

Letter from an Artist: Marty Pottenger

Marty Pottenger is a community performance artist and carpenter who has lived and worked in New York City for more than 20 years. She wrote to us about what happened when she used her community-art and counseling skills in Lower Manhattan after the attacks on September 11, 2001.

Pottenger is well known for "[City Water Tunnel #3](#)," her Obie-award-winning arts project in New York City with workers who built the largest non-defense public-works project in the Western Hemisphere. She is currently mounting a large project with The Working Theater and the Snug Harbor Cultural Council.

We share her letter with you here as an example of how artists can help their communities deal with crisis.

—Linda Frye Burnham, CAN

September 19, 2001
New York, NY

Dear Friends,

Well, here we are. Sorting this out as best we can. The news from our one remaining TV channel, plus the Internet, indicates that both racist and anti-racist responses are happening all over the Australia, Europe and the U.S. It will be an upsetting and interesting next period to live.

The understanding of New Yorkers — that aware listening is a powerful gift — is evident as my neighbors sit on stoops, people stop to talk on the street, reaching out with a head-nod or an eye-squint. Looking out to see who else is looking out, too. The grief and shock are evident everywhere as well. Our Re-Evaluation Counseling (RC) Listening Projects are going well. They make a difference and add to what's going on already all over the city. For me their greatest impact seems to be on us. The work makes clearer our own inherent initiative, connection to all people, our ability to stretch under duress and learning to function as a team outside of traditional counseling activities.

The only time I've been able to cry from a deep place or actually feel the fear is whenever the sound of sirens fill the air or in the first seconds of a phone call from someone who doesn't live in New York. So far it hasn't failed. But I've noticed the importance for me to spend time with my friends and family as well. When I'm scared, that's usually the hardest place to stick.

My time in Kosovo and Yugoslavia after the war there serves me well here. There I learned the profound difference between what we are told by media, what our imaginations and early hurts conjure up and what is actually happening in the places themselves. I also began to understand the critical need for people to stick together, listen to each other, and to both stand up for what is right and not cut people out of the circle of community.

We were able to successfully organize a gathering of my RC colleagues last night at my home/neighborhood, which has no damage at all, but is relatively close to the World Trade Center Towers. We are in one of the "evacuated, sealed off, all-businesses-closed" part of lower Manhattan. Repeated in print, radio and TV is the fact that "No one can enter this area without identification proving they are residents." While I have no argument with any of this as a way of trying to deal with what's happened here, the reality is that we are walking around, listening to each other, sitting on stoops, going into the shops, cafes, grocery stores, schools and laundromats.

The reality is that while there are police barricades that check identification north and south of us, anyone can enter the neighborhood simply by taking the subway to any one of five stations and getting out. I think it was useful for people who came to see and experience the difference between "the story" and reality.

Today I finished making two long (1' by 30') canvas banners, which now hang from a fence at Union Square. It's a park where Emma Goldman and Abraham Lincoln spoke and where the first U.S. Labor Day parade was held just over 150 years ago. The banner is in two parts. In foot-high letters against a watercolor blue-and-white background (I was going for the balance of attention from sky and clouds) in English, Gandhi's

PEACE WILL NOT COME OUT OF A CLASH OF ARMS, BUT OUT OF JUSTICE LIVED.

Below this is the same size blue banner, but blank, with markers and pens hanging at either end for people to write whatever they want to. Next week we will be hanging the same size banner and text in Arabic, Hebrew, Chinese, Spanish, Farsi and Russian. I "coupled" the signs to try to prevent the Gandhi quote one from being torn

down. We'll see. People have a lot to discharge.

A good cry earlier in the morning let me clear out enough brain space to slow down on what my sign was going to say. Much of my help making and installing it came from people literally passing by, for the most part. We painted it past midnight last night on a sidewalk downtown and at least 50 people passed, some holding candles from the vigil/memorials. About 9 p.m. a woman and man approached, she with NYU medical shirt, both looking very tired. They stopped and read it and stood there for a long time, while three of us continued painting. After the first hour, I realized it made sense to treat each person uniquely and not engage everyone who stopped. Some needed to share the connection silently, some a few words of encouragement or disagreement, others more of a discussion/session, and some people just wanted to stay for a long time.

The night cool, we were one block north of the police barricades, so fairly near to the WTCs for most of us. Quite a few rescue workers came by on their way to and also from their work down there. A few of them were near tears reading the sign and getting to stop and not "do" anything. Almost everyone stopped and stayed for awhile. Since I've been making public art works/performances for so long, I well understand the power of a public project, but never quite so clearly the power of making the work *in* public too.

Back to the woman doctor and partner/friend. They both had been voting right at the WTC when the planes hit. They both ran. Since then, she's been working as a doctor at the hospital right there. They both talked off and on for the whole visit. It turned out that he had lost 30 of his co-workers and friends. She asked if she could translate the text into Chinese. I said that that was the only language I had not been able to have it translated to yet. So for two hours, she sat on the curb, the headlights of my friend's car the light we were all working by, plus five candles from the vigil. Every while or so, she'd call me over and we'd think together about the possibilities. I learned a little more about the "culture" of the Chinese language. All of us trying to understand and articulate what we thought Gandhi meant by the word "justice" and then of course, "lived"!! Even "clash of arms" has its complexities. She moved here from China about 10 years ago, and explained that "justice" in Chinese would ordinarily only refer to the legal system. As she left to go home, she said that getting to do this had been her first joyful time.

Just in getting some of the translations from men I'm friends with in my neighborhood, I've already gotten to offer some [counseling] sessions. Mohammed said thank you with tears, Alex who is Russian had the opposite reaction. It's been a good project all round. I stayed with the sign once it was up for a few hours today. At least 100 people have written something, both angry and reconciliatory. Already there are at least 10 languages there, but that's New York. Two different hardware-store guys split the cost of materials 50/50 with me. We've known each other for over 20 years and I wasn't sure that they'd like the text, but I ended up telling them anyway today and they asked me to sign their names to it. We missed my deadline ... but had a very human time from beginning to end. I had wanted it up to welcome President Bush yesterday afternoon to NYC, with a hope that it would be read by men and women all over the world (CNN) in their own language, without government censors/translators. * More stories from today's ten hours of finishing and hanging, but enough for now.

Over a couple thousand people are there at Union Square at any one time. Five white cellists are playing Bach under a circle of trees, as ten black young men are playing trumpets and trombones in the center of a circle of 300 people. Hundreds of photos of the missing people are on trees, fences, lampposts, with scores of candles burning below them. The subway stop is a fence of pictures of the missing loved ones. It's big. So much of NYC will seem different from the heartrending images, memories and experiences.

There are small groups of Tibetan Buddhist monks praying with incense near Pentecostal Christians crying and speaking tongues ... both of them near a couple of homeless guys who are intermittently shouting at the top of their lungs the most intelligent words of the day – about capitalism, military industrial complex, and so on – while hundreds of people stand silent, some crying and hugging, around thousands of candles, flowers, photos, poems, together on the ground at the foot of the statue of George Washington on a horse, which is now covered in the word "LOVE" written in all colors of chalk. The sign is completely filled with thousands of statements as of last night.

Love, Marty

Note: In October 2001, the Gandhi sign was carried by our Women in Black contingent in the first anti-war demonstration here in NYC, the same day President Bush had set to begin bombing Afghanistan.