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The Psychosocial Impact of Environmental Disasters

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As Dr. Ayres mentioned, I was summoned on rather short notice and I accepted the invitation mainly because I think as many people as possible should learn about the psychosocial effects of disasters such as happened at Times Beach and several sites in eastern Missouri. I want to give you one disclaimer first of all, and that is that I am not a professional counselor. My credential is that I have been a pastoral presence at the Times Beach area and we are starting to work now with Castlewood, Minker-Stout and other areas. I have been, in effect, working with the people there since June of 1983. What you are hearing, then, is not so much hard scientific data as impressions and, hopefully, some insights.

The unique thing about Times Beach is that the people there experienced, in a period of 18 days, two very different kinds of disasters. The first one is what we call a natural disaster. In old insurance policies they were referred to as "Acts of God." The second kind of disaster that they experienced 18 days later was what we refer to as a man-made, or a person-made, disaster. We need to keep those distinctions in mind. We are going to emphasize the impact primarily of man-made disasters.

I would like to center my remarks around five factors that we have noticed at work in the situation. They are 1) responsibility for the disaster, 2) assistance that is offered, 3) trying to make sense out of what happened, 4) the visibility of the disaster and 5) the recovery process. As far as responsibility is concerned, in a natural disaster no human being is usually held responsible for what happened. Everybody agrees that God did it, or else it just happened; it was a matter of fate. In a man-made disaster someone is responsible, and a great deal of energy is spent trying to determine culpability. The victim spends a lot of energy that could be used to recuperate determining who is responsible for what happened. It is an attempt to receive just compensation and to somehow try to make sense of the situation. If you can find who did it, it just makes it pull together a little bit; so responsibility goes from the individual, in this case the hauler, to industry, to government. Each party in the chain denies or does not feel the responsibility and more energy is required of the victim as one goes up or down the ladder, as the case may be.

Legal procedings will not allow the victim to unite with other victims and speak out about what he or she really feels because of legal advice. The community, and when I say community I am referring to the non-victim community, the setting in which the people who have been involved in the disaster and are feeling results, is also aware that someone is responsible and that tends to make the situation less clear cut than if it is a natural disaster. It makes it more difficult to identify with the victims as readily because of mixed feelings about culpability and self-interest involved with responsible parties.

It is interesting to see people move from non-involved to involved. There may someone be at the site whose property was not contaminated who is somewhat sympathetic with what is going on, but yet removed; all of a sudden they try to get a loan and find that they are redlined because of their proximity to a contaminated site. Immediately, their perspective changes as to who is responsible for this.

What is the difference between a neighbor whose house is struck by lightning and burns and is seen standing out in the cold in the middle of the night and a neighbor who just got a letter from the government stating that their deed will be marked contaminated and all property values will then be lost because their home, their land, is contaminated? People react differently in one situation to the victim than they do in the other situation. There is the same amount of loss involved to the victim in either case, but the victim is receiving different responses from the community depending on whether it is a natural "blame it on God" type disaster or a man-made disaster.

In the area of assistance to people who are affected in environmental disasters, when there are natural causes acts of charity and assistance are generally viewed as good and helpful and appropriate by both the victim and the surrounding community. Often, in a man-made disaster, the same acts are viewed ambivalently by both because, again, of the factor of culpability.

The victim needs as much or more help as the victim of a natural disaster. There is a great grieving process going on. People are grieving the loss of neighbors. There has been relocation. New addresses for their friends and neighbors is privileged information and cannot be gained by anybody. The community is immediately dispersed. Children want to know where their old friends are and cannot find out. There is grieving for the community's way of life, the way it used to be. People are feeling, "We'll never find another Times Beach," and looking back at the good in that community way of life which stands out in bolder relief than when they were in it. It is almost a ghetto mentality in a good sense -- "our community, our way of life is lost forever."

There is grieving for possessions, and not just for their monetary value. One woman just could not get over the loss of her throw rugs. She had three or four different sets of throw rugs that were lost. Throughout the years she had changed these rugs in her house, and she

looked forward every season to changing the throw rugs. It affected her view of her home and her life, and those were lost in the flood. I was in a trailer day before yesterday in Times Beach and the Christmas tree was still standing from last year. Wedding pictures are gone. Possessions mean an awful lot, and the grieving is not just monetary, it is also part of you and the community and your way of life.

You grieve over your lost sense of dignity. Perhaps your house had been paid for and you had worked all your life to get that house paid for, and now you have to start again. Now someone else will tell you how much that house was worth and, in effect, how much you are worth. Your niche in the community is gone. You do not know how you fit in anymore in your relocation site.

Grieving is also over financial security. A man lost, or was in danger of losing, his job because if he lived within 25 miles of the home office he got a car. He was relocated 28 miles from the home office; he lost his car. Business income is lost. Savings are used to help friends who are in trouble and to supplement payments being given if they are not adequate.

Above all, there is grieving for loss of freedom. You are in a victim stance. Someone is always giving to you. Someone is always trying to save you. You cannot paint the wall on your house or put up a picture, because the house is not yours. Your elected leaders are dealing with other authorities. You do not control your government as much as you did before. You have very little decision making power and you are being forced to make big decisions -- decisions on relocation, schooling, homes, furniture, legal proceedings -- at a time when it is difficult to make any decisions at all. The question, in effect, that we get asked a lot is "Am I reacting rationally to these situations? How am I doing under all of this pressure in making decisions?"

The result of all this grieving is ambivalence about the assistance being given. It is in the face of the surrounding community's ambivalence about whether assistance is really out-and-out aid or compensation for injustice that has been done. The victim feels that he or she deserves the assistance because he or she has been wronged. Some of the assistance is being offered by people who, in the victim's view, are tinged with responsibility for the disaster in the fist place.

At the same time, the victim is ambivalent about voicing concerns regarding the assistance. Your own future assistance may be threatened if you raise a concern. Your neighbors may be threatened. You are feeling at the same time truly grateful for the good help that is being given you, and still you are feeling not fully compensated for the wrong that has been done.

In the area of assistance, the surrounding community feels no consensus about who is responsible and that affects the community's desire to assist and the amount of assistance that should be given.

The community does not feel what the victim feels. The community sees this as a grant or something given, whereas the victim may view it as just compensation. To give assistance may be construed as admitting liability; to identify with the victim might mean to be identified as against someone or an agency or a company which can have repercussions for you.

The community surrounding the area that has been affected gets tired of public requests for assistance. Residents are asked not to speak out anymore about dioxin at meetings. A talk show on the radio described it as "showboating" when Times Beach residents went to the microphones at a public meeting. The longer the results of the disaster go on the more tired the community becomes of hearing about it and of being asked to offer assistance; that is, unless they begin to see that they are somehow involved and they themselves may be victims someday of the same kind of problem.

The third factor is how do people view making any sense of, or we would say integrating, this experience? When it can be viewed as a natural disaster or an act of God, the Divine Being is viewed as having somehow a benevolent purpose in mind and letting this happen. If that is not the issue, then it is "the fates" -- it just happened; that is the way it is, and you accept it and move on.

In a man-made disaster, the way it happened is viewed as a malevolent type of thing. It is the difference between going to the doctor and getting cut for your own good, which you can accept and welcome, or getting brutalized in the park, which does not make sense. The victim wants to make sense out of it. Why did this happen? How did it happen? We hear a lot of rationalizations; perhaps somehow it was a Communist plot. Perhaps some public agency was in cahoots with somebody and needed the land. Another common rationalization is guilt. Was our community doing something? I had a man tell me it was God's getting back at people for problems that were there before the flood. That is not a comfortable feeling, but at least it makes sense out of what happened.

It is hard to find a good purpose at work in a man-made disaster, identify with that purpose and, by identifying with it, integrate it into your life and move on from there. You cannot accept it as "it just happened" because somebody, you are not sure who, made it happen or let it happen, and you are not sure exactly how it happened. That affects the trust level. It starts low, as rehabilitation begins, and it gets lower as it goes along. People who may have been involved in the problem in the first place now say they want to help. There are feelings of betrayal that agencies that may have been seen as protective somehow let this happen, a great deal of suspicion that self-interest is being served by offers of aid.

The surrounding community, as far as making sense out of it, usually comes into the situation, or becomes acutely aware of it, at the point where remedial actions are beginning, and they see these offers of help as well-intentioned and adequate. The community wishes the victims would be more accepting; it cannot quite under-

stand the lack of trust. The victims' lack of acceptance keeps the situation kind of in a nonsense light. It cannot be finished for the community. The community has a need to feel that justice will be done in the situation, so the community may work to impose its own sense on the situation. More than in a natural disaster, the community begins to wonder if victims did not somehow deserve the disaster in the first place and perhaps might now, to some degree, be exploiting it. This is all an attempt to make sense out of the event so it can be integrated and life can continue.

The fourth factor is visibility. In a natural disaster, the results are usually visible. You can see the flood waters from Highway 44 as you drive past. You can see the overturned houses. In a man-made disaster, results are usually less visible. If the victims cannot see it, they begin "seeing it" everywhere. As you lie in your bed at three o'clock in the morning thinking back on all the times your children were exposed to the dirt in your yard where the grass was rubbed clean from the top of the soil underneath their swing set, you begin to wonder if the very pillow on which your head is lying is not also contaminated. A mother told us about going out and mowing the grass because she will not let her teen-age son go out and do it anymore. She would rather accept the exposure than let the son do it. Everything in the medical history becomes connected somehow to the potential exposure to the chemical. You begin to look more seriously for problems in your children. It seems to be that we worry more about our children than we do about ourselves -- similar to "It's okay if I smoke, but I sure hope my son or daugher doesn't." People seem willing to accept more exposure for themselves than they will accept for their children.

When there is little visibility of what is going on there are few criteria for assessing the damage. You do not have the criteria, and you are not quite sure anybody else does. Thus, there are no criteria to assess how you are doing on the recovery. There is a nagging question about the future. You discount the words of experts because you are quite sure no one can speak with certainty. Attempts at premature certainty are particularly distasteful. Love Canal comes to mind, five years of extremely expensive long-term health studies which are now being called inaccurate. The greatest desire is for a reliable health study but often experts cannot clearly define the problem. Is it just dioxin? Or is it dioxin in combination with other contaminants? What happens to dioxin in the water? in the air? in the soil? What are the real and what are the imagined health problems? How do finances play in? What are the psychological effects? What are the legal effects?

Because we have difficulty defining the problem, we have trouble coming up with answers. Answers lie in the future. Attempts are made to provide hasty and ephemeral solutions. Sometimes they are motivated by fear of publicity, fear of legal proceedings or fear of political repercussions. Good intentions become frustrated for lack of reliable means of implementation of the plans. The request for help we hear most often from the people is "Pray for us." People who

come with more practical offers of help sometimes leave frustrated and angry.

Also related to visibility, as far as the community is concerned, is fear of contamination. If it can't be seen, who knows where it may be? A Times Beach resident walked into a restaurant and was identified as having been seen on television as from Times Beach and the restaurant cleared. Children are isolated in school. Laundries will not do your wash. Property values are affected in the neighboring communities.

Finally, the recovery process is a factor. In a natural disaster, precedents are available. In a man-made disaster there are few precedents. Precedents are being established now. The victim knows in a natural disaster some of the procedures having to do with health, medicine, insurance, legal proceedings, government assistance; or at least he knows that somebody else knows what the precedents and procedures are. In a man-made disaster the individual suffers just as much but the unknown adds to the suffering. Not only does he victim not know, but he knows that nobody else knows what the answers are in this situation. Victims are dealing with ever-changing scenarios for recovery -- relocation, clean-up, storage, temporary relocation, vacuuming, covering with oil. They are told that these are probably interim solutions, or worse perhaps, experimental -- experimenting with the individual's health, family, home, land, possessions and community. Sometimes the reaction is to make your own personal solutions. Sometimes it is immobility; you build your own reality to prove that you do not have to move. Or you build your own personal plan against all suggestions -- run away; do not accept aid of any sort.

The process for recovery seems interminable. As solutions change, the people implementing them try to catch up. A man sitting in my office made six phone calls to two different agencies to find out where a document was, just kept bouncing back and forth between the two agencies. You have to learn the new alphabet soup, all the acronyms of all the agencies. You are dealing with changing personnel, unknown personnel and cryptic processes. Rules are applied that did not envision the situation as it now stands, sometimes "Catch 22" type rules. You are relocated outside a certain area and your children can no longer go to school where they used to, but you still must pay taxes there.

The community which surrounds the situation as far as recovery is concerned, and by community I mean those taking responsibility for trying to help, is keenly aware that it is setting precedents. It is buffetted by pressures from all sides, from above, from the victims, from lack of sure knowledge and data; and so, wisely, it tries to move slowly. Right now there are 67 people out of the 800 families who were forced to leave Times Beach who have gotten their settlements -- 67 out of 800 after a year. There are attempts to overlook the individual as a person, to overlook the individual site, to overlook emotions, to overlook the need for information; there are feelings that the victim is being unreasonable because the victim

cannot see the whole picture, the national picture, and how this fits in and how it is setting precedents. Oftentimes the people working with them are not natives, perhaps do not understand everything that has gone into the way people are reacting. Perhaps the victim does not understand sometimes how hard the administrators are working to help. For both victim and the community trying to deal with the disaster, the ultimate procedural question comes down to: Who will pay the price for dealing with the risk of the unknown?

If you will permit me just a couple of impressions in conclusion. The danger most involved in this situation is that of characterization, of viewing the victims as either good guys, super resilient heros, or viewing them as bad guys who are getting part of what they brought on themselves. The psychosocial impact is the same as that in any other community: strained family relationships, financial problems, chemical problems, stress-related sickeness, spiritual problems, career and job problems. People are reacting like any other community would that is being aggravated by the stress of the situation, reacting like you and I would given the same factors. One does not know when the impact of what happened is really going to hit. I suspect it will be more in the near future when there is time to finally sit back and mull over what happened and to think about it more. There is, in my opinion, a crying need for a humanitarian approach, a concerned presence as opposed to studying them, publicizing them, converting them, organizing them, administering them, convincing them or diagnosing them. Our staff at the Ecumenical Task Force is often amazed and embarrassed by the gratitude that is expressed by the people, because we are not sure how we are helping. The reason probably is that the most urgent need is for people to walk alongside the victims as they try to deal with uncertainty.