

Metaphors of Terror

—*September 16, 2001, edited July 2014*—

Our Brains Had to Change

Everything we know is physically instantiated in the neural systems of our brains.

What we knew before September 11 about America, Manhattan, the World Trade Center, air travel, and the Pentagon were intimately tied up with our identities and with a vast amount of what we took for granted about everyday life. It was all there physically in our neural synapses. Manhattan: the gateway to America for generations of immigrants—the chance to live free of war, pogroms, religious and political oppression!

The Manhattan skyline had meaning in my life, even more than I knew. When I thought of it, I thought of my mother. Born in Poland, she arrived as an infant; grew up in Manhattan; worked in factories for twenty-five years; and had family, friends, a life, a child. She didn't die in concentration camps. She didn't fear for her life. For her, America was not all that she might have wanted it to be, but it was plenty.

I grew up in Bayonne, New Jersey, across the bay from that skyline. The World Trade Center wasn't there then, but over the years, as the major feature of the skyline, it became for me, as for others, the symbol of New York—not only the business center of America but also the cultural center and the communications center. As such, it became a symbol for America itself, a symbol for what it meant to be able to go about your everyday life free of oppression, and just able to live and do your job, whether as a secretary or an artist, a manager or a fireman, a salesman or a teacher or a TV star. I wasn't consciously aware of it, but those images were intimately tied to my identity, both as an individual and as an American. And all that and so much more were there physically as part of my brain on the morning of September 11, 2001.