



## A Memoir of September 11, 2001

I was planner/manager of the working conference of international women's studies journal editors which was held at Mount Saint Vincent University during the first week of September, 2001. Forty delegates, virtually all of them women, had gathered together to mark the founding of the International Network of Women's Studies Journals (now the Feminist Knowledge Network). They came from every continent except Antarctica: 18 countries, including the United States, New Zealand, Korea, the Sudan, Pakistan, Canada, Belgium, Thailand, Australia, Indonesia, Norway, Uruguay, India, Denmark, the Philippines, Argentina, England and Uganda. All but a very few of the delegates were visiting Canada for the first time and only one or two of the others had ever been to Halifax, the capital city of the province of Nova Scotia, on Canada's east coast.

The ten-day conference had gone so wonderfully well - the weather was perfect, the meetings productive, and we had spent evenings together taking in harbour cruises, going to restaurants and the local casino, and being treated to the best of Nova Scotia hospitality by local hosts who opened their home to everyone for a huge house party. The delegates were staying at the Sisters of Charity Motherhouse, a spacious convent adjacent to the university campus, chosen because of its beautiful and convenient location and because I knew that the Sisters would make these visitors feel very welcome. And they did in numerous thoughtful ways.

September 11 was the last full day of meetings for us and some people had already flown home. The majority of those remaining were itching to wrap up our work so that they could take in more sights, shop, and sit in the sun and talk with their newly-met colleagues. I'll never forget the face of the student assistant who came into our meeting room and said, "Something awful has happened." We immediately went to the nearest television and tuned in in time to see the World Trade Center towers on fire and the first one fall. Soon the room was filled with silent, shocked faces and over the next couple of hours, my emotions went from disbelief ("these scenes can't be real"), to confusion ("who would do such a thing to innocent people"),

to fear ("I want to be with my family"), to empathy ("what can I do to ease the upset of the people with me in this room"). I stayed as late as I could, knowing that everyone must have been going through similar reactions and that they would want to contact their families right away. As the only Haligonian in the group, I knew the comfort of home and family was a short drive away, and I later realized that, despite my efforts, I would not be able to give these visitors that feeling of security with mere words. I eventually left with a sinking heart and slept poorly that night.

The next morning I was out at the Motherhouse early and by then, hundreds of people from the international flights which had been diverted to Halifax International Airport were billeted in the Motherhouse and the gymnasium and hallways of the University. Some of these people had joined conference delegates in the television room to watch the coverage. Meanwhile, emergency services were being quickly established and everyone was taking advantage of the banks of computers which had been set up in the Motherhouse corridors and offices to give visitors e-mail access. By that time, it was clear that re-scheduling the conference delegates' return flights would be a chaotic and lengthy process, and most probably that they would be stranded until well after security procedures would allow the diverted flights to be completed - however many days that would take. I was prepared to meet angry and fearful faces of conference delegates when I arrived. But that wasn't what happened.

I found out that the night before, they had gathered in the kitchenette of the wing where they were staying in the Motherhouse and banded together in creating a meal. The unfortunate events of the day had led them to seek comfort in camaraderie - well known by Nova Scotians who have endured the inconvenience of being "storm-stayed" by winter snow. Each night afterwards, delegates would take turns cooking a meal from "home" for all of the group, and although many were indeed anxious to leave Canada and return to their families, the solidarity of the group carried them through. The Sisters frequently offered comforting words and extended great generosity in



agreeing that the conference people could keep their rooms as long as they were needed.

We all were aware of the activity around us on the Mount campus. The University mobilized numerous volunteers to accommodate, entertain and support the needs of stranded airline passengers, even converting the meeting room which had been our home for a week into a temporary theatre showing videos, and lining the hallways of its buildings with cots and blankets. At the Motherhouse, we saw the comings and goings of passengers who struggled to complete their journeys into the US - parents spent hours on telephones and on-line attempting to charter cars and taxis, while children played impromptu games of soccer on the lawn outside. The presence of many security personnel was a constant reminder that Halifax was taking part in an effort of hospitality unlike any other in its history - having seen what happened in New York, no one knew if the danger was over or who would be targets.

Once the passengers from the diverted airplanes were able to leave, the activity ebbed, Haligonians went back to their regular lives, and the conference delegates continued to bide their time waiting for flights home. Happily, in the end, each one did return safely. One delegate said to me before she left that she wished all the world was like Halifax.

What struck me most forcefully during the seven days after September 11, the time it took to get the remaining 31 conference delegates back to their home countries, was the grace with which each one of them endured a very difficult time, and the unobtrusive and gentle support they, and the Sisters, gave to each other. Patience, strength, empathy and hospitality among the women transcended the violence which intruded on our lives.

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