

Jason Powers reflections on the creation of the September 11, 2001 Tribute. Published on Medium.com

This was originally written as a Facebook note 5 years ago, looking back at my 9/11 story on the 10 year anniversary.

I'm not usually one to write long form about myself, but my 9/11 experience was a significant milestone in my life on so many levels, it seems appropriate to reflect on what happened ten years ago. I wouldn't blame you if you just skipped all this and moved on to the next cat video or foodie pic. In fact, you probably should.

Ten years ago I was a 24 year old single white male emo artist / musician type trying to figure out my place in the world. So in other words, nothing out of the ordinary. I was living in a 1 bedroom suburban style apartment in Corona, California. For those who don't know, Corona is right outside of Orange County via the 91 Riverside Freeway, one of the deadliest stretches of asphalt in the US.

I had moved to Corona 4 years prior, not for school or a job or anything that usually motivates someone to move to a city right outside of other more prominent cities, I just wanted to move out of my folks house and my buddy Brad in Corona needed a roommate. So I rolled up to Brad's bro-pad with all of my belongings packed into my maroon '90 Ford Tempo. I had \$1k saved and figured that would give me a month to find a job. Any job. I wasn't going to be picky. I knew the day job would only be temporary, since I would be forming the next Weezer buzz band or illustrating the next hip alt-comic (Madman, Milk & Cheese, Land of Nod anyone? My comic geek streak runs deep!), or be 'discovered' artistically in some other way and somehow end up replacing Conan (Fallon!!!).

My thousand bucks life savings, a temp job as a JCPenny Young Men's Department holiday help cashier, and a false start at a two man, chain-smoking 'Graphics' operation, managed to just cover me until I landed a copy boy gig at a PIP Printing franchise. This was the best possible job for me.

For in my 3+ years there, not only did I become a master of changing toner, clearing paper jams and power using the intimidating double-sided, collate and staple features, I learned graphic design from the outside looking in.

I learned how to recreate the business cards customers supplied in Powerpoint, properly in QuarkXPress. I learned the basics of typography best practices. I learned the differences of RGB/CMYK color spaces. I learned how to mix press ink to match a Pantone swatch. I learned about dpi, plate separations, gripper margins, dot gain and ganging. I learned how to be the mediator between an irritable customer and an irritable pressman. I learned why it's funny and cringeworthy when you see Courier as the unintentional headline font in a print ad.

All this graphic design knowledge all came in really handy when my band, The Bedwetters, never made it out of the garage and none of my self published comics caught on, despite Deaf Date Comics being ranked #93 in Gear Magazine's (RIP) '100 Hottest People, Places & Things of 2000 List.' That was a kick discovering they ranked me in their list ahead of the city of Glasgow while flipping through the issue at Tower Records (RIP). And, shockingly, I wasn't somehow in some other way artistically 'discovered.'

So in 2001, that put me in my first official job as a Designer. My buddy Brad and his dad had a nice little web services business going and I was hired on to be their Web Designer. I had been teaching myself Flash and Dreamweaver, so that mixed with my print design knowledge, made me somewhat qualified for the position I guess. I was living the dream, designing from home!

Unfortunately, about the same time I was hired on, the dot-com bubble burst and the company started slowly losing other streams of revenue, and me completing my web design projects soon became the main factor if we were all going to get paychecks that month. Stressful and depressing to the max! I think I gained about 30 lbs during that period, which is even more impressive considering I didn't even have a dining table, I just pulled out the kitchen cutting board over a stool to eat my baloney sandwiches. In addition to work stress, I was feeling a general disconnection to my surroundings, interests and friends. It was a tough summer and it felt like a chapter in my life was closing.

My two sisters and my young niece flew in to town the first week of September to visit. It was great to get a dose family to lighten my spirits. I instantly smiled when I greeted them as they walked off the plane at their gate terminal. They were staying with friends while in town, so I'd hang out with them after work. Monday evening, they were still figuring out what to do the next day, they were considering going to Disneyland or something. I told them to call me in the morning to let me know their plans.

The phone rang just before 10am September 11th morning, I had just woken up a few minutes earlier and hadn't gotten to my computer yet. It was my youngest sister, Sarah, as expected calling to let me know their plans.

The following conversation is the most 'Sarah' thing I think Sarah's ever done. We chatted for about five minutes, something along these lines:

"Hey Jason. How're you doing?"

"Good, just waking up."

"Oh cool. That's nice you get to sleep in a bit working from home."

"Yeah, I guess so. I should probably be getting up earlier than I do."

"Really? I'd sleep in if I could. You're so lucky."

"So, are you guys going to Disneyland today?"

“Nooo..., I think we decided we’re just going to stay at the house today. We’ll probably just take the kids to the park to play for a little bit.”

“Ok, well then I’ll just work for a few hours then come over and hang out. Any plans for dinner?”

“We’re not sure. Maybe we’ll BBQ or something.”

“Sounds good.”

“All right, we’ll see you this afternoon then.”

“Ok, see you guys later.”

“Oh, hey, Jason; so..., some terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center..., and it collapsed.”

“WHAT!?!”

My little sister informs me of the news of 9/11 after five minutes of calm small talk about making plans for the day. She left out the part that they’re weren’t going to Disneyland because it was closed due to terrorists flying planes into things! That’s so Sarah.

I spent the rest of the day like most people did, pouring over 9/11 stories and updates in stunned disbelief, with the news on in the background, wondering if there were more attacks coming. Like after a large earthquake, my body stayed tensed up waiting for the aftershocks.

My sister’s return flight was canceled, due to all planes being grounded. They stayed in town an extra few days to see if flights would resume, then we eventually drove them home meeting my dad half way to pick them up. With family and work to keep me busy and occupy my mind, I made it through the week without a major breakdown. My meltdown happened Saturday morning.

I felt paralyzed in bed. Absolutely no energy or desire to get up. I’d cry, then settle, then cry more. I think I eventually slipped into the silent crying where your face just pinches in on itself, and your mouth opens up and curls down, and your chin stutters, but no tears or sounds accompany the sadness. After a couple long hours of being a pathetic lump in bed trapped in thoughts, a song popped into my head. It was Victoria Williams’ version of ‘Can’t Cry Hard Enough.’ Oh man, that got me balling the strongest. But it also got me out of bed.

I pushed William’s ‘Swing the Statue!’ CD into the stereo and played ‘Can’t Cry Hard Enough’ on repeat and sagged in my chair and wept. That song was the perfect companion for my current state. The simple, cutting lyrics said what I needed to feel:

And now that you’re gone

I can't cry hard enough

No I can't cry hard enough

For you to hear me now

And Victoria William's honest, frail, often un-pretty singing was the voice of comfort I needed to hear. And as all good sad songs do, it made me feel sad, but then it made me feel better. It was the emotional release I needed to get unstuck and carry on. So I spent the rest of Saturday unshowered in my PJ's at the computer, clicking through all the unfathomable photos and stories, crying every few hours as emotions built up.

Besides the shared national disbelief and sorrow of that time, I think we all shared a desire to "do something" to help. Towards the end of the day, I had gotten most of the sadness out of my system and that urge to "do something" came to the forefront.

I thought if listening 'Can't Cry Hard Enough' while processing the photos and stories of 9/11 was a healing emotional release for me, then I could offer that to others. I started gathering AP photos to edit together a simple Flash slideshow to accompany the song. I spent 3 days putting together the 'tribute to the victims' clip, adding some copy and scripture at the end to try to contextualize the piece as ultimately hopeful. I posted it on September 18th to the homepage of my deafdate.com website, a site that had been the home of my Deaf Date Comics, then emailed the link out to 25 friends and family along with this message:

My intention is that this tribute might express a feeling that so many of us are coping with right now, be a release for sorrow, and most importantly, offer hope in this time of need.

I got some thankful and heartfelt replies back from my contacts and saw that it had reached 1,000 views by the end of its first day. I was excited people were sharing the link to the tribute and from the feedback I was getting, it was fulfilling its purpose. The following day it topped 2,500 views. The third day online it climbed to 10,000 views and caught the attention of my hosting provider.

I was using local company with a very basic plan, and this increase in traffic was crushing the shared server the site was on. They contacted me and graciously waived the additional bandwidth fees and moved it to a more robust server. They hesitantly agreed to continue hosting, but would only do so up to a point without me paying for the extra bandwidth, which would be hundreds of dollars a day at the pace the traffic was growing.

So by the fourth day, keeping the tribute online became a part-time job. I put a request up on the site for bandwidth donations. I started emailing and calling all the major hosting companies requesting a donated home for my 1.2mb SWF file, which by the first week was getting over 100,000 views a day. I was learning that bandwidth at this level wasn't cheap! I was working out temporary deals a few days or weeks at a time to keep hosting going. If only YouTube was around back then.

When I saw the sudden rise of traffic after the first few days, I figured I should reach out to Victoria Williams to get usage permission of the song. The only contact information I could dig up was her site's message board moderator's email. I shot off an email to the address, doubtful it would be read. But a few days later I got an email back from William's then husband, The Jayhawks' Mark Olson, saying I should give 'Vic' a call. I dialed the number and sure enough it was Victoria's slow, soft, southern drawl:

"Hiii Jaaaayson. Mark's at the computerrr teeellin' me you waaana use one of myyy soongs for your video the iinternet? Welll gosh, of course. I mean, it's not liiike I diiid anything for your mooovie, you maaade it. I'd beee happy to let you use the song."

I was talking on the phone with one of my favorite songwriters, thanking them personally for the song that meant so much to me during that time. Crazy!

Keeping up with email coming in through the site became another part-time job. I was getting messages of thanks by 10's, then 100's, then 1,000's.

A common theme was that the tribute really did provide a healing release of emotion. Highlights included emails from Ground Zero first responders and FDNY firefighters who had to hold it together to get their rescue work done, but were then able to weep at home with the tribute. Emails from family of the people shown in the tribute. Personal emails from spouses of people who went down on the planes and perished in the towers. I felt silly accepting their thanks, as they were the ones wrestling with the most pain.

I could not believe this whole international community of people were reaching out to me saying the tribute was helping them heal. I believe one woman said it was 'blessed.' Something bigger than the sum of its parts was breaking through and moving people.

I was getting requests to show the tribute at memorial services, in school classes, at offices, at police and fire stations, at church services. People were requesting my mailing address to send homemade thank you gifts, cards and handwritten letters.

On the hosting front, I had to temporarily pull down the tribute at the height of its traffic on October 9th. 3 weeks of it being online was all my hosting company could handle. Fortunately, I was able to find a larger hosting sponsor to give the tribute a proper home, and I relaunched it a week later on it's own URL, cantryhardenough.com, where it was able to reach millions. It remained active there until 2007.

Before 9/11, I was already toying with the idea of going back to school full-time as my next season of life, requesting information from Rhode Island School of Design and Parsons in NYC. 9/11 removed any doubt that this is what I should do, and in my scouting, I came upon this small little art school in Seattle, Cornish College of the Arts. I visited the campus in October, 2001, and fell in love with the old ivy-covered buildings tucked away in the lush, green, mish-mashed artsy Capitol Hill neighborhood. And the city of Seattle was the exact opposite of Corona and exactly what I needed.

Since it would be almost another year before I could enroll there, and my current employment situation appeared to be sputtering to an end, I swallowed my pride and asked my folks if I could move back in with them temporarily. All they could offer me was a couch to sleep on, as their house was already full with my sister, niece and a foster child living with them; I gladly accepted.

So in November, 2001, I was back in my hometown of Grass Valley, CA, couching it with my folks. It was actually an amazing transitional time. I got to reconnect with old friends, make new friends, play some music, and figure out by trial and error how to be a designer. I even got another copy boy job. And I shed that weight depression had packed on. Thanks Atkins! (Ironically, I'm now back to my larger weight ten years later. Thanks dad-gut!)

An unplanned outcome of the creating the tribute, was getting client work from it. A fellow named Bruce Allen contacted me upon seeing the tribute, and hired me to do a series of Flash design projects. He turned out to be a great long term client. His projects were what enabled me to make the jump to support myself as a freelance designer through my first couple years at Cornish.

It's impossible to view the tribute now the same way as when it was created. The images of 9/11 have been politicized from every angle. And on technical level, by today's standards it looks like something that could be put together in iMovie in an hour. Nothing special. But for whatever reason, during the weeks after 9/11, it was special.

The whole experience reinforced my belief that making art is "doing something." It showed me the magical power of editing together image, audio and copy to say the right thing at the right time. It was my first taste of the even bigger distribution power of the internet. It galvanized my career path as an interactive designer, that passion overtaking the rockstar and comic artist dreams. And it made very clear that no one is truly alone in this world and we're not separated by all that much.

I'm amazed and humbled that my little 9/11 art project spread so far, made a little difference and touched so many lives. The response I received back literally, *LITERALLY* changed my life.

Thanks for reading my ramblings. If you enjoyed this, look for my next long form post in ten years.