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DISASTER

A Psychological Essay

by

MARTHA WOLFENSTEIN

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Introduction



IT IS NOT EASY to find out how disasters affect people. In the best of times our observations of human nature are rather rarely intensive or systematic. In the alarm, disorder, pain and grief created by large scale catastrophes, there have been too many more urgent things to do. It is only recently that research teams have been going into the field to interview victims of disasters, and to observe some of the consequences of such events. The present study is based on material collected in this way, mainly from peace-time disasters in the United States. The material on which I have worked has been brought together by the Committee on Disaster Studies of the National Research Council, and the central core of the data consists of protocols of tape-recorded interviews with disaster victims, gathered by research teams of the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago, the Disaster Research Project of the Psychiatric Institute of the University of Maryland, and the Waco-San Angelo Disaster Study of the Department of Sociology of the University of Texas.

I have taken these data as a basis for formulating a series of hypotheses about how people react to disastrous events. For this purpose I have attempted to apply hypotheses derived

from psychoanalysis to material which is suggestive but non-intensive and fragmentary. For the testing of the hypotheses which I present much more intensive observation would be required. Since this study was undertaken as a contribution to further research planning, let me indicate in a general way the kinds of statements with which I am concerned and the kinds of additional data which they call for.

1. I have tried to describe and interpret a range of subjective and behavioral phenomena which occur in people involved in a disaster. However, this is often based on very rough and summary descriptions. Take, for instance, what has been called the "disaster syndrome." People who have just undergone the impact of an extreme event may describe themselves, or be described by others as "shocked," "stunned," or "dazed." I have tried to reconstruct in a conjectural way the inner dynamics of this state. But the subjective content of the state itself has as yet been only very incompletely reported. The same applies to the illusion of invulnerability which some individuals are supposed to be able to preserve in moments of extreme danger while others lose it. We need much more precise and detailed descriptions of these and other subjective states which as yet remain obscure.

2. I have elaborated a number of dynamic hypotheses to account for various reactions to disaster. For instance, I have suggested that the upsurge of loving feelings towards others following a disaster is related to a surfeit of vicarious gratification of hostile impulses by the extensive damage which has been done. The predominance of good sentiments may thus be considered as in part a consequence of the temporary subsidence of the negative feelings which at other times interfere with them. Or, I have suggested that the humility sometimes expressed by survivors, the resolve to lead better lives, may be motivated by the need to defend oneself against the sin of pride. One may be tempted to feel superior in one's immunity (of course nothing can happen to me). But this may be followed by alarm that the powers that be will punish one for such presumption. The danger is then warded off by a submissive and dutiful attitude. (Needless to say,

in the case of these reactions and others I have envisaged a multiplicity of alternative or mutually reinforcing motives.) However, it is clear that for the confirmation of any such dynamic proposition more intensive data would be required than are at present available.

3. For every phase of a disastrous experience I have indicated a considerable range of possible reactions. There are some people, for example, who ignore warnings of an oncoming disaster, while others pay attention to them. Following a disaster, there are some people who talk about it continuously while others cannot bear to hear it mentioned. Many people move back again into a disaster-stricken area and reestablish their homes on the same ground. But there are some who move away. Again, after a disaster, some survivors feel, 'I must be pretty good, a favorite of the gods, or I would not have survived.' Others in the same situation are overwhelmed with guilt, feeling that they should have sacrificed themselves for loved ones who perished. In the case of these and any number of other alternative reactions, the question arises: what are the conditions for their occurrence? Who will react one way and who another? It is of course particularly important to try to determine the conditions for recovery from a disastrous experience and the conditions under which it may leave more or less lasting disturbances. On the basis of general clinical knowledge, I have speculated about some of the factors which may be operative in such alternative ways of reacting. Again, such hypotheses would need to be checked by much more information than we now have about individuals who react in these various ways.

4. While we may be able to indicate something of the range of possible reactions before, during, and after a disastrous event, we still do not know about the combinations of such reactions or their frequencies. At the end of Part II (in the section on Activity and Emotion) I sketch sequences of feelings and behavior throughout the course of a disaster as reported by two exceptionally articulate and self-observant subjects. But even in these cases the information is very fragmentary. On the whole we cannot as yet identify recur-

rent combinations and sequences of reactions. Of the various attitudes expressed by different people following a disaster, we cannot say which usually go together or what is the interplay between them. For instance, many people following a disaster are tormented by the memory of it. Also many people stress how lucky they were to escape with less damage than others. Sometimes the same people express both these attitudes. But I cannot say what the interplay is between the distress about the terrible experience which one cannot forget and the feeling of having been so lucky. Nor do I know how often one of these attitudes occurs in the absence of the other. Thus I describe and interpret a series of attitudes but I do not have enough material on individual subjects to present a series of combinations of reactions. To take a more complicated instance, I consider denial or acknowledgment of danger as it occurs in four phases of a disastrous event: when it is in the remote future, when it is imminent, in the moment of impact, and after it has passed. I attempt to indicate at which points denial is or is not pathological and/or pathogenic. However, there are sixteen possible combinations of denial and non-denial for these four phases. I have no detailed exemplification of any one of these possibilities, let alone any basis for estimating their relative frequencies. Even apart from the question of combinations or sequences of reactions, there are very few points where separate items of feeling or behavior have been quantified (as in the predominant tendency to be unworried about remote threats, and to move back into a disaster-stricken area). All the ways of acting and feeling which I describe and the underlying motives which I suggest may be supposed to occur in some people at some times and in some places. But the question of frequencies, like that of conditions, remains to be decided.

I have at various points ventured interpretations in cultural terms of various reactions which I have found recurrent in my material. So, for instance, in the emphasis on keeping calm, and in the repeated assertion "we were lucky" despite whatever damage or losses were suffered, I have been inclined to see something characteristically American. Similarly, the

extremity of guilt of some of the survivors at Nagasaki, the feeling that they should have died in the attempt, however futile, to save their loved ones, seemed related to certain distinctive traits of Japanese culture. These judgments of what may be culturally distinctive are based on the coherence of the reactions observed in disasters with other attitudes which, in previous studies of the given cultures, have appeared to be characteristic of them. Such cultural hypotheses would again require much more extensive observations for their verification. To affirm cultural regularities, of course, in no way precludes acknowledgment of the wide range of individual differences, of other group differences, nor of commonly human responses. As an instance of the latter, I believe that the view of disaster as the great equalizer (the high are made low) is, if not universal, at least very widely recurrent.

While the hypotheses which I present are intended as suggestions for further research, they would also require a more precise reformulation for this purpose. So, for instance, with the hypothesis about the reduction of hostility as a condition for altruistic feelings and behavior following a disaster: it would be necessary to develop indices of the degree of increase of altruistic sentiments and activity and of the degree of reduction of hostility in order to test this hypothesis. Similarly with the other hypotheses here presented, they would have to be translated into operational language. I have not attempted to do this at this point. Rather I have tried to give the emotional flavor of the experiences of disaster victims in what aims to be an evocative and empathic way.

I have been largely occupied with reconstructing motives which are unconscious or not fully conscious. This, however, does not mean that I am mainly concerned with non-adaptive behavior. Unconscious motives may lead to useful undertakings or may reenforce consciously reality-oriented activities. So, for instance, thinking about and preparing precautionary devices against a future disaster may be in some degree motivated by the need to master the trauma of a past one. Consciously the individual may be concerned with the physical efficacy of these precautions. Less consciously he may

be working over his unresolved feelings of alarm from the disastrous experience already undergone. Also, on a less conscious level, precautions may be invested with a power of prevention. Thus I am concerned here with underlying as well as manifest motives for all kinds of reactions to disaster, with no special emphasis on psychiatric casualties.

In his book on *Air War and Emotional Stress*, Irving Janis summed up what had been learned about reactions of civilians to the bombing of cities in World War II. It is not necessary here to recapitulate all of those findings. The present study concentrates on recently gathered material from peace-time disasters. However, I have drawn on observations of war-time reactions of citizens and soldiers to supplement and fill in gaps in this latter material. To delimit further the scope of this report, I have not undertaken to deal with the functions of social organizations in coping with disasters, and in the range of reactions of individuals I have not attempted to investigate psychosomatic disturbances.

In relating what I have been able to find out or surmise about how people react to disasters I have followed a simple time sequence: the first part deals with the phase before a disaster, the second with its impact and the time immediately following, and the third with the aftermath. However, since I have tried to make connections as far as I can between later and earlier events, there is a certain amount of looking before or after in each part.

The first part begins with remote dangers, the predominant tendency to be unworried about them even though they may be considered probable, and the subjective conditions which make some people alarmed about them. I then consider some of the prognoses about large-scale disasters put forward by those who are forced to anticipate such events, and particularly expectations of mass panic and madness. There follows a consideration of denial of imminent threats and the consequences of such denial; attitudes about precautions and efforts at propitiation of fate; some of the ways in which past experience of catastrophe influences anticipations; and the effects of sharing danger with others. Recent peace-time disas-

ters on which research has been done have been mainly of a sudden and unexpected sort (such as tornadoes). So for the discussion of attitudes towards a threat which is recognized in advance I have drawn to a considerable extent on observations made in Britain during the bombings in the last war. It is in parts two and three that the material from recent interviews with disaster victims becomes the major data for analysis.

In part two, I discuss the impression of the disaster victim in the moment of impact that he alone has been hit, or that the destructive force is focused on the spot where he is, and the painful feeling of having been abandoned by both human and superhuman sources of help. I then attempt to analyze the conditions under which the individual's sense of invulnerability is shattered or preserved in an experience of extreme danger, the near-miss and remote-miss reactions. There is then a discussion of the dynamics of the disaster syndrome, the state in which the person who has just undergone an extreme event appears stunned and dazed. This is followed by a consideration of panic, the different meanings of the term, the conditions for the occurrence of various kinds of panic, and some speculation about why the extreme form of panic appeals so strongly to the imagination (to account for its being anticipated so much more often than it happens). I then discuss the altruistic behavior which is often so marked immediately following a disaster, as well as tendencies towards orgiastic abandon which are sometimes manifested in extreme situations. This part concludes with a consideration of divergent tendencies toward emotional excitement or efficient action, and of alternations between distressed and euphoric feelings in living through a catastrophe.

In the third part I consider the repeated revival of a traumatic experience in memory, and efforts to ward off such painful recollections. I take the occasion to bring together the hypotheses about the conditions and effects of denial in the various phases of a disaster. I discuss the expectations of an imminent recurrence of a catastrophe on the part of those who have undergone it. There follows an account of the

great attraction which a disaster locale has for sightseers coming in from outside, and the variety of motives which impel disaster victims to move back into the same area. Next I proceed to examine the sentiment expressed by survivors that they do not regret the loss of their property (property being regarded as a payment for life), and that they are very lucky, despite whatever damage they have suffered: it is someone else rather than themselves who should be pitied. I then attempt to interpret the rise of strong positive feelings for others immediately following a disaster, and the subsequent decline of these good feelings. Finally I consider issues often raised by a disaster as to whether men or gods are to blame, and the alternatives of revolt against the powers that be or submission to them in the face of catastrophe.

Part I:
Threat



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I.

Who worries about remote dangers?



HUMAN LIFE is liable to many hazards. People are run over in the street, automobiles collide, travelers are injured or killed in train wrecks or airplane crashes. In the seeming security of one's home one may fall down stairs and break a leg. A child playing hide and seek may close himself in an old ice box and suffocate. One may fall prey to disease or something may go amiss with a vital organ—a heart attack, a brain hemorrhage. The cocktails and cigarettes which we enjoy may be working irremediable internal damage. And then there are the more large scale dangers of fire, flood, earthquake, tornado, and the man-made destruction unleashed in war. As we consider such a list, is not our first reaction apt to be one of smiling? Yes, we will say, and as you are walking down the street a tile may fall from a roof and hit you on the head. But who can worry about all these things?

It is with this reaction that I should like to begin: the attitude of denial towards remote threats. This denial has a number of aspects or alternative forms. We may exclude various threats from awareness. We simply do not think about them. Or if we think about them, we do not believe that they will happen, or that they can affect us. Or even if

we entertain the possibility that they may affect us we take this as a purely intellectual statement to which we attach no feeling.

In considering reactions to disasters, I shall try to show the varying role of denial in relation to different temporal phases of a disastrous event: in relation to a remote threat, to an imminent threat, to the impact of extreme danger, and to the phase of retrospect. We shall see that the conditions and consequences of denial vary with these different phases.

Certain attitudes towards a remote threat appear in the findings of a survey made in 1946 of Americans' feelings and forecasts about the atomic bomb.¹ Half of the subjects in this nation-wide study said that they were not at all worried about the bomb, while only one-eighth acknowledged being decidedly worried; the rest were slightly worried. How was this preponderance of non-worry related to prognoses about the future? Few people felt confident that the bomb would not be used against the United States. Thus absence of worry frequently coexisted with acknowledgment of the danger. The relative independence of worry and prognoses appears further in the attitudes of more and less well informed individuals. Those who were better informed on world affairs were less likely to believe that the bomb would work for peace by making other countries afraid of the United States; they were more ready to believe that other countries would soon get the bomb (this was in 1946); and they were more doubtful that the United States would find a means of defense against the bomb. Yet they did not worry any more than the less well informed who inclined to the opposite, more optimistic prognoses.

One may ask: what is the state of mind of someone who acknowledges the likelihood of such an extreme danger but does not feel worried? I am reminded of another paradoxical combination of feeling and belief, what Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith." In this one responds to events in a story or on the stage with strong emotion even while one knows they are not real. In the opposite situation, a reality value is attached to an event

but without emotional response. This is the position of those who consider an atomic attack (or today, of course, it would be an H-bomb attack) against the United States likely, but do not feel worried. We have here what would appear to be an isolation of affect rather than the denial of an external situation. But does not the external situation which elicits no emotional response seem in some sense "unreal"? Is not the acknowledgment of it merely verbal? In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy describes how the dying man recalls the syllogism he learned in school, beginning with the general proposition: All men are mortal. While he had not doubted this proposition, still it had seemed to have no application to himself. Only now that he was faced with imminent death, this commonplace sentence became infused with meaning. Admission of a painful prospect on a purely verbal level may thus coexist with denial on a less conscious level, or with the implicit qualification: it does not apply to me.

Important factors in attitudes towards future dangers are estimates of whether anything can be done about them, and whether the individual himself is in a position to do anything. In respect to the bomb, the same survey indicated that expectations of its being used against the United States were frequently combined with the counteracting expectation that before this would happen the United States would have developed an adequate defense. This confidence that the "leaders" or the "government" could and would do something was generally combined with a belief that there was nothing the private citizen could do. Such attitudes towards world affairs illustrate the trend of what has been called "privatization."² The ordinary citizen tends to feel increasingly that he has neither the knowledge nor the means to take a hand in the great affairs which affect his destiny.

The association between non-worry and the conviction that there was nothing the individual could do was sometimes made quite explicitly. As one person put it: "It's just like living in a country where there were earthquakes. What good would it do if you went to bed every night worrying whether there would be an earthquake?"³ The conviction

that there is nothing one can do figured prominently also in the opinions of a smaller sample of subjects interviewed in 1950 on the prospects of nuclear bombing.⁴ In this group, an expression of lack of worry tended to be coupled with doubts whether these weapons would ever be used. When the interviewer questioned such optimistic prognoses, interviewees showed some apprehension at the same time that they pictured a nuclear attack as a situation about which nothing could be done. According to their image, all within a certain radius would be killed, while all outside it would be safe. This evidently would make any preparation for post-attack remedial activities superfluous. Probably the conviction that nothing can be done and the oversimplified image of the event reenforced one another. While it was found that avoidance of anxiety and denial of danger tended to yield to the pressure of conflicting evidence put forward by the interviewer, one may suppose that his subjects ceased to think about his arguments after the interview was over. In dealing with a remote threat, denial is often not total. But it may be something that one thinks about only very rarely. And having taken the pains to think about it once, one may feel that one has paid the price of emancipation from this worry: one need not think about it again for quite a while.

Thus we see a number of the factors which affect attitudes towards a remote threat. There are varying estimates of the likelihood that the threat will materialize. One may or may not believe, for instance, that nuclear weapons will be used, or may assign varying degrees of probability to this prospect. One's belief in the likelihood of the danger may be purely verbal and may coexist with disbelief on a deeper level. One's acknowledgment of the dangerous possibility may be continuous or intermittent, alternating with implicit denial. One may more or less explicitly exempt oneself from possible involvement. Again, one may estimate variously the possibilities of preventive or remedial action. And one may have different ideas about whether one could oneself take any such action. Anxiety about a remote threat seems to be little related to prognoses. This suggests that the belief in the

coming danger on the part of those who remain unworried is not very intense. The expectation that superior authorities will do something to ward off the threat, and the often combined belief that the individual himself can do nothing, are apt to be associated with absence of worry. In connection with remote threats, the usual reaction appears to be explicit or implicit denial that it will materialize or that it can apply to oneself, and isolation of affect from the idea of the event.

However, there are evidently some people, though a minority, who do worry about remote dangers. Who are they, and what factors account for their anxiety? Let us leave aside for the moment those whose position of authority and responsibility requires them to anticipate dangerous possibilities and consider those who worry on their own. There is considerable clinical evidence to suggest that those who are apprehensive about remote dangers, or more terrified than others about less remote hazards, are so not because of a more realistic attitude towards the world but rather on the basis of emotional factors. The individual's own impulses or fantasies of punishing agencies are projected on the external world. Take, for example, the situation in New York City during World War II, when there were regular air raid drills in the schools. For most of the participants apparently these drills were either a dull routine or a brief respite from chores, with little thought being given to the not very imminent danger to which they were related. Some children, however, and also some adults, became acutely anxious in this situation, with fears of bombs exploding and houses being blown to bits. A therapist in a child guidance clinic observed among patients who showed this reaction an emotional predicament which constituted the real though unrecognized danger. These were individuals who in their family relations experienced intense hostility together with great fear of retaliation if they expressed it. They felt that they would be precipitated into great danger if the hostility which they inhibited precariously and with great effort were to break through. This, then, was the explosion which they dreaded, the image of which became projected on the outer world. The danger of

bombs exploding thus seemed imminent to them though it did not to others in the same external circumstances.⁵ Similar factors operate to produce more than ordinary alarm in imminent danger situations. Thus the rare air-raid phobias observed in London during the last war appeared to be related to unconscious fantasies which were stimulated by the falling bombs.⁶

Comparing those who are fearful and those who are unworried about remote threats, we could advance the hypothesis that both construe the external world on the model of their internal emotional situations. The individual who fears that he may not be able to control his own destructive impulses anticipates on the basis of projection that explosive forces in the external world may break through restraining bonds. Conversely, those who remained unworried about the hazards of the atomic bomb frequently expressed confidence that their government would find a way to counteract its destructive force. The counterpart in terms of internal dynamics would be that in these subjects hostile impulses are sufficiently under the control of ego and super-ego that they do not fear being carried away by involuntary outbursts. Thus, in relation to remote threats, we may say that those who are relatively free from inner strain will not be likely to worry about them, and such worry when it occurs will usually indicate some emotional disturbance. This is not to say that everyone with emotional difficulties worries about possible world catastrophes. There are so many other things that the neurotic may worry about, which may even make him quite indifferent to, say, the dangers of bombing even when they are immediately present. In other morbid conditions there is a pervasive absence of emotion. We must distinguish between the lack of worry which is a manifestation of such an affectless state and that which derives from emotional well-being. And we should note that it is only in certain kinds of emotional disturbances, as yet not sufficiently delimited, that anxiety about world cataclysms becomes prominent.

There are many motives which may contribute to vivid