

Faith in Tough Times:
How to Survive a Faith Disaster
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Luke 10:30-35

We are all intrigued by the way one person survives a terrible disaster while another in the next house, or sitting in the next seat on the plane, does not. It seems that luck, whimsy and fate, randomly pick one person to survive, while another perishes. But I've discovered in reading about physical and natural disasters, that we can do more than we think to save ourselves and others. As Hunter Thompson said, "Call on God, but row away from the rocks." I'm going to look at some examples of how to survive physical disasters and then see what elements of these discoveries also apply to surviving faith disasters.

"Don't let panic freeze you." That's the first rule of survival. A common reaction reported by police trainers and firefighters is that in a crisis, people tend to freeze, like the proverbial deer in the headlights. This may be a human equivalent to an animal's response of playing dead to discourage an attacker. But those who resist this temptation are more likely to survive. Kent Harstedt, a survivor of the 1994 sinking of the ferry *Estonia* in the Baltic Sea, said that when the ship listed 30 degrees, slamming passengers, furniture and flower pots against the wall of the lounge, he resorted to his earlier military training: Consider option one and option two. Decide. Act.

Harstedt knew he had to get out of the lounge. As he fought his way to the deck, he noticed many people simply frozen in place. Harstedt jumped off the ship moments before it sank, hung on to a life raft for five hours and was one of the 137 out of 989 passengers who survived the sinking of the *Estonia*.

The second story is from a fire in the Beverly Hills Supper Club in 1977 that killed 167 of the 3,000 people in the many rooms of the club that night. The interesting element here is that people exercised their roles in being leaders and followers. Employees took charge, 60% of them taking some kind of leadership. Servers and hostesses evacuated their guests. Cooks and busboys fought the fire. Guests acted like guests, waiting to be led, with only 17% helping in any way. People followed whatever patterns they knew of, if only grade school fire drills.

In the Beverly Hills fire there was little if any selfish behavior. People do their best in the worst of times, but they'll do even better if they are encouraged to play an important role.

The third story is of 9-11. Amanda Ripley of Time magazine says that "In every disaster, buried under the rubble is evidence that we can

do better.” Not only do we learn about building better buildings, but we also learn that the more control people feel they have over their crises, the better they perform.

Rick Rescorla was the head of security for Morgan Stanley Dean Witter at the World Trade Center. A former military man, Rescorla was responsible for Morgan Stanley employees on 22 floors of Tower 2. After the basement parking garage of the World Trade Center was bombed in 1993, Rescorla saw the way people slowly ambled down the stairways and knew it took too long. He decided to turn his employees into survivors.

He began running the entire Morgan Stanley company through regular surprise fire drills. He trained them to meet in the hallways between stairwells and proceed two by two from the 73rd to the 44th floor. Taking millionaire high performance bankers away from their work was a radical intervention. But Rescorla believed that the best way to get through a disaster was to repeatedly run through rehearsals beforehand, and he insisted.

He timed them and pushed them to go faster. He taught them never to go up, for roof rescues are rare, but to always go down in the case of an emergency such as a fire.

When the first plane hit Tower 1, the Port Authority official announced on the intercom that everyone should stay at their desk. Rescorla grabbed his bullhorn, walkie-talkie and cell phone and systematically ordered Morgan Stanley employees to get out. When the second plane hit Tower 2 about 38 floors above, he had most of his people moving down stairs. Tower 2 shook and swayed. Rescorla’s people panicked and froze for a moment. He calmed them. Then he distracted them from their fear by singing an old battle song from his Cornish homeland. Then he got them moving again.

Only thirteen Morgan Stanley employees died when Tower 2 of the World Trade Center collapsed, including Rescorla and four of his security assistants who intentionally went back up to help others escape. The other 2,687 Morgan Stanley employees were safe.

Studies indicate that people who respond well to trauma have three advantages: a belief that they can influence events, an ability to find a purpose in life’s turmoil, and a conviction that they can learn from positive and negative experiences.

We need to pay attention to these elements for the natural disasters that we are likely to face in our lives. It is, in fact, a good thing to identify the exits on the airplane you’re flying in. From 1983-2000, 56% of all passengers involved in airplane accidents survived, often because they did know how to get out.

How then does this apply to a faith disaster? When I talk about a faith disaster, I mean anything that threatens our mental, emotional, and spiritual balance. Divorce, the death of a loved one, a job loss, a serious illness, a terrible conflict or struggle with a child, parent or

friend, a major economic set back, as well as a simple loss of self-confidence can all be faith disasters.

The first thing I believe we need to do to survive a faith disaster is to prepare by getting in good spiritual shape. One element of surviving physical disasters is to be in good physical shape. If you can't move, they say, you lose. The same is true of faith disasters. Legendary former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld once said that when the conflicting currents of life threaten to engulf us, they can be channeled through the sluice gate of prayer if that channel has been dug in advance, and if it has been dug deep enough.

You've heard it said that there are no atheists in fox holes. A study of the prayers uttered in those foxholes during the Korean War revealed the most common prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep..." We need to be better prepared than that.

Jesus once observed the shallow behavior of the people of Jerusalem and said, "If they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen in the dry land?" If our faith isn't healthy in the good times, what good will it be in the worst?

Perhaps it's worth having a few faith fire drills.

Second, when crisis strikes, do something. In a personal/spiritual crisis, just as in a physical crisis, we tend to get paralyzed. When I see someone for counseling who is weighed down with the problems of their life, they often say they feel cornered, damned if they do, damned if they don't. I typically encourage them to act. "If you feel damned if you do and damned if you don't," I say, "then do. Err on the side of action. Fight your way out of the corner."

In a faith disaster just as in the World Trade Center disaster, don't stay at your desk while disaster looms. Move. If you remember nothing else from this sermon, let it be this. I'll say it again, if you're feeling damned if you do and damned if you don't, then do it. Do something.

In fact it's a good rule in the midst of working through any tough time to get up and walk, even if it's around the office or around the block. Even if you're stuck in an argument with your partner, walk and talk.

So step one is prepare yourself now, while the wood is green, while life is still relatively comfortable. Integrate the spiritual practices of the Soul Station, on the book marks we handed out last week. Some are still available in the foyer. Let the light of God in you shine from you and to you, as it shines in these mirrors.

Step two. Move. Act. Fight the paralysis of panic. Don't play dead. Believe in possibilities.

Step three. Listen to this short portion of a familiar parable of Jesus.

"A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead... A priest... passed by on the other side. So likewise a

Levite...But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him..." (Luke 10: 30-34.)

Besides the obvious reminder to help an injured neighbor on the side of the road, the other lesson of this parable of the Good Samaritan is to accept help, even when it is from someone you never expected to help you. That's true in a faith disaster as well as a physical disaster.

The most difficult thing I face is as a minister is dealing with people who are in crisis but who won't let me or anyone else in. And in when it comes to rejecting help, I can be as stubborn as anyone here. Six years ago, on Labor Day I went in to the emergency room with what I thought was probably some kind of bacterial infection induced fever. Imagine my surprise when upon probing my abdomen the emergency room doc was said, "What the hell is that?" which is not something you want to hear on an examining table.

The next day the surgeons removed what they thought was a malignant growth the size of a Nerf football along with two and a half feet of my intestine and six inches of my colon. I was the same age my father was when he was diagnosed with a cancer he died from four and a half years later.

I had my own faith crisis and struggled mightily. When the church called and asked if we needed any meals, I, being a guy, said no. Sandy grabbed the phone and said, "Sure." That was the beginning of my acceptance of help, little by little, of people bringing food and support, of my friends taking care of me, and of my road to recovery. It turned out I didn't have cancer. But in accepting that help, I was like that guy lying beaten up on the side of the road who let the stranger throw him on his donkey and take him to get fixed up.

I have two other final examples to share. First, the current economic crisis is and can become a faith disaster, for it challenges who we are when our financial resources are threatened. My pension at retirement would have been less than my current salary anyway, but now it is way down. And who knows where it will go from here?

So what do I do? First, act. I'm moving some money around, but financial people say not to change much, and I can't move anything in my pension until the next quarter in January. And this is usually the case. The first kind of action we want to take is not available.

But I also act in another way, which is to remind myself of my faith priorities, what is truly important to me. I can give up a lot financially and still be a happy and caring person. I may well have to work more like five years rather than two years at my projected half-time position here before full retirement, but hey, we can all live with that, can't we?

I'm praying for understanding, direction, and a plan. And I'm ready for help if I need it.

Second and this is for us as a church. Will this economic crisis cause us to retreat from one another, each hoarding our own resources, or will it draw us together? I believe that we will rise to our common faith challenge. I believe our channels of prayer have been dug deep. I believe we know how to move forward rather in action rather than fall into the fear of paralysis. I believe that leaders will emerge to guide and lead us to safety when we are lost. I believe we will connect with each other.

Here we are, one week from our congregational meeting where we will consider next year's budget. I believe in two things. One is that we will care for, understand, and support each other through these tough times. And there is one other thing we can't forget. As the rich have been getting richer in this country, the poor have been getting poorer.

Thirty-seven million Americans live below the poverty line, and even that data is probably outdated on the low side. The safety-net for the poor is full of holes. This economic hurricane is going to be tougher on them than it is on us, and is up to us to keep the faith that in these the least among us beats the heart of God. When we touch a hand of the least among us, we touch the hand of Jesus. That is our purpose as a church.

I believe, as the hymn says, "We are pilgrims on a journey, we are neighbors on the road; we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load." (Servant Song). That's a good song for surviving any faith disaster, for who wants to survive it alone?

References: Amanda Ripley, "How to Survive a Disaster", Time Magazine, June 9, 2008

Prayer –

I invite you to pray for three things today –

First consider your sense of God, the holy. What and whom do you pray to? See this spiritual presence within you, in all the people around you, in the sacred space that is this church, in creation, and then a power that is in yet beyond all of this. Give this power a name and hold it in prayer...

Second, pray that the gift of giving may well up in you so that generosity will be no stranger to your heart. Pray that generosity be a flowing river irrigating the channels of your life.

Third pray for the part of you that is unable to receive, the part of you that feels it must always give. Pray that this holy one deep within you may give you a glad heart that can open to the blessing of receiving. And while you're praying for yourself, pray for all those who need the gift of being able to receive.

And with your sense of God deep within, your prayer for giving, your prayer for receiving in your heart, pray for the deepest difficulty you face. Ask for what you need. Be open to receive it. Amen.