



## Natural Disasters and Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

“Spirituality is a personal quest for the transcendent, how one discerns life’s meaning in relation to God and other human beings. Healthy spirituality fosters healthy relationships and affirms all of life’s experiences as part of the journey.” —Rabbi Eric Lankin

When disaster strikes, the thousands of threads that together make the fabric of our community and the tapestry of our culture are at risk. Not all are torn, but there will be rips in the cloth. Underlying that fabric is the spiritual life of the community: the practices, beliefs and rituals that provide meaning to life and support for all those connections.

The present paper discusses the consequences of natural disasters and the need of spiritual care as a coping strategy. During a crisis, spirituality helps victims to cope. Important to any catastrophic event is the understanding that every disaster creates unique circumstances that require relief responses tailored to the specific situation. Spiritual distress is one of the most personal aspects of our lives. Rarely are people open about their spiritual anxieties after a stressful event like a disaster. What helps is for people to be able to have their experiences validated by another, not just acknowledged. Not only does this support the person experiencing the distress, it strengthens the sense of community for all those involved. An important part of spiritual gatherings is to validate people’s experience and publicly acknowledge their life of faith.

**KEYWORDS**

Spirituality, Natural disasters, Spiritual distress.

**INTRODUCTION:**

India has been traditionally vulnerable to natural disasters on account of its unique geo-climatic conditions. Floods, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes and landslides have been recurrent phenomena. About 60% of the landmass is prone to earthquakes of various intensities; over 40 million hectares is prone to floods; about 8% of the total area is prone to cyclones and 68% of the area is susceptible to drought. In the decade 1990-2000, an average of about 4344 people lost their lives and about 30 million people were affected by disaster every year. The loss in terms of private, community, and public assets has been astronomical.

At the global level, there has been considerable concern over natural disasters. Even as substantial scientific and material progress is made, the loss of lives and property due to disasters has not decreased. In fact, the human toll and economic losses have mounted. It was in this background that the United Nations General Assembly, in 1989, declared the decade 1990-2000 as the, “International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction”, with the objective to reduce loss of lives and property and resist socio-economic damage through concerted international action, especially in developing countries.

In 1996, 40 million disaster-affected people depended on humanitarian assistance, a 60 per cent increase over the average figure of 25 million in the 1980s. In the first half of this decade, over US\$ 30 million was spent on humanitarian assistance. The average cost of natural disasters over the past 25 years stands at over US\$ 87 billion a year. The average amount spent on humanitarian response in US\$ 3 billion a year. Compared to expenditure global military spending is around US\$ 780 billion.

A ‘disaster’ can be described as a condition or event of significant destruction, disruption or distress to a community. Disasters of different types occur when hazards affect large populations critically. They can occur anywhere and they are generally unpredictable.

**World’s worst natural disasters:**

Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, cyclones, hurricanes and others form the natural phenomena of the disasters. The following table shows the total deaths, people affected either directly or indirectly from the disasters, and the economic damage due to recent disasters from year 2002 to 2005.

**Damages of natural disaster in the world (2002-2005)**

Year	No. of Disasters	Death Total	Affected People (in) Million	Economic Damages (in) Billion
2002	-	24500	608	Us\$. 58.3
2003	700	76806	255	Us\$. 56
2004	305	244500	150	Us\$ 92.5
2005	360	91900	157	Us\$ 159

Source: <http://www.redcross.ca/2006>

Recently the eastern coast of South India was hit by Hud-Hud cyclone (Oct. 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014). The ‘Hudhud’, which was centered around 970 Km southeast of Gopalpur in Orissa and 1000 km east-southeast of Visakhapatnam, Hudhud caused at least 46 deaths within Andhra Pradesh (total 109 including Nepal). Total damage costs are estimated to be at least Rs. 70000 crore (US \$ 11 billion).

“Disaster affects the entire fabric of a community that existed prior to the event and can cause traumatic stress among the whole community. Disaster recovery is in large part the rebuilding of community, the re-tying of the thousands of strands of relationship in the fabric of our being together that have been severed by the disaster” (Rev. J Robinson, Jr).

Disasters often have a human component, including New York’s World Trade Center on 9/11, the Gujrat earthquake, the 2004 Tsunami or the Hud Hud cyclone in Vizag. Regardless of the cause of the disaster, what is the person’s first reaction? Does he or she see the blame for the disaster as being human, as being natural, or as being related to God (or some

other power that is greater than human or natural means)?

When disaster strikes, thousands of threads that together make the fabric of our community and the tapestry of our culture are at risk. Underlying that fabric is the spiritual life of the community: the practices, beliefs and rituals that provide meaning to life and support for all those connections. The spiritual life of the disaster victims is also at threat.

People react very differently to disaster, even in their spiritual lives. Some will be overwhelmed by events and have traumatic stress reactions. Others, incongruously, can be energized. Some even say they feel more alive and connected to the divine during and immediately after a disaster than ever before. For these people, spiritual life is something immediately at hand – or newly found – rather than something lost. Communities will normally reconnect with their sources of resiliency, including their spiritual life, following disaster.

The literature also suggests that during a crisis, spirituality helps victims to cope. Important to any catastrophic event is the understanding that every disaster creates unique circumstances that require relief responses tailored to the specific situation.

### WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Spirituality is a part of culture.

“Spirituality is a personal quest for the transcendent, how one discerns life’s meaning in relation to God and other human beings. Healthy spirituality fosters healthy relationships and affirms all of life’s experiences as part of the journey.” —Rabbi Eric Lankin

“There is no essential demarcation between sacred and mundane, or the secular and spiritual. All of life’s activities are infused with a spiritual dimension—echoing as it were, Divine remembrance—so as not to consider the material (including our earthly life) as an end unto itself.” —Dr. Faiz Khan.

“Spirituality is the essence of life—the beliefs and values that give meaning to existence and that which is held sacred. It is one’s understanding of self, God, others, the universe, and the resulting relationships.” —Rev. Naomi Pagan

Spirituality refers to an inner belief system. It is a “spirit-to-spirit” relationship to oneself, others and the God of ones understanding. Everyone is a spiritual being.

### SPIRITUAL WELL BEING:

An individual, who expresses affirmation of life in a relation with a higher power (as defined by the person), self, community and environment that nurtures, celebrates wholeness.

For organizations that seek to encourage psychosocial well-being during disasters or in post-disaster phases, attentiveness to spiritual life is essential. Apart from the personal spiritual crises that people may go through during disasters, routines are disrupted, preventing people from practicing their normal religious disciplines. Prayer places may be destroyed. Burial practices may not be recognized, causing anguish. Meditative practices may be impossible while racing to avoid danger. Honouring ancestors, elders or God may be pushed aside. Some may feel their beliefs have failed and their understanding has been mistaken. These crises of faith and disruption of spiritual practice can have effects as acute as the physical disaster itself. Responses to births, deaths and other life transitions should always reflect the spiritual beliefs of those involved and be guided by those familiar with those traditions.

Death Rituals for those who have died as a result of the disaster and those who die during the disruption that occurs afterward may not be possible in the way that the community would normally expect. Assisting in ameliorating the effects of international and national requirements for the handling of

remains in a way that is acceptable within the spiritual life of the community will be important. In the same manner, birth rituals, such as naming children etc., may be complicated by where the birth takes place, medical complications and access to religious leadership to perform any necessary ceremonies.

### SPIRITUAL DISTRESS:

The state at which an individual or group experiences or is at risk of experiencing a disturbance in the belief or value system that provides strength, hope, and meaning to life.” The way in which the divine is perceived by the community will have an impact on planning for support of spiritual care activities.

### Signs of spiritual distress in the community include

- Lack of opportunity for the community to gather to grieve and pray.
- Disruption of normal spiritual practices by necessary search and rescue or relief operations.
- Expressions of anxiety about proper rituals for the dead.
- Over involvement with spiritual practices by persons who previously had little interest.
- Presence of spiritual care providers at shelters and relief centers beyond initial relief operations.
- Complaints from spiritual leaders that the community is having difficulty moving on or accepting their new situation.
- Body language can be an important indicator of spiritual distress, especially when the community gathers with a faith leader.
- How receptive is the faith leader to assistance and suggestions? Are they open and able to listen or controlling and self-directed?
- Disinterest or active rejection of self-care.
- Whether conversations about healing are appropriate to the stage of recovery.
- An absence of valuing self-care and a lack of expectation that it should be provided. A resistance to providing support and accommodation for making self-care training available.

### Responding to spiritual distress in the community

- Cater to physical needs to facilitate spiritual care, for example, setting aside time, arranging for space and materials, and publicizing services.
- Provide spiritual care for faith leaders to enable them to lead again.
- Train for spiritual caregivers in the effects of disaster on spiritual life and suggestions on bringing back those who may have become marginalized.
- Organize within the community to support renewal of religious services, if they have been disrupted.
- Strategize how to provide special care to the most vulnerable and those with special needs.
- Budget for time and resources to make spiritual care accessible and user-friendly.

### SPIRITUAL CARE:

Anything that assists an individual, family or community in drawing upon their own spiritual perspective as a source of strength, hope and healing is ‘Spiritual Care’. Spiritual care can be any service or act that helps an individual, family or community to draw on a spiritual perspective as a source of strength and healing. In disaster, anything that nurtures the human spirit in coping with the crisis is spiritual care.

The assessment of Spiritual care needs should include all ages and stages (children through adult and all stages of faith development). Those with special needs will require access to services in a way that is useful for them – such as signing for the deaf during services or assistance to those with visual impairments. Some disabilities are not easily observed, so it will be important to ask who may need special assistance, whether assistance in transport, special foods or medicine.

A disaster causes lot of havoc, damage of material, social and individuals. This results in loss of hope and causes despair.

Hope is the central capacity that contributes toward personal and communal resiliency. It enables individuals, families and communities to endure great hardship with courage. The maintenance of hope during times of struggle is a central priority of spiritual care providers. The loss of hope is despair.

Despair is one of the most crippling human spiritual conditions. It can adversely affect many other areas of physical, mental and spiritual health. Despair can begin to take root when tasks seem insurmountable and conditions seem unsolvable. Spiritual care stimulates a sense and experience of hope in individuals and communities. Seeking opportunities to appreciate a form of beauty is one powerful intervention.

#### WHEN IS THE NEED OF SPIRITUAL CARE?

Transition from emergency relief and short-term recovery to long-term recovery can be painful and confusing for a community after a natural catastrophe. The community may feel abandoned. Some agencies that specialize in emergency response often have visibly different roles in long-term recovery. Some emergency workers who responded initially may not be replaced when they finish their deployments.

In the aftermath, physical and emotional recovery may seem impossible to achieve. The disaster itself probably evoked feelings of rage, dismay, and shock. The transition to long-term recovery may involve feelings of exhaustion, confusion, and despair.

This is an especially important time for spiritual care providers to attend to such feelings. Spiritual care providers will care for individuals, families and the community in many of the same ways in the long-term.

Spiritual care facilitates a guided conversation around specific themes with an individual or a family. People are encouraged to verbalize tangible examples of successes during other periods of difficulty in several areas, including:

- Personal – One's personal life history
- Family – The broader history of one's parents, grandparents and ancestors
- Cultural – The experience of one's nation, ethnicity and culture
- Spiritual – The history of one's faith group or spiritual perspective.

Spiritual care helps survivors restore a sense of control over life by helping them take "ownership" of what happens next. They couldn't control the disaster, but they certainly can control their response to it by making decisions about their recovery.

Community faith leaders are usually best able to offer spiritual care in times of trouble. Spiritual care following an emergency can be quite different than in normal times. Faith leaders may themselves be hit hard by the disaster and need support and care as much as their followers. So faith leaders should be offered support services, even though they may say they are fine.

#### SPIRITUAL CARE AS A COPING STRATEGY:

Spiritual care is not therapy. Those who experience spiritual stress following a disaster are not sick; they have experienced an overwhelming event that may naturally challenge their spirituality. The goal is to provide support that allows the survivor to reestablish their own sense of spiritual wellbeing in keeping with their culture. Resolving feelings is not the goal of spiritual care. It is important to avoid projecting our own feelings about the disaster and its consequences onto the survivor.

#### Things to keep in mind:

- Offer prayer if requested.
- Permit people to share their memories.
- Encourage people to be connected to loved ones.
- The job of the aid worker is to assist the community in surviving the impact of the disaster, reconnect with their

own sources of resiliency and restore the community's hope.

- Many disaster areas are on the boundaries between communities with radically differing faiths. Humanitarian staff can help these differing groups find ways to reside near one another while at the same time avoiding conflict. Addressing these potential conflicts will require skills in mediation and conflict resolution.
- Each faith community should be safe to practice its belief without intimidation. To make this possible, it may be necessary to plan for physical distance between groups when performing rituals or holding services. It may also be helpful to bring leadership of differing faiths together periodically to allow for coordination and planning. High profile events, festivals and religious observances may be opportunities for healing – or for conflict. Good leadership planning can avoid the latter.
- Spiritual spaces are often places of sanctuary and refuge, and if possible, such spaces should be provided. Patience and flexibility will make this process smoother and enable resolution more quickly.
- **Advocating** for provision of the necessary resources for spiritual practice is a necessary part of every response. There will, however, usually be some resistance by other aid workers to attending to spiritual issues, especially when physical survival needs are grave.

#### ELEMENTS OF HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY DURING DISASTERS:

Members of a faith community affected by a disaster can be overwhelmed by the devastating nature of events. Aid workers have observed that six requirements seem to be common for healthy spirituality following a disaster. Providing these six essential spiritual care supports can help communities come back together more quickly and encourage a more self-reliant and participatory recovery.

##### 1. Reassurance and Support

Disaster survivors need reassurance that they can survive this time spiritually. They also need support as they struggle with both the consequences of the disaster and the changes that will be needed in their own lives. Reassurance is not the promise that things will go back to how they were – or get better. Most people are able to rebuild a 'new normal' in which they can see some positives, but none of us would choose to endure a hurricane to build a new house.

##### 2. A Safe Place to Share

Disaster has a way of making us feel helpless, spiritually as well as emotionally and physically. It is understandable that many of us will question our faith. To be able to sort out those doubts we need a place that is "safe", not only physically, but spiritually, to share those questions with others or just meditate on those questions ourselves. To meet this need, faith communities can provide a quiet place for people to think and pray; an opportunity before or after services to meet with a spiritual leader; and special opportunities for survivors to share with one another where someone will be present to help everyone be heard.

##### 3. Validation of Experience

Spiritual distress is one of the most personal aspects of our lives. Rarely are people open about their spiritual anxieties after a stressful event like a disaster. What helps is for people to be able to have their experiences validated by another, not just acknowledged. Not only does this support the person experiencing the distress, it strengthens the sense of community for all those involved. An important part of spiritual gatherings is to validate people's experience and publicly acknowledge their life of faith.

##### 4. Opportunities to Act

When a disaster hits our own community, participation in the recovery helps us regain control over our own lives. Even small choices – between coffee or tea, for ex-

ample – help the survivor re-establish their own sense of power. Over time, the feeling of helplessness begins to dull and anxiety subsides. Including survivors in decisions about the operation of the community and in the delivery of goods and services can also benefit their spiritual lives.

### **5. Opportunities for Making Meaning**

Rituals give survivors a chance to reflect on the meaning of events for their lives. Ceremonies like memorials or prayer services can be arranged so that people are able to share their reflections with the community of faith. When disasters happen at a distance from the faith communities that have a connection to the disaster, caregivers will want to be sensitive to the need for support.

### **6. Reconnection with the Community**

Some people respond to disaster by withdrawing from the community. Faith organisations offer people a way to reconnect as much or as little as they like at their own pace. Spiritual caregivers should be sensitive to sudden changes in involvement in faith community activities. Many times those who stop participating or suddenly begin after a long absence are experiencing difficulty with their spiritual life.

Thus,

### **“LET’S PRACTICE SPIRITUALITY AND LEAD A HAPPY LIFE”**

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