

Not My Fault: After tragedy, be a helper

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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My husband and I spent five days last summer in Pittsburgh. Our daughter was performing in an opera festival and it was an opportunity to visit a city we'd never visited. I had lumped Pittsburgh in my mind with other Midwestern cities – Cleveland, Detroit, Cincinnati. Not quite sure what I was expecting, but it wasn't the beautiful, diverse walking-friendly city that we found.

We stayed in a wonderful old stone home in the Shadyside neighborhood. Shadyside and neighboring Squirrel Hill harken back to the salad days of the early 20th century when Pittsburgh was one of the wealthiest cities in America, with homes built by the burgeoning upper middle class. The tree-lined avenues invited exploration and there are plenty of shops and restaurants within easy walking distance.

I became a big Pittsburgh fan. We barely made a dent in the multitude of museums, explored Fort Pitt and the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers, rode the funicular, saw a Pirates game and took a day excursion to Fallingwater, the summer "cabin" Frank Lloyd Wright designed for Edgar Kaufmann that became the most famous house in the country. It was easy to see why Pittsburgh has been consistently listed at or near the top of America's most livable city lists.

Last week's assault on the Tree of Life Congregation was a gut punch. It was no more than a ten-minute walk away from where we stayed, and we drove by it several times a day. Although we were there only a short time, this was my neighborhood. I can easily recall the sights, sounds and smells and I am connected to what happened there. If it could happen there, it could happen anywhere.

Reports of atrocities, disasters and tragedies in some part of the world surface every day. Developing a thick skin to create distance is one way to remain sane. But it is also a way to reinforce denial, treating events that happen in far away places or to groups we don't identify with as something that can't happen to us or to people we know and love.

There are connections between human-caused tragedies and earthquakes disasters. Both cause loss. Both occur

without warning. Both require response and use the same incident command/emergency management protocols. Both often result in finger pointing and recrimination as to what could have been done to prevent or lessen impacts.

There are also important differences. As horrific as the Pittsburgh shootings were, they did not meet the legal definition of "disaster." There will be no Federal Disaster Declaration by the President and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will play to role in the aftermath. That does not lessen the magnitude of what happened, it is just how the Stafford Act, the legislation passed in 1988 that established the role of FEMA in disasters, governs how the Federal Government reimburses states and those impacted by disasters.

FEMA assistance and disaster declarations are based entirely on impacts and financial costs, regardless of the cause. The Stafford Act reimburses governments the costs of managing a disaster that exceeds local or state abilities to respond – such as clearing debris, repairing roads and bridges and government structures, providing shelter assistance and in some cases providing low-cost loans to businesses and individuals for rebuilding. It is independent of the magnitude of an earthquake, the category of a hurricane or the number of people killed in a hate crime or terrorist attack.

There have been 112 FEMA declarations to date in 2018. As usual, severe storms (including hurricanes, typhoons and tornadoes) are leading the pack with 56, but close behind are fire events at 52. Of the 12 declarations for California this year, 11 were fire emergencies. No disasters this year, or last or for at least the past decade have been ascribed to non-natural causes. The 1995 Oklahoma bombings and the 2001 terrorist attacks both received Presidential Disaster Declarations, but the Sandy Hook (2012) and Las Vegas (2017) shootings did not. The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was never declared a federal disaster.

The primary damage caused by events like the Pittsburgh shootings was to heart and morale of a community and not to buildings or roads. The recovery won't involve bricks and mortar and construction crews. In a way it's a more difficult one because there is no list of the repair sites or the volume of debris to be removed.

The Tree of Life Congregation was also in Mr. Rogers' neighborhood. Fred Rogers lived in a brick home about three blocks from the Congregation. Our children grew up in the Rogers era and he is both hero and role model

for me. When faced with a dilemma, I'll often think, "what would Mr. Rogers do" in this situation.

It is a small blessing that Mr. Rogers was not alive to experience the attack of last week. But I have a pretty good guess of what he would say. He often told the story about when he was a boy and would see scary things on the news: "My mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers — so many caring people in this world."

<https://www.fredrogers.org/parents/special-challenges/tragic-events.php>

The key to recovery is to be one of the helpers.

Preparedness tip of the week: Choose an out-of-the-area contact person. Arrange for someone who lives out-of-state to be your go-to person when a disaster affects your area. Make sure other family members and friends know whom you have designated, and to call them for updates on how you are doing. It can be difficult to get information out in a time of disaster, but much easier to only reach one person than dozens.

Lori Dengler, PhD is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, and an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. Questions or comments about this column, or want a free copy of the preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground"? Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu

<https://www.times-standard.com/2018/10/25/lori-dengler-kudos-to-the-rising-number-of-shakeout-participants/>