Responses of Survivors to Man-made Catastrophes

Summary of the plenary speech by

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At the start I want to take my subject in a very special direction. I want to take up the Hiroshima experience as my model for survivor responses, for several reasons. It is central to my own work and life. More important, it has been an important basis for our understanding of survivors in general. In my own work, when I eventually wrote my book on the Hiroshima disaster, I developed a section at the end about survivors. I compared those survivors with the survivors of the European holocaust, and raised general principles for all survivors. I reckon that is in the psychiatric tradition of studying extreme situations to illuminate less extreme situations. Lastly, the spectre of nuclear holocaust haunts us as a backdrop to all lesser violence.

In interviews with survivors from both Hiroshima and Auschwitz I have found a sense that there are no words to give form to their overwhelming experience. Yet form and meaning must be given; it is a psychological necessity.

I detect a growing sense of inevitability of nuclear disaster, certainly in the United States. I answer that by looking back at Hiroshima, not as past history, but as a source of wisdom for our present dilemmas.

I arrived in Hiroshima in 1962 to gain some quick impressions, and I immediately discovered that after 17 years no one had made a systematic study of the psychological, social or broadly human effects of the tragedy. I have found since, in general, that the more huge and threatening the human disaster, the less likely it is to be studied. Why? These topics are very painful to the investigator. Also all of one's spiritual and intellectual assumptions and moral priorities become questioned in studying these big disasters; we are reluctant to do such questioning. If we do stay and confront these things, there are great opportunities for much-needed intellectual and professional breakthroughs.

FOUR PHASES

I studied two groups of survivors: one group consisted of certain community leaders; the others were randomly chosen from survivor lists. From both groups I found amazingly vivid recollections years later, divided more or less into four phases. I call the first an immersion in death. It was a sudden and permanent shift from normal existence to this overwhelming immersion in death. It embraced the idea of everyone dying, the whole world dying. Normally psychiatrists associate these feelings with serious psychopathology, but here they understandably came from an externally imposed situation.

The second phase was associated with what I call invisible contamination. Many people did experience all sorts of strange and grotesque physical symptoms within days or weeks. These were, of course, acute radiation effects, but as all this was quite new, some dreadful epidemic was feared. The fears involved not only the deaths of survivors, but plant life—nature drying up at its source.

The third phase began some years later with the discovery of an increased incidence of forms of leukaemia, and eventually other forms of cancer. The final returns of these studies are still not in, and there is concern about the next generations. Studies of the second generation are negative, but the potential transmission of radiation is endless, and so is the fear.

The fourth phase is a lifelong sense of identification with the dead. Survivors often consider themselves as if dead. They also experienced significant discrimination in crucial areas like marriage and jobs—a second victimisation. Underneath the overt reasons for discrimination was an aversive sense—they were reminders of something dreadful which people did not want to be reminded of.

HIROSHIMA THEMES

I reckon there are three central themes peculiar to Hiroshima, and rather different from other forms of lesser violence. The first is the totality of destruction: one bomb, one plane, one city. The second is the unending lethal influence characteristic of radiation effects, and described above. The third has to do with the sense of having been victimised by this ultimate weapon.

Hiroshima does, however, serve us by contrast. Some say the beautiful modern city there now proves you can fight a nuclear war and then rebuild. That is wrong. Hiroshima could only be rebuilt because there was an outside world to bring food, medical care, and eventually every human energy. We cannot count on the existence of such an outside world any more.

Hiroshima's struggles over commemoration have messages for us. Especially there were arguments over restoring or replacing the "atomic dome", a reinforced concrete building which survived in skeleton form. Some said it was painful to keep it; others said keep it as a lesson. They decided to do neither, but let it crumble naturally. Eventually the problem solved itself, as it became dwarfed by a skyscraper next door.

There are also difficulties in finding an acceptable level of commemoration on the anniversary, because it coincides with a traditional summer festival when the dead are welcomed back in a celebratory atmosphere.

One survivor's predominant impression was of nothingness, of looking down on the city, and seeing it no longer existed. He suggested the authorities find the exact hypo-centre, and leave nothing there. On 6th August he said everything should be closed, and the city once more a city of the dead—both ideas symbolising a truth about the atomic experience.

At Auschwitz I noticed similar evocations of emptiness—a room full of shoes, and another room full

of suitcases. One struggles to do the work of imagining the missing people. There are parallels in acts of lesser violence.

I turn now to themes that are common to survivors of every kind of death immersion. I use as examples Hiroshima, the Nazi death camps, the Vietnam War, and a small flash-flood disaster at Buffalo Creek in 1982, whose cause was like that of Aberfan.

THE DEATH IMPRINT

I call the first common principle in this disaster work the death imprint, the indelible image of the death encounter, which condenses the entire experience, and may include many cruel details. Though the disasters are different in scale and dimension, this phenomenon is common to victims of them all. Survivors may feel stuck, unable to absorb that imagery or move beyond it. The nature of the deaths is of great importance, and so is their own death fear, even encompassing the environment. These indelible memories have also potential for survivor wisdom and creative energy, however.

DEATH GUILT

The questioning along the lines "Why did he or she die, and I survived?" is sometimes called *survivor guilt.* It can produce severe self-condemnation, and the sense that if I had died, he or she might have survived. It could have had a rational basis in the selections at the Nazi death camps, but most often does not. The feeling was most strongly present at Hiroshima. I call it *paradoxical guilt,* which is sometimes felt more by victims than by the actual perpetrators. This psychological guilt is quite different from moral guilt, which works in opposite ways. I found this residual numbed guilt very strong in Vietnam veterans who had merely witnessed or failed to stop atrocities, or had a buddy shot down near them. This guilt is so very strong because our society has never taken corporate responsibility for the war, but prefers to place it on the veterans' shoulders.

I have come to distinguish animating forms of guilt from static guilt. Animating guilt can be a spur to self-examination, and then the guilt can move towards the anxiety of responsibility. This happened in an impressive way with many Vietnam veterans. Static or numbed guilt, however, keeps one bound to the experience, and one cannot move on positively. I think the helping professions can assist people to move from static to animating guilt, and then from guilt to responsibility and some behaviour which alleviates the guilt. Freud described the great residue of guilt, which we acquire, as a source of great danger to our survival, but he also understood some guilt is necessary as a cement to society. I find the very absence of guilt produced by technological distancing from the effects of our weapons equally threatening. So no emotion is always bad or always good. The important thing is its relationship to the rest of our life.

Extreme helplessness contributes greatly to both residual guilt and residual anxiety. It makes us run through the bad events again and again, trying to do the thing one was unable to do earlier.

PSYCHIC NUMBING

In Hiroshima survivors repeatedly said that although they had seen death on a massive scale, they suddenly ceased to feel. This psychic numbing turns out to be perhaps the most fundamental approach to disaster, with a biological origin in the freezing of animals faced with great danger. It is a useful defence mechanism, in the short term, enabling people to preserve their sanity in the most extreme situations, but the effects continue afterwards to produce apathy, withdrawal, depression and even despair. The most extreme example of numbing might be the *Musselmänner,* those in Auschwitz who were so numbed that they were robot-like, living dead. There is a need for some numbing, to manage psychologically, but too much prevents movement towards long-term survival.

Numbing includes the classic psychological defence mechanisms of repression, denial, isolation, etc. It remains an issue for caregivers who are equally capable of it, because most of the healing professions are reluctant to come to terms with traumatic experience in general. We don't take into account that severe adult trauma is of the greatest importance, occurs all the time and is central to human existence. All the more so in extreme situations or for survivors of death immersion. Psychosomatic illness also very frequently occurs. One can take the body pathway when there is no way to express emotion.

SUSPICION OF OUTSIDE HELP

You will often recall widows and widowers suspicious and resentful of help, because it reminds them of their weakness. The world seems to have been inverted, morally, or a counterfeit one substituted, without justice or humanity. With Hiroshima there was much anger, but great difficulty with where to put it.

A man-made holocaust, as opposed to an Act of God or nature, produces a sense of being demeaned, being less than human. Obviously in Nazi death camps, but also in Buffalo Creek, that was true. There is evidence emerging that symptoms of survivors of man-made disasters are likely to be more severe and last longer. This is intensified where acts of violence, and especially direct acts of violence, are concerned. One was not protected against the demeaning effect.

QUEST FOR MEANING

Scientists are reluctant to talk about meaning: it does not sound scientific. But you cannot understand disasters of any kind without considering the need to give meaning and inner form to the experience, and to life thereafter. Survivors of Nazi death camps seek evidence that criminal acts are punished, so they can see themselves in an ordered moral universe again. There can also be a strong impulse to bear witness to the dead in some project, to create something from otherwise horrific situations, or to continue someone's work. Nazi camp survivors had such motives in creating the State of Israel. Parents of children who died of leukaemia may equally find some meaning in promoting leukaemia research.

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adaptation is extremely difficult when things happen so fast, so absolutely, and in such an extreme fashion. Especially when there is no corpse or grave, the rituals of mourning can be difficult or impossible. There are broadly two alternatives for the survivor. He can stay numb and never recover properly. At the other end he can achieve meaning and even illumination. Most end up somewhere between the two.

Some "prophetic survivors" can bring forth knowledge of special value. There have been some Vietnam veterans, some death camp survivors and some American physicists who have brought out truths with a view to preventing the experience recurring. The work of Vietnam veterans has had much influence on subsequent United States' policy.

THE HEALING PROFESSIONS

Many veterans moved away from the veterans' hospitals to unofficial groups, and expressed great anger and irony against "Chaplains and Shrinks". We discovered that previously when they had felt great anxiety and fear and also moral revulsion, and had consulted either a chaplain or a psychiatrist, they had been encouraged to go back and persist in the daily atrocities. Here was the spiritual authority in one's society undermining one's last vestiges of decency. This led me to question the whole concept of the professional. In medieval times we had the idea of a profession of faith. Now we have the idea of a body of skills. I suggest we have lost some of our values. We think that because we belong to a healing profession, anything we do is perforce good. I think we need a model in respect of advocacy for, and detachment from, such issues. Sufficient detachment, yes, to apply our technical knowledge, but with awareness of what we stand for being in the forefront rather than being bootlegged in; it is not unscientific to have such moral advocacy. We have a series of moral struggles as great as have those who fight or are involved in wars.

So we study man-made disasters and survivors of violent events, not only to understand and offer help to those survivors, but to counter the violence itself, to contribute to the prevention and repetition of these destructive events, and especially the ultimate violence of the nuclear end.

Modern Man Facing Death

Summary of the plenary speech by

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh

As an emigrant from Russia, a soldier, a French resistance worker, a doctor and a priest I have been in contact with death and violence all my life. For most Western people life is now safe within limits of which I had no notion when I was a child.

I find a strange inconsistency in modern man's attitude to violence. We show great indifference to the destiny of the victim; all our interest is concentrated on the fate and psychological situation of the culprit. The punishment of the aggressor, whether it is a collective aggressor or an individual one, frightens the majority of people. We have lost the sense that a judge is both more or less than human, more because he has a divine right to judge and condemn, and he has not the human right to give way to his natural compassion. Violence and aggressiveness are not resolved by these attitudes to death and violence. When we respond to the possibility or fact of violence with anger and hatred and fear, we only increase the violence, and create an atmosphere where some will enact the violence we feel within ourselves.

I find the fear of dying and of death all the time among Western people, but less among Russians who have suffered a great deal, yet face it calmly as one of the events of life. In schools we should have education for this, rather than so much sex education. There is a sort of craven turning away from death. It results not in an intensity of life, but a hunger for survival at all costs, for many a survival without meaning, and at the cost of quality of life. I feel many people could face both violence and death if they knew more clearly what they stood for. They would then be prepared to pay the cost. If we were prepared to take moral responsibility more clearly in this way, we should be able to identify, in all situations, what we are called to do.

Unfortunately in normal life twilight or patches of darkness are more frequent than moments of pure and perfect light. Often I will realise that I cannot altogether be what I want to be, or should be. There are limitations placed on me by my society, my education, my intellect, my willpower, and everything that I am.

There are, however, ways in which we can retain personal integrity even if the general cause, the war perhaps, seems to be wrong. Instead of looking at things at a level beyond us, we can look at them at our own level, where we can act responsibly. In war, for instance, we can focus on solidarity with comrades. The cost can still be high, sometimes life itself. Occasionally life itself is more costly even than death, and eventual death may be a release.

So an ideal can sustain someone in the face of great suffering. Even if the ideal itself is ugly or wrong, we should not insist on its error.

What of faith and real atheism? St. Paul spoke of being "separated from the God whom I love" while he lived. In this spirit there are examples where violent death is actually an expression of love. I reckon most of those who call themselves atheists are actually agnostics. Many say they reckon there is nothing after death. If you talk with them in more detail, you discover they are terrified of a void after death, an experience of not being, which is a logical absurdity.

One of my friends came back, miraculously, after four years in Auschwitz. I asked him what he brought back from his time there. He said "I see with horror how unreal life is around us, how trivial, how empty, how meaningless the life of people is in freedom". Also he said "I have lost my peace". By this he meant that as long as he was a victim of all the brutality and in danger of death he could ask God to forgive his tormentors. Now he was free, and wondered whether God still hears prayers that are only sustained by the memory of suffering.

As long as the victim thinks in terms of revenge, and hatred is not

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