

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

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My 9.11 reality call

I have debated for some time whether to write this piece. It is perhaps a little self-indulgent, but it has had a purgative effect.

In the UK, you call 999 for fire, police and ambulance. In America, you call 911 for the same service. However, for all of us, particularly Americans, the number 911 now has a different significance, September 11th, the day when we were all attacked by terrorists. For me, amongst many things, it was a reality call.

In America, certain dates have particular significance in the context of people's lives. People still remember what they were doing on June 5th 1968, when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas by Lee Harvey Oswald, July 20th 1969, when Neil Armstrong became the first person to set foot on the moon's surface, or January 28th 1986 when the Challenger Space Shuttle exploded shortly after take off. Personally, I do not remember what I was doing on those three particular days. I was too young for the first two; for the third, I recall thinking that space flight, although treated as if it was a short-haul flight to Tenerife, was still hazardous work undertaken mostly by highly trained military personnel who knew the

dangers (it seemed too early to be sending up civilians - an unnecessary risk for publicity). And now, September 11th 2001 - 9.11. Do you remember what you were doing when you got this emergency call?

My recollection is this.

I was away at a scientific meeting. At about the time the second plane was crashed into the World Trade Center in New York, I was on the telephone to a former member of my laboratory (although I did not know at the time what was going on thousands of miles away). I was leaving a long telephone message about some ideas I had for a paper that we were trying to get accepted in a journal. I want to emphasize that at the time I was thinking that getting this paper accepted was very important to me. I do recall being anxious about how we could appease the reviewers without doing more experiments or sucking the text dry of all speculation. The latter stands out in my memory because we wanted to use the text to make some, admittedly, speculative conclusions about the broader impact of the work in general. To say that thinking about this work consumed all my time would be an overstatement, but I did fret over it. It was very important to me.

I left my hotel room to go down to the

next session of the meeting and was greeted by knots of shocked colleagues who asked me if I knew what had happened in New York. Bewildered, I returned to my room and switched on the television to CNN.

The images were surreal. I think that like most people my initial impression was one of disbelief. I watched over and over again as a passenger jet in slow motion (but it was in real time) homed in, struck and was then swallowed whole by a World Trade Center Tower. And, it was such a beautiful day, with a clear, blue sky. Different views of the crash were shown, as if multiple cameras had been deliberately placed around the towers to get different angles. How many takes were necessary to get the impact just right? Where was Bruce Willis in his torn and dirty vest?

Then the towers collapsed. Great plumes of gray dust burst out between the high-rise buildings, ordinary people (or were they extras?) running, running, running. How was this possible? Then the first images of the survivors. They were coated in ash, walking trance-like, ghostly, the surrounding streets, blanketed with shredded pieces of paper (I thought that everyone used computers?), suddenly emptied of life, a weird silence except for the emergency chirping of badges on downed rescue workers.

Then the enormity of the catastrophe began to sink in. One heard telephone calls from people trapped in the towers

or on the hijacked passenger planes - mothers, husbands, daughters, friends calling their families to say good-bye. They were not military personnel calmly calling flight ops that they had a malfunctioning engine and that they were 'going down'. No, these were ordinary people realizing that they were trapped and that this was the end. The number of people lost began to be counted: the hundreds of firefighters and police that had responded to the crashes but had been entombed within the collapsed towers, the thousands who could not get out and the passengers on board the hijacked planes.

And then I started to think about what I had been doing at the time of the plane hijacking and the crashes. During the time that this was happening, I was fretting over the publication of work that indicated the possible role of a protein in moving other proteins. From my new vantage point of other far more significant problems in the world, I could survey the significance of what I had been worrying about. It was like being on a beach, a very big beach covered with sand. I had been on my hands and knees with a powerful magnifying glass, carefully moving a grain of sand two grains over and one up - ah, the impact of that move on the beach as a whole! Now I could not make out clumps of sand - let alone the one special grain of sand that I had been working on.

Frankly, I was embarrassed and somewhat ashamed. My 'scientific'

problems were truly insignificant in light of what had happened on that day. My desire to foist another paper on the scientific community was not so important. My feeling of self-importance that the paper would make such a big impact was, of course, overblown and ridiculous, as were my concerns over the minutiae of the criticisms and my mild resentment that the reviewers were unreasonably persecuting me.

So where does this leave me? I am not giving up science. In the big scheme of things, it is still important to understand what we are and how we are put together. All our work will have, collectively, a tremendous impact on humanity. My interest in science is undiminished, my enthusiasm for the scientific questions that we are working on unflagging. I still like writing, submitting and publishing papers. I still enjoy talking about our work in seminars and at meetings. Teaching and training are very rewarding. But, I have a better perspective, or perhaps it is a renewed perspective. I see more clearly how we must contribute together. I remind myself not to be self-inflated about the importance of my work and to zoom out to see the bigger picture. And, I remind myself that I am lucky to have the freedom to be doing something I really enjoy.

That was my 9.11 emergency call. I will remember.

Caveman

Letters

JCS welcomes correspondence provoked by articles in all sections of the journal. Responses to articles in the Sticky Wicket section should be sent directly to Caveman (email: caveman@biologists.com). Correspondence relating to Research Articles, Commentaries and Cell Science at a Glance should be addressed to the Executive Editor and sent to

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