

“Fault Line”
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[Background – This service followed the “Great Shakeout,” a regional earthquake drill. The service also followed “Safety Day,” an educational session sponsored by the congregation’s Safety Task Force. A representative from the Montclair Fire Department spoke to the congregation during the service. He brought safety literature and sample “survival kits,” which were on display after the service. The service concluded with an evacuation drill (the congregation exited the building in under three minutes). As it happened, several wildfires were burning in Southern California. Over 800 homes were destroyed. Thankfully, no one died.]

I will take a risk and begin with some “gallows humor. Two men were standing in line, waiting to buy tickets to a baseball game. Baseball spring training is a beautiful time of the year to be in Florida. “Are you from here?” one man asked the other. “No, I’m from Ohio. I’m here on vacation.”

“How bad is the economy in Ohio these days?” “It’s grim, no doubt about it. I’m just lucky that I have a good insurance company.” “What do you mean?” “Two years ago, my house burned down, and I was able to rebuild it with the insurance money.” “That must have been a terrible time for you. I’m glad your insurance company came through.”

“Yes, and two months ago, my house burned down again! The insurance company paid again. This time, I decided not to rebuild. I’m here, about to enjoy the baseball game because I have such a good insurance company.” “We are both very lucky,” said the other man. “My house was destroyed in a flood. I was able to rebuild, thanks to my insurance company.”

[pause] “How do you start a flood?” ;)

Disasters happen. We rarely have such a direct hand in starting them, though sadly, sometimes we do. We do not have control over what happens in a disaster, but we do have a surprising

amount of control over what happens after a disaster. What happens after a disaster depends on two things: preparedness *before* the fault line passing underneath our living room rumbles to life and resilience *afterward*.¹ This congregation can help us prepare for a disaster. Thank you to the Safety Task Force and to everyone who helped with Safety Day yesterday. Not only can this congregation help us prepare for disaster, this congregation can help us to strengthen our capacity for resilience after disaster strikes.

In the mid- to late 1980's, I lived in Pasadena and worked in a high rise building in downtown Los Angeles. One day I was talking on the phone at work, and my chair mysteriously started rolling. The phone cord mysteriously started stretching and stretching. A split second later, I felt the rocking motion, but I will never forget my initial confusion. "Why is phone cord stretching? Why is the chair rolling?" The experience made for a cute story to tell friends and relatives living in other states.

I did not take earthquakes seriously until later. One day, a conversation with a coworker stopped me in my tracks. She was on the company's disaster recovery team. What a concept! Besides doing her regular job, she and others on the team were paid to think about disasters and how to recover from them. That almost sounded like fun. The project sounded like fun until she mentioned that the company's disaster recovery plan included designating certain restrooms within the building as temporary morgues. Bodies would be taken to the designated restrooms and not to other restrooms. "Body bags" had already been purchased. "Body bags" -- a cost of doing business in earthquake country.

What kind of people think about disasters before they happen? Wise people, as it turns out -- caring people, people who deserve respect, people who we should emulate. Last Thursday morning at 10 a.m., hundreds of thousands of southern Californians participated in the "Great Shakeout" earthquake drill.² The take-home message was simple: "Drop, cover, and hold on." I was working at home when the imaginary magnitude 7.8 shaking began. Yes, I felt a bit foolish,

¹ This mention of "the fault line passing underneath our living room" is a reference to the poem entitled "Fault Line" by Robert Walsh. The poem was read earlier in the service. See http://www.traumaministry.org/resources/fault_line.htm.

² See www.shakeout.org.

even though no one was there to see me drop in a corner of the living room, cover my head with the cushion from a chair, and hold on to a heavy built-in hutch for two minutes, with my legs cramping most of the time. Better to feel foolish than to be injured -- or worse.³ Had it been a real 7.8 earthquake, an estimated 1,800 people would have died. By the way, and I won't mention any names, "drop, cover, and hold on" does not mean "go stand in a doorway."

When disaster strikes, we do not all respond in the same way. We respond in different ways. Our responses are shaped by past experiences, mediated by our temperament. Common responses are grief, guilt, denial, blame, revenge, and profound sadness. "The spiritual journey of those affected by disaster primarily involves an ongoing process of introspection, learning, and action in order to exercise the will to move on with life," writes William Sage.⁴ A disaster is a traumatic event in which our ordinary ability to cope is overwhelmed. "Overwhelmed is the operative word," according to Therese M. Becker, manager of pastoral care at the University of Chicago Hospitals.⁵ Another way to put it is that trauma occurs when "one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences."⁶

Speaking of feeling overwhelmed, I felt nearly overwhelmed by simply reading about disasters and disaster recovery in preparation for this service. I came across a comprehensive Emergency Action and Recovery Plan for Religious Organizations. I thought I had seen it all, but here, as Appendix C was something called the "Kidnapping/Hostage Checklist."⁷ There is something incongruous about the word "checklist" following the words "Kidnapping" and "Hostage," as if a terrifying situation could be made better by having a form to fill out.

The helpful checklist creator provided boxes next to 24 words which might describe the voice of a kidnapper or hostage taker. Check all that apply: Was the voice loud? Slurred? Familiar? Disguised? Nasal? Ragged? Crying? In the next section, the helpful checklist creator provided

³ See <http://www.earthquakecountry.info/roots/index.php>.

⁴ "Spiritual and Emotional Care Resource" by William W. Sage, Church World Service, p. 5. See <http://www.cwserp.org/congregations/index.php>. The link to this document is at the bottom of the website.

⁵ She is quoted by William Sage on p. 4 of the "Spiritual and Emotional Care Resource" document.

⁶ This definition is by Bessel A. Van der Kolk, who is also quoted by William Sage on p. 4.

⁷ This document is available on the Church World Service website, <http://www.cwserp.org/congregations/index.php>.

15 types of possible background noises that might be heard during the phone call. Check the box that applies: Street noises? Machinery noises? Animal noises? I almost expected there to be an itemized list of possible animal noises – pig? cow? horse? llama? giraffe? dolphin? ;) That’s when I realized that I was getting “punchy” by doing so much research on disasters.

I wondered, are we striving to transform chaos into order by means of plans and paperwork? Does it help or hinder mental health and spiritual health to keep something like the Appendix C checklist near the phone? Does preparing for disaster bring *more* fear into our lives instead of less fear? Those questions were quite “alive” for me, and the jury was out for a while regarding the answers. Then the jury returned and announced its verdict. No, we are *not* neurotically trying to transform chaos into order by means of plans and paperwork. Our preparation and care are expressions of love. Preparing for disaster brings *less* fear into our lives, not more fear.

At the time of the Whittier earthquake, my commute from Pasadena to downtown Los Angeles took me through the tunnel near Dodger Stadium. Though I had not prayed for years, in the weeks following the earthquake, as soon as I drove into the tunnel, I started praying, “Please, God, not now. Hold off a little longer. Please don’t let there be another earthquake right now!” It was embarrassing to realize that I was OK with people dying in a collapsed tunnel before I reached it, and I was OK with people dying in a collapsed tunnel after I had driven through it. I just did not want the tunnel to collapse on me. In my own defense, this happened before I went to seminary. ;)

My flip flop on prayer is not unusual among survivors of a disaster. “Public tragedies tend to ‘shake up’ deeply-held religious assumptions, challenging the outlooks of victims, emergency responders, and even those who experience the event from a distance,” says the Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh. “Trauma causes some to cling to beliefs all the more, while others let go of their beliefs . . . After a hurricane, a Unitarian Universalist whose spirituality honors nature can feel alienated from the earth, winds, and waters which once gave solace. A humanist, once so

positive about humanity's potential, can lose faith in human institutions when they fail to act responsibly. The beliefs that were once avowed or rejected become subject to re-examination.”⁸

The Rev. Aaron Payson is part of the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Ministry, which was started after September 11, 2001. He describes the life cycle of a disaster as having seven phases.⁹

- 1) pre-incident, when people may ask “what if” questions
- 2) the warning phase (e.g., the hurricane will make landfall in two day; obviously not all disasters have a warning phase)
- 3) the actual disaster itself
- 4) a heroic phase of rescues
- 5) Next – and this was news to me – there is a honeymoon stage, which I will come back to in a minute.
- 6) The honeymoon phase is followed by a long roller coaster of disillusionment.
- 7) Finally, a new equilibrium is reached. Life is not the same as before the disaster, but the disaster no longer dominates in consciousness.

In the honeymoon phase of the life cycle of a disaster, people are grateful for having survived. People can see help coming. They get food on demand. They get conversation on demand. They get attention on demand. Special bonding takes place among the community of survivors. There can even be a feeling of euphoria. After the honeymoon comes the long roller coaster ride of disillusionment. In part, disillusionment occurs, according to the Rev. Payson, because tensions emerge within the community regarding whose story about the disaster seems to be winning in the popularity contest of public opinion.

It is difficult for a community to fold all the stories of all its members into a larger story. Yet folding them into a larger story, a larger context, *must* be done. It must be done if the community wants to minimize the infighting and the competition for allegiance that are common

⁸ “Making Meaning After Disaster: a Workshop for Unitarian Universalist Adults” by the Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh, p. 1. See http://www.uua.org/documents/dfd/workshop_making_meaning_after_disaster_080727.pdf.

⁹ A video of the Rev. Aaron Payson's presentation is available for viewing online. See <http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/leaderslibrary/120488.shtml>.

in the disillusionment stage. In the congregation, we can learn to live with what he calls “sacred ambiguity” – not needing to reconcile all the different versions of a disaster. We can fold all the stories into a larger narrative. Together, we can hold all our stories.

I conclude with a look at resilience and the ways that being an active participant in the life of the congregation can strengthen resilience. We need all the resilience we can develop after a disaster. “Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity . . . Resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary . . . Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.”¹⁰ Each of the 10 ways to build resilience can take place within the ebb and flow, within the give and take of active participation in the congregation: Make connections with others (build relationships). Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems. Accept that change is a part of living. Move toward your goals. Take decisive actions rather than detaching from problems and just wishing they would go away. Look for opportunities for self-discovery. Nurture a positive view of yourself. Keep things in perspective. Maintain a hopeful outlook. Take care of yourself.

“As human beings we reflect, ask ‘why’ about our lives, because we are drawn to seek meaning. We need meaning as much as we need food and drink. Our reflection is rooted in this human drive to understand, to make the truest and richest meaning possible of our lives.”¹¹ In this congregation, we help each other make true and rich meaning. May we prepare and plan so that fear does not control us. May we strengthen resiliency in ourselves and in each other. May it be so!

¹⁰ See “The Road to Resilience” on the American Psychological Association website, <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=6>.

¹¹The quote is by Killan and Debeers in *The Art of Theological Reflection*. It is found on p. 9 of “Making Meaning After Disaster: a Workshop for Unitarian Universalist Adults” by the Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh.