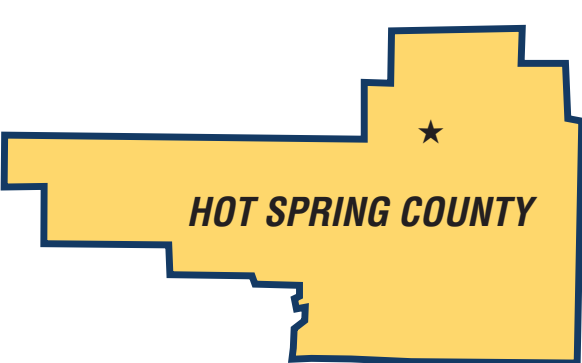




Honoring

25 YEARS



The power of presence
in the face of fear

A Freshly Brewed column by Heather Bennett Ritter

In one of his many songs written for Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, Fred Rogers posed a deceptively simple question: what do you do with the mad that you feel?

In the 25 years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, ongoing international events as well as recent happenings in my own life have forced me to face a similar question:

What do I do with the fear that I feel?

For myself and many others who found themselves within the vicinity of impact on 9/11, a startling realization surfaced: that on even the sunniest of September mornings, something that seemed to plunge from the literal clear blue sky could bring you face-to-face with mortality in an instant.

Within my Arden Street apartment mere miles from Ground Zero that day, I experienced one of the most intense sensations of fear I've known within my 44 years. Even from Upper Manhattan, the distant smoke and the sudden, disorienting stillness of the city streets were unnerving omens.

As I trembled in that fifth floor walk up for hours upon hours, bubbles of fear swelled within my chest, festering with questions too terrifying to speak aloud.

Could there have been a dirty bomb on one of those planes?

Could something in the air be poisoning us now?

What if something else is coming and we can't get off the island?

As the phone lines remained jammed and busy, I wondered, what if I never see my family again?

Even in the weary lull of months that followed, the hot wire of terror flared again nearly 2 years later when much of the northeast and a portion of Canada was plunged into darkness during a widespread power outage in August 2003. Waves of anxiety seized the area as we rushed to our car radios to tune into news of whatever had blindsided us yet again. We were somewhat relieved when the cause of the blackout was reported to be a system failure related to a software bug.

Once a level of such intense fear has pierced your consciousness, it seems you're forever plastering over that initial breach with whatever remedy is at hand. Some attempt to mend the tear with artistic expression or meaningful personal connections. Others may reach for intoxicating substances, subscribe to some form of ideological extremism, or spend their lives seeking one fight after another in response to the

blow they never saw coming.

Sometimes they simply succumb to the paralyzing drain of their life's energy and purpose.

If that fear comes with any sort of consolation prize, it's the gift of gaining a deeply-ingrained respect for those who choose to show up when the sky literally falls.

Even on a familiar plane like Hot Spring County, I hold my breath when I consider what our local first responders encounter here on a daily basis.

Anyone who's read our front page over the past year can see how sudden and extreme even local emergencies can be. Reflecting on what level of impact such scenes can hold — especially for those who respond to them day after day — it's humbling to realize stronger people than I choose to make such encounters the focus of their life's work.

Such service is worth much more than a restaurant discount, a monetary donation, or a national day of remembrance. People who work to protect, rescue and process the damage of our worst days deserve more than recognition.

Proper compensation, strong training and a guarantee of mental health support without stigma are also crucial.

A little over a month ago, I found myself on the receiving end of their services when my CR-V was hit at a high rate of speed from behind while I was traveling to cover a fatality wreck on I-30.

While dealing with a level of dizzying shock shortly after experiencing an eternal slow-motion moment of wondering whether I would live or die after impact, I found myself in the kindest of hands. Even the Red River Wrecker tow truck crew and state law enforcement officers who were hours into dealing with the aftermath of the earlier wreck were a godsend. If I had been utterly alone, I don't know what I would have done.

A quarter century after the intense shock of 9/11, I'm not sure there is a way to make peace entirely with the fear of pain and annihilation. Once you've experienced it at that level, it either withers you or changes the course of your growth in some meaningful way. Such encounters are a crossroads, and we're lucky if we're left to choose our next steps.

I still don't always know what to do with the fear that I feel, but I know now what it's worth when someone chooses to show up and meet me at the point where things have fallen apart.

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Mostly cloudy, very warm and humid with a heavy thunderstorm around

93°/71°

SAT - SEPT 12

Mostly sunny, very warm and humid; a thunderstorm in spots in the afternoon

95°/74°

SUN - SEPT 13

Mostly sunny and very hot; danger of dehydration and heatstroke if outside for extended periods of time

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