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Erik O. Ronningen's *Inside Out: Escaping from the Twin Towers* (Reprinted by permission)

Posted on September 11, 2015 by **Woman Around Town** in **Living Around**



Where were you on 9/11? Most people can remember with frightening clarity where they were that day. Erik O. Ronningen was on the 71st floor of the North Tower when American Airlines Flight 11 struck the building. He survived. For several years he grappled with the idea of writing a book, interviewing other survivors about what they endured that horrific day. The result is *From the Inside Out: Harrowing Escapes from the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001*. Erik was recently interviewed by Woman Around Town's Publisher Debra Toppeta and Editor Charlene Giannetti. Here are his answers.

Why did you feel it was important for you to write this book?

It's not so much that I "felt it was important" to write this book, initially, because I'm not a writer. The "important" came much later for me. What happened is, that on Wednesday the 12th, my wife, Sarah, and I were talking late into the evening about my near demise and the events of the day before, when out of the blue I had a foreign thought: "Write a book." I discuss this at some length in the Preface, but my goal of getting published by the first anniversary, and then the second became overshadowed when my wife's cancer returned. So, I shelved a three-quarter completed manuscript to take care of Sarah. And after she passed away on New Year's Eve 2004, due to one thing or another, I lost all interest in the book.

As the years passed and I began to adjust to my new widower status (it takes time), colleagues, friends and family members began asking what was the status of the book. Then after forty-five years I "happened" to reunite with an old classmate I hadn't even thought of since graduation. He was a senior executive with Barnes & Noble; we began lunching once a month, one conversation leading to another, and he asked to see the three-quarter-finished manuscript.

Coincidentally, as a colleague, Terry Morrell Jones and I were threading our way through the thousands of tourists at the World Trade Center Construction Site, she asked me, "How's the book coming?" I responded, "I shelved it. With the passage of time nobody would be interested." She looked at me with an astonished expression, swept both arms in a wide circle and asked me, "What are all these people doing down here?" Good point!

I began looking into what had already been published, and decided to weave the events of each character in the book in a timeline, as I couldn't find any books that had approached the subject in this method. And I wanted to write the individual experiences as dispassionately as I was able, allowing the reader to infuse his or her own emotional take in the reading experience. I thought this was a more accurate, and more fair way to relate what those of us were going through trying to escape those doomed towers. In large part, Charlene and Debra, I think this is why the book is important.

You open the book with a nightmare you had that the towers were falling. Was that a fear that you lived with? Was that because of what happened in 1993?

I wasn't in the towers on February 28th, but was a few blocks away and felt the explosion. However, the dream wasn't a result of a fear. It was a nightmare of the towers falling due east, like an extension ladder; not an accurate dream though, as it collapsed in on itself. I also had the same dream the early morning hours of October 7, 1996, my first day working at the World Trade Center.

Dreams of this nature before a catastrophe are not that unusual; reports of them can usually be found after the event on "page 49 below the fold." But they are interesting, and do evoke some thinking and a few questions, don't they?

Sections of the book are difficult to read. Were those parts difficult to write?

Because those of us that survived that unbelievable day did nothing but relate our experiences to each other for six months, and I was also now beginning to speak with the tourists, writing them was an extension of the sharing process. Though I must confess to you, Charlene and Debra, that when I listen to the recordings of my interviews with them, a tinge of emotion surfaces.

In the epilogue you talk about the health problems you and other survivors have suffered. How are you now?

Compared to the first five years post 9/11, I am doing very well, thank you. Despite the fact I inhaled an unknown quantity of the contents of that black, evil cloud until all passages became blocked, my physician continues to give me a clean bill of health. That said, my ability to memorize and to retain information for more than a couple of minutes is practically nonexistent. In all fairness, accepting the fact that I am also now considered “elderly,” certainly by the younger generation, parts begin to wear out, and the part that recalls information stored in memory does not function as well as it once did. I have accepted the condition, regardless of the cause, for what it is, and continue to adjust to the new normality. If nothing else, we must certainly learn to be adaptable and to accept change graciously.

What has been most helpful coping with this devastating experience?

Talking about it; sharing the experience with others. We naturally talked about that day amongst ourselves; it was all we could talk about. And because I was down at the World Trade Center so often in the early days, the tourists were flocking down to see the site. I was a little hesitant at first, but eventually began approaching little groups of tourists asking if I could answer any of their questions. I discovered that I enjoyed pointing out what was where, and what my experiences were. It was cathartic and uplifting for me, and when I could I'd spend an hour or two a day answering questions from people who had traveled around the world to visit. I was giving them a little extra something to take home with them for their efforts to find their way to lower Manhattan.

And from those beginnings, I have been invited to speak at elementary and high schools, at conventions, before community 9/11 remembrance celebrations, book signings, radio and television interviews...and with you, thank you, Woman Around Town.

I don't want to leave out the critical importance of the overwhelming, wholehearted support my wife, family and friends provided. There are no words in the English lexicon to express my gratitude for everything they did to help me get through the critical early days, months, and years.

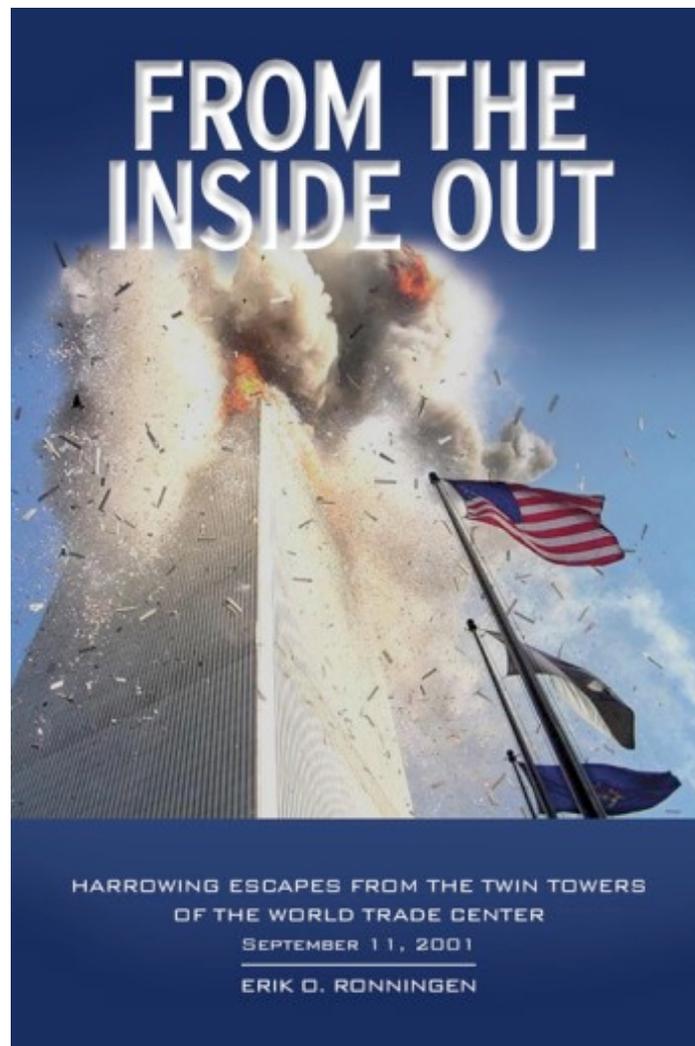
Have the memories of the day diminished over time for you?

Time heals all wounds, they say. And it's true. With the passage of time, and making the decision to move forward with one's life, the further in the past the experience, the less “painful” it is. Generally speaking, the memories have diminished, and it's only natural. But it's curious also, with memory, as they are always there. It's a matter of recall. A certain trigger will bring to mind a memory long thought lost. I once heard a definition of memory that struck me: The Past Present. Because when I speak of that day, it's as if

the events happened almost only yesterday. Those past memories are in the present as I discuss them. You can occasionally hear the emotion in my voice as I speak of certain aspects. And of course there is a certain, specific kind of low rumbling, loud clapping thunder that sounds just like the towers collapsing. It is as if I am right back there nearly at the base of Tower Two as it collapses. In my book I have a rather graphic description of this event.

Have you recently been in touch with any of the people profiled in the book? How are they doing?

Most of the folks have retired, and a number have moved away. But the few that remain, I occasionally do see and have a short visit. Each continues to make the effort to be upbeat, lively and “normal.” But as we talk there continues to remain imbued deeply in memory the difficulty of the day, and remorse of lost friends and colleagues. But we each give the other moral support and encouragement, and for the most part everyone is coping well and making significant progress in living a normal life.



Can you tell the story about the photo you used on the cover of the book?

This is an especially touching story and personal to me, and of course it's covered more thoroughly in the book. Jim Usher was with a construction firm installing the access control system upgrade in the towers. That morning when he felt, more than heard, the initial explosion, he immediately evacuated all his people out of his office in the sub-basement of the South Tower. Then he went around the floor and evacuated everyone he saw.

When Jim exited the South Tower onto the Plaza he noticed a couple of wounded men, standing, stunned. He went to the first and helped him out to safety for medical assistance, telling the second man that he'd be right back for him. As Jim returned, there was a tremendous explosion overhead, the searing heat and over-pressure slamming him face down onto the pavement. In his suit pocket he had a digital camera, which he reached for and blindly pointed skyward, snapping a photograph. Because, as he tells it, he wanted his two daughters to know how their father died when they pried the camera from his dead fingers.

Jim and I had lunch a year or so later when we both discovered that each had survived. He related this incident and showed me the photograph, saying that he shared it with no one; it was personal, and private.

Twelve years later when it came time to select the cover for my book, the photograph I wanted was too expensive. Mulling over the cover selection, early one morning I awakened from my night's sleep with the thought, "Call Jim Usher." Jim and I hadn't been in contact for six or seven years. I hunted him down, told him what I was doing, that he was one of the fifteen main survivor characters in the book, and that I was requesting his consideration for permission to use his photograph on the cover. There was no hesitation in his reply. "Absolutely."

What I especially enjoy about his photograph, aside from the fact it had never before been published, is that our national colors are still waving proudly in the breeze. I think it captures the spirit of America; the enduring toughness, resilience and tenacity of what makes America great.

Thank you for asking me this question.

What were your feelings when you watched first responders go up into the towers while everyone else was going down?

By the time I saw the firefighters climbing up into the towers, I had been climbing down for nearly an hour, and I was exhausted. All I could think of was "God Bless" the courage of these young—and not so young—men. We must remember also, that those of us below the strike zone did not know what happened, nor did we know of the degree of devastation. So, it was firefighters doing their job—and what a job; climbing up thousands of stairs with their heavy bunker gear on. Those of us on the inside getting out will never forget these valiant men... and those that continue to serve.

Have you been to the 9/11 museum? What was your reaction to it?

I have. On a number of occasions. From time-to-time I am asked to escort people through and to discuss my day with them. I have the privilege of knowing the Chief Curator & Director of Collections, Jan Seidler Ramirez. She and her staff have

performed miracles transforming that gigantic space with uncounted 9/11 artifacts, into a masterful accomplishment that feels more like a Cathedral than a museum. It is the embodiment for what seems to have become a national slogan, *We Will Never Forget*.

When you talk to people about your experience, what do they want to know?

One of my most cherished memories when I was relating my escape to a group of tourists, so caught up in the experience of the adventure, one woman at the end of my tale, with tears rolling down her cheeks asked, sobbing, “Did you get out?” It made me laugh, and then she got it and the whole group had a good laugh. It was a wonderful moment of levity; and healing.

On a number of occasions I have been asked, “What one lesson learned would you be willing to share?” There are so many—and I’m referring to individual lessons learned, not the ones politicians parrot about national security—but one especially helpful to me has been the admonition, “*Live each day as if it were your last.*” The events of 9/11 have brought home a truer essence of that counsel for me. “How would I like to be remembered if I died today?” is perhaps part of it. If I die today, is my life in order? Because our lives can change in the time it takes the second hand to tick from one second to the next. Nearly 3,000 individuals, who didn’t make it home for evening cocktails, went to work content in the groove of their daily routines. The 9/11 experiences have helped put into perspective for me, the thoughtless and selfish pettiness of my attitude and actions toward my family, friends and colleagues. If I knew I was going to die today, would I exercise my acid tongue? Would I be so thoughtlessly selfish as to completely ignore the considerations of others? There are consequences to our actions.

But then I must consider, What is important? Is my petty little business (and I’m not decrying business)—a business that can be lost in the time it takes to snap my fingers—more significant than a lifelong friendship with my loving companion and family? Is the climb to the top so important to warrant sweeping aside everyone who gets in my way?

With a thoughtful consideration toward others, and a cooperation with understanding, how much better would our relationships be with spouse, family, friends and associates alike. And how much better would we be in our businesses and sports and hobbies, etc. What a practical concept; a concept that need not wait for a mental awakening such as 9/11 to be considered, and applied.

Early on I talked with a number of businessmen that worked in those towers twelve/fifteen hour days, who confessed to me that the events of 9/11 changed their priorities. That they have had a change of heart, reassessing their values, realizing that their relationships with family and friends have priority over their businesses, and that they were spending much more time with their families, getting in at nine and leaving at five with no detrimental effects to their business.

How will you be spending this 9/11?

The past couple years I have been invited to be interviewed on FOX 5’s *Good Morning New York* with Rosanna Scotto and Greg Kelly. It’s possible I’ll be invited again, or with another network, or radio interview. Then I return home and spend a quiet day with

family and a close friend or two; reviewing the events, lessons learned and, what we can do to make better efforts going forward.

You speak so calmly and dispassionately about September 11th. How have you been able to cope so well with everything you experienced that day?

I thank you for that, but occasionally you can still hear a little of the emotion creep into my voice as I discuss certain aspects of that unforgettable day. But to address your question, first and foremost, at the very beginning I determined that I was not going to allow the circumstances of 9/11 to control me—and there were seven instances that I knew it was time to meet my maker. I could see what others were going through, grappling to deal with, and not succeeding as well as I'm certain they wished. It's individual of course, and it doesn't take away from anyone, but I made the personal decision that I was going to be in control of myself; not the events of 9/11 controlling me. It was not easy, and it continues to be a work in progress. For example, in the epilogue I discuss the difficulties with certain noises; the sound of an express train traveling by the platform, or being caught walking under the railroad trestle at the instant a train passes overhead. The sound not unlike the Boeing 767 driving high into the tower, exploding and the building dramatically swaying side-to-side. I am instantly transported back to that experience, and have had to sustain the right effort to subdue the emotion of that moment to keep myself as calm and internally quiet as possible. It works, and as a result I have had the opportunity to assist others, rather than the one requiring the assistance; speaking to groups of people about that day and the personal lessons learned and applied.

Would you be willing to discuss a little about that little voice that instructed you to “walk east,” just as you were about to go into the Plaza? What do you think it was?

For me this was such an interesting facet of the whole experience that morning, because I was doing everything possible to get into the sub-basement of the South Tower to assist my best friend, Doug Karpiloff, Life, Safety & Security Director, who was in the Operations Command Center. Throughout the book I show how I was constantly being “pushed away” from getting down into the basements of the South Tower. And when I eventually found myself on Church Street with the thousands upon thousands of gawkers, I made the decision to go into the Plaza to provide what assistance I could, as I had seen the carnage from within the North Tower.

But as I was about to turn west into the Plaza, I heard in my head a calm, quiet voice say, “walk east.” There was no question but to obey. My right foot came down and I did a military left flank onto Fulton Street. I got a dozen paces or so when the earthquake began; the collapse of the South Tower. Had I not turned east, away from the towers, I would have been between the towers and entombed in the ensuing rubble.

What the “voice” was must be approached perhaps from a more spiritual, religious, or divine perspective. I do not go to church, but I do pray everyday and one of my favorite books is the Bible. At the core of this poor explanation to your question, Charlene and Debra, is the knowledge that individuals do not die before their set time. There are a number of biblical references to this, of course. That being said, if we believe in a God, a Deity, a Holy Spirit, call it what one wishes, it stands to reason that he/she is just and fair, and that there would be a plan. That we don't know the plan is a different question

and discussion. Accepting the premise for the moment that no one dies before their set time, how is one averted from blindly walking into a situation that will get them killed (going into the Plaza between the towers, for example) if that is not their “set time?”

The concept of Angels, Seraphs, or Messengers of the Lord is not an unfamiliar one. So, as a part of the “plan” just mentioned, an angel would be dispatched to redirect that individual (“walk east”) out of harms way. The 11th and 12th verse of the 91st Psalm addresses this very clearly. And if it is the person’s time to die, no angel is sent.

I have many, many examples from 9/11 alone that illustrate this concept of angels helping, leading people away from harms way; many more dramatic than mine.

From the Inside Out: Harrowing Escapes from the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001

Erik O. Ronningen

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