

**Healing a community:  
Application of Bio-psycho-social principles**

Keynote address

**Allen R. Dyer, MD, PhD**  
Senior Health Advisor  
International Medical Corps  
1313 L Street NW Suite 202  
Washington, DC 20005

India Disaster Management Congress  
New Delhi, India  
November 6, 2009

**Abstract:**

Natural Disasters create havoc in the lives of individuals and communities that require concerted effort to overcome. Individuals heal in families and communities, which may be disrupted by the disaster. This presentation describes a national training program delivered to Chinese volunteers and professionals dealing with the aftermath of the Great Sichuan Earthquake. Additionally some reflections are offered on the additional challenges of applying psychosocial principles to manmade disaster situations, building on models of restorative justice, which might provide avenues for community healing.

## **Healing a Community: Application of Bio-Psycho-Social Principles**

**I would like to start by expressing my appreciation for the invitation to speak with you today and to be part of these important discussions about disaster management. India has been at the forefront of such considerations for a long time and has offered much to the rest of the world. My first impressions of India were heat and dust and stereotypes and contrasts. When my wife and I first came to India twenty-five years ago with our small children, we stepped off the plane here in Delhi in the middle of the night to a blast of pre-monsoon hot air. Our six-year son said, “Mommy, someone forgot to turn off the engines.”**

**Over the years, we have come to love and respect India for its many gifts to the world.**

**In the area of disaster management, India has learned important lessons from its many disasters – lessons that others are now learning from India. Notably we must acknowledge -- disasters WILL occur. Though they cannot be predicted, they can be anticipated. It may sound obvious to say this, but the importance of anticipation must be emphasized because we often react to disasters after they happen.**

**Two of America’s biggest disasters took the country by surprise. The attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, were the second and third attacks on that announced target. As unimaginable as these attacks may seem, they should not have been a surprise. Also Hurricane Katrina exposed not only weakness in the levees surrounding New Orleans, but also in failure of planning that left victims**

**waiting days for food, water, shelter, and evacuation. To say that it can't happen here is a form of denial.**

**Denial and anticipation tell us something fundamental about human psychology. People respond with better and worse ways of coping, defense mechanisms. Based on the work of Anna Freud, George Vaillant and others have suggested a hierarchy of defense mechanisms. Denial, projection, reaction formation are more primitive, while anticipation, sublimation, and altruism are more mature. Everyone acts out of a certain degree of self-interest or narcissism, but some people-- at least some of the time-- are able to look to the common interest and common good: We're all better off when we're all better off. The theme, which I would like to develop here, is that disaster management is an attempt to reduce the extent of personal and mass tragedies by anticipation and planning.**

**Natural disasters are sometimes considered natural evil. Such things as tsunamis and earthquakes can be considered innocent disasters—unlike wars and riots-- in that there is no human action of causality. These are times when bad things happen to good people. Even illness can be disastrous in the life of an individual, family, or community.**

**But such overwhelming disasters can usher in a fatalism can make people passive in face of what seems to be inevitable. A kind of learned helplessness is reinforced by fatalistic beliefs. The crocodile will eat me if my time has come, so there is no need to be careful when bathing at the river. Fatalism is no excuse for not having warning systems in place to announce an oncoming tsunami – not in 2004 and certainly not in 2009. The airport security measures that are now in place**

throughout the world were first recommended-- and rejected—in 1994 after the first attack on the World Trade Center the previous year.

Before saying a few words about the more difficult problem of man-made disasters and their associated evils, and the implications of global climate change for human responsibility, I would like to describe the application of psycho-social training principles to the Great Sichuan Earthquake, a training program based on psycho-social principles worked out in India and used so effectively in response to the 2004 tsunami.

The Great Sichuan earthquake occurred May 12, 2008, at 2:28 in the afternoon. It was 8.0 on the logarithmic Richter scale. It lasted 120 seconds, and killed over 60,000 people. Millions of people were left instantly homeless. The epicenter was near the city of Chengdu. The tremors were felt as far away as Shanghai, Beijing, and in India.

[There is something to be said about the geology of earthquakes in China. Unlike some countries, where earthquakes occur by tectonic plates sliding against one another, China has no such fault lines. It is constantly vulnerable from the pressures of the Indian sub-continent pushing against the Himalayas. I mention this because in such an “innocent” natural disaster, there is no guilt or blame, but there is a human response, which transcends nationality. Indians responded generously to the human need as did Russians and Americans and people of many nationalities.]

I had previously lectured in Chengdu and was asked to come back after the earthquake to give some lectures on disaster mental health. I said it would make

more sense if I could put together a team to include my Indian colleagues from NIMHANS in Bangalore, who had done such wonderful work for the tsunami survivors and from whom I had learned so much. And so we assembled a multi-disciplinary and international team of Americans, Indians, Indian-Americans and Chinese-Americans, who employed the well-established training of trainers program to eager and receptive audiences in Chengdu and several of the disaster villages. One of the newspapers that reported on this headlined the article, “Healing a community” which makes the point that it is not just a line of isolated individuals passively receiving treatment, but a psycho-educational process of stitching back together the social fabric which in which individuals live and develop and are sustained.

In China, everything is on a grand scale. In recent years, cities have burgeoned with massive apartment and office blocks. We were told that our training programs would be televised to four remote sites. When we arrived, we were told that our classes were being broadcast to 100 sites and were being seen by 15,000 people.

# Stages of Grief / Loss

Denial	Denial	Disbelief	Outcry
Anger	Anger	Anger	Intrusion
Bargaining	Blame others	Self-pity	Working-through
Depression	Blame self	Sadness	Adjustment
Acceptance	Acceptance	Acknowledgment	

The Training of Trainers programs basically teach people how to listen to stories and listen for feelings. They teach trainers that grief is a process, it takes time, it has stages, and that it is better to talk with others about one's experience than to isolate feelings. The feelings people have are not abnormal or pathological; they are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. One feeling in particular is important to note, and that is Anger, which is an inevitable hurdle that for most people is difficult to deal with and to overcome. The biologically rooted response of feelings of anger raises questions for fairness and justice. These can be isolating, and dealing with anger as a community can help people feel that they are not alone.

Time and time again in Tamilnadu, I heard teachers say that this training process brought children back to life. Before they had the training, students sat in the classroom dazed; after the training, the students began to re-engage in life. I

also heard comments in camps that had no training that there was nothing going on, there was nothing to do. “We have lost not just friends and family, but our livelihood. The children don’t even go to school.”

Such attentive, empathic listening takes a toll on teachers, trainers, and counselors. Hearing stories of loss and despair, especially when one would like to make things right but cannot, is not an easy task. Another dimension of training is counseling the counselors. Our sessions in the disaster villages in China served the counselors as a form of group therapy (or group processing). One counselor acknowledged the complex emotions that were stirred up within himself. Another woman, who was training to be a police officer as well as a psychologist, told of prisoners who suddenly saw their lives in different terms and wanted to cooperate; she described one man who felt so guilty in face of other people’s suffering that he asked to be executed. One woman, who had been on an airplane at the time of the quake, experienced intense emotion that she had been spared when others had not. One counselor told of a girl, who had been saved when her teacher fell on her. The teacher was killed by the collapsing building, and the girl lived for three days in the arms of her dead teacher. She could not speak, but drew a watch on her counselor’s arm. It said 3 o’clock, perhaps the time the teacher died. She realized that she needed to be present for the mute girl, but also needed someone to be present for her as she had difficulty talking about her feelings and had stopped her own psychotherapy.

\* \* \* \* \*

In calling such natural disasters “innocent”, I would like to contrast the opposite, namely “guilty” or “culpable”. We enter the field of tensions, the kaleidoscope of conflicts, where human actions taken on moral dimensions, the world of good and evil: Man-made disasters. Man-made disasters are more intractable and difficult to deal with because the moral dimensions of guilt, blame, fault, responsibility and choice evoke feelings fear, rage and vengeance. Someone chose to do this. Revenge must be taken on them or their descendents. The roots of such vengeance must ultimately be biological as well as psychological; they are human responses rooted in the feelings of the body-mind; they are witnessed in the most ancient civilizations. They divide one group of people from another, self and those like us from the Other, those that are different.

We understand that the grief accompanying a loss involves complex emotions with biological as well as psycho-social components. These feelings are modulated over time, may ultimately be resolved, may be stored or held onto, may be transmuted into feelings of depression, passivity, helplessness. Inevitably there will be feelings of anger that cannot be denied. These angry feelings may be turned inward, they may be rationalized philosophically or religiously, or they may be turned outward in a desire for retribution, which may lead to group violence. Inevitably these feelings involve moral issues, what is right? What is the right thing to do? What is justice?

At this complex junction of human affairs, we see an intersection of the medical and psychotherapeutic concerns with the judicial and political concerns. How can people overcome the tragedies of war and ethnic tensions in a way that

does not perpetuate the cycle of death and violence? I see this as one of the crucial questions of our time when a small handful of individuals can cause mass destruction. Another way of posing this question may offer some avenues for hope in disaster management. How can we come to see greater possibilities for the forces that unite us rather than the forces that would divide us into smaller more antagonistic groups?

The organization I work with, the International Medical Corps, works worldwide in 23 countries and has been working in Iraq since 2003. Much of the humanitarian work is disaster response, but an important ingredient is “capacity building”, helping the Iraqis re-establish a normal life, rebuild the infrastructure, not just the physical infrastructure, but importantly the social infrastructure, the medical infrastructure, the educational infrastructure, and to reestablish the fractured communities in which people can live, develop, and be sustained. At IMC we call this, the “humanitarian surge”. And aid organizations are increasingly recognizing this important activity as a mitigating force in conflict areas, “fragile states” they are sometimes called, or “vulnerable states”.

An important aspect of this capacity building is to understand what went wrong and what lessons can be learned that mitigate future conflict. Inevitably I will have to oversimplify my diagnosis because Iraq like all these conflict situations involve complex emotions and complex religious, ethnic, political and social factors. What I would like to suggest is that the situation in Iraq is by no means unique and that wars such as this throughout history have pitted one group against another, that evil people have been able to exploit fear and anger, asking some people to join

**against others, identifying with the gang or group or tribe against a group of others who are perceived in some way to be different. The rationale is often couched in noble, idealistic religious or ethnic terms.**

**The stories are familiar, Shi'ia or Sunni, Catholic or Protestant, Hindu or Muslim, Republican or Democrat, Ibo or Hausa, Hutu or Tutsi, black or white. Often there is a colonial legacy of long-standing resentments. Often there is a history of community harmony, working and living together and inter-marriage. So the stereotypes are extremes, and the people that exploit them are extremists. Though these are familiar stories of conflict, we search to write different endings, to anticipate disasters, even human-made disasters and mitigate them before they boil over.**

**\* \* \* \* \***

**There are some models that offer the possibility of hope rather than vengeance. In South Africa after apartheid, in Rwanda after the genocide, In Greensboro, North Carolina, USA after a “massacre” in which several people were shot at a demonstration in a confrontation between a group who called themselves the Communist Workers Party and the Ku Klux Klan, in Canada where certain groups of Eskimos were denied fair schooling, in Gujarat – in these and other situations, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, or Truth and Justice Councils, offer an alternative to “getting justice” understood as retribution and punishment, often perpetuating a cycle of violence. Increasingly these techniques of restorative justice are being used in schools and in juvenile courts.**

Like India's traditional panchayat courts, Rwanda's gacaca courts provide opportunities for community hearings, confrontation or conversation of victim and perpetrator. In such meetings stories are told and heard. Face to face. The stories we hear often come down to "bad leaders", just following orders, going along with what others were doing. At such moments of hysteria and paranoia, we see people abdicating personal moral responsibility, subsuming oneself to something larger, the tribe, the group, the gang, the nation. We might call such defining moments "moments of truth" or perhaps "moments of mischief", when emotion overcomes reason. Here we see good people being persuaded to join bad people in evil acts. Again, I would suggest anticipation and planning might better prepare communities to avert such disasters. The time may come when we begin to speak in disaster management not only of conflict and post-conflict areas, but also pre-conflict areas, where education and training, community building, and peace building efforts may avert or diminish conflicts and keep them from becoming disasters.

\* \* \* \* \*

There is one potential disaster, which exceeds even nuclear catastrophe in its potential magnitude and threat to human civilization. That is global climate change. At the least we may anticipate more extreme weather patterns: hurricanes, typhoons, flooding in heavily populated lowlands, along rivers and deltas. These would be like other natural disasters, but with a human component. But there is an even more serious consequence of global climate change that must be anticipated. If we deplete too many forests and saturate the oceans with carbon dioxide, we may exceed the ability of this planet to support human life. The interests of the small

**village are dwarfed by the needs of the global village. We must learn to put aside small differences and work together – or perish.**