Disaster after Disaster: Unexpected Thousand-Year Floods and Presidential Elections

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Abstract: One person's disaster may be another's opportunity. Depending on the level of damage one has personally experienced or witnessed others experience may determine the level of impact or fate of recovery. The authors reflect on the state of Louisiana where racial turbulence and a thousand-year flood happened just prior to the presidential election in 2016. Using a base of "disaster capitalism" to frame how we may understand the still-evolving Trump administration, we reflect personally and professionally on how some may profit from the enterprise of disaster and how human service professionals may mitigate devastating results through their own awareness of the narratives and changing societal attention or alienation. Three narratives are presented within a broader discussion of the historical relevance, timing, and experiences of the faculty and practitioner who were initially destabilized by the election results.

Keywords: disasters, Louisiana, Baton Rouge, disaster capitalism, Alton Sterling, Hurricane Katrina, floods

Disaster after Disaster

In August 2016, Baton Rouge and nearby parishes felt the devastating effects of the 1000-year flood that destroyed 110,000 homes with more than $20 billion in damages, killed 10, and displaced nearly all of the people residing in flood impacted areas (Gallo & Russell, 2016). Before miles of destroyed belongings were collected, Louisiana and the nation confronted the election of a president that campaigned with divisive rhetoric. Over a year later, people are still homeless and at risk for enduring economic exploitation and mental health challenges based on the result of disaster exposure, lack of support, and economic hardship (Chang & Broome, 2017). Over a year later, people were either disgusted, disheartened, or delighted with the state of the U.S. and its leadership. In some ways people were either harmed or spared by the election. The writers fell into a category concerned about how the results may harm the most vulnerable.

Since 2000, more than 28 subtropical cyclones/hurricanes have struck Louisiana (Landsea, 2017). Likely the most well-known, and also the most expensive was Hurricane Katrina which caused over $106 billion in damages and destroyed parts of New Orleans and nearby parishes in 2005 (Burnkard, Namulanda, & Ratard, 2008; Lorenzetti, 2015). The resultant flooding due to the levy breach killed 1,577 people, notably people who were poor and living near the levee break and unable to evacuate. Ninety-three percent of the decedents were Black and 40% were over 65 years old (Heldman, 2011). A month following Katrina, Hurricane Rita hit the southwest region of the state. Less than five years later another major hurricane, Gustav, struck Baton Rouge. That same year the Deepwater Horizon (BP) oil spill gushed 210 million gallons of oil in the gulf for five solid months from April to September, rendering those related to the waterways and fisheries jobless and devastating the Gulf (Allen & D'Elia, 2015).

Disasters, whether natural, human-caused or even, perhaps, political, are highlighted or forgotten, depending upon media interest and the political climate. Coverage may depend on who's harmed and who's escaped the wrath of disaster. Understanding what is heard or what evades attention may be partly understood through the lens of "disaster capitalism" (Klein, 2006, 2007), which speaks to how disasters can be immensely profitable in a free market economy.

Louisiana, like the rest of the U.S., can also be seen through a lens of still recovering from the disaster that was an economic system based on slavery and subsequent legislated racism through Jim Crow laws and separate but equal policies. Less than a month before the flood, the capitol city witnessed the killing of 37-year-old Alton Sterling. Sterling, a Black man, died on July 5, 2016 in broad daylight, from the gunfire of a Baton Rouge police officer. The tragedy prompted painful reactions to police brutality and energized both the Black Lives Matter movement and a counter Blue Lives Matter effort, which itself ultimately succeeded in passing legislation that made resisting arrest a felony.

For Louisiana, the 2016 flood was just another major disaster in a state all too familiar with catastrophe. There was another storm brewing: the 45th presidential election, which like a hurricane's unpredictable path, wasn't clear where it was headed and what aftermath it would leave, but there was no question people would experience the effects differently depending on the ideological topography and perspective. The following reflections on the election disaster are from three experts in the helping profession: clinical psychologist, Dr. Richelle Allen, who was working in a large public mental health facility in Massachusetts, and two social work faculty at Louisiana State University, Dr. Jennifer Scott, a scholar interested in poverty, inequality and immigration policy, in her second year, and Dr. Priscilla Allen, a gerontologist who focuses on psychosocial care of older adults receiving long term care, who is in her sixteenth year. Their memories are presented to illustrate how disaster can create tension and power differentials that both help and hinder those positioned to help.

For some, the election of Donald Trump felt like an unexpected disaster, forcing those who could most anticipate that their lives would be detrimentally impacted should he fulfill his campaign promises to learn new ways of thinking, coping, and practicing. "Disaster capitalism" speaks to how disasters - both natural and human made - yield enormous profits in a free market economy; a governmental hands-off or outsourcing approach, more like a state-within-state, less fettered by restrictions (Klein, 2007). Conceptualized by journalist Naomi Klein, "disaster capitalism" helps us to understand how some profit immensely after devastation occurs.

The "disaster capitalism" lens is helpful to understanding how both the Trump administration's use of crisis and the state of seemingly constant disaster in Louisiana wear people down to get them to stop fighting by blaming both sides. The government can appear humanistic through the offshoots to private enterprise and focusing on how some organizations rebuild and appear to have a sturdy infrastructure, yet reducing the government's responsibility to the people most hurt (Klein, 2006). The media, or the political party may focus on the well-funded projects and blame those who don't reap financial rewards as languishing and incapable of bouncing back. Disaster after disaster in Louisiana wears people down and hinders their ability to fight the power differentials to win better lives for themselves, and then can be blamed for their own failings. As

an example, the people who work the front lines of repair are paid minimum wages, while those who set the contracts in times of recovery profit in enormous ways and become more powerful. The lists of disasters and destruction are mentioned with the historical underpinning that capitalism without concern can erode the foundation that people need to be productive; in a structural scaffold, we may even rely on those who suffer. The belief of the capacity of the disenfranchised and those of us who work to counter social injustice, however, is never extinguished, but it may have been tested in the days, weeks, and months after the election.

Election Reflections

What does this mean to those we serve, work with, teach, and counsel when we ourselves are reeling?

Dr. Richelle Allen, a psychotherapist in Massachusetts reflected:

> *On the morning of November 8th, it was a challenge to be a therapist and listen for meaning while my own internal echo shouted: "Not my president!" My first post-election clinical activity was stages of change, a weekly psychotherapy process group for individuals with life threatening medical conditions secondary to intravenous drug use. Four women and three men, each individuals in early recovery, each intimately familiar with one disaster after another, seemed unmoved—consistent with the emotional numbing often seen in individuals with complex trauma, I thought. To address apparent alexithymia, I explicitly checked in about the change we had all just experienced. Each of the women surprisingly commented with relief that it wasn't "her" and together agreed that their relief was in large part because our new president is not "a woman." The consensus among this group of young white women in (allegedly) one of the most progressive states in the country, was that a woman could never handle the emotional stress of a job like the President's. My mantra changed to "Not my country."*

> *Meanwhile, I received anecdotal evidence that the demand for psychotherapy drastically increased in places like college counseling centers after the election. I didn't see that shift in the state system, however, but the setting may not have been similarly explored. Beyond obvious difference in ideology (And where does that come from anyway?), perhaps those who are healthy enough to fight against internalized hate respond with outrage and those more familiar with disaster and shame normalize the mess and carry on with perpetual numbing.*

Dr. Jennifer Scott, an assistant professor at LSU shared her practice perspective and concern for the immigrant population post-election:

> *For about the last decade I have been working with the Hispanic/Latino immigrant community in the U.S. The largest portion of my work life during this period, outside of research, has been with a worker center in Texas where, among other things, I would conduct intakes with construction and domestic workers who had not been paid for their work or were injured on the job. For many of these families, life was lived paycheck to*

paycheck, and a loss of any income could spell disaster. Even when they were able to recover their wages or receive compensation for injury, it rarely meant long term financial security; jobs in this sector are precarious and it was not uncommon to see a worker again for a new case of wage theft or injury. On top of this struggle (or at times arguably creating it), some families had to cope with a constant awareness of an additional source of impending disaster, that they or their loved ones could be picked up by immigration and deported. The feeling of waiting for the next disaster was often palatable.

Having arrived in Baton Rouge just in time for the 2016 floods, I was just barely getting my bearings in this new community when the election results hit. Tasked with teaching social welfare policy, I take seriously my charge to support students with a diverse range of backgrounds and political opinions in learning about the architecture of our social welfare system and the policy making process in a way that encourages them to engage in policy advocacy, both as citizens and on behalf of their clients. I encourage students to look at social problems through multiple frames, research the debate on policy positions and to interview and understand stakeholders with contrasting perspectives as part of policy analysis.

Yet the rhetoric of the Trump campaign and what I understood of the soon to be president's policy positions challenged my understanding of both the pedagogy and purpose of this practice. Regardless of one's positions on questions of public policy, the man who would become the new president ran a campaign that used stereotypes, not data, about Mexicans and immigrants (among others) to incite a base of support among people who either felt economically marginalized or were unwilling to consider sharing their wealth. So how does one present as rational policy positions that are grounded in stereotypes, not real information? Is it responsible to ask students to take seriously statements that present a very real challenge to science and reason? To act as though I accept and/or ask them to accept that an administration that has willingly associated itself with white supremacist groups explicitly interested in disenfranchising and marginalizing communities of color could propose anything that does not actively support those heinous goals?

Since inauguration we have seen one attempted policy after another promise to further terrorize immigrant communities, to keep people in a state of waiting for the next disaster. Increases in number of raids by immigration enforcement have torn more families apart, and even citizens have been deported because they fit the profile. To support his candidacy, and then his presidency, a person must either agree with these stereotypes or simply be willing to throw people (or not mind if someone else throws them) under the bus for a fairly ambiguous promise of personal economic gain. By asking us to accept alternative facts, this administration calls us to question what it means to encourage understanding "both sides." Teaching and advocacy require supporting students to understand that for policy positions to even warrant consideration all sides must first be grounded in rationality, fact and a sense of social justice if we are to avoid disaster.

Dr. Priscilla Allen, a gerontologist and professor at LSU recalled a teachable experience:

I showed up for my social work class just following the election with few words; my intention was to help people to focus on their community engagement projects. I wanted to get in and get out unscathed, which was out of character for me; I'm by description, a processor to the point of saturation, and typically relish and invite productive conflict in order to activate problem solving and learning.

On this particular morning, however, I felt raw and unwilling to engage in what I was still reeling from. What I failed to recognize was that there were students feeling the same, and those who saw a silver lining were likewise willing to share and the two positions were brewing a storm in the midst of my resistance. The atmosphere was tense. A student suggested there was something going on and we should talk about it. I had encouraged students to bring issues up to grapple with, to process, but it was me that felt incapable to bring up the election. I didn't want to isolate anyone or myself. I felt alone and risk-averse. In times where there is the incredible burden and opportunity of academic freedom, there is also a very real responsibility not to disenfranchise persons in their own classroom. Everyone was on edge. Friends. Family. Students. Administrators.

Finally, I sat down and opened the class for discussion. It may have been one of the more memorable experiences in my 16 years. The students called me out on my resistance. We spoke. I listened. There were people on both sides, some who were disgusted, and others who wanted to say to give the new administration a chance. It was a message in tolerance and in listening. Social workers must have a nonjudgmental stance with their clients. It doesn't mean we are nonjudgmental, it just means we must examine our feeling and continue to work on the proverbial but important adage: starting where the client is.

The three of us may even understand why people wanted the troubling charismatic Trump. He told his voting base what they craved to hear, what they believe they can become, and it didn't hurt that his supporters overwhelmingly despised President Obama. Depending on your position, he is the bully or the hero. Someone who will stand up and unabashedly present as a protector of the working class obviously carried clout among the majority of the electoral college count. A renowned expert in race and class discrimination put it this way. "If I hadn't gotten a raise in 12 years and someone promised me one, I'd probably vote for them, too." Considering the piqued hope of at-risk people is relevant.

There is no doubt that disaster hurts those who already have limited resources, live in flood-prone areas with housing that is often less secure, and live in places that are globally and economically disenfranchised (White, 2013; World Bank, 2017). Those who lost loved ones or property, however, or who experienced the trauma through other people's anguish may feel the toll so much that they live in a position of suspended reality, denial, or disillusionment. Identifying trust and resource assistance especially for people feel disconnected or disempowered is key. When Trump won the election, there were people who were elated, or spitefully happy, but there were many people who experienced unspeakable devastation and fear, watching in slow motion, unable to make sense of the historical event, as if disaster had struck.

We can anticipate long-standing psychological trauma for people who've endured natural disasters and who've been preyed on by forceful neglect. Being aware of the cost of disaster and the exploitation of both the political and the private enterprise using a "disaster capital" framework may be a valuable tool in the minds and efforts of those who fight social injustice. The lessons, and perhaps the silver lining of disaster aftermath, is that one ideally assesses what's lost and creates a new meaning. Like rebuilding after disaster, a renovated interest in the political sphere with more participation may result. That is if the survivors are fortunate to work with people who will help them to evaluate the possibility, the restructuring and integration of trauma, unpacking the pros and cons, and share to the experiences with interested agents invested in true recovery.

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