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The Fire Alarm is Ringing. What Are You Waiting For?

How a fear of change can prevent you from acting when it matters most.

In the New York Times, Michiko Kakutani wrote that Stephen Grosz's The Examined Life "distills the author's twenty five years of work as a psychoanalyst and more than 50,000 hours of conversation into a series of slim, piercing chapters that read like a combination of Chekhov

and Oliver Sacks.” *What follows is an excerpt from the book, in stores now.*

When the first plane hit the north tower of the World Trade Center, Marissa Panigrosso was on the ninety-eighth floor of the south tower, talking to two of her co-workers. She felt the explosion as much as heard it. A blast of hot air hit her face, as if an oven door had just been opened. A wave of anxiety swept through the office. Marissa Panigrosso didn't pause to turn off her computer, or even to pick up her purse. She walked to the nearest emergency exit and left the building.

The two women she was talking to – including the colleague who shared her cubicle – did not leave. “I remember leaving and she just didn't follow,” Marissa said later in an interview on American National Public Radio. “I saw her on the phone. And the other woman – it was the same thing. She was diagonally across from me and she was talking on the phone and she didn't want to leave.”

In fact, many people in Marissa Panigrosso's office ignored the fire alarm, and also what they saw happening 131 feet away in the north tower. Some of them went into a meeting. A friend of Marissa's, a woman named Tamitha Freeman, turned back after walking down several flights of stairs. “Tamitha says, ‘I have to go back for my baby pictures,’ and then she never made it out.” The two women who stayed

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behind on the telephones, and the people who went into the meeting, also lost their lives.

Research has shown that, when a fire alarm rings, people do not act immediately. They talk to each other, and they try to work out what is going on. They stand around.

In Marissa Panigrosso's office, as in many of the other offices in the World Trade Center, people did not panic or rush to leave. "That struck me as very odd," Marissa said. "I said to my friend, 'Why is everyone standing around?'"

What struck Marissa Panigrosso as odd is, in fact, the rule. Research has shown that, when a fire alarm rings, people do not act immediately. They talk to each other, and they try to work out what is going on. They stand around.

This should be obvious to anyone who has ever taken part in a fire drill. Instead of leaving a building, we wait. We wait for more clues – the smell of smoke, or advice from someone we trust. But there is also evidence that, even with more information, many of us still won't make a move. In 1985, fifty-six people were killed when fire broke out in the stands of the Valley Parade football stadium in Bradford. Close examination of television footage later showed that fans did not react immediately and continued to watch both the fire and the game, failing to move towards the exits. And research has shown, again and again, that

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when we do move, we follow old habits. We don't trust emergency exits. We almost always try to exit a room through the same door we entered. Forensic reconstruction after a famous restaurant fire in the Beverly Hills Supper Club in Kentucky confirmed that many of the victims sought to pay before leaving, and so died in a queue.

After twenty-five years as a psychoanalyst, I can't say that this surprises me. We resist change. Committing ourselves to a small change, even one that is unmistakably in our best interest, is often more frightening than ignoring a dangerous situation.

We don't want an exit if we don't know exactly where it is going to take us, even – or perhaps especially – in an emergency.

We are vehemently faithful to our own view of the world, our story. We want to know what new story we're stepping into before we exit the old one. We don't want an exit if we don't know exactly where it is going to take us, even – or perhaps especially – in an emergency. This is so, I hasten to add, whether we are patients or psychoanalysts.

I have thought of Marissa Panigrosso countless times since I first heard her story. I find myself imagining her in her office. I see her computer screen, the large windows. I smell the morning smells of perfume and coffee, and then – the first crash. I see her walk to the

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emergency exit and leave. I see her colleagues standing around. Tamitha Freeman leaves, and then a few minutes later returns for her baby pictures. I see myself there – in the south tower – and I wonder, what would I have done?

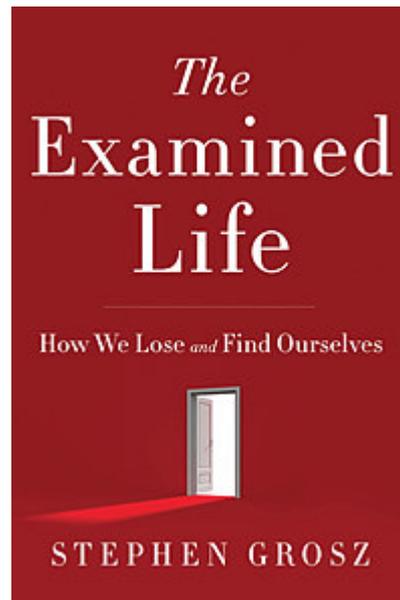
I want to believe that I would have left with Marissa Panigrosso, but I'm not so sure. I might have thought "the worst is over." Or worried that it would feel ridiculous to return the next day only to discover that everyone else had continued working. Maybe someone has told me, "Hey, don't go. The plane hit the north tower – the south tower must be the safest place in New York" – and I stay.

We hesitate, in the face of change, because change is loss. But if we don't accept some loss – for Tamitha, the loss of her baby photos – we can lose everything.

Consider Mark A., a thirty-four-year-old who has just discovered a lump on his testicle but doesn't want to see his physician until after his holiday in Greece. Rather than attend the doctor's appointment his wife has made for him, he runs some errands, picking up suntan lotion and some T-shirts for the kids at Baby Gap. "I'm sure it's nothing," he says. "I'll see to it when we get back." Or there is Juliet B., a thirty-six-year-old who has been engaged for seven years to a man who regularly has affairs and visits prostitutes, and who behaves like a "bully" with his clients and co-workers. "I can't leave him," she says. "Where would I go? What would I do?"

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For Mark A. and Juliet B. the fire alarm is ringing. Both are anxious about their situations. Both want change. If not, why tell a psychoanalyst? But they are standing around, waiting – for what?



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Photo by Bettina von Zwehl

Stephen Grosz is a practicing psychoanalyst—he has worked with patients for more than twenty-five years. Born in America, educated at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Oxford University, he lives in London. A *Sunday Times* bestseller, *The Examined Life* is his first book.

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One lazy Saturday morning, my father took me with him to his office. He picked me up in a light-blue Buick, ugly as hell, and started down Ten Mile, just one of a dozen—or a hundred—parallel streets that stretched across that vast grid of the north. We could see the Detroit Rena... [Continue reading](#)

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