Osler would likely have recommended), this is probably not the course of action most readers will take.

But it is possible that lengthier footnotes would not remedy the more fundamental problem of our lack of a common classical education. Where an allusion is familiar, the passage resonates with a meaning that can’t be conveyed by the few spare words that make up an annotation. It is at these moments that one realizes what Osler has lost in the translation across time: the subtle richness arising from a wealth of knowledge that comes only by delving into the great works of civilization. The annotations in this book help to open the door to the intellectual world Osler inhabited — to enter it fully is another, more challenging, step.

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Lifeworks

Bravest face forward

When speaking with New Yorkers, one realizes that there exists a time before and a time since September 11th. The event that caused ripples of consequence across the planet has changed the face and heart of a city that is perhaps the greatest icon of America. As many of us who were geographically removed from the site slip back into normal consciousness, New Yorkers are faced daily with reminders. References continue to appear in every conversation. It is no surprise, then, that Faces of Ground Zero, an exhibition of photographs of New Yorkers involved in the September 11th disaster (shown at the Vanderbilt Hall of Grand Central Station in New York from January 7–20, 2002) was a source of renewed emotion.

This project, conceived by photojournalist Joe McNally, is intended to celebrate courage and humanity. The images pay homage to those who were the common heroes of a tragedy and provide a vehicle for many to navigate through their grief.

The photos are giant Polaroids taken in the weeks after the disaster. Made using a room-sized Polaroid camera (the world’s largest), each picture measures about 40 × 90 inches, creating a larger-than-life size image of a wide range of people involved in the tragedy, from firefighters and clergymen to volunteers and window washers. Taken in the studio using powerful flash lighting, each image is a sharp colour portrait against a stark white background.

I had seen tiny reproductions of these prints before entering the public exhibition space at Grand Central. They had reminded me in a certain way of the glamorous still-life photos of Irving Penn in Vogue or the crisp fashion images of Richard Avedon in Harper’s Bazaar. I didn’t understand how they could represent the humanity of such a horrible day. But when I walked into the striking Vanderbilt Hall, with its creamy marble walls and golden lighting, the aim of this exhibition truly came into focus.

The giant Polaroids were placed back to back between glass and mounted on bases that allowed them to be free-standing. As a result, rather than hanging on a wall, they were scattered throughout the room, integrated into the large crowd of people viewing them. Elevated slightly, the portraits stood head and shoulders above the crowds, like the larger-than-life sized heroes they’d become. The stark white of the backgrounds took on a creamy appearance with the available light and seemed to disappear, leaving only a series of staring, almost three-dimensional figures attempting to convey what they had experienced. In fact, their faces do convey the breadth of emotion that many of us felt that day — some of them saddened, some shocked, some strong, some angry.

To Sadie, from her sister Emily

And from love we will remember you, but that I cannot say.
Because miracles do happen.
Let’s hope it happens today.
And if it doesn’t then you will always be an angel in every way.
From godliness to family we love you Sadie, And with that I can truly say. I love You!
Love, Emily XOX

The author of this poem is 11 years old. Sadie, her 2-year-old sister, was well before this past summer, when she developed progressive and intractable seizures due to a rare form of chronic encephalitis (Rasmussen’s encephalitis). Sadie is being cared for at home by her family with the support of the neurology and palliative care teams of the Montreal Children’s Hospital. This poem was submitted by Dr. Stephen Liben with the permission of Emily and her family.
A video in the corner of the room demonstrates how these enormous photographs were made. Using a souped-up version of a common instant-camera, we see “instant” pictures of “instant” heroes: everyday people brought to remarkable stature through remarkable events. Viewers can celebrate the common hero by sharing in the common grief, and by feeling the swell of pride that these were New Yorkers like themselves who earned greatness by rising to the challenge of the moment. As former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani said, “We have met the worst of humanity with the best of humanity.”

During my visit to New York in January, I saw the swell in American patriotism that followed September 11 reflected in other exhibitions in the city. At the Ariel Meyerowitz Gallery, photos taken from 1981–2001 by Meyerowitz’s father, Joel, showed the New York skyline, the World Trade Center a prominent feature. Star Spangled Spirit at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery showed images of the American flag taken by photographers as diverse as Diane Arbus and Robert Frank. And an eight-minute film by Jason Kliot at the International Center of Photography recorded close-up images of people’s faces as they look at Ground Zero, the catastrophic scene sometimes reflected in their glasses.

But the huge portraits at Grand Central Station are a more direct reminder of the events of that day. And while this show has not created images that redirect the future path of photography, it is difficult not to feel a chill of remembrance when viewing them. These photographs jab at some still-raw emotion.


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Illness and metaphor

Tobacco for distempers

June 27th—The ague again so violent that I lay abed all day, and neither eat nor drank. I was ready to perish for thirst; but so weak, I had not strength to stand up, or to get myself any water to drink. …

June 28th—Now, as the apprehension of the return of my distemper terrified me very much, it occurred to my thought that the Brazilians take no physic but their tobacco for almost all distempers; and I had a piece of a roll of tobacco in one of the chests, which was quite cured, and some also that was green, and not quite cured. …

What use to make of the tobacco I knew not, as to my distemper, or whether it was good for it or no; but I tried several experiments with it, as if I was resolved it should hit one way or other. I first took a piece of a leaf, and chewed it in my mouth, which indeed at first almost stupefied my brain, the tobacco being green and strong, and that I had not been much used to it. Then I took some and steeped it an hour or two in some rum, and resolved to take a dose of it when I lay down. And lastly, I burnt some upon a pan of coals, and held my nose close over the smoke of it, as long as I could bear it, as well for the heat, as almost for suffocation. …

After my broken and imperfect prayer was over, I drank the rum in which I had steeped the tobacco, which was so strong and rank of the tobacco, that indeed I could scarce get it down. … I found presently it flew up in my head violently; but I fell into a sound sleep, and waked no more til… in the afternoon the next day. …

Be that, however, one way or the other, when I awaked I found myself exceedingly refreshed, and my spirits lively and cheerful. When I got up, I was stronger than I was the day before, and my stom-ach better, for I was hungry; and, in short, I had no fit for the next day, but continued much altered for the better. This was the 29th.

From Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe (1719)