I love New York

LAST WEEK I WAS WALKING DOWN SIXTH AVENUE AT lunchtime, and I saw about 700 people in the street. Everybody was looking up at one of the big office towers, necks craning, mouths open.

“What’s up?” I asked a guy on a cell phone.

“Bomb scare,” he said. He looked bored.

I don’t want to live here anymore. I wish I felt differently. But I don’t. So now I’m sort of thinking about alternatives.

My abode a small town would make a good home for my family, a little village like the one that Ma and Pa Kent raised young Clark in. I grew up in one of those. It was nice. Movies were 35 cents at the A l icon Theater. The librarian knew all our names. It was flat there in Illinois, which meant that you could get on your bike and be at the other end of town in five minutes. In the fall we burned leaves in garbage cans, and the sweet, tangy smell filled the air from one corner of town to the other. Of course, this little burg was outside Chicago, where the Sears Tower looms over Lake Michigan, and only half an hour from O’Hare, the busiest airport in the world. That’s not far enough away. Not by half.

I could find a really teeny-weeny village, I suppose, far from strip malls and the stench of the city. I’m sure they would like me there. I could be a pharmacist, if I learned that trade, or cut hair at the barbershop, or work for the local newspaper, and eventually people would come to accept me, the way I look, and talk, and dress somewhat differently from everybody else around, no matter how hard I try, and come to view me as a part of the community the way people do in small towns. After 50 or 60 years.

I should probably look at cities, right?

Los Angeles is the first one that comes to mind. I love Los Angeles when I am there. Of course, there’s a possibility that I wouldn’t be living in the Four Seasons Hotel on Doheny as I do when I visit now. I would probably have to buy a house of some sort. I saw a million-dollar home in Beverly Hills not long ago. It reminded me of a cottage my parents rented on the Jersey shore when I was a kid, only it was smaller. And then there’s the fact that everybody in Los Angeles is sort of in show business in one way or another and the effect that has on their minds—and you sort of have to take into consideration that one day Los Angeles could be on a very large island just off the coast of Las Vegas. All in all…

Miami is nice. It has a booming economy, I hear. There are many elderly people there, living out their days in ice-cold air conditioning, mall-walking for exercise perhaps three times a week, but I wouldn’t find much to do with them beyond that. Our meals times rarely coincide. Miami also boasts a large and flamboyant South Beach scene, but I was there once and felt out of place with no iguana on my shoulder.

Then there is Pittsburgh. I’ve spent quite a bit of time in Pittsburgh, because the headquarters of my dead corporation was there. I drank at Froggy’s, which served an entire water glass full of scotch as a matter of course. I’ve stayed at the H ilton and stared at the glowing red Westinghouse sign across the river, and treated six hungry businessmen to a steak dinner for $87. I’ve had meetings in conference rooms looking over the point where the Allegheny and the Ohio join to meet the mighty Monongahela. The green hills stretch out away from Pittsburgh over the fields of Pennsylvania where the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant sits, pregnant with uranium.

A ll right, then, what could be better than Boston? I enjoyed the ten years I spent there long ago. Met my wife and got married there. I was poor and drove a cab to make ends meet. I would get in at 5:30 A.M. in the garage near Fenway Park—the same garage frequented, it turns out, by several of the hijackers who lived in the city for years—and drive all day to places like Foxboro, Roxbury, Lincoln, and Medford. By the end of the shift, tired but happy, I would clear between 40 and 60 bucks. Did you hear that bin Laden’s brother lives in the Boston area? Or was it his sister? Whatever, right?

Seattle is very nice, although with the pop of the dot-com bubble perhaps not quite so prosperous and crammed with opportunity as one could hope. I could go there and live on one of those

October 15, 2001  FORTUNE  • 69
A World-Class MBA Without Interrupting Your Career

By day, STANLEY BING is a real executive at a real Fortune 500 company he'd rather not name. He can be reached at stanleybing@aol.com.

As I walked down Sixth Avenue to get there, mountebanks were selling American flags and pins and World Trade Center T-shirts with AMERICA FIGHTS BACK! emblazoned below the Twin Towers. “Check it out, check it out!” they said, as if they were selling hot watches. People were smiling. They were also buying.

The Century Club is a nice old Victorian place, with elderly carpets, a lot of dark wood, and bad art donated by generous members. The room we were in was a large one, and drinks and canapés were being consumed in mass quantities. As always, people seemed to like the deep-fried stuff the best. There was nothing healthy on the menu, but for some reason that didn’t seem a consideration all of a sudden. There were toasts for the honoree of the occasion, and a lot of hugging, and even a few tears, as one sees these days, and still more drinks, and then it was eight o’clock, suddenly, and a bunch of us went out to dinner. We stayed pretty late and talked about a lot of subjects, including a few unrelated to our present difficulties.

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The Importance Of Irrelevance

The days are getting shorter. I looked out the window at 5:30 today and realized that the sun had long since departed. I had to call Office Services and remind them to replace the fluorescents I’d allowed to burn out during the days when there was too much light all day long. Maybe I’ll requisition a desk lamp and turn on that more humane source of illumination when dusk begins its shadow dance around the edges of my office. That would be nice. But when you come to think about it, dark … light …

It really doesn’t matter. Does it? What do you think?

Becky came to see me. Becky is unhappy in her current position. She has every right to be. She’s smart and ambitious and could do a lot more for the corporation if anybody would see it that way. “It’s my résumé,” she says, pushing an exquisitely processed sheet of paper across the desk at me. Becky watches me read. Her face is wrinkly around the edges of her mouth, and her eyes are huge and a little watery. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I know my situation is, like, completely irrelevant in the vast scheme of things.” She looks intently at me to see if I understand, which of course I do.

We’re all feeling a little irrelevant, now that the scheme of things has suddenly gotten so vast. A cross town, for instance, one of our people has come down with anthrax. Not the kind that kills you, but the stuff that gets onto your skin, which is far less serious. She’s going to be all right, and we’re all monitoring a slight tickle in the back of my throat since I heard about it. Certainly nothing could be less important than Becky’s résumé in light of these dire events. But when you think about it, it makes sense to build things, and that is certainly important, unless somebody is going to come along out of nowhere and knock it all down again, and of course the FBI has told us that could happen at any time. So spending an entire morning determining the level of investment in our infrastructure feels a little odd. We might as well do it, though. It is, after all, what we do.

Is Becky’s résumé less important than what Jack Welch is doing? I saw him on television last week. He was in a bookstore talking with a bunch of fans. Jack, as any reader of this magazine knows, has a book out that recounts the events of his life as an American success story and provides insights about management, too. It was written at the turn of the millennium and is focused on the issues that seemed important then, many of which, of course, are eternal. Much of the planned promotional hoopla was derailed after Sept. 11, but now Jack Welch is back. He’s out there pumping and thumping, because … well, if you had a book, wouldn’t you want it to be a success? I would. You have a book. You go out and sell it. It’s what they do.

Is Becky’s future occupation more irrelevant, for instance, than next year’s capital budget? Next year’s capital budget feels very important now, or at least it did last month, but it isn’t going to change the course of history in any way. The assumption is that it would see it that way. “It’s my résumé,” she says, pushing an exquisitely processed sheet of paper across the desk at me. Becky watches me read. Her face is wrinkly around the edges of her mouth, and her eyes are huge and a little watery. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I know my situation is, like, completely irrelevant in the vast scheme of things.” She looks intently at me to see if I understand, which of course I do.

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And how about football and tennis, and possibly even hockey? Or basketball, now that Air Jordan is back? He’s back, right? Or baseball! Now that the World Series is on, isn’t baseball somewhat less irrelevant than Becky’s next step on the corporate ladder? Fifty-five thousand people who went to Yankee Stadium to see the Pinstripes whack Seattle seem to think so. I watched from home. In the back of my mind, I was still thinking quite a bit...
about whether the supply of smallpox vaccine would be ready in time to protect my sleeping moppet down the hall. But for a while there I lost myself. The big game was on. We watch. It’s what we do.

Advertising? Is that irrelevant? Or the production of consumer goods? Packaged foods and 18 kinds of Gatorade and blue jeans that cost $125 and sneakers that light up when you run and all the good things that the world seems to hate us for producing? Are those things less important than getting Becky behind a real leather blotter? I think not! They’re every bit as unimportant and more so!

Well, perhaps the quality of the table to which we are assigned at lunch is still relevant. It feels that way. Two days ago I went to lunch, and they tried to give me half of the usual portion of chicken breast in my salad. Was that important, when you consider that the use of tactical nuclear weapons is now being openly discussed by some crazy people? How shallow am I? What happened to the sense of perspective we’re supposed to all have now?

Ah, but I did care. I cared a lot. I gave them holy hell, and they brought me another piece of chicken that I didn’t even want. My victory over the forces of small portions was complete. It was a stupid victory. But I fought for it and won. Because it’s what I do.

My concerns are small and narrow. My occupation is ridiculous. My activities are, for the most part, mundane. That’s my game. It has brought me this far, and I guess I’ll stick with it.

The weather has been beautiful lately. The air is mellow for this time in October, to the point where the leaves have barely begun to turn. Some trees, of course, have erupted into a riot of red and gold and every conceivable shade of yellow. Behind the warmth of the sun there is a suspicion of the north country, a crispness that invigorates but does not chill. When the cold descends, I know it will come all at once, and the oaks and maples will simply go from high summer greenery to naked brown winter in a couple of days. Then there will be leaves upon leaves in the street, big crunchy piles of them that smell sweet and invite anyone with a child’s heart to dive right in.

No, the leaves don’t matter. They’re destined for the compost heap almost immediately. In the meantime they look kind of beautiful, though.

Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go get my car washed.
I noticed people crying in the street. At 9:05 a woman screamed, and I turned and saw a second mushroom of red and yellow flame. Berry, too, was dead. It occurred to me that there were quite a few, then kept walking. Walking seemed the thing to do.

An ambulance whizzed by. I turned north and started my short walk to the office. I’m supposed to be at my desk by a little after nine, and I owed the chairman a call at that time whose subject seems so unimportant now that I wonder why we generally care about what we do at all. I didn’t want to be late, at any rate. I fished out my cell phone and speed-dialed my secretary. “Dialing,” said my StarTAC, then nothing. My BlackBerry, at any rate. I fished out my cell phone and speed-dialed my home again. “I’m sorry,” I told a recording, and I hung up.

People were jumping off the World Trade Center. A tiny body was falling, headfirst, from an unimaginable height. The right tower was collapsing into itself with thousands of people standing inert on the sidewalks, if this World Trade Center thing was going to change the agenda for the day. We have a lot going on in our business right now. This is the start of our new season, and you don’t want a lot of extraneous stuff to distract the public in the middle of that, you know.

I got to my office and noticed folks congregated in the hallway. They were crying and appeared to feel that they themselves might be in danger. I found that this idea surprised me, and a little worm of fright poked its head out of my consciousness. Danger? Here? I went to my office and called home. I couldn’t get a dial tone. It’s one thing for cells to be down, but land lines? I turned on the television set in my office. On one side of the split screen, the left tower of the World Trade Center was collapsing into itself with thousands of people still inside. Could that be possible?

On the other side of the screen the Pentagon was burning.

People began coming into my office uninvited. This is not an unusual thing—my door is always open—but it was not normal. They didn’t knock. A few young women were weeping. The guys were trying to look tough, but failing. I was aware that I suddenly didn’t feel very managerial. I called my home again. “I’m sorry,” I said a recording, and I hung up.

People were jumping off the World Trade Center. A tiny body was falling, headfirst, from an unimaginable height. Then the right tower coughed up a puff of noxious smoke and ash and with a great groan disintegrated, live on TV. There were shots of terrified people running from the blast. “On any given day,” the television said, “some 200,000 people work in or visit the World Trade Center complex.”

We watched with that creepy sense of both observing and living in a part of history. “What’s going to happen to Morgan Stanley?” said a friend of mine. “They have 25 floors in one of those towers.”

About halfway to my building, which is about 40 stories high, I noticed people crying in the street. At 9:05 a woman screamed, and I turned and saw a second mushroom of red and yellow flame belch from the side of the other tower. I watched it for a while and then kept walking. Walking seemed the thing to do.

A few years ago, after my dad died, I found myself seeing him in crowds, in shadows. I wanted him to be there, but he was not. And still I saw him in those random places. Until, one day, I didn’t anymore, and then I knew he was well and truly gone.

Now I found myself wondering, as I walked through crowds of people standing inert on the sidewalks, if this World Trade Center thing was going to change the agenda for the day. We have a lot going on in our business right now. This is the start of our new season, and you don’t want a lot of extraneous stuff to distract the public in the middle of that, you know.

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I had to get out of the city. There is a car service that operates out of the space in front of our building. Five of us were going north, and although we heard that the bridges were closing, we got the last car out. On the way home we drove through the working-class neighborhood where my grandfather had a candy store and my mother grew up. Everything was still standing. In fact, the area looked a bit better than it had in the ‘70s and ‘80s, when a lot of it was gutted and burning and given up for lost.

It is now the day after the morning after. I am sitting in a train absolutely full of people headed back to work. They are reading, talking. The smoke and exploded sheetrock is still swirling above the common grave that was once the World Trade Center. New York has requested 6,000 body bags from the federal government.

The chairman of Morgan Stanley was shown on the news last night, addressing his employees over a teleconference. He did well, and spoke of going on, of how things aren’t as bad as they first thought they might be. He seemed to be crying, but you can’t really tell these things on video sometimes. Today they are reporting that that firm lost perhaps 40 of its 3,700 people who worked in the building.

The newspaper is full of obituaries. On the radio three children were talking about their father, who was on the 102nd floor of one of the towers. They talked in high-pitched, wounded little voices until, choked with grief and the injustice of their loss, they could not go on. More than our skyline is changed forever.

Buildings can be rebuilt. Grief, as incredible as it may seem to those who have been hit hardest, will pass, even if it never entirely goes away. As time works its inevitable magic, life will poke its sturdy head up through the rubble.

But some things will not return to the way they were before. They say the ultimate goal of terror is to create not just fear in the enemy, but the same kind of atavistic hatred in the adversary that produced the act itself, the desire to abandon all pretense of humanity, to move forward blindly to destroy the object of one’s animosity. If that is true, our assailants, who believe they act with the approval of their God, have succeeded far beyond their dreams.

This nation has an astonishing ability to transcend the unthinkable and move on. Whether that is good or bad I leave to you. But some things, I think, should never be transcended.