

A Survivor's Story

Author: Dot Hill

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Questions to Consider While Reading:

1. How does this survivor's illustration differ from what you would expect of a survivor of a terrorist bombing? Is there anything about her behavior or her recovery that made an impression on you? If so, what?
 2. How does the author's description of the sequence of events following the bombing illustrate the psychological impact of a disaster? Which of the events had the most impact on the author? Are those events the ones you would have expected to have the most impact?
 3. If you encountered this survivor on the scene, how would you have intervened with her? What if she had refused your interventions? What would have been your prediction of her recovery? Do you think your help may have changed her actual recovery process?
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My name is Dot Hill and I work for General Services Administration as a Contract Specialist. GSA was on the 1st floor of the Murrah Building, in the northwest corner. At 9:00 AM on April 19, 1995, I'd gone to our break room to watch the first 15 minutes of the Live with Regis & Kathie Lee show.

Prior to going to the GSA break room, I talked with Michael Loudenslager, one of our Planner/Estimators, about some office policy issues; then briefly with Steve Curry, our Work Inspector. His daughter and mine were the same age and graduating at the same time. Coincidentally, too, they were both going to Rose State College to study physical therapy. I realized it was already 9:00 AM and I was going to be late for Regis, so I rushed to my desk, grabbed my fresh roll and coke and made a mad dash.

There was a young lady cleaning our break room who walked out as I came in. She asked that I leave the door propped open for her. I placed our large recycle can in front of it so it wouldn't lock shut, turned on the television to channel 9, sat down at the table, took a bite of my roll, and the next thing I knew was nothing I had known before.

The lights went out. I heard a loud BOOM. My body swelled, all the air was forced from my lungs, and almost immediately the ceiling started falling in on top of me and dust was in the air. I thought the TV had blown up; the air conditioning or something had fallen through the roof; a bomb had gone off; I was going to die, all within seconds of each other. I thought, okay, I need to inform someone we have had an incident here. I opened my eyes and saw nothing but black. Dirt particles and God only knows what else filled my eyes, nose and mouth as I tried to breathe, making me choke. I am EXTREMELY claustrophobic and knew I would die, if not from suffocation, then by trying to fight for air. Just as I began to panic, I heard the young lady who had been cleaning our break room screaming for help. I always thought I would be the type to panic in a dangerous situation. Maybe this screaming is what saved me from panicking, because I immediately called out to her to hold on I was on my way, but I couldn't see. I asked her to speak so I could try to follow her voice. She just kept screaming. I tripped over stuff on the floor, over the recycle bin I had placed in the door, and over my own fear.

Finally, I reached her and told her it would be okay. I grabbed her hand and we inched our way along the granite wall, tripping over debris and tried to reach GSA's front door. Still we were suffocating. You couldn't see 1/1,000,000th in front of your face and had to keep your eyes closed. I was wondering if we would ever get to breathe again.

Suddenly, we heard men's voices. She began to yell for them again. When I felt another hand on mine, I opened my eyes to try to see who it was. Through all the "stuff" hanging in the air and getting in our nose and eyes, I saw Don Rogers and Bob Dennis. Don was the Building Manager for GSA and Bob was the Court Clerk for the District Courts. They were both covered in white and black dust. Almost like powder. I asked Don what had happened. He didn't know, but said we had to get out of the building.

I began to head toward the front entrance doors. Don asked me where I was going. "Out," I said. "Well, you'll have to go out this way (pointing to where Pam and I had just been)." I told Don I was NOT going back that way and he said, "Well, there is nothing that way, so you are going to have to go this way." I asked Don about the babies on the 2nd floor, if they were okay. Don didn't think so, again told me we had to get out and grabbed my hand as Bob grabbed Pam's. We all tripped and almost fell flat several times before finally getting to the dock doors. That's when we could breathe. Just a little though.

When we stepped out onto the corner of 5th and Harvey my world fell apart. Don and I stood looking at the destruction, the smoke, the fires, hearing the popping sounds, seeing the black smoke and smelling something horrid. The whole front of the Murrah Building was gone. "Stuff" was hanging off it and smoke tumbled out. Across the street, the Athenian was crumbled in and the cars in front were on fire, as well as cars in the parking lot beside the Athenian, and debris was everywhere. I turned to Don and said, "What the hell happened here? This looks like Bosnia." Don couldn't reply. He was as shocked as I was. We just grabbed each other and hugged. I again started asking about the babies on the 2nd floor day care.

Don said they were probably all gone. I couldn't stand it. My grandson Tyler used to be in that daycare. I got to know the other babies when I would go play with Tyler. I visited them after he left there because I would miss him so much and they brought comfort. Precious gifts from God. All of them. I felt terribly sick at my stomach.

Still, Don and I couldn't move. We were in shock, I guess, or too stunned to move. I turned, looked across the street and saw the Post Office and other buildings messed up. I then saw a co-worker, Kathy Brady, come out of the building. I asked if she was okay and she said yes. "What happened?" she asked. Again, we had to say we didn't know. Then I saw Sherman Catalon, an Assistant Building Manager, come out of the front of the building where our offices were. He walked out where Don's office window used to be, covered with white dust and bleeding on his face. He said he was okay, but thought we had all left him.

By this time, sirens could be heard. A policeman came to where we were and I told him about the daycare on the 2nd floor. He turned and looked at the building with no sign of hope in his eyes. He asked me how many children and I told him I didn't think there was any more than 20-25. He immediately got on his radio to relay the message and followed Sherman, who had started back inside where he walked out of only moments before.

It took me only a moment and I was following. I saw Joanne Hutchison, my immediate supervisor, and Tom Grufman, another co-worker, coming out of the building. I went in right after Sherman and the policeman, and told Joanne and Tom to let me help them, climbing over rubble and debris trying to get to them. Finally, I reached Joanne's hand and Tom told me to just help her—he was fine. Joanne had blood running down the side of her face, and Tom was white as a sheet from the dust. I led Joanne to the opening and told her to take a left out of the office where there would be policemen or EMT's to help her.

I looked back and saw Sherman and the police officer, who I later learned was Terry Yeaky, helping Tom Hall, our other Planner/Estimator. Tom was covered in blood and saying something I couldn't understand. I was standing beside Officer Yeaky trying to get closer to help Sherman lift Tom, when Officer Yeaky told me I had to move.....I was standing on someone. Tom had apparently told them the location of Richard Williams, our Assistant Building Manager, and I was standing on top of him. All I could see was rubble. No body...nothing but rubble. I climbed back out onto 5th Street.

Kathy Brady was there and we decided to go to the south side of the building to see what we could do about getting into the daycare and the babies. Kathy was barefoot for some reason and she was walking in all the glass and debris barefooted, so I made it to the south side a little ahead of her. I checked on people who were bleeding as I went past. Other injured and non-injured federal employees were starting to appear.

I made it to the door of the 2nd floor entrance. It was blocked with chunks of cement and other debris. I looked up, saw people standing close to the edge of where the building had been torn away and became concerned about getting them out safely, too. It was then I saw John Cresswell, our maintenance mechanic for the Murrah Building, on top of one of the cement planters lifting debris out of the way. There were others federal employees saving fellow federal employees lives. No questions asked, they just dived right in after their friends and co-workers. To this day, I still feel that more would have been lost if the federal work

force hadn't gone back inside to help. When John saw me, he asked how others in the office were and I told him all I knew for sure... Don, Kathy, Joanne, Tom, Sherman, and Tom Hall.

I began climbing up to help John and he told me to stop. I didn't listen. It was then a large man came and placed a section of the fence from the daycare playground against the planter, using it as a ladder to get up by John. I pushed his bottom to help him up then followed. John again told me to leave, that I didn't need to see this. He didn't know what I had already seen on my own. I told him I had a strong back, to let me help but he insisted I leave. Again I looked up at the building, and that's when I saw a black man sitting close to the edge of the 3rd or 4th floor, I couldn't tell which. The man's head was bleeding profusely where his scalp had been torn and he was looking at me with huge dark eyes as if to say, "Well, are you going to come help me or just stand there staring?" John told me not to worry. It was too late. This man's face is with me every day, even now.

As I climbed down from the planter, a woman came running toward the entrance of the 2nd floor. I stopped her and told her she couldn't go in the building. She said her baby was in there and my heart finished dying. I asked his name while leading her to a spot where we could sit. His name was Blake Kennedy. I knew Blake. I then asked her if she prayed and she said yes, so we prayed for her baby boy....that he would be found safe. An FBI man walked up and told us we had to leave. I informed him about her baby being in the daycare and he took her away.

Eventually, I found Kathy again. We walked to the corner of 4th and Harvey to see if we could assist those gathering there. Many of the employees from the building were trying to locate their co-workers, and medical personnel were assisting the injured. I turned back toward 5th Street and noticed two women laying on the street that weren't there previously. It was Melissa McCulley, our 20 year old student aide, and Pam Briggs, our FBF Clerk. Kathy and I went to assist. Melissa was complaining about her knee and hip hurting. She had a large gash on her leg near her knee that we could see all the way to the bone. Kathy and I looked at each other deciding not to tell Melissa what was hurting her so badly. We simply told her we couldn't move her leg until a paramedic looked at it in case it was broken. Her hip was also dislocated.

Pam was right beside her so I turned and took her hands. The only thing I could see wrong with Pam was a portion of her scalp laying back. She was holding her stomach saying it hurt her really badly. I tried to calm her as she asked me what happened. I said I didn't know, probably a bomb or something. She just closed her eyes. I asked Melissa and Pam who I should call and Mel told me to call her boyfriend. He would know how to reach her Dad. Pam said to call her mom. I had nothing to write their numbers on and knew I'd forget it. A lady came up and asked if she could help. She took down the numbers and said she would try to reach them both.

Just then, a paramedic came with a body board for both. I helped them load Melissa on hers and carry her to 4th & Harvey. Pam was carried by two men. After being placed on the ground, Pam asked about the daycare and I told her it was really bad. I checked on Melissa again and saw a paramedic with her. A nurse came up to me then and told me to hold a bandage loosely on Pam's head to hold down her scalp. I stayed with them there until they were put on an ambulance and taken to the hospital.

I got up and began checking on others from the building. Tiredness hit me like a rock, and I just stopped where I stood and stared at the south side of the building. Then, I began to walk up to the plaza to go back to the north side to see what I could do there. I headed back to the north side, and on the way I stopped and thanked God for letting me live. It would be the last time for a long time that I would do that, or even talk to Him. When I got to the corner of 5th & Harvey and saw no one familiar, I headed back to the south side of the building. When I saw federal workers, firemen and other rescue workers carry someone out of the building, I would go look at the body to see if I knew who they were. Most of them were unrecognizable as people much less individuals. I continued doing this every time a body came out. At one point, I looked up at 4th & Harvey and saw my husband, Chris. It seemed to me it was awfully fast for someone to have been told about the disaster and for family to start arriving. I had no idea how much time had passed.

I began yelling for Chris but he couldn't hear me. He was looking at the bodies on the street, knowing he would find me there. My desk faced the front of the building. He looked up and saw the south side of the building and later told me he thought, "Well, maybe. It doesn't look too bad from here." Finally, he heard my yelling and turned toward me. I ran into his arms so fast that I think I almost ran through him. The

bear hug he gave me back almost choked the air out of me. He, too, asked about the babies. For the first time, I cried. For the first time, emotion came in. But, as quickly as it came in, I pushed it away. Chris asked if I could leave and I told him I didn't know, but I wasn't leaving until I knew where my friends were.

Chris asked if I had seen my brother, as they had left work at the same time. I told him no. Soon someone yelled for us to run, that they had found another bomb. I just stood there staring at the building. People ran past me and still I just stood there. I didn't care. Then Chris grabbed me and drug me away. Reality hit me then, I guess, and I yelled we had to help Emmitt because he couldn't move too quickly having just recovered from knee surgery. Chris reached for him but two other men grabbed him first and we all headed west on 4th. That's when I saw Florence Rogers, head of the credit union.

She was wrapped in a blanket with a faraway look in her eye. I put my arm around her and we continued west. We stopped after a few blocks, and a hospital bus stopped in front of us. I placed Florence on there and Emmitt as well. Florence just looked at me and grabbed my arm. I told her it would be okay and Emmitt took her and calmed her.

Chris and I began walking again and caught up with another of Goodwill's employees. He had one of our radios so I used it to make contact with the others from the office. They said I was to head to 10th & Robinson to the command post. We all three headed north to 10th, then over to Robinson, all the while looking for friends from the office. We couldn't locate the others so, again, I got on the radio and asked where they were. I was told they had moved to Guardian Funeral Home. Eventually, we met up and I felt great relief that so many of us were there.

Tom and Kathy told me Don Rogers had been taken to the hospital because his blood pressure had made him collapse. We tried to figure out where others were. Tom collapsed and medics checked him out, sending him to the hospital. Apparently, his liver had been damaged. Kathy and I were alone again. No one knew where Sherman had gone, or where Richard, Mike or Steve might be, or the status of Tom Hall.

Emmitt showed up and we all sat for a little bit watching the medics organize their teams and issue instructions. Businesses were already bringing in food. Kathy and I went inside thinking we needed to let our Regional Office know the situation. We hoped the phones were working. At the site, we had seen people with cell phones and no one could get out on them. Neither of us could remember the phone numbers we called every day. I then remembered my friend Jean Pitts' number and called her. We were told to wait for our regional office folks coming our way.

Chris told me to try our kids. Oddly, I hadn't thought of my family this whole time. I tried our home first and couldn't get through. After several failed attempts, I called my parents. Maybe the kids were there. I spoke with my family members, but not my kids, so I tried home again and got through this time. I think my son, Brian, answered, or maybe it was my daughter Sara or Christa. I still don't have that memory figured out. It was good to hear their voices, though. Chris explained the situation to them.

We waited for our regional people to show and talked about the others....what had happened....what next. Eventually, someone took Emmitt home leaving just me, Chris and Kathy. We could hear the mechanics talking on the radio about stuff. Kathy said I could leave if I wanted to, but I told her I couldn't leave her all alone. Somehow we got the information that our regional people were at the Medallion Hotel on Sheridan, so we headed that way. When we arrived there we found out they hadn't arrived yet. So, I told Chris I wanted to go to the hospitals to see whom I could find.

First was St. Anthony Hospital. It was a madhouse, with people everywhere. Since he was feeling ill, Chris waited in the truck. It had begun to rain and was turning cold. I checked the walls for information about victims, finding that Don Rogers had been treated and released; Richard Williams and Tom Hall were at University Hospital; Pam was at St. Anthony; nothing about Steve or Mike. Randy Ledger, one of our other mechanics, was at Presbyterian. I didn't even know Randy had been in the building.

I left St. Anthony's to go to one of the other hospitals, but Chris was too sick and needed to go home. All the way home neither of us spoke. As we got about a block from the house, I laid my head on his leg and began to cry again. Very quickly I made myself stop. When I walked into my home all my kids were there. I grabbed my grandson Tyler and hugged him hard. My daughter, too, I think. Chris immediately went to bed. Soon, my parents, sisters, nieces and nephews showed up. They read me the list of people who had

called them to see if I was okay. It was quite long. Nothing fazed me at this time though. All I could think about was getting back to those hospitals.

I told them I had to clean up and leave again, and my little sister said she would take me. I called my supervisor, Joanne, to see how she was and to find out what we were to do the next day. She said if I felt up to it, to show up at the Medallion the next morning at 9:00 AM for a meeting of all employees.

Sue took me first to University where I checked on Richard Williams. I tried to go in and see him, but doctors were in his room trying to sew his ear back. His wife Lynne came out to talk to me and said she would let him know I had been there. Tom Hall was next. His wife met me outside his intensive care room and led me in to see him. He was covered from head to toe, just about, in bandages. His carotid artery had been cut, he had a broken leg, lacerations everywhere. His face was so swollen and cut I could barely tell it was him. I felt sick but tried to be calm for him.

We left University to go to Presbyterian and see Randy, but I had missed visiting hour. They were only every few hours, so I talked with his family and they said they would let him know I had been there. Randy couldn't talk. He was in truly bad shape. His carotid artery and jugular had been cut and he'd almost bled to death. I left.

Sue tried to get me back downtown to the Medallion, but all avenues had been closed. We were both so disoriented we didn't realize Sheridan would have taken us right there. By this time, it was about midnight, so Sue said she was taking me home.

When I got home, I tried to sleep but couldn't. I went in to check on Chris and he was burning up with fever. I gave him medicine to help that and went and sat in the living room in the dark. I sat there all night long...in the dark. At 8:00 the next morning I changed my clothes, brushed my teeth and headed downtown.

At the Medallion, I was stunned to see the headquarters that had been set up. All the mechanics were there, even those from our outlying areas like Tulsa, Muskogee, Hugo, Idabel and McAlester. People from Ft. Worth Regional Office were there working like bees. It was like old home week, but with a sick twist to it.

Those of us who were in the building met in one room with our head of Personnel, Charles Fernandez. He discussed many things with us, explaining how things would work for us. We talked about Steve and Mike. Mike's son, Kyle, was there. We did the best we could to keep our act together but it was a strain. We sought work to do to occupy our minds. After a few days, we got word of Steve's and Mike's bodies being recovered. We all were devastated, even though we pretty much knew.

We mourned not only for the loss of great friends, but also for their families. We attended funerals, dealt with pain and suffering from loss, and supported each other. We drew closer together as a family and friends. From the very day of the bombing, we all went right to work doing what a Building Manager's Office does—taking care of others. It became our crutch. All of us that could worked long, long days for many, many months. We all still carried a dark cloud overhead though. Our common bond....memories, nightmares, and worst, the guilt for being alive.

For me, depression set in and life went out the door. I could no longer sleep, eat, function as a mother and wife, daughter, sister or friend. Nothing mattered anymore but my need to die. That in itself added more guilt since I felt any single family would let me trade places with their lost loved one if it were possible. Death became my strongest desire—my only companion. I could no longer live with the guilt and memories.

I wouldn't take any assistance being offered by various agencies, even that of my employer, because I felt I didn't deserve it. I lived, others died, others were more injured, help them instead. After about 7 months, I began having dangerous flash backs and was put into counseling before I ended up in a hospital. It took me approximately 6 months of counseling before I was ever able to share my "story" with the counselor. I didn't have a right to have a problem, but with the counseling and the support of other survivors whom I trusted, and could finally share things with, I began to move down the road to adjusting to my new way of life. I would have to say, however, that the greatest help to me has been my faith in God. He has never left me, and has sent people into my life to help me realize that I lived for a reason. I may not know what it is

now, but one day I will, and until then, I live my life. If I had to live, then live I must and I do. I'm not saying it's easy, but it is happening.

It is important to me to focus on helping others affected by terrorism. I can understand. I have been there, lived through it, and now want to help, if I can. I don't presume to know the answers. I only offer a shoulder, an ear, a heart, and understanding. I've learned everyone deals with trauma differently and no one experience is the same as another. We all arrive at a destination at different times, and it's okay. We will step forward one and back two, or forward two and back one, but there is always a forward progression. It's important to look for that and recognize it.