

Facing disasters with faith — or without faith



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My daughter and I were pretty shaken by the 1989 shaker in San Francisco when over 50 people died and part of the Bay Bridge collapsed. We huddled in a doorway of our cheaply made apartment (built on landfill) and cried as the walls swayed and bookshelves fell. It was a scary 15 seconds.

I still remember scrambling under the desk in my suburban Seattle school the morning of the 1964 Alaskan earthquake — the one that moved the continent a fraction of an inch. Almost as scary as our nuclear attack drills.

Carol and I followed the fires in the Bay Area intently as some of our friends and colleagues evacuated their homes and watched neighborhoods burn to ashes. It was very emotional even from a distance.

Most of us have felt the fear of these tense moments. How many of us have faced natural disasters in one form or another? (Human-caused tragedy is another story).

In recent weeks we've seen an endless series of terrible natural events from hurricanes to earthquakes, floods and fires. A continual barrage of images and stories from Houston to Mexico, Puerto Rico to Northern California and far away centers of suffering.

Sometimes it seems we're members of the Disaster-a-Day club. Will it ever stop? We know it won't, as long as we're holding on for dear life to this rock spinning wildly through space.

I've been reflecting on the Four Elements and how they can seem at times to be out to get us. Air/Wind — hurricanes and tornadoes. Water — floods and tsunamis. Earth — quakes



Chris Highland's photo of Dry Creek Valley in Sonoma County, California, where wildfires have been burning for nearly two weeks. COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

and landslides. Fire — volcanoes and firestorms.

The ancient Greeks gave each element a name and a god. The Wind was the winged Eurus with Zephyr and friends controlling the Four Winds. Poseidon (Neptune to the Romans) handled all things Water, ruling the ocean. Earth was Gaia, the Mother of all material things. Fire was the realm and responsibility of Hephaestus (Vulcan to the Romans).

The word "dis-aster" originates in the Latin: "bad star," maybe related to our expressions "not in the stars," or even "under a dark cloud." "Somebody up there doesn't like us" might be a similar phrase.

We try to make sense out of destruction, especially faced with the awesome power of nature. For thousands of years we've attempted to put a human face on the elements so we can better

comprehend the incomprehensible. It can't simply be a natural thing, it has to be the work of a heavenly hand.

One rather odd thing about disastrous events is they, more than just about anything else, reveal our latent superstitious nature. We can almost predict responses that turn a natural event into a "lesson," a "test" or a "message" from the divine. Some go so far as to credit God when one person survives a calamity while others die.

We sometimes hear the claim that a weather or geologic event is some kind of judgment or punishment, usually directed toward unbelievers or other "unrighteous" people.

Ancient people were very superstitious, believing that "the gods" were angry or pleased, bringing peace or war, prosperity or ruin. It appears to me that at least part of the history of religion can be explained by appeasing

and pleasing the Powers so they won't be upset enough to throw lightning bolts.

Where does the responsibility lie with disasters? It depends on lots of things, but as I see it, blaming them on the forces of good or evil doesn't really help. It deflects the responsibility and disrespects nature itself.

Shoddy housing construction may lead to many deaths in an earthquake. Poor planning or building in a flood plain may have terrible consequences. But we can't blame some other someone somewhere. We may not understand, but that doesn't mean we can get away with claiming or blaming a god.

Awful and awesome things that happen to us and our world might serve to remind us of two things: We're not in control, and nature is greater (this is almost a "statement of faith" for me, and requires no belief). We are made of the four Elements so any one of them can help or harm us at any time. If we're honest with ourselves, we are only an infinitesimal part of nature.

For those who believe in God, disasters present a difficult dilemma chock full of questions: Why do terrible things happen? Why doesn't God stop them? Why aren't prayers answered for so many? What can we learn from the kindness and selflessness we see when disaster strikes?

Perhaps people with faith or without faith can find something to agree upon here. If we leave out the superstitions we can face adversity and the questions together.

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