

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-

term study on the psychological aftereffects of the earthquake. All that would come later, in eras of greater sophistication.

Between the lines of what James wrote about his experiences, the reader can pick up his sense of pioneering. There was little precedent for a visit by a trained scientific observer to the scene of a disaster--so little precedent, in fact, that in the early stages it fell to such disaster relief organizations as the League of Red Cross Societies to serve as the instrument for gathering and evaluating a great deal of the information we now possess about the social and economic aspects of earthquakes. Though in the half century since its foundation the League has conducted relief operations following many kinds of disaster, earthquakes have always played an important part in its work. In just the last six years, sixteen of the League's most prolonged and expensive actions have been launched in response to severely destructive tremors in Afghanistan, Algeria, the Azores, China, Greece, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, the Philippines, Romania, Turkey and Yugoslavia. As you well know, some of these countries have been struck more than once by earthquakes during the last six years. Moreover, as one of the first organizations to urge advance planning for the quickest and most effective response to the disasters we hope will never come, the League has learned a great deal about mitigating the impact of earthquakes.

In what follows, I want to offer some apparent constants that the League has been able to distill from a half century of disaster relief experience; I am setting these remarks forward in the spirit of William James, not as final truths, but simply as the best we have been able to do so far.

A word about the League role in any disaster will be helpful in setting the stage. The League of Red Cross Societies is the umbrella organization for the world's national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies--126 of them at present. As their description implies, these Societies operate on a national level, each responsible for providing services within its country's borders. When disaster strikes, a Society may conclude that it lacks resources and must appeal for them outside its own national boundaries; that Society then asks the League for support, and we coordinate the influx of money, supplies and expert personnel from other national Societies--and, on occasion, from other governmental and non-governmental organizations as well. The League always works through its national Society members, always from the inside out, rather than from the outside in.

The primary disaster relief responsibility lies with the national government of an affected country. Often, however, the Red Cross can begin disaster relief action before anyone else--a point that holds as true of the League as of its members. Such speed is possible because the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement has endeavored to achieve administrative streamlining, and because it can operate without reference to politics or ideology.

Generally the League's disaster relief role is confined to the emergency period following a disaster. This role is geared to supporting its member Societies as they work to meet immediate emergency needs--often assisted, as I mentioned earlier, by support from other agencies. As the emergency phase comes to an end, the League usually phases out its operation.

This quick summary needs two major qualifications. First, there is a growing trend toward League involvement in the post-emergency recovery phase. For example, the League coordinated rebuilding of Red Cross of Yugoslavia physical facilities in certain areas following the 1979 earthquake there, and after the 1976 Guatemala earthquake assisted in providing new homes for victims most in need. Second, as pointed out earlier, the League was among the first to urge pre-planning, and its involvement in this field is expanding very rapidly.

Its general involvement with disaster situations has enabled the League to sort out certain features that are peculiar to post-earthquake situations, or at least more prominent in them. William James, you will remember, felt that he was undergoing a very special experience. Others have felt the same: earthquakes have so special a power to move and impress that they have almost developed a mystique, and their occurrence provokes great outpourings of public generosity. Unfortunately, this generosity often leads to pressure on contributing countries to send more aid than is needed or, just as often, inappropriate aid. This kind of response creates problems--if nothing else, it blatantly fails to respect the sovereignty of the affected country and the authority of national officials in charge of the overall relief action. In addition, existing channels become clogged with unneeded and--as we will see in more detail shortly--sometimes even harmful assistance or material.

The solution to this difficulty, I want to stress, is not to set up yet another agency to do the coordinating. Given the many organizations already at work, and the difficulties many of them have in surviving under present economic conditions, nothing would be gained by creating another one unless we have some imperative reason to do so. The solution, rather, is to work for more effective coordination and cooperation among the agencies now working in the disaster relief field.

The dramatic quality of earthquakes also--all too frequently--provokes a criticism that people with disaster relief experience find strange and unfair. With the attention of every television viewer, radio listener and newspaper reader riveted on an earthquake area within hours after the first major tremor, the same public that is moved to massive response is also moved to impatience. We often hear criticism because there is confusion at the scene and because, with communication out or curtailed, it is neither quick nor easy to find out the full extent of the damage, the casualties, or even the exact extent of the affected area. Although such criticism is probably inevitable in the excitement of the moment, it rests on the mistake of confusing an event with its effects. The dead, the stunned and confused survivors, the lack of communication, the disruption of public utilities, the shortage of food and medical supplies--all those things and more combined are the disaster. It is only a convenient ellipsis to say that an earthquake is a disaster--in strict accuracy, the earthquake causes the disaster. Praise or blame should be given out to relief organizations on the basis of speed and effectiveness with which a relief operation is instrumental in helping restore order.

Another special feature associated with earthquakes is the relative shortness of the emergency period immediately following the event. It is perhaps for this reason that after most earthquakes, existing medical facilities can usually cope with the increased demand, though they may need additional supplies.

Also, as William James noticed in San Francisco, there is not much panic in the aftermath of an earthquake. What there is--and James was surely among the first scientifically trained observers to draw attention to this fact--is psychological shock. The sooner a victim shakes this effect off, the better for his or her long-range psychological health. Therefore, it is extremely important to involve the victims in their own recovery efforts, and aid is patterned accordingly.

More problems lie here than are at first obvious. The donor in an industrialized nation wanting to send assistance will often send what he himself would want to receive. It does not strike most people that supplies appropriate to say, a Yugoslavian earthquake victim, might be unappealing or even religiously forbidden from the viewpoint of a victim in Afghanistan. Worse, some forms of food and medical aid create long-range expectation that cannot be sustained, or that will eventually require resources unavailable to a given population. In the most extreme cases, the wrong aid can do more damage to economic and social patterns than the disaster itself. Every effort should be made to make prospective donors aware of these problems, and the League has tried to do its share in heightening government, agency and general public awareness; but the problem persists, and may well persist for a long, long time.

While I am far from having said everything about emergency aid and post-emergency phase recovery that could be said, limited space obliges me to move on to a concluding word about planning to mitigate the impact of seismic incidents when they do occur. The most useful point I think I can make is to stress the importance of accessible scientific knowledge. Neither the League nor anyone else can plan well unless they have a good idea of what they are planning for. Some factors--for example, the need for well-stocked, accessible supply depots, and a network of trained volunteers--obviously remain constant, but other elements require specific technical advice. In the case of earthquakes, someone with an idea of fault patterns can forecast probable damage and need--and this is only one example of dealing with perhaps the only remaining natural disaster of any frequency that we still do not know how to predict accurately.

Too often, the scientific community does not do enough to bring understandable information to the attention of the administrator and field worker who will do the work of planning. An article, buried in a hard-to-find journal, given a title that modestly conceals its true significance for planning, and couched in technical jargon, can be of no help toward alleviation of suffering. Information should be made available in a form useful to those who have the disaster planning responsibilities, and made available as soon as possible. You will recall that William James did not contribute his impressions of San Francisco to an academic journal: he wrote them out for a boys' magazine, to make what he had learned accessible to a very large audience at an age when curiosity and willingness to learn are at a very high pitch.

It would be appropriate to mention at this point that as part of its general pre-planning work, the League is now conducting a study to determine whether an international convention is needed to protect the rights of natural disaster victims--victims of conflict are already protected under the Geneva Conventions and their protocols.

I want to end up with the observation that most of these brief reflections will strike people as elementary if not obvious. Some of the lessons we have learned are so elementary that it has taken decades to learn them well, and others are so obvious they can hardly be repeated too often. The insights I have reported rest on the observations of disaster relief workers who have dealt over the years with problems of victims in countless earthquakes; these insights were formulated in the spirit of the same William James who once said that in writing a long and difficult book he had "forged every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts".

REFERENCES

James, William. Memories and Studies. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.. 1911.