

SENSEMAKING: THE SUMMER OF OUR DISCONNECT

Paul Abels, Ph.D., California State University, Long Beach

“Have a Pleasant Summer!” These were the words written in LARGE letters on the front page of the NASW California News (July-August, 2006). Great idea, if only I could stop reading the newspapers, listening to the radio, and watching T.V. The headlines in another article asks, “Just a heat wave or the beginning of Doomsday?” While written in a light vein, it didn’t make me feel any better. In addition, it would also help if I wasn’t a social worker with the social justice and service commitments that assumes. Now I don’t think we need to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders, but this has to be an awfully hard summer to relax. Even those on a cruise might have a sliver of concern after reading how a cruise ship listed 15 degrees and a hundred or so passengers were injured. This summer presents problems that aren’t reflected in songs like *Welcome Sweet Spring Time*, or the 13th century ballad, *Summer is a-Comin’ in, Sweetly Sing Coo Coo*. Record breaking temperatures were reported world wide, and newspapers shared the front page war news with heat wave news.

There have been other problematic summers. Notorious, of course, were the summers of 1995 when 750 people died in a Chicago heat wave, most of them aged and single room occupants. A high proportion lived in one ward of the city. Then there was the fire in the summer of 2003, when 30,000 died in Europe; 15,000 of them in France, mainly the elderly. Perhaps the toll was intensified because help was not available. August is vacation time in France, and many of those died because their families and medical personnel were out of town. In both of these heat waves, there was a lack of service and connections for those who suffered the most. Europe is once again feeling

a heat wave, but is reported to be better prepared this time. Still, the toll on the aged world will be high.

In the summer, high water temperatures intensify the power of a hurricane and can lead to the kind of winds and waters that ravaged New Orleans and other surrounding areas last year. That threat must still raise nightmarish fears in the minds of many living along the historically hurricane threatened coast lines. A number of articles have suggested the area still isn’t prepared for another hurricane of such tenacity. This year, throughout the world, high temperatures have broken the records held since records have been kept.

While an overwhelming number of scientists see Global Warming as a major cause for extreme temperature changes, floods, and glaciers melting, our politicians are waiting for more evidence. But then, I can’t find any call for action in the NASW News on the subject. Do we have a role?

Before I go on, I want to acknowledge that there are the many other tragedies taking place this summer. To discuss even a small number would be beyond the scope of this column. A list might include: the wars, terrorism, bird flu, starvation and genocide, the volcano eruptions and a tsunami in Indonesia that killed more than 400 people. Warning systems were not yet in place. Are there some of these events we should connect with? Do we have a role? As a profession? As citizens?

Some of this early summer reading and viewing made me reflect on how, in the face of all of these events and more, people faced with catastrophes survive, carry on, and continue to build for the future. In most cases these are the “Yederman;” the common folk

persons we often serve. They might easily be you and me. It is hard to imagine that we are not in some way affected by the summer news. At times, when hope and efforts at sensemaking doesn't quite help, I have thought that the lack of sensemaking can be mediated by humor.

For example: During my summer newspaper reading I suffered an ego shattering blow when I read the findings of a survey on economic class, reported out this summer in the press. According to the report I am about to disappear, if I haven't already. The middle class has vanished! This is not a joke, it is a fact because I read it in the *New York Times*, (Scott). It was substantiated by the *L.A. Times* (Cleeland). It was kinder to me than the *New York Times* since the headline says: "...Middle Class Shrinks", while the *New York Times* headline proclaims: "Cities Shed Middle Class..." The latter made me feel reptilian-like. Shedding my skin is much worse than shrinking, I thought. Both articles indicated that Los Angeles is one of the most economically segregated cities in the United States. New York and Miami are also high on the list. Both articles deal with the growing gap between rich and poor and the loss of the middle class. Now of course this is not funny, because it means there are a lot of poor people out there and the loss of the middle class may mean a loss of support and connections for help. Do we have a role? Of course! But do we have the connections we need to help?

Putnam's theme in his book *Bowling Alone*, is that persons with numerous connections tend to be healthier, more economically well-off, live longer, find jobs more easily, and are more able to accomplish what they want, and so forth. But he says that over the past years, there has been a decrease in civic involvement; loss of membership in various groups and disintegration of community. He calls for an increase in Social Capital, (connections of

trust, reciprocity, support, a more civil society). But my summer reading turned stormy when I read this week that the number of connections persons have with each other is still "shrinking." People are "shedding" their connections, if they ever had them in the first place. Once again my impeccable source is the *New York Times*. The number of confidants a person has is down. "Americans have fewer close friends than before." (Hulbert). Now of course some people have numerous contacts with others through chat rooms on the web, and sources for information are there, and even counseling is available. But what is missing is our connections with those who could be considered confidants. Also missing are the kind of connections that could help you find a job, build a better community, or rush over to help when you or your child is ill.

As I write this, I realize that the summer is just about over. I need to stop reading the newspapers; maybe I will go see the *Da Vinci Code*. Or listen to some music. Now here's something... Oh, it's something by George Gershwin... *Porgy and Bess*...

"Summer time and the living is easy....."
Makes sense to me.

References

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