



Learning From the Past

by Joseph Scanlon

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Admirable, yes; different, no

Although the behavior we see among the Japanese in this disaster is impressive, it's no different from what researchers have come to expect.

When German bombers were pounding London in 1940, Edward R. Murrow brought the war to Americans with his broadcasts from such locations as Trafalgar Square. His introductory words, "This is London," became as well known as his name.

His broadcasts were accurate and the British made no attempt to censor them, but in a strange way they were misleading, just as some of the reports coming from Japan are now.

The story Murrow was telling was of British phlegm and resilience despite air raid after air raid. On Sept. 22, 1940, for example, he began by stating, "I am standing on a rooftop overlooking London," and went on to say he could see that people had flags flying everywhere. "No one told them to do it," he said, "and no flag out there is white."

It was true that the British were defiant despite the bombing, though many fled the city every night and returned during the daytime.

It's also true that Murrow was correct in saying that behaviour was admirable.

So why was he misleading? He was misleading because of the implication that the behaviour he was describing was peculiarly British.

Japanese not unique

Disaster research has shown that individuals cope very well in disasters. It is the survivors, both the uninjured and injured, who do the initial search and rescues and provide the initial transport to medical centres. They are not dazed or confused or in shock, but instead they look around them, see what has to be done and do it.



Japan's stoic response to the massive earthquake, while admirable, is unsurprising in light of researchers' analysis of other countries' recoveries from similar tragedies. (AP photo)

It's true that on rare occasions, usually when there is already social breakdown, there is looting, but for the most part victims do not loot. Disasters do not turn ordinary citizens into criminals.

The British, in short, were behaving during the blitz the same way as others have always behaved in comparable situations.

The same sorts of misleading reports are coming out of Japan. Take this one from the March 19th edition of The Economist: "Many foreigners have expressed deep admiration for the calm resilience the Japanese have demonstrated this week."

Like Murrow's reports, it is no doubt accurate. But like Murrow's reports it implies that the Japanese are somehow different, that others would not be so resilient.

The reports from Japan about the absence of looting need to be seen in the same way. It isn't the absence of looting that is worth reporting. It would be news if there were looting.

Other reports, however, are less accurate. A number of stories I saw portrayed people moving away from the most severe impact areas and called that movement "panic."

Just imagine that your home was shaken, perhaps damaged or destroyed by an earthquake, but you survived that. Then you heard a tsunami warning, and you managed to move fast enough to survive that. Next you learned that there could be radioactive emissions from a nuclear plant.

Surely it makes common sense that you would want to get away. There would be nothing panicky about such behaviour.

Duty trumps disaster

In any case, other stories reveal the opposite of panic.

Recently, there have been surveys asking health personnel if they would be prepared to report to work given a pandemic. Many said they would not.

Their answers do not fit with what disaster researchers have found: that emergency personnel stay on the job under the most difficult conditions. In fact, two of the most esteemed scholars in the field, Russell Dynes and Henry Quarantelli, were adamant on this subject:

In sum, in examining a sample of 413 persons who held positions in emergency-relevant organizations, *not one abandoned his/her emergency role obligations to opt for familial role obligations...* Consequently ... not a glimmer of support exists for the usual predictions about the consequences of role conflict in emergency situations. The empirical cupboard is so bare that there are no anecdotes to support the conventional wisdom.

So what do we see in Japan?

We see a physician staying with his patients even with the threat of radioactive emissions. We see power plant workers exposing themselves to what could be damaging levels of radiation. In short, we see the Japanese doing what Russian firefighters did at Chernobyl (although the Japanese at least have protective gear).

What we don't see, even in these horrendous conditions, is what sociologists call "role abandonment." The surveys may suggest we can expect that, but the behaviour of the Japanese suggests otherwise.

And that behaviour, too, conforms to what research shows has happened in the past. People may say they won't report for duty, but when duty calls, they do stay on the job.

The economic aftermath

It's easy to forget something else, and that's how quickly economies can recover from even the worst catastrophes. It's true that parts of Japan have been terribly battered by the earthquake and tsunami. But it's also true that other incidents, even the far more devastating Kobe earthquake of 1995, had very little impact on the economy.

Disasters bring misfortune to many, especially those who suffer loss of loved ones or personal injury or loss of homes or businesses. But it's also true, and has been seen many times in the past, that recovery can be remarkably quick.

The economic aid that pours in makes up for the many losses. As I have argued in the past, the result is a zero-sum effect. There are losers, but there are also winners, and the two even out.

In the case of Japan, of course, there is one element that's unclear as of yet, and that is the impact of radioactive emissions from the damaged nuclear facilities.

That could have an incalculable impact on Japan. But as was true during Three Mile Island, and even during and after Chernobyl, in Japan the people are handling even the radiation threat calmly, as one might expect.

I am not for a moment suggesting anything less than admiration for the victims of the current disaster, one of the worst I can ever recall. I am just suggesting that as we admire the behaviour of the Japanese -- and there is much to admire -- we remember that they are behaving as those of us who have studied disasters would expect.

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