

IN THE SPIRIT OF WILLIAM JAMES:
REFLECTIONS ON LEAGUE OF RED CROSS SOCIETIES EXPERIENCE
OF EARTHQUAKES

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Conferences such as this often find it useful to have a symbolic standard-bearer, some pioneer in the field. Let me suggest William James, the American philosopher-psychologist who always stressed the need to see experience for what it was, and to keep on learning from it--also the man who lived through the April 18, 1906 earthquake that devastated San Francisco, California, and who reacted to it by studying the reactions of disaster victims.

James was a visiting professor at Stanford Univeristy in Palo Alto, California, about fifty miles south of San Francisco, at the time of the earthquake. He was awakened at about five in the morning by an ear-splitting noise and the trembling of the earth: as he lay in his bed with the world roaring and shaking all around him, he felt--he wrote in a letter soon after the event, and then in an essay first published in a magazine for boys and finally reprinted in his book, *Memories and Studies*--as if something had picked up his house and was shaking it "as a terrier shakes a rat". James recorded his deep awe at the overwhelming power that had suddenly been let loose, and his feeling of frightened exhilaration: "Go it!" he said he wanted to yell, "and go it stronger!"

In spite of the serious heart condition that was to kill him two years later, this man of genius who must certainly stand as one of the finest scientific observers of all time, decided to go see for himself what effect the earthquake had had on the people of San Francisco. James managed to get on the only train up to San Francisco on the day of the disaster, and to return on the only one coming back the same evening.

He spent the day walking through a city just devastated, his sensitive eyes watching the often stunned but seldom panicky reactions of those whose lives had been thrown into disorder. He saw the huddling-together of people whose common bond is that they have lived through a catastrophe, watched them as they immediately set about rebuilding their lives, even while the city was still in flames. He did not leave us his observations of the primitive disaster relief operation that began almost at once, or attempt to follow up his own observations by starting a long-