

A Changing World, with Unchanged Principles

It has been almost a year since 9 · 11, and I still remember vividly what happened that day. Living a few blocks away from the World Trade Center in Battery Park City, I was woken up by the deadening noise when the first plane crashed into the North Tower. I had just finished preparing for my international copyright class a few hours ago, and I thought I would get a couple of hours of sleep before I headed back to Cardozo. Half awoken, I looked out the windows and saw the deserted highway, the lines of stopped cars, and fire engines and ambulances rushing toward what had yet to become Ground Zero. Little did I know what would be revealed minutes later.

Today, I still recall the moment when I watched the South Tower collapsed in front of me on television and saw, seconds later, the hurricane of dust and debris blowing toward my bedroom windows, which faced the World Trade Center directly. The electricity supply was gone instantaneously, and the whole building was covered in darkness. If filmmakers had to portray Armageddon, that was the scene.

When I was in my hotel room rewatching images of the attacks, I could not help but think about what we had chosen to do in our life—the legal profession. When you started law school, people always talked about how society needed lawyers and how powerful they could be in today’s litigious world. In a time when our city was in desperate need, we felt completely helpless. The news announcers kept repeating the types of skills they needed at Ground Zero—firefighting, paramedic, ironworking, construction, and ability to handle cranes and other heavy equipment. Yet, I couldn’t find a thing I could do. True, there were many things I could do as a volunteer, but none of them required legal training.

Ironically, I had just completed a law review article on how we can use the nonzero-sum approach to resolve global intellectual property conflicts and was planning to expand the claim by applying it to international trade and other difficult transnational disputes. As academics, we always try to find ways to make the world a better place. We teach, we write, and we speak. But are our ideas really useful? Are we really improving society? Or are we just a bunch of elitists who talk about ideas that have no relevance to the outside world?

As the attacks faded away in the next few days, many of us tried to regain some sense of normalcy—by reuniting with family and friends, by continuing our work, and by reassessing our personal choices and goals. It was at that time when I realized the true impact of the September 11 attacks. Although the attacks had cost the lives of more than 3000 people, including that of my classmate and a fellow alumnus, the ramifications of the attacks had yet to be known. Being an expatriate in a minority race, I could not help but sympathize with the plight of immigrants, residents of Arab and South Asian descent, and those innocent people in countries that allegedly harbor terrorism. The collapse of the World Trade Center was only the beginning, and the ramifications of the September 11 attacks had yet to unfold.

A year’s time might not be sufficient to heal our wounds, but it allows us to reflect on the event in a calm and rational manner. Now that I look back at the September 11 attacks, I think very differently than I did immediately after the attacks. By sharing our ideas, finding new solutions, and teaching the future pillars of society, we *are* changing the world and making it a better place. By doing so, we also can help find the delicate balance between individual rights and limits on personal freedom and promote a dialogue between cultures and communities that fail to understand each other. The world is changing, but our living principles remain the same. And for this reason alone, I am glad to be an academic.

Peter K. Yu ’99
Acting Assistant Professor of Law
Executive Director, Intellectual Property Law Program
Deputy Director, Howard M. Squadron Program in Law, Media & Society