

mumbled my good-byes to the couple. Mr. Kraatz moved to his wife's side to embrace her. The door to their lives was now closed to me. Dr. Black stopped me outside the examination room.

"How are you feeling? You look a little pale."

"I'm ... I'm fine, I suppose. I just feel really ..."

"Helpless? Overwhelmed? Cold? I did too, at your stage. I still do sometimes, but I deal with ALS patients all the

time so I can't afford to let it get to me. There's only one patient left to see. Why don't you go home early? I think you've probably learned something about life and death today. Go home and think about your experience here. Think about how lucky you are to have your health. Think about the things you enjoy doing in life, your friends and your family. And also, think about why you really want to be a doctor. Sometimes we do help people get better when they are ill, but our

responsibility also lies in helping people die with dignity, comfort and, perhaps, a little sense of control." He smiled at me sadly, then moved on to the next room.

And so I walked home, feeling numb. And feeling privileged to see what I had seen that day.

Stephanie Plamondon

Physiatrist

Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital
Oakville, Ont.

Room for a view

The flags of Saint Paul's

The tower clock of Saint Paul's is stopped at 5 to 10. Two battered and smoke-drenched flags move gently in the breeze. One is Old Glory; the other is unrecognizable. A side door of the 235-year-old chapel is open; lights burn within. This sturdy old lady of a chapel, where George Washington once worshipped, offers respite and succour to battle-weary rescue workers.

Next to the flag pole is a tree. Battered by debris, it is stripped now of its leaves. Beside is a street lamp adorned with a Christmas star. Stand at just the right spot and you see the star, the branches, the bedraggled flags and, behind them, a clock stopped in horror.

Silent watchers line the street, too overwhelmed to make conversation. The only sound is the pounding of the demolition equipment, then a roar as more debris succumbs. The air fills with a new cloud of dust. Then, another pound, another roar. Relentless.

The police stand proud, on guard, their backs to the drama, their eyes haunted. Protecting the dignity of the dead.

We move on.

We discover an environmental team. Test equipment is attached to one light standard on each block. They move from one to the next in their jeep, taking readings, monitoring air quality. Many buildings are surrounded by special screening — like shrouds — to

keep dangerous materials from escaping (although no one believes this works) and to protect the public from falling glass as the repairs go on inside. Abandoned buildings have signs posted in several languages, warning of the asbestos danger. "No admittance."

A huge white tent, perhaps one or two city blocks in size, sits at one site; it houses emergency medical services and provisions for the workers. Here, more signs: "Do not leave site without washing down." Two workers in bright yellow gear from head to toe, including face protection, stand across from each other, holding powerful hoses. Each vehicle is blasted thoroughly as it leaves.

Entire city blocks are now just a jumble of uneven earth, cordoned off by high fences and used as equipment storage areas.

We cannot see what is seen on TV. Those images are captured by professional camera crews with special permits. We see only the dust, a distant view of the innards of a building not yet torn down, the makeshift wooden walls and scaffolding, miles and miles of chain link fences, and — everywhere — workers. Police, guards, rescue workers trudging to and fro, heavy equipment operators, truck drivers. Most are friendly, or at least tolerant. Some are not. Huge orange letters on a wall angrily state: "No photos. Cameras will be confiscated."

We see civilians coming out of a walled-off area. They are returning from a special viewing platform, erected for the families of those lost. We stand back quietly as they pass our way. We move on, feeling intrusive.



Then comes the largest shrine. Flowers, both fresh and very dead. Teddy bears, brand new, rather bedraggled, or rain-saturated and pathetic. Poems and pictures. Here, the grief and futility is overpowering. Over to the side, a few tourists laugh about the fact that their hotel phone number is Pennsylvania-Six-Five-Thousand. They break out in song, then realize their gaffe and stop abruptly. A strange way to end our pilgrimage. From death to life, in one split second.

Jennifer Raiche

Jen Raiche is an editor with *CMAJ*. She visited Ground Zero on Dec. 1, 2001, during the Canada Loves NY event.