

Disaster, Environment and Social Order: Reflections on Katrina
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Kai Erikson
William R. Kenan Jr. Professor Emeritus
Sociology and American Studies
Yale University
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I wanted to begin by talking generally about the study of disasters and to say that this is one of the true growth industries not only in sociology, but in the other social sciences as well. Those of us who have been drawn to that grim topic have had very steady employment in recent years, as you can well imagine, because the human landscape of our time has just been littered by specimens of the particular events that we study. Within the past year and a half there was that tsunami in South Asia that swept away a quarter of a million people. There was an earthquake in Pakistan that killed some hundred thousand people outright and doomed many more to what is turning out for them to be a very hard winter and probably a much harder fate in the long run. There's been the endless brutality in Darfur that has so far been responsible for some two hundred thousand deaths with no end in sight and I'm not even adding that the number of deaths from that conflict actually comes closer to two million over the long haul. And then of course there is our own Katrina, which is in some ways a minor catastrophe when measured by the number of casualties that were actually counted there, but of tremendous importance when measured in other ways too.

Not far beyond that horizon of a year and a half there's the looming presences of what we have decided to call 09/11. There was Chernobyl. There were the violent slaughters that took place in Cambodia and Rwanda and what was once Yugoslavia. A few years before that and within the lifetimes certainly of the oldest of us, and I would certainly count myself in that category, are what historians may someday nominate as the two most important events of modern times one of them being the Holocaust and the others being the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I'm too much in awe of the Holocaust to have ever said a word about it but I have written a little bit about the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Why would anybody be interested in such a subject matter as that? Well one obvious answer is that disasters are so frequent in our time that their presence is simply inescapable. You can't turn the corner without running into one and if your mind is set in that way there are plenty of things to look at. But it isn't really just a matter of numbers either. In the first place modern disasters do so much more harm when they do occur which has something to do with the way humankind distributes itself across the surfaces of the earth and something to do with the way our species finds a way to concentrate people and ideas and activities and things of value in very small clusters where they become a target for any kind of activity.

And the second thing, why disasters are so much more important than they used to be, is that news of them is broadcast so quickly and so widely that they for all practical purposes become a moment in everybody's history. They become a datum in everybody's store of knowledge. They become a part of everybody's collective consciousness. So that we'll be able to sit tonight and talk about a tsunami that took place half a world away and the people who lived near that tsunami would know exactly what we were talking about when we use the words 09/11. These are universal events by now.

For sociologists and for other social scientists there's another answer to that question. Sigmund Freud a hundred years ago or more said that one of the reasons why it's important to study the disordered mind is to see how the ordered mind in fact functions. It's like examining the pieces of a broken crystal to see where the fault lines were in that structure in the first place. And in the same way that's true of almost any kind of disaster. Katrina is a very good example in that sense but it is also far from unique. What a disaster often does is to peel away the surface of the social order in such a way so that you can reach down inside and look at the workings of that social order. It's almost like one of those clocks that fascinated me when I was a boy where one of the sides is taken away and replaced by a pane of glass so you can see the mechanisms clicking away on the inside.

This may seem like a strange association at first, but this is sometimes even the case literally. I don't know anybody here has had the experience of being in New Orleans or along the Gulf Coast since that disaster, but those of you who have will know what I mean when I say you can look upon acres upon acres upon acres of homes that have been broken open by the force of some wind or the force of some water or the force of some other kinds of surge. It's almost as if the outer layer was stripped away in the same sense that I was talking about. It's almost embarrassing to look at it sometimes because its like a body being broken open in front of you and revealing the anatomy of the thing inside. It's almost like attending an autopsy and, as I am going to suggest to you, that's a pretty good metaphor in other ways too.

That example that I gave you belongs more in the realm of metaphor than it does in other ways, but this one does not. Do you remember this? That in the early days after the collapse of the levies in New Orleans the reports that came through the press were almost unanimous in saying that something truly horrendous was happening in the streets of New Orleans, in the Convention Center, in the Superdome, and in other parts of the city. Something dark, something sinister, something depraved, something menacing. Rescue vehicles were being fired upon. Assaults and rapes and homicides were taking place in the hundreds. Anarchy was loose on the land. It was like a tale of horror written by maybe Thomas Hobbes and with illustrations by William Blake in the darkest and the sourest of all the many sour and dark moods that he was capable of. The word insurgency was brought up any number of times. Many of you will remember that. And what is being talked about here? To put it bluntly what was being talked about is black fellow townspeople, in New Orleans in particular, black fellow citizens of this land.

Well the good news is that most of it turned out not to be true. So we can say, “Wow, what a relief.” There was a lot of looting. There is no question about that. A lot of it took the form of flat out stealing of a normal sort. We saw on television any number of people picking up a plasma television set worth a thousand dollars and walking off into the pitch dark of New Orleans where there hasn’t been any electricity then and there hasn’t been any electricity since. Other people were foraging, they were finding ways to live. I met one young man down in New Orleans when I first went and I asked him what he was doing and he looked at me with this small smile and he says, “Well, man, I was living large,” which was a very good expression.

As it happens for those people who study disasters this is not an unfamiliar thing at all. Rumors of misdoing are so common in disasters like this and any other that they can almost be predicted. But these reports were so far off the scale that they need a different kind of explanation. We need to ask where those reports came from. We need to ask why did reporters and the rest of them believe them so readily. What are we going to say about those reporters who are supposed to be shrewd in the ways of the human animal and what are we going to say about ourselves who believed it as quickly as we did? Is this one of those windows that is opened into the inner workings of our society that gives us a view of our minds and of our social order?

Well you can at least say this, that the world must look like that to some of us and perhaps to some degree to all of us. And what is this anyway? Is this a southern vision of hell? Is this an American vision of the class structure? Is this a racist vision of any of those things? Some of that can be attributed to the excitement of the moment because this is the kind of thing that does happen in disasters. But I would suggest at the same time that the excitement has a way of summoning up something from deep in the mind that was already there all along. This is something well worth pondering.

People who study disasters make a distinction of the following sort. On one hand they talk about natural disasters which in law and in everyday usage is what people normally mean by the expression “Acts of God.” These are disturbances or rumblings that issue from some location out in the natural world or someplace like that and come across the horizon and intrude upon the human world. The obvious examples of natural disasters are the ones I have mentioned so far: tsunamis and earthquakes and hurricanes. But we could add to that fires and floods and plagues and all of the other awful happenings that are described so lavishly in the Old Testament.

And on the other hand, specialists talk about technological disasters by which they mean events that result from human actions, from human behaviors, from human motives. These acts result from miscalculations and error, which is what the story is told about Chernobyl, or comes from a matter of stark malice, which is what happened in 09/11.

Now I said Acts of God a minute ago and I would like to take a very brief detour into a territory that I would never have dreamt of entering a decade ago, or twenty years ago, or thirty years ago when I first got into this. But Acts of God are a legal expression. And the general assumption being made when people use that expression is that God caused

them to happen if only in the sense that the heavens set natural cycles into motion. The comings and goings of winds, the risings and fallings of waters, the arrivals and departures of fires and plagues and earthquakes and iceflows and all of the other shifts in the order of things that somehow come around the corner to bring hard times to people of the earth. And that really is the way of nature. Every now and then, earthquakes erupt along faults that are already a part of the earth's structure. Every now and then floodwaters rise along plains that are named for the odds that floods are going to take place on them. We've talked about 50 year flood plains, we've talked about 100 year flood plains.

These are what a colleague of mine, Charles Perrow, calls 'normal accidents.' It's the title of a book and very good expression. What he means by that is that these kinds of things are just simply built into the design of the universe. He would say that the same thing is true of human structures as well. They are now so intricate and so complex that disasters of one kind or another are not just likely to occur but inevitable over the long haul. I'm interested in nuclear power for reasons I won't go into tonight, but we even have estimates of the following sort: that the odds of the failure of a nuclear reactor is expressed in almost the same way as the odds of a flood. (This is one that I got some years passed. I have no knowledge of the accuracy of this nor do I really think accuracy has anything to do with this.) But a core meltdown can be expected once every 25,000 reactor years of operation. Now I ask you how would anybody make a calculation like that? Especially when almost two of them occurred within one year. But that's not what I'm here to talk about.

I'm saying all of this because this is not what Pat Robertson means when he talks about Acts of God when he alludes slyly to the possibility that God might have caused Katrina because he was so irritated that a gay woman was actually treated as a worthy human being in a public ceremony somewhere in the United States. One can ask, you know quite reasonably, what kind of a world does that man live in? But at the same time we have to recognize that that view of where disasters come from and what they are all about is far older than sociology and far older than the study of history. They are of very considerable lineage. That's the story that is told about Sodom and Gomorrah, and more often than we would like to remember is that is the story that was actually told about the sack of Rome and about the London plague and about the Lisbon earthquake and any number of other disasters of that kind. I had written this sentence or thought about this sentence before I noticed in something I had read just the other night. The mayor of New Orleans used an expression very like that in the last month or two. I can't remember exactly what he said but he talked about New Orleans as something that must have irritated God in some way.

So let me just add as I would bring this detour in return to the main highway that the victims of disasters have a tendency to wonder much more than Pat Robertson does as to where the intentions of God should be seen in a disaster that has occurred to them. But unlike Pat Robertson, who sees the disaster as an occasion to ponder the delinquencies of other people, most people who live through disasters use that occasion to ponder if there is anything wrong with themselves. If they are in any way at fault for this terrible thing

that has happened. And I'll sermonize for one minute saying that from my way of thinking that ought to be the first concern of a preacher to ensure survivors that it is not their fault. But what do I know, I am a sociologist.

The distinction between natural and technological disasters is quite useful for many different kinds of purposes. It's a very simple classification scheme, natural and man-made. We can't say man-made: human-induced or technological. I stand corrected. But that distinction is a very difficult one to deal with. When a mine shaft collapses in Appalachia, it is almost always in part a collaboration on one hand between a restless mountain and a human error underground on the other. When an epidemic spreads across Central Africa, it owes its virulence at least in part to new strains of bacillus that come out of the natural world somewhere and the way that those are being reached by old customs of the people that are living there.

Most disasters, in any case, are somewhere in between. They are an interaction. They are an intersection. A collision might be a better word between an event that can be seen as having been generated somewhere out in the natural world coming to meet with some pattern of human settlement, some human way of life. If a tremendous gale or flood or something like that registered at the very top of whatever scales are available to measure them by would sweep across a desolate plain somewhere and do no harm to human beings, do no harm to social structures, it's not likely that they would be called a disaster by any news agency anywhere on earth. It's not likely that they would even be considered news.

What's really important here is not, from a sociological standpoint, is not how we assign a particular disaster to a place in a classification scheme like the one I just suggested to you and certainly on the basis of its external features. But what's important is what the disaster did to human tissues, what it did to human minds, how it worked its way into the fabric of human experience. And for these purposes what we need to know is how that event was visualized, how it was coped with, by the people who encountered it head on. How it felt. How it is remembered in the musings of the day. How it is remembered in the dreams of night. How the narrative spun around it came about. What damage it did to the flows of continuing lives.

Now it may be worth noting in this connection how often survivors remember the force that came out of nowhere to crush them and to hurt them as living creatures with personality and motive and something very much like malice. It just happens, I bet you don't know this, it's just one of those happy coincidences that occurs in history and the social sciences, that William James, the great William James, was in the vicinity of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906. And he felt the tremors as he was lying in bed quite early in the morning. And his first reaction to them was that this was something that had been aimed directly at him personally. He wrote, "I personified the earthquake as a permanent individual entity. It came directly to *me*." And the *me* is italicized. "Animosity and intent were never more present in any human action, nor did any human activity ever more definitely point back to a living agent as to its source and origins." That's how social scientists talked a hundred years ago.

I once did a study of a mining community in West Virginia called Buffalo Creek. It was crushed by a huge avalanche of black water and solid waste. I was struck in the year or two that I spent interviewing down there how many survivors remembered thinking that the floodwaters were like living creatures which had actually come after them as individual persons just like William James. One of them said, "The water seemed like the demon itself, it came, destroyed and left." And another person said, "I felt like the water was a thing alive and was coming after us to get us all. I still think of it as a live thing." This was maybe two or three years after the event.

Similar thoughts of that I happen to know have been echoed all along the Gulf Coast and all through New Orleans in the time after Katrina. One person in New Orleans said, this was a little tongue in cheek, but you'll get the idea, "That water didn't knock or ring the bell, it chased us right up the stairs, right into the attic and on up to the roof. Now water is not supposed to be like that." Now this was a joke, but this was a joke on the part of a person who I'll bet you anything dreams in the middle of the day of this black water coming after him. And I'd be amazed to learn too, although I don't know anything about the culture, that the reaction was very common along the coasts of Indonesia and Sri Lanka when the tsunami hit. I don't know about any of you, but I saw a lot of news clips of water that seems like it's coming over there and suddenly it makes a turn and comes directly at me. Of course that's how you see it but it's at the photographer who at that point had the sense to get out of there and that's the end of the newsclip. If that water didn't look like thing alive coming at you I can't imagine what would.

It's a little stretch from what I just said to where I am going, but we need that sometimes on public occasions. We don't have the time to fill in all the mortar that is necessary. But what I would like to suggest here that in a light way that there are many times that it is very easy to imagine that the incoming calamities of one kind or another, it almost doesn't matter what they are, actually seem to be probing the landscape for its softest flanks. Its almost as if there was a heat seeking device searching out the most vulnerable, the least defended people to be found anywhere along that vast horizon. Poor people and other equally disadvantaged people are so often the targets of disasters that they have been known to wonder about that again and again, "Why us, oh Lord? And why here?"

If William James could react as he did in the comfort of a hotel room, he was actually in Palo Alto which is a good distance away from San Francisco, and I remind you he was a Harvard professor, it's not hard to see why people who live in poor fishing villages following very different kinds of cultures would find it easy to fit the same thing. But when you look in on such a scene from a reflective distance, which is what at least I am trying to do here tonight, it is clear that human populations are spread out in such a way that the least protected persons are the most likely to be located in harm's way. So in a sense, it is not a situation where disasters seek out the vulnerable, but a situation in which the vulnerable are already located in places where disasters are most likely to strike. Tsunamis don't seek out the poor, the poor are pressed to the edges of the sea in places like Indonesia because of the property values there and because of the kinds of employment that is available there. Earthquakes don't seek out the poor, they strike

evenly at all the structures in its path but do the most damage of course to the frailest and the most shoddily built of the housing. If we have time I can tell you maybe what Kobe looked like after the earthquake there. Toxic wastes don't seek out the poor, they are simply deposited on the same terrains that poor people are deposited on and for the same reason: it has something to do with the value of the land underfoot.

A list like that could be stretched out endlessly. But I could even go a step further to suggest that if you drew a map of the locations of which disasters are most likely to strike in this world, you'll also be sketching at least an approximate map of the locations where the poor are most likely to be gathered. This isn't true all the time because there are exceptions by the dozen, but it is true much of the time. It's a correlation as we sociologists like to say. It just happens enough to qualify as a pattern. And there should be no real mystery to that, you know when you come right down to it. We were talking earlier today about the Mississippi. Who lives along the bluffs and who lives along the floodplains of the Mississippi River do you think? Who do you think lives in a corridor of chemical plants on the Mississippi Delta that is named Cancer Alley? But you see the point.

Now Katrina is extremely instructive in this regard. It hasn't escaped the notice of those people who were exposed to the disaster that the failure of the levies in New Orleans had the sharpest effect on those people who lived in neighborhoods the farthest below sea level. That's how gravity works. But the people who lived in the lowest elevations in the mean time tended to be poor or black or both because that's how the social order works. The same is true up to a point along the Gulf Coast, although that's much more complicated. Living along the outer edges of the land and thus being exposed to the dangers of the sea are hard scrabble fishing villages, other communities that engage in occupations very much on the margin. And mix together in much smaller quantities with casinos and condominiums, and stately prebellum homes. The casinos and the condominiums are very new, the stately homes are very old. But they do share a commonality that they happen for the most part to be insured, which is not true of almost anything you would find in the fishing villages.

So as I just said a minute ago, most disasters should be seen as an interaction between some kind of disturbance that issues from the natural and now that I've brought this subject up sometimes even the human made world colliding with some kind of human living arrangement. We have become very expert in this technological age in measuring the force of that disturbance, of that disturbing agent. We can assign grades to earthquakes and hurricanes. We can measure the volume of floods. We even know how to quantify the yields of nuclear detonations. But on the other side of that correlation, we're not so good at calculating the levels of the vulnerability of the human and the social and the environmental landscapes that disasters struck. And it might seem like a good idea, this is a worthy project for a social scientist sometime, to try and construct some kind of vulnerability index. It would be how solid the flesh that is being exposed to the disaster, how sturdy are the minds, how resilient are the communities in which people live, how supporting and nurturing are the traditions by which they live, how bruised, how exhausted, how beat up is the land itself.

Obviously I'm kidding because there's no way on earth that we're ever going to be able to reconstruct that kind of an index. There's going to be no rating to 5.6 as for an earthquake, there's going to be no rating of category 3 as for a hurricane. But at least we could think a bit about that matter.

I once made a distinction a long time ago between what I call acute and chronic disasters. It was a variation on the theme that I brought up a moment ago that disasters should be characterized not only by their formal properties by which I mean the velocities of their winds or the intensity of their tremors or the volume of their destructive power or any such matter as that, but rather by the kind of havoc that they leave in their wake. And what would happen I asked on that occasion, that was quite a number of years ago, if the definition of disaster depended not on what an event looked like but what the event did to the people and the things and the land that were exposed to it. Not what the event looked like but what the landscape looked like after the event had passed.

Now what acute disasters do, acute, I'm not describing their beauty, what acute disasters like storms, fires, explosions can do to people is to cause a deep sense of shock, almost a concussion of the spirit. They can cause feelings of hopelessness about the future as well as a lingering doubt about the reliability of the human and natural worlds in which we live. We will come back to that.

Acute disasters can slow the reflexes. They can numb the mind. They can depress the spirit. These are among the manifestations of what clinicians mean when they talk about trauma and any of the different forms of that word. All of this has been very well established by disaster studies. Frances Westley described those things as something that erodes the human spirit, suggesting that it is something like the way that it erodes the natural landscape, which I would take credit for if I thought I could get away with it. That's really neat. Erosion is a word I can share across many different disciplinary boundaries.

Now if you asked, where in this world will you be most likely to encounter those ways of behaving that I was just describing, those frames of mind. Many of those who have been there, who have seen that, who have had some kind of experience with it would nominate such places as these: refugee camps and sharecroppers huts, inner cities and remote mountain hollows, skid rows and battlefields and perhaps reservations set aside, perhaps some of the reservations set aside for Native Americans. These in many ways are places where they already have assembled at one time or another and become more defeated.

Many of the people who are found there, in such places as that, have been traumatized by sustained exposure to poverty. Or by the mindless brutality of the kind that we know in Rwanda and Darfur. Or by forms of exploitation and degradation that have marked the colonial past of vast portions of our world. Or by being driven away from lands in which people feel at home and among their own kind, where people feel human and feel intact. In Frances' introduction she mentioned the talk that Bill Cronon gave that was the first of series and it was called, "A Sense of Place." Those of you who heard it did so in this

hall, I heard it on a tape walking along a ridge in New Mexico with the sun out. It's a very good way to be acquainted with the work of William Cronon. I would like to pay him back for that pleasure by giving two very brief stories about a sense of place that he can add to that enormous store of such tales that he keeps in the back of his mind.

The first of these stories Mike Bell has heard at least a dozen times and I ask his forgiveness. It was about a time I was interviewing some Haitian migrant farm workers in South Florida who had gone through a terrible disaster. They spoke only Creole and I speak only English and that was not a good mix. But I was aided by a very brilliant young anthropologist who spoke Creole and knew the Haitian people well. And I did what most sociologists do, I asked the dumbest question in our vocabulary which is "Where are you from?" If I ask you where are you from you are going to tell me probably where you were born or where you live. That's a much more complicated question for most people in the world. Even I knew enough Creole to be able to tell that she was not asking the people "Where are you from?" She was asking something else. When I asked her what she was saying she said I know what you are trying to find out and I'm asking them, "where are you a person?" Sense of place.

This other story takes place in Stadtschlaining in the far eastern edge of Austria up against the Hungarian border. Sociologists and anthropologists are interested in whether the people who live there think of themselves as Austrian in the long-term or think of themselves as Hungarian. So a sociologist, this was not me this time, but someone very much like myself got off the square in Stadtschlaining one day, walked up to a man (sociologists can be extremely rude) and walked up to somebody and says, "Where are you from?" The man looked up to heaven for help looked down at the ground to see if there was a hole to get into and he looked to his right and he looked to his left. What the sociologist wanted to find out is does this guy think of himself as Austrian or Hungarian. And the man went through all of this that I just described and finally he just says, "I'm from here." Sense of place.

I'm going to return to the contrast between acute and chronic disasters in a moment but for now we are already on another detour so I might as well make the most of it. And this time from the talk of disasters writ large to the talk of Katrina as a singular event with my topic still being for the moment a sense of place.

I noted earlier that Katrina was not all that impressive of a catastrophe when measured on the scale of physical casualties which is how we usually do it if you think about it. Was it 1000 people dead? Was it 1100 dead? Was it 1300 people dead? We really don't know which if you think about it is almost an astonishing fact. Vague answers like that is what you get from an earthquake in some remote corner of Ecuador. But we truly have no idea how many people died and probably never will. But Katrina involved a very impressive evacuation of population. About 1 million people left their homes to get out of harm's way and it might have been many more than that, we don't know that either. And that's getting up there. This is not the largest evacuation in American history, something like two and a half million people hurried down the public highways in Florida when a hurricane named Francis took place. Does anybody even remember that? It was one year

before Katrina, two and a half million people. I had completely forgotten about it even though disasters are my business. But that evacuation and others like it are very short in duration. People go off for a day or two and then they come back. The evacuation from Katrina is almost sure to be very long-term, even for those people who someday do manage to return home. And it's going to be permanent for the people who never do get home at all which as of right now looks very much as though is going to be the vast majority. So in that sense, what we are talking about here is not an evacuation at all but the early stages of what will soon have to be classified as a migration. There are comparisons that we could make about that too.

The exodus from the Dust Bowl in the 1930s involved maybe the same number, a million people. And the migration of people from the rural south to the urban north in the late 1930s and the early 1940s was maybe one and a half times the size of the migration we're talking about. And the waves of European immigration to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was in the tens of millions. So this is not the largest shift of population in our history. It's not even the largest shift when we're talking a shift that is quite internal to the country itself. But the odds are that it was far and away the most abrupt, that it was far and away the most scattered, and is going to be far and away the most disruptive. The evacuation from the Gulf Coast and New Orleans was a matter of very few hours. The migration from the Dust Bowl was a matter of months and years, the migration from the South to the North was a matter of decades. But a million or more people left almost the same general parcel of land within 24 hours or maybe 36 hours. That's an awful lot of people moving very quickly.

Most migrations involve well traveled pathways from a place of origin to a place of landing. The Dust Bowl, I wasn't there to see it but we've all seen the same movies, I imagine it like a row of ants going down Route 66, the ants being made up of Model Ts with frying pans kind of flapping on the side. But they were taking a path that was already charted long in advance and going to a destination that they had already scouted out. That is true of all the migrations that we can talk about as having a major role in American history. But here the particles were blown by the winds to all points of the compass. There are people from the area in Anchorage, there are people in Salt Lake City, there are people in Las Vegas, there are people in Detroit, there are indeed people in Madison and New Haven to bring them closer to home. But it's much too early to really speak of a diaspora as some newspapers do because roughly 40% of the people who migrated right after Katrina are still in the physical boundaries of Louisiana itself and another 40% are either in Texas or Mississippi or Georgia. Most of them are within maybe a half a day's drive from where they came. The fact of the matter is that almost all of those people, that's probably 800,000 people I'm talking about, are occupying extremely precarious niches in the places where they find themselves right now. Most of the communities that have been their host have all seen themselves as staging areas and not as options for permanent settlement and most of the FEMA operatives have not planned to put people into hotels forever so that what's happening now is that migration is in some ways just now beginning in earnest. Many of you have probably noticed lately how many people have been thrown out of hotels and are now looking for places to stay, how many people are leaving towns nearby where their welcome has been used up.

It's important to remember about New Orleans that it was a city of neighborhood clusters very like the rest of southern Louisiana. It's probably the most rural of urban settings one could imagine. This is an astonishing figure for people who know much about cities, but close to 90% of the African American residents of New Orleans were born in very nearby regions of Louisiana itself. The percentage for white residents is a little bit less than that but it's way, way above the national average in such matters as that. So let's say 85% of the people were from the same state. What do you suppose that number would be for Chicago? What do you suppose it would be for New Haven? What do you suppose it would be for Madison? It would be a lot less. It's also important that even those who moved a short distance as measured on the map have been very likely to call themselves refugees. You may remember there was a lot of talk about the word refugee in the press when all this came up. Their president and every newscaster in the land has told them that they are not entitled to use that term because they are still within the territorial boundaries of the United States. But I would say that the president and the newscasters would be much better apt to listen to what these people are saying. They know what the word refugee means. They don't need a geography lesson. They don't need a civics lesson. What they are telling us is that they no longer feel at home in the new locales where they find themselves now even though they are half a day from home. But they no longer have this feeling, and this comes back to those stories, that they no longer belong to a place where they are a person. They're no longer where they should be which is here.

I am not going to pursue the matter now but those persons who have been sent out onto the public roads have been torn loose from the human landscape where they felt at home, where they felt protected by a layer of insulation that only kin can provide, have suffered a blow every bit as harsh as the hurricane or the collapse of the levies. And many of those refugees are going to need help. I wouldn't be surprised if most of them are going to need help and at the rate we're going right now, we've lost track of where they're going. The government is making no effort to find out where it is and like so many other migrations the danger really is that they are just going to sink into the countryside without a trace, without a sound and we won't know.

Now I'm back on the main road again after the second detour and speaking of chronic as opposed to acute disasters. I was making the point that chronic disasters often turn out to be traumatizing in much the same way as acute ones do. Now it may sound as if I'm playing a bit with words and I really am in a way, but sometimes word games have the advantage of sensitizing people to something else. What I would like to sensitize myself to is the fact that acute disasters very often visit the homes of people who have already been the victim of chronic disasters. This is trouble seeking the haunts of the already troubled and of the already damaged. That idea first struck me when I was studying that coal mining community that I was talking about before. It was battered quite literally to a pulp by a horrifying flood that churned out a very narrow mountain hollow. Now the true dimensions of that event can't be discovered in measuring the height of the flood itself from the creek bed and the speed of the flood calculated in miles per hour and the tonnage of waste that was caught up in that flood as it moved down the hollow. The true

dimensions of that event have to be discovered by consulting the minds and the memories and the dreams of the people who were exposed to it. That really is where the story resides. That's really where the disaster itself resides. Once you begin to piece the story together from sources like that it was easy for me to conclude, that among the miseries experienced by the survivors of the Buffalo Creek flood is the fact that the disaster that happened upon them hit a community that had already been shaken by any number of other disasters in the past. That has something to do with the kinds of exploitation that has been the fate of the people of Appalachia for a long time. But that is another story for another time.

What I wanted to do was to offer another example or two somewhere from the files from the back of my mind, I collect stories too, to illustrate the point better but time is running short here. The files that I would have drawn from had I done that involve a band of Ojibwe Indians in Northwest Ontario who have many relatives living in these parts, or at least north of these parts as far as that goes, who are recovering from a mercury spill in their ancestral waters. Or those migrant workers I just alluded to from Haiti who saw all the money that they'd ever earned and had set aside for the poorest families in the poorest country on this continent, having seen that money stolen by a banker that they trusted. They would be native fishers from the shores of Prince William Sound at the time of the Exxon Valdes oil spill in Alaska. And they would be Marshall Islanders from a remote island called Utirik which is in the middle of the Pacific which was exposed more than half a century ago to a shower of radioactive ash from a nuclear detonation from another atoll with the beguiling name of Bikini, three hundred miles downwind from this island. Now imagine this ash picking up going three hundred miles in a straight line to pick out the only island from there to California and you can imagine why the people there would have thought they were picked out for this.

What all those people share in common is that they're enough demoralized, enough beaten, enough buffeted about by a series of shocks, and most of those shocks being the result of white visitors from a long distance away, that the cultural and the social diagnosis of what really is ailing them even today has to begin by looking at those points in the past. We're talking here about four different acute disasters. They were a mercury spill, a grand larceny, an oil spill and a radioactive fallout. But those acute disasters can only be fully assessed in my way of thinking in the context of the chronic disaster that had preceded them. I call all of those chronic disasters some form of colonialism, but you don't need to, it's the content of it and not the name of it that really matters.

Now to return to the distinction of natural and human induced as I warned that I would, I noted that it is sometimes difficult to draw useful parallels, useful distinctions between the two when looking primarily at their physical properties, but the point I want to make is that the people who experience disasters and are caught up in them and experience them close on usually find it much easier to draw that distinction than experts do. They have their own way of measuring. They gather their own data. They consult their own inner logics. They use their own form of calculus and that calculus is every bit as wise so far as I can see and as shrewd as the one that is employed by specialists. To go back to Buffalo Creek for a minute, that mine disaster in West Virginia, the attorneys

representing the coal company at the time of the flood used the expression again and again, well, they said, "It was an act of God." And to clarify things, one of them in particular who was called upon to say what on earth does that really mean he said very helpfully, "Well, the dam was incapable of holding the water God poured into it." Now he was using a term that has a very clear meaning in his own professional vocabulary. It says something about how little attorneys from Manhattan Island sometimes understand miners from Appalachia, but that's not the point I really want to make. The point I want to make is that he was talking in effect to the people of Buffalo Creek that had spent their whole lifetimes thinking about the ways of heaven, studying on the ways of heaven would be their way of putting it. Through their calculations, this was the most shocking and it put them into a froth into a fury, because to their way of thinking this was but a way of blaming the Almighty for easily identified misdoings of other human beings. In the mountains that's a true transgression. That's a sin. The word blasphemy is not taken very lightly in the mountains or in those parts more generally and I heard it again and again when I was there.

When one has been caught unaware of a natural event it's far easier to understand and far easier to come to terms with than to feel that one has been damaged by the miscalculations or the indifference or anything else of other human beings, especially if those other human beings were people whose charge it is to look after their best interests. People who go through that experience feel these things almost as a form of betrayal. To them it's a terrible blow to the human spirit, it's eroding in lots of different ways. It's not hard to appreciate why that should be so. This is just a paragraph out of Sociology 101 which Michael Bell and I taught together more than once. The mortar that binds human communities together is made up, at least in part, of trust and respect and decency and in moments of emergency, of charity and of concern. And it's a tremendous shock to the system when those basic expectations are not met. They've already been made vulnerable by a very sharp trick of fate and they must now face a future without those layers of emotional insulation that the community and that the larger society are supposed to provide. That is very hard to deal with. And it doesn't take very long for people who go through that for that disappointment to ripen into a feeling that human institutions simply cannot be relied on. Imagine what it must've been like in New Orleans let's say a week after Katrina hit being marooned on one of those concrete little islands in a great sea of black sludge easily visible to hovering aircraft but no water, no food and, maybe the hardest of all, with no indication of any kind that their fellow human beings gave a damn about what was happening to them. It would be certainly no surprise to me, if I were there sitting on one of those islands and I had a rifle I would certainly shoot it in the air just to announce that I exist, whether I shot it at something or not which nobody seems to have done. But everybody in the country could see with their own eyes what was happening there. Once again it was a window open on the inner workings of our society, but this window was just impossible to overlook. Everyone could see that it was a large poor underclass, many of them black, that for all practical purposes were abandoned by their fellow countrymen.

One can say, I would say, at least like William Blake in my worst moods that that's been true for a long time. There's no news to that. We haven't heard anything about our

society about that. Abandonment like that is at least possible to live with if the sound of it is muffled, if the sight of it is muted, if the fact it is made abstract by those cascades of numbers that seem to pour out of the public press every time this discussion of poverty takes place. But this revelation took place in the full glare of television, it was unmistakable. It was unforgettable. It was a lesson to those of us who had not heard the message yet, which weren't very many, at least very few here anyway. But more than that it was an alarm to those who felt themselves abandoned. They're not going to forget this anytime soon and I would just recommend that it is important that we don't forget it anytime. I don't want to be the sociologist that goes up to them the next time some study is done and say, "Well now, how much confidence would you say you have (on a scale of 1-10) now in human government? How much confidence would you say you have now in your fellow human beings?"

In many ways the disaster that struck the Gulf Coast and New Orleans was misnamed. Katrina was a code name for the hurricane force winds that blew in from some location far out at sea. It was a natural disaster. But the people of New Orleans at least know with perfect clarity that this was a technological disaster, a failure of human engineering, a failure of the human social order. One reporter from the Times Picayune, which most of you will know is the paper in New Orleans, who is himself a native from New Orleans wrote in a story about Katrina, "It was the nation's worst ever natural disaster." By now I would hope he is reconsidering that expression because to most of the people who read that article that would be as obtuse and as uncaring and as near a form of avoidance as possible. In its own way it would have been what the people of Buffalo Creek would have called blasphemy.

One way to look at that calamity, and a lot of people do, is to say that New Orleans was a victim of a flood, which was a technological disaster and the Gulf Coast was a victim of the winds and the waves and the surges known as Katrina which would be a natural disaster. In that case this would kind of be a technological disaster on top of, or folded into, or somehow related to a natural disaster. Now you already heard me say that the people of New Orleans have done their calculating, they know perfectly well what they think this was but the people of the Coast are still thinking this matter through and what they're doing is pondering the roles played in what happened to them by the disappearance of the coastal islands and the wetlands, the barrier shoreline that nature had supplied as a source of protection. They're pondering the developments schemes of every kind that depreciate the land about them. They're pondering the strange doings of the American Army Corps of Engineers and they're pondering the stunning incompetence of the state and federal agencies and many more things like that. We haven't even gotten to the subject of global warming. And the jury is still out along that Coast and that's the only jury that makes a real difference here. They may very well conclude that this was a technological disaster too and if they do come to that conclusion, they are going to have all kinds of data to support their feelings about that. And if they come to feel betrayed as the people of New Orleans do, if they feel that they have been let down, if they feel that they had not been treated in a way that fellow countrymen should, this is going to be quite a reckoning.