Giving Voice to Grief After 9/11

Fall 2003

The Guys, first a play and now a movie, is based on a series of conversations that began a week after 9/11 when Anne Nelson, then a professor at the Graduate School of Journalism, met a New York City fire captain who needed help writing eulogies for eight of his men.

The play—a 90-minute dialogue between a writer and fire captain—debuted at The Flea Theater on December 4, 2001, with Sigourney Weaver as Joan, the writer, and Bill Murray as Nick, the captain. It played for weeks to sold-out audiences, and in the following months readings and performances were staged across the country. The movie, directed by Jim Simpson and starring Weaver and Anthony LaPaglia, opened last spring.

The Guys came to campus when Nelson, now a senior fellow at the Initiative for Policy Dialogue at the School of International and Public Affairs, read a monologue (below) from the play during Columbia's remembrance ceremony in Low Plaza on the first anniversary of September 11.

"Are you ok?" That was what we all kept asking each other, the rest of September. What was the answer? The pebbles dropped in the water. The point of entry is you, yourself. Were you present at Ground Zero and wounded, suffocated, or covered in white ash? No? I guess you're ok. The first ring around the pebble: "Is your family ok?" Did you lose someone in the Towers or on the planes?

The next ripple—friends. "Are your people ok?"

Next ripple: If someone died in the Tower that you had dinner with once and thought was a really nice person, are you ok?

Next: If you look at a flyer of a missing person in the subway and you start to lose it, are you ok?

(Pause.)

If all the flyers are gone one day. They're—gone. Are you ok?

Is anyone ok?

That first week I bought a coffee at Starbucks on the way to work, and the guy at the counter handed me my cup and said,

"Here's your change. God bless America."

And I took a breath, and said, "Are your people ok?" And he said, "Only two missing."

Only two.

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