

Reaffirmation

| BY DE TEEL PATTERSON TILLER |

RECENTLY I MET WITH a small delegation from the Coalition of 9/11 Families—survivors and families and friends of those killed in the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. By their count their membership numbers around 3,000—roughly the same as lost that dark day more than two years ago. The group’s journey to Washington, DC, was borne of an interest in seeing the remains of the towers designated as a National Historic Landmark. The putative leader of the delegation was a young, purposeful man, Anthony Gardner, whose older brother, Harvey Joseph Gardner, died in the collapse of the North Tower. **THE MEETING WAS DIFFICULT** and, at times, heart wrenching. Everyone had a story making the tragedy compelling in ways the media never could. For the first time, I had a personal connection to the events of September 11. During the meeting, I referred to three grainy color photocopies, photographs of the site today from what I guess to be 10 to 15 stories up. There, in the bedrock of Lower Manhattan, in an area now inelegantly dubbed The Bathtub, were two dotted outlines, one clear and one barely perceived. **THE IMPRINTS OF** Minoru Yamasaki’s twin towers were unmistakable. The inches-high remnants of the beams anchoring the towers—driven into the rock in the late 1960s—were now two perfect squares, each exactly an acre. I had seen these photos before. But now they had a profound impact where before they had not. What had changed? **IT WAS, I THINK, THE PERSONAL CONNECTION** that I now had with the horrific event. As I looked at the images and listened to the group’s struggles to ensure that the footprints (as the Coalition calls them) were preserved in the Studio Daniel Libeskind design, I was struck again by what compels us to be part of historic preservation. **WE PRESERVE HISTORY IN PLACE** so that generations yet to come can make a personal connection or, as Martin Buber would put it, an “I/thou” relationship with our Nation’s past. We often lose sight of this amidst the paper, regulations, politics, and processes. We do what no book, television show, movie, video game, or amusement park ever can. In the 388 national parks, in the more than 1.3 million properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and in the more than 2,300 National Historic Landmarks, we make the story of this

land tangible and accessible. **IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN** whether the Coalition will be successful. New York City politics is a no-holds-barred contact sport and much is at stake in the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site. I hold out the hope that it may be possible to find some compromise that preserves the remnants of the towers so that 100 or 1,000 years from now, Americans of those generations will be able to walk over the bedrock and forge their own connections with this event that so changed our lives at the beginning of the 21st century.

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HISTORY IS A POWERFUL AGENT. And the places where history happened are nothing less than touchstones that convey who we are as a people, where we have been, and where we are going. Preserving these places is a social contract among generations. That ennobling fact compels the Coalition of 9/11 Families. And in a world constantly struggling to meet the most basic of human needs—peace, health, freedom—history is fundamental. Often it is not for the faint of heart, playing out in frightening ways. But without history, how would we know what is worth struggling for?

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