

Metaphorically, tall buildings are people standing erect. As each tower fell, it became a body falling. We are not consciously aware of the metaphorical images, but they are part of the power and the horror we experience when we see them.

Each of us, in the premotor cortex of our brains, has what are called mirror neurons connected to visual areas. Such neurons fire either when we perform an action or when we see the same action performed by someone else. There are connections from that part of the brain to the emotional centers. Such neural circuits are believed to be the basis of empathy.

This works literally: When we see a plane coming toward the building and imagine people in the building, we feel the plane coming toward us; when we see the building toppling toward others, we feel the building toppling toward us. It also works metaphorically: If we see the plane going through the building, and unconsciously we evoke the metaphor of the building as a head with the plane going through its temple, then we sense—unconsciously but powerfully—being shot through the temple. If we evoke the metaphor of the building as a person and see the building fall to the ground in pieces, then we sense—again unconsciously but powerfully—that we are falling to the ground in pieces. Our systems of metaphorical thought, interacting with our mirror neuron systems, turn external literal horrors into felt metaphorical horrors.

Here are some other metaphorical and symbolic effects:

- **Control is up.** You have control over the situation; you're on top of things. This has always been an important basis of towers as symbols of power. In this case, the toppling of the towers meant loss of control, loss of power.
- **Phallic imagery.** Towers are symbols of phallic power, and their collapse reinforces the idea of loss of power. Another kind of phallic imagery was more central here: the planes penetrating the towers with a plume of heat, and the Pentagon, a vaginal image from the air, penetrated by the plane as missile. These phallic interpretations came from women who felt violated both by the attack and the images on TV.