we can handle at the time. I feel numb and alone.

The next morning we discover that part of the reason we remained on the plane so long was security. The other was preparation. St. John's is a small, sleepy town on the island of Newfoundland, which was formerly its own country until it joined Canada in 1949. St. John's

airport has never seen more than four international flights a week. In the span of a few hours it was littered with 27 wide-bodied international flights wing to wing on the tarmac. And 4700 stranded passengers. The town does not have the fuel, the personnel, the mechanics or the customs agents to handle it. What St. John's does have, however, are the volunteers. Hundreds of tireless, merciful volunteers. As soon as the setting-up is complete, our group is cared for at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints facility. We total eighty-nine passengers from our plane, along with well over a hundred French women from an Air Transport flight that was headed from Marseilles en route for Toronto. During the week that follows, we are surrounded by Mormons, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and local neighbors that come out to see if they can offer anything further.

Our shelter is headed by an energetic woman named Sharna. For six days, she never leaves the building. She eats with us, sleeps with us (although those of us who don't snore, sleepwalk or talk in our sleep only catch a precious few hours), wears the same clothes and goes without showers like the rest of us. She is also our source of information and hope.

Her first words to us are that the borders are closed and air traffic is halted until further notice. As the week unfolds we sporadically learn that the planes are being stripped and that all luggage will be gone through thoroughly. Any nail files, scissors, clippers, metal, open bottles, spray bottles, glass, food or electronics that are non-functional will be confiscated. The FBI will be investigating and everyone is "suspect," especially those flights that were headed to NY. There are five. There is no word on when JFK will reopen. Our flight is going to be number twenty-six out of twenty-seven. We hear we may go to JFK. We may go to Cincinnati. We may go to Atlanta. We don't know any of this yet.

We are not allowed to leave the building. We could be called to leave at any moment. I still need to reach Stephen. There is one phone and 250 people. The line to use it stretches the length of the building for most of the duration of our stay. I wait. He does not sound like himself, but he is alive. I breathe for what feels like the first time in a day.

I join the others who are sitting outside, just staring off in the distance and thinking. A neighbor comes over with her dog, Hope. It is assumed that everyone misses their families, but had not been discussed that some of us miss our pets. Hope makes us feel closer to home. The neighbor's name is Sarah. She stays to talk. She is kind and compassionate. She is disabled and finances are tight, but she offers to open her home for showers if we are still here in a few days. We are, and a handful of us will accept the offer. When we do go shower, she has shampoos, soaps, toothbrushes and deodorants lined up for each of us. She also has coffee and doughnuts. This is more than she can afford, yet the smile never leaves her face and the kindness never leaves her eyes. I grow teary-eyed. We return to the shelter and Sarah comes to help with dinner. She hands me a folded piece of paper. She has written me a poem. My heart breaks.

When we are permitted to leave the building an hour at a time, volunteers offer to play tour guide. We jump in cars and go to see what St. John's has to offer. Bars are on George Street, shops are on Water Street. What was once a town with a thriving commercial fishing industry is now in dire straits. Fifteen years ago a moratorium was placed on fishing until the supply replenished itself. In the meantime, the fishermen were given severance pay for several

years and the opportunity to complete their education, free of charge. Most just waited for the fish to come back. The fish never did. Fortunately, Newfoundland has discovered oil off its coast. They are only in the beginning stages of harvesting it, but the future looks promising.

We are also taken to Fort Amherst, located atop a channel to a harbor so narrow that most cruise ships cannot have passage. Our last stop is Cape Spear, the Eastern-most part of the North American continent. There are only two things located there – a lighthouse, and a lone Canadian flag flying at half-mast. I again grow teary-eyed. The outpouring of sympathy from these people is too much to handle.

The next day, we are permitted to walk a few blocks to a small shopping mall. I go alone. I need time to myself. I want to browse and attempt to feel like a real person again. In the first store, the shopkeeper tells me if there is anything at all that any of the passengers need, just to let her know. The next shopkeeper informs me that she has never seen the mall so empty. The locals are at home glued to the news. Only Americans are venturing out. The one after that looks sad when I walk in, and is crying by the time I leave. The shopping center is not a place to clear my head after all and I return to the shelter.

About this point, some of us start to wonder if the volunteers have taken time away from their normal jobs, in addition to their families and normal lives. We ask, and are told not to worry. We are told we have more important issues to think about. Later that night, I over-hear a conversation about how the different organizations in Canada must figure out how to split up the cost of keeping 30,000 downed passengers for the week. I make a mental note to myself to send up several donations when I get home.

Throughout the week the volunteers are with us. They cry, talk, pray, and even laugh with us. They wear American flag pins, and sport star-spangled neckties. As we unrelentingly watch CNN and sing along to the national anthem and dozens of other hymns that are broadcast, they sing with us. They know the words better than some of us do. They are truly angels, each and every one of them.

We are still here on Sunday, and we are invited to the Mormon service. No matter what religion we are, we all attend without exception. It is the first chance we've had to give something back. We are also invited to speak. I stand up and look around at my new friends, both passengers and Canadians. With an unsteady voice I address the congregation. "I want to share with you a poem that was written for me. In only a few days, someone who had before been a stranger to me was able to express how I was feeling better than I ever could. And if anyone doubts that this nation feels our pain, I hope this will show you differently. It is entitled *A Return to Innocence*:

*A couple of days...
As I find myself...
From out of the rubble and confusion
And yes. Fear.
I have a friend...
For a day...*

A lifetime in my heart.

You... so tiny of stature

So small

And timid?

No – You are strong...

Usually;

In control...Not so?

But it is OK.

You can return to your self-confident self.

Your world, once again

Will be...

Is...

Yours.

Hang on to your spirit

Through your return to innocence.”

We are called to leave late Sunday night! We say our good-byes and thank-yous and promise to keep in touch. And we will. One of the volunteers has set up a web site so we can share our stories and our thoughts.

After many hours in customs, and a long flight to Atlanta, we are on home soil. From an enthusiastic and emotional flight attendant come the best words I have ever in my life heard, “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome back to the United States of America!” More tears, but this time they are accompanied by equal amounts of cheers.

Out of this, I now have new beliefs. I believe in our President. I believe in our military. I have a renewed sense of patriotism and a resurrected belief in the power of the human spirit. These things had been missing from my life, and I needed them.

I will now conduct myself differently. I will never say goodbye to family and friends without telling them that I love them. I will focus less on myself and material possessions and more on the truly important things in life. I will practice more patience and less selfishness.

Aside from the terribly devastating tragedy forced upon our country for reasons we do not understand, I do not regret the experience I had while in Canada. For so many others, it was business as usual over the week that followed, with no time to cope. Instead, I was forced to take the time to reflect on life, and mourn for the loss of so many. I was with people that felt exactly as I did, and I am fortunate that we were all together during the pain and the worrying and grieving. I was one of the lucky ones. I was not alone after all.