

THE EARTHQUAKE PEOPLE - DEALING WITH NATURAL DISASTERS

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On a planet that is itself alive, safety is an illusion; psychology offers no solace in dealing with larger-than-human events.

To be a sudden and helpless participant in an event like last January's 6.8 Northridge quake in Los Angeles is to be suddenly and helplessly beyond the reach of everything one has ever been taught, every book one has ever read, every psychological theory--in short, beyond every normal human expectation.

Without warning in the dark there was the shaking, everything shuddering, shivering, the beds, the walls. There was the shock of being suddenly and absolutely awake, as awake as it is possible to be, with no residue of sleep. Many labeled this level of wakefulness "fright," but that was later, when speaking of it. In the moment, it was one's animal body in pure wakefulness. It was a lesson in how asleep we normally are with our eyes open.

In the same instant there was the sense of trying to see what we could not see in a dark room, a dark world, a world of trembling shadows. And it was not only the world that trembled, it was us--our bodies were both being shaken by the quake and shaking within, a double onslaught. Then to bolt from bed naked, stand in the doorway, shout to each other, we had to shout for there was a great sound. We were shaking and the walls were shaking, so this sound seemed to come as much from within as without. It was as though we were shouting over ourselves, through ourselves. Shouting each other's names. Your name is a strange and fragile thing to hear, even shouted, amid such sound.

Then came the surge. Walls that had been shaking now were jolting, the floor was bouncing, it was hard to stand up and everything was crashing. There was the sound of many things breaking, the sound of the walls as they strained, and beyond all this another sound, unthinkable, indescribable. It was the sound of the quake itself, a sound from deep in the earth.

Then the building stopped shaking but we didn't. This was also terribly strange, fumbling with our clothes in the dark amid broken glass, as though we'd forgotten how to get dressed.

From somewhere not far off there was a huge explosion. It sounded like (and turned out to be) a house falling down. Then we waited, outside, in the chill of early morning. But my body was colder than the dawn chill could account for--I was stone-cold with shock. We sat in the car, the heater going full blast, but I couldn't get warm. I could function, but I couldn't stop myself from freezing. And while we waited, it quaked some more. They call them "after-shocks," but it feels like, and is, more quakes. That morning they were very strong, rocking the car back and forth as though it were held in some great hand and were being toyed with.

GEOLOGY LESSONS

Did the writer of the Book of Revelation experience something similar? For it felt as if we'd gone to sleep in our world and had awakened in his. We'd gone to sleep in a world of shared assumptions--a world in which the most basic assumption is that if we work hard, stay focused, watch our diet, live decently, and try to be conscious of our feelings and our thoughts, we'll be all right. We'd "grow," as they say. We'd learn to be happy and whole.

But we'd awakened to a world in which all of that could be swept aside in an instant, and there was nothing we could do about it. But, unlike the vision of Revelation, in our cataclysm there was no one to blame. The media spoke of "victims" of the earthquake, but when there's no one to blame how can one be a victim? We hadn't been attacked, although we felt attacked; we had merely experienced a moment in the life of the planet, on the planet's own terms. It's not quite enough to feel the earthquake to adequately comprehend the psychology of earthquakes, and to assimilate the earthquake's lessons for our lives. We also need a bit of geology.

When I was a kid, there was a geology book that had maps of the North American continent as it had been through all the ages of the Earth. One eon there was a Florida, another eon there wasn't. At one time, according to that book, the Pacific came all the way in from Baja, cut around the Rockies and didn't stop till the Texas Panhandl. Sometimes there was a California, sometimes there wasn't. If you flipped the pages, you could watch the continent change just like a cloud in the wind.

A week or so after the Northridge quake, ther was a 5.5 temblor in Wyoming, and (on the same day) another 5 in Idaho. In fact they have many quakes in the Wyoming-Montana-Idaho area that usually go unreported nationally. They're part of

the geological process that is still forming that young mountain range called the Rockies--a process that includes the huge dome volcano we call Yellowstone National Park. The geysers there, like Old Faithful, are symptoms of that volcano. When you visit Yellowstone, you are on top of one of the biggest active volcanoes in the world. It hasn't erupted in recorded history, but that's no comfort. Recorded history goes back only 5000 years with any consistency; most volcanoes stay active for hundreds of thousands, even millions, of years. Our small bit of recorded history doesn't give us much to go on when we speak of volcanoes, fault lines, and the like. On February 5th, only about three weeks after Northridge, there was a 4.5 in Illinois, on the huge New Madrid fault that cuts across the American Midwest, a fault far bigger and potentially more dangerous than California's San Andreas. The hugest quake in North America happened not in California but on this New Madrid fault early in the 19th century, before the Midwest was heavily settled. It was so violent a quake that it made the Mississippi River flow backwards. It was felt as far away as Washington, D.C., with a shock powerful enough to ring the church bells there. A couple of decades before that, Virginia had a serious quake reported by Thomas Jefferson in his journals. Geologists say these areas could quake again at any time. I am not trying to frighten anyone. This is simply the behavior of the Earth we live on. Nothing is amiss. The planet lives. Living things move.

Or rather: what is very much amiss is not the planet but how we think about the planet. We expect it to stay put, and it has no intention of doing so. Which brings us to a little lesson in engineering. In the Northridge quake, as in the Bay Area quake of 1989, structures fell down that weren't suppose to fall down. It wasn't because anyone was especially negligent (although California spends more money on freeway landscaping than on freeway "retrofittin"--reinforcing); it was because we don't really know much about quakes, and we don't have the technology to cope with them.

FAULTY KNOWLEDGE

For instance, where the Interstate 5/Antelope Freeway interchange went down in Northridge, the road swayed 10 feet. it hadn't yet been retrofitted, but what if it had? The retrofitting planned for that freeway (construction was to start in a matter of weeks) was calculated for only a two- or three-foot sway. It wouldn't have saved the interchange. Even huge steel-framed office buildings that were thought to be

invulnerable to quakes sustained deep cracks in their supporting columns.

Northridge taught us that much of our knowledge of construction in quake zones is simply wrong.

Scientists don't even know where most of the fault lines are. Nobody knew the Northridge fault existed until it shook. Until very recently, nobody even knew that "buried thrust" faults like Northridge were much of a danger. They constitute what Caltech seismologist James Dolan calls "a whole seismic hazard that we didn't even appreciate until six years ago."

Nor does anyone yet understand the connection between various fault lines. Seismologists used to say, as a matter of course, that quakes near one another weren't connected. Now they're saying, as Tom Henyey of the Southern California Earthquake Center told Newsweek, that it's theoretically possible that one quake could "jump from fault to fault [across Southern California's] full 100-mile fault zone," causing "an earthquake that registers close to an 8." That's 125 times more powerful than Northridge.

In other words, the Big One could come at Los Angeles from several directions now, not just from the San Andreas. Or there could be several Big Ones, one right after the other. And what is true for California could be as true for the New Madrid fault in the Midwest, or all those faults in the Montana-Wyoming-Idaho triangle.

HOUSE OF CARDS

So we don't know where the faults are: we don't know how they're connected, if in fact they are connected; we don't know whether they'll shake horizontally or vertically; we don't know how hard they'll shake; and we don't know when. But we can only base our building codes on what we do know. The Northridge quake, like the Bay Area quake before it, proved that even California, with the most advanced building codes in America, has based these codes---which is to say; its homes and business buildings--on knowledge that proved to be either incomplete or outright inadequate. And if this is true for California, it is far more true for places like Wyoming, Illinois, and Pennsylvania, where quakes aren't much taken into consideration by builders.

Even if we had sufficient funds (which we don't), we can't build beyond what we know. These quakes have taught us that we don't know much, but now we do know:

We have built an entire way of life beyond the limits of our knowledge. We did it innocently enough, and the best intentions. We did it without knowing we were doing it, without planning to do it. But we certainly did do it, and we are now living out the consequences.

To realize that we live in a civilization built beyond the limits of our knowledge is, in itself, an earthquake--a kind of mental earthquake that grows larger on one's personal Richter scale the more one thinks about it.

Again, I'm not trying to frighten anybody. But there is no point in being in denial, either. Denial never made anybody any safer about anything.

Which brings us to psychology. Which of the myriad theories can I turn to? Where is the how-to book that can help me cope with earthquakes? What can I tell my therapist? What can my therapist tell me?

It won't do any good to talk about my mother or my family. They may be the source of a lot of hang-ups, but they're not the source of an earthquake. Nor did the quake happen because of a misapprehension of the gestalt. Being more open about my feelings may help me adjust a little, but it can't adjust the basic situation that will always produce earthquakes.

Talking about anima or my animus isn't going to be much good. As far as analyzing dreams, virtually everyone who goes through a major earthquake dreams about it afterwards, and those dreams aren't terribly hard to analyze. They mean: "I've been through an earthquake and it scared me witless." Posttrauma stress may be treated chemically or verbally or both, but again that doesn't necessarily change the basic situation. Also, with aftershocks that can go on for weeks and months and even years, as is expected with Northridge, when can the traumatic event be declared over?

MYTH & PHOPHESY

If we have a Jungian therapist we could talk about the quake in terms of myth. A "religious counselor" could discuss it in terms of phoshecy. But the planet behaved this way long before humans existed to make up myths, and long before there were prophecies to be fulfilled. Propheying cataclysms is a pretty safe bet since geology has proven that cataclysms are the natural behavior of the planet and are bound to occur.

To say, as the writer of Revelation would say, that the Northridge quake (and the smaller quakes across the country that followed it) are God's judgment is to wonder what this God was judging when all those millions of quakes and volcanoes occurred before humans appeared on the scene. Such prophies are only a fantasy of control: They contend that if only we can be good enough, these events won't happen. But geologists have proven that quakes will come again and again, no matter how good or bad we are.

Leaving myth and religion, we could go to a classical psychoanalyst and talk about the quake undermining the ego. Yet to speak of "ego" in relation to a force of nature as enormous as an earthquake is to enter the realm of the absurd. Of course it undermines your ego. It undermines everything else, too, including the building you live in and the highway you drive on.

STEEPED IN RELATIONSHIPS

The issue of denial has some pertinence, but it's hard to focus on one's personal denial when, as far as earthquakes are concerned, our entire civilization is in denial. (In California a nuclear reactor was knowingly built on a fault line. Now that's denial.) Addiction, abuse--all the main-stay issues of psychotherapy in our era--may be aggravated by earthquakes, as may any psychological condition; but an earthquake experience has the paradoxical effect of trivializing such conditions in the same instant that it aggravates them.

The difficulty is that psychology, since its inception, uses the human being as its sole reference point. Psychology sees our dilemmas in terms of the family, relationships, brain chemistry, and the soul, but psychology stops at the influence of the nonhuman. When psychotherapy, whether verbal or chemical, is confronted with larger-than-human events, it stutters, sputters, and goes dumb.

Where can we go, then, for a frame of reference? How can we situate ourselves? We are creatures that use words and concepts as for behavior--maps to consult in times of crisis. The panic we feel, both in the aftermath of a quake and in the prospect of future quakes, is that quakes render our usual words and concepts useless. Our plans seem futile, our hopes feel fragile, our ambitions trivial.

Plans, hopes, and ambitions are ways that we organize today in terms of tomorrow. It is, of course, inevitable that we behave this way--tomorrow is real, it

does come, and without some sort of hope, plan, and ambition, tomorrow tends to come chaotically, in ways we're ill-prepared for. But earthquakes and upheavals also come. Tomorrow is full of them. They are inevitable, and, as we are finding out, they are virtually impossible to plan adequately for. But these very things--that upheavals are inevitable and impossible to plan for--may be gifts to us.

To learn the teachings of upheavals perhaps we need to remember that psychology began as a branch of philosophy. "Philosophy" is a stuffy word these days, but it is from philosophy that both science and psychology evolved. Psychology seeks to solve problems. Philosophy was often more modest: it sought to describe, contemplate, and explore problems. There is no way to "solve" earthquakes, or any great nonhuman events, so psychology pales before them. But to contemplate and explore the implications of an earthquake--that is possible.

PSYCHOLOGY STAMMERS

Ask the psychotherapists about earthquakes and they are at a loss. They've been trying to help you get along in your marriage, or come to terms with your parents, or get along with your children, or focus your work, or get over your depression. These are all worthy goals, as long as the ground stays put. But when the earth starts to shake, or you're struck by a plague, or your life is shattered by random violence, those worthy goals are put on hold, at least for the moment, and something stronger is needed.

The late Achaan Chah Subato, a monk from Thailand, had access to a stronger way of thought. One day people came to him and asked, "How can you be happy in a world of such impermanence, where you cannot protect your loved ones from harm, illness, and death?" He held up a glass and said, "Someone gave me this glass, and I really like this glass. It holds my water admirably and it glistens in the sunlight. I touch it and it rings! One day the wind may blow it off my shelf, or my elbow may knock it from the table. I know this glass is already broken, so I enjoy it incredibly."

This glass is already broken. This earth is already shaken. This plague has already come. This gun has already been fired. This civilization has already ended. This great book you are writing has already been forgotten. This fine business you

are nurturing has already been antiquated and gone bust. This city you are building is already in ruins.

BEGIN AT THE END

These are not abstractions or philosophical games. As the living planet moves with its earthquakes, volcanoes, and storms, it will change everything you know--and, as we have seen, this can happen in a moment, in your lifetime. If not yours, your children's, or theirs, or theirs. Even if humankind could solve all its human problems and learn to live peaceably and ecologically, the upheavals will still happen! The New Madrid fault will tear Illinois and Missouri apart. California will become an island. The enormous volcano we call Yellowstone National park, far bigger than any volcano that has erupted in recorded history, will devastate the American West. This glass is already broken. Coming to terms with your mother, or curing your depression, or making a lot of money will not fix it.

This doesn't mean that the concerns of psychology are useless. It just means that psychology can't make you safe. Nothing can. An event like the Northridge quake teaches that safety is not human possibility. Our planet is beautiful, but it is not safe. Our lives can be endlessly interesting, inspiring, happy, sad--but they cannot be safe. That doesn't mean we are in danger everyday; it means that basic dangers are ever present, and, like death itself, sooner or later those dangers will touch everyone of us.

To buildss one's life on fantasy of safety is, paradoxically, to be in more danger than we have to be. For when the inevitable danger manifests, when the Earth inevitably shakes, when the illness inevitably comes, when the glass inevitably breaks, it cracks not only our buildings but our hearts and our sanity...if we have shaken too much on a fantasy of security.

The inevitability of danger is not the end of the world. It's the beginning. We are not Zen masters, like Achaan Chah Subato, but we are human beings who can begin to understand that we are all earthquake people, people who interact not only with each other but with forces far greater than ourselves, far greater even than humanity. These forces should not only humble us, they should focus us. The presence of these great forces beneath our feet, in our seas, in our skies, is like a voice telling us in no uncertain terms to live this day, to open our hearts in this moment, to be guided

by our deepest feelings not on the weekend, or on our vacation, or next year sometime, or when we retire, but in this very hour.

This is not to sacrifice the future for the present, or to live as though there's no tomorrow--we know how that can lead to self-destruction. But an emphasis on security in the future can lead to a dryness of heart that makes us feel we are not really living, have not really lived--a feeling that may be the worst self-destruction of all.

As earthquake people, as people who live in the volcano's shadow, as people whose discipline is to remain aware that we exist among forces much huger than ourselves, huger than civilization, huger even than our dreams, we don't have to shrink in fear and we don't have to deny our fear. We can accept our fear of life's quakes as itself a kind of teacher, teaching us to focus on what is most genuine in our lives before the walls come tumbling down. If, in those first moments or months of focus, we see that our lives aren't as genuine as we wanted them to be--that in itself is a great teaching, a good earthquake, and an awakening to what our lives still can be.

Without warning in the dark there was a great shaking. Everything shuddered. Everything crashed. And what we were left with was the very thing that all the philosophies, all the psychologies, all the teachings, has tried to give us: the nakedness of our hearts, and a tomorrow stripped of all that was false.

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