

PASTORAL THEOLOGY AND CATASTROPHIC DISASTER

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Introduction

The shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999 initiated a set of circumstances that have ultimately led me to write this article. I vividly remember that day as if it were yesterday. I can still feel remnants of the shock, terror, sadness, anger, and perplexity that suddenly befell us. Pastors, students, churches, seminaries, and other responders offered support and safety to those most harmed. We struggled to find words to interpret to ourselves and to others what had happened and how we might respond pastorally and theologically.

It was in the midst of this painful horror that I became aware of the need for explicit pastoral theological attention to public tragedy and corporate grief. I was still pretty rattled by the huge sense of loss and vulnerability in our community when I had an unsettling conversation with Howard Clinebell at an AAPC Convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico, later that month. Joretta Marshall was my colleague at Iliff at the time. She and I were talking when Howard approached us and said something like, “Columbine was a terrible situation. It’s like the Oklahoma bombing. It forces us as pastoral caregivers to come to terms with the corporate and public dimensions of grief and loss, not just the personal. I think that this is a great time for you two to write an article on corporate and public loss.” I was not yet ready to write at that time. I was too compromised by my own pain and distress to have the kind of perspective needed to research and write on such a difficult reality.¹ Nonetheless, Howard planted a seed that has continued to germinate.

The task has become both more urgent and more difficult since the time of the tragedy. It is more urgent because it is more pervasive. The increased likelihood of experiencing public tragedy and ministering to corporate grief has risen to alarming proportions throughout the world, as well as in our own communities. In the past, these events seem relatively random and isolated. Now, some form of public catastrophe seems to threaten all of us. The ongoing threat and reality of terrorism, genocide, and other forms of Democide, exposes us to the increasing possibility of

public tragedy and corporate grief. We are also haunted on a daily basis by the specter of the Bird Flu escalating to pandemic proportions which could rapidly destroy up to two billion members of our planet.

Tragedy has become acutely public. For the United States, the signature and defining event thus far in the 21st Century has been the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center and attack on the Pentagon by terrorist violence. Recently, Hurricane Katrina has captured our compassion and horror as we have attempted to respond to its devastation and to its disclosure of the fissures in our social, political, and economic structures. The AIDS pandemic, the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2005, recent earthquakes in Pakistan and Iran, and the eruption of the Merapi volcano in Indonesia unite the human community in our compassion for one another. These events call for deeper analysis as well as generative networks of prevention, when possible, and response. They also reveal deep fissures and seemingly irrevocable differences in the human family.

In the face of these and other catastrophes and the rising threat of new disasters, pastoral caregivers and their teachers and supervisors are called upon for guidance, interpretation, wisdom, and compassion. The core questions for the pastoral theologian arising in the landscape of public tragedy and corporate grief are fundamentally theological questions.

My central theme is that when engaged by pastoral response and pastoral theological reflection, catastrophic disasters disclose the acute vulnerability of all human life to remorseless powers and to abject helplessness. Lives diminished by catastrophic disaster can best be sustained by three responses: first, by lamenting the world that was lost; second, by interrogating the social, moral, and cosmic order giving rise to catastrophic disasters; and, third, by reclaiming life through an enduring strategic outpouring of justice-based communal, political, economic, and spiritual assistance over time.

What is a Catastrophic Disaster?

The term, “catastrophic disaster,” has been coined for the purposes of this essay. It is not common nomenclature in the disaster research literature. I will claim that “catastrophic disasters” have several features, which taken together, comprise uniquely destructive human and natural events. I will proceed to describe these features in a manner that I hope will prove to be resonant with theological themes and pastoral engagement later in the article. The following discussion is heavily

reliant upon Kauffman (2002) Lattanzi-Licht & Doka (2003), and Zinner & Williams (1999).

When I speak of catastrophic disasters in this paper, I am speaking of cataclysmic intrusive events that tragically kill individuals and destroy, rupture, or render ineffectual the personal, communal-cultural, ecological, governmental, and economic structures necessary for life to be viable. Because they directly rupture and reverberate through a broad network of interconnected persons and community structures, catastrophic disasters are comprehensive in scope and their consequences can be expected to continue impacting individuals and communities over several generations. I want briefly to highlight five aspects of this description which include: first, their intrusive and cataclysmic nature; second, their comprehensive influence; third, their tragic elements; fourth, their ongoing evil consequences; and, fifth, their need for massive resources and continuing interpretation.

First, I want to emphasize that catastrophic disasters are intrusive cataclysmic events that involve violent loss of life. A catastrophe is intrusive because it befalls individuals and communities, contrary to their intentions and expectations, and violently throws their world into misery and disorder, characterized as “disaster.” Victims are not able to prevent or stop a catastrophe. The power that is unleashed in naturally-generated disasters such as Katrina, and in socially-produced disasters such as Columbine and 9/11, is relentless, implacable and remorseless. It comes with a cruel force that is indifferent to the life and welfare of those caught in it. Human vulnerability and helplessness rise to paralyzing proportions.

Second, it is critical to recognize that catastrophic disasters are comprehensive in scope. They impact the total environment, as well as individuals, families, and other primary systems. Persons, communities, and environments struggling to survive catastrophic disasters are powerless alone to remove the conditions resulting in their demise. They require rescue or assistance from external resources if life is to be maintained or restored. At the same time, public services are often temporarily or permanently unavailable or overwhelmed. There is limited capacity and resources to protect oneself and one’s community from harm. There is no effective place to turn for help. In worse case scenarios, the fabric of life is either torn to shreds, or removed altogether.

Third, catastrophic disasters are tragic events. The use of the term tragedy has a fairly wide range of meanings. In common parlance “tragedy” indicates any unexpected misfortune that negatively alters the

expected course of life. It is tragic that someone has a serious or fatal car accident, or comes down with cancer, or makes a mistake that seriously harms others. Tragedy in this sense means “bad luck” or the somewhat random negative consequences of living in a world that is beyond our control, or where conflicting goods lead to negative outcomes. When used in this way, tragedy is close to the idea of “fate,” since bad things come upon persons or groups in spite of their actions or intentions, and the consequences can sometimes be disastrously catastrophic.²

At a deeper level, tragedy refers to the negative consequences arising from “flaw.” By flaw I mean a failure of a community or individuals to do the right thing, either out of defiance or neglect, thereby bringing horrendous catastrophic consequences into the world. Sometimes the evil actions of one person or one group bring undeserved tragic consequences to others. In other cases, victims of tragedy are implicated in the tragedy that has befallen them because of specific actions, or failures to act, on their part or on the part of their community. Used this way, tragedy is more than “fate,” but derives from “flaw” or some combination of fate and flaw.

Whether from fate or flaw, a victim of tragedy has had some event impact them that challenges their assumptive world and moral universe. While the conditions leading to tragedy may in principle be avoidable, the questions raised when tragedy occurs are unavoidable. Tragedy therefore inaugurates a very complicated mixture of living with unwanted and unexpected loss and of confronting the perplexing challenge of assigning proper accountability, facing unanswered questions and searching for positive meaning.

Fourth, catastrophic disasters are intrusive tragic events with enduring evil consequences. The term evil as I am using it comes from process theology, though I use it to describe empirical historical realities rather than abstract concepts. Evil takes the form of discord or triviality, and is the opposite of beauty, which is viewed as harmony and intensity of experience. Catastrophic disasters are by definition genuinely evil since they bring about both discord and triviality. The world suffers due to catastrophic disasters. It may take generations to recover and rebuild the destruction that exists on so many levels.

Fifth, catastrophic disasters mobilize a huge amount of material and human resources, including massive media attention and involvement, and elicit multiple levels of interpretation and evaluation. They engender a fundamental human need to help one another, and force us to come to terms in a new way with the question of meaning and moral

accountability for the tragedy that has intruded into our lives. Put succinctly, disasters set into motion human caring and human thinking.

Responding Pastorally and Theologically To Catastrophic Disasters

I propose that catastrophic disasters introduce compelling contextual realities that push pastoral theologians and caregivers to develop our theological articulation and pastoral practice in relatively new ways. I have identified three core themes — that of lamentation, interrogation, and reclamation — to guide our thinking and caring.

Lamenting a Torn World

As we have seen, catastrophic disasters, above all, initiate a cataclysmic set of huge traumatic losses. There is overwhelming shock and devastation that rips through a community when a catastrophe occurs. In both the literal and spiritual sense, catastrophic disasters turn citizens into exiles and inhabitants into refugees.

As persons and communities begin a process of articulating their anguish and coming to terms with its causes and outcomes, they engage in a form of lament.³ The pastoral caregiver and theologian understands lament as a mode of response by which the losses are truthfully and fully named and as a means of expressing and legitimating their feelings of futility, pain and anger. Lamentation is the beginning of a private and public process of coming to terms with catastrophe and disaster and of mending the web of existence that has been torn or blown away. As a personal form of speech, lamentation is a well-attested action that enables persons to find an empowering voice, and to begin to overcome the sense of acute vulnerability generated by intrusive cataclysmic loss. As a public form of speech, lamentation begins to tie persons back to the world and to a community from which they feel severed. As a religious form of speech, the prayer of lamentation places these devastating losses into the context of ultimacy and asks unrelenting questions about the nature of the created order and the power and goodness of God. Lamentation becomes possible after the initial shock and numbness wears off and when a basic safety net has been established.⁴

Pastoral theologian Kathleen Billman and theologian Daniel Migliore identify several ways in which lamentation “can help to support the life of faith.” (1999, p. 104). It does this by

offering a needed language of pain; confirming the value of embodied life; granting permission to grieve and protest; challenging inadequate understandings of God and preparing

the way for new understandings; strengthening our self-understanding as responsible agents; purifying anger and the desire for vengeance; increasing solidarity with others who suffer; and revitalizing praise and hope. (p. 104f).

I want to highlight two implications regarding lament for pastoral care and theology in response to catastrophic disasters. First, lament provides the starting point of interpretation and response to losses through disasters. Without the capacity to lament, and the caregiver's capacity to facilitate lamentation, life is further diminished and persons become frozen in time and space. Lamenting is a form of grieving or mourning loss, and is necessary for consolation and comfort to become possible. In the wonderful words of Herbert Anderson and Kenneth Mitchell, "Those who mourn can be blessed because they can be comforted. It is difficult, if not impossible, to comfort someone who does not mourn." (1983, p. 166). On a more public and corporate level, one of the ways human communities lament is through the emergence of multiple, spontaneously generated sacred shrines. These may be places where pictures of the lost are displayed in hope of locating and being reunited with them. They may appear at various locations around the community, such as a park bench, a tree, or a pond where people gather with flowers and mementoes to share their sorrow and to lament the tragic circumstances that they are trying to survive.

These sites become signifiers of solidarity and comfort as well as of loss and sacred memory. We know that sacred spaces can be contested, because part of lamentation struggles with a search for truthful speech about devastating and unjustified loss. There are conflicting meanings of what is sacred and secular in interpreting disasters; and accordingly, the danger for further violence and trauma is quite high around these sites. When sacred space is later identified by permanent memorials, it becomes both a source of ongoing lamentation as well as a context for interrogating conflicting interpretative schema regarding the events. The ongoing debate about whether to include shooters' names in public memorials at Columbine and how to memorialize the destruction of the World Trade Center are cases in point. Another example is the conflict about whether protests of war should be allowed at funerals to honor soldiers killed in the line of duty.⁵

In addition to the emergence of spontaneous shrines, established religious communities provide invaluable corporate resources for lamenting losses and addressing acute catastrophe. Churches, mosques, synagogues, and other loci of religious presence attract persons and

provide liturgy, education, and basic food and shelter by which to address the catastrophe. I shall never forget the way the churches in the Columbine area of Littleton provided safe space and a place to pray, cry, support, and reorient a terrified and shattered community. On a larger scale, there were numerous civic-sponsored events in which persons could come together to support one another and to lament and memorialize losses with which we were all struggling. The public presence of religious leaders and the generosity in which they provided use of their sacred spaces became indispensable roles in helping individuals and communities to lament the catastrophic disasters that have befallen them.

Second, lament provides a profound theological and pastoral framework in which to understand the universal human process of grieving and coping in response to traumatic loss. Lamentation addresses loss and trauma within the horizon of personal and social experience, as these are articulated before God and the world. As such, lamentation is more than a resource of healing and coping. I believe that the reverse is true. Mourning, grieving, and coping are important elements in lamentation, but lamentation has broader and more complex dimensions than those conceived by theories of coping and grieving.

Lamentation is best understood as a lens through which one's whole life is grasped, and in which it is particularly engaged in times of tragedy. A pastoral-theological interpretation of lament provides the basis for moral outrage, social protest, and for engaging and revising theological interpretations of God and the world. Just as catastrophic disasters rip us from life and its moorings, so lamentation both disorients and re-orients us to our world and forces a reconsideration of our beliefs about its goodness and destiny. Understood in this way, lament is a pastoral theologian's heuristic tool by which the caregiver might explore (without fear or hesitation) the labyrinths of despair, perplexity, and outrage engendered by the onset of catastrophic misfortune.

Interrogating Catastrophe

In addition to hammering us with devastating tragic loss, catastrophic disasters generate an immediate and spontaneous sense that something has gone terribly wrong. The sense that something is radically wrong inevitably evokes the question, "why did this happen?" The question, "why" condenses an array of thoughts and feelings, including futile helplessness and muted outrage.

In generating the question, "why?" catastrophic disasters initiate a thorough process of interrogating fundamental assumptions and

beliefs about life. If lamentation tells us the truth about our pain, the truth of our pain pushes us to examine the truths we hold about our world. The role of the pastoral caregiver and theologian is not merely to offer meaning to sufferers from disasters, but also to share in a painful struggle to create new meanings from the rubble of shattered beliefs and assumptions.

One of the most difficult questions confronting the pastoral caregiver is, “what is God’s relation to this tragedy?” We owe ourselves and our communities a truthful wrestling with possible answers or approaches to answers to this question, recognizing that our interpretations may provide exactly what is needed, or they may fall short of what is needed.

On this score, I was very impressed that public responses to Columbine did not overlook some commentary on God’s possible relation to the shootings. In every case that I heard, religious leaders who spoke about God interpreted God as compassionate and aggrieved by the violence, rather than as in any sense willing or condoning it. People repeatedly affirmed that these acts were not the will of God. And while some persons certainly had to wrestle whether God could have prevented these shootings, or whether they might have a higher purpose, they believed God was not held responsible. This overt and public interpretation enabled persons potentially to find comfort in God as a compassionate presence among the sufferers, and this assisted the devastated community to begin to look elsewhere to assign responsibility for the shootings.

But, what does the pastoral caregiver say to the person who believes that God could have prevented these events, if God was all powerful and cared enough to do so? Could not an all powerful and all good God have changed the minds of the shooters, or made the bullets miss? Could not God have put it in everyone’s mind to stay away from school that day? Could not God have made one of those bombs that Eric and Dylan created explode in their car on the way to school and put an end to them without hurting anyone else? Or could God not have sent someone to meet the deeper needs for love and belonging that Dylan and Eric articulated so hauntingly in their journals? (Newsweek, 2006).

Let us take the case of God’s relation to the destructiveness of Hurricane Katrina. While there was little by way of blaming God for sending a hurricane to punish New Orleans or to bring redemptive suffering to the Gulf Coast, could not the God who is reputed to create heaven and earth have sent that hurricane somewhere less harmful?

Or, barring that, could God not have inspired the minds of decision makers over the last century to decide in favor of — rather than against — protecting wetland buffers, constructing viable levies, and having very good safety and evacuation measures in place?

One might wonder in light of these disasters whether God really is, or for that matter could be, in control. And if God is in control, is God really providential and benevolent? Looking at it in this way, lamentation incorporates bewailing a lost sense of ultimate benevolence that lies at the heart of things, and engenders an angry indictment of the God on whom we are asked to rely for protection and special favor. Can the pastoral caregiver and theologian come clean about the limitations of our settled beliefs about God when they are interrogated by the horrors and consequences of catastrophic disasters? If these catastrophes are outside the active will of God, then what significance and power does God have for the world? If they are heinous agents of either God's active or passive will, then in what sense can we believe that God is good? On what basis can we believe that God is a benevolent moral agent in whom we can have confidence that good is stronger than evil, and that God is an agent of life rather than of death? What kind of God do we think we are representing as pastoral theologians and caregivers when these questions are raised?

However, if God is not indicted, then who might be held accountable? The interrogation may begin with God, but it does not end with God. Columbine, Oklahoma City, 9/11, the Mumbai bombings, and other tragic examples of violence lead us to ask, "What kind of human being brings ruin on others?" Indeed, if any human being or group of human beings can bring about such catastrophic disaster on fellow humans, what does it mean to be a human being and to belong to a human community? Is the human capacity for violence and hatred a result of injustice perpetrated upon the actors, or does it arise from unchecked instinctual hostility? Are we agents of our own acts, or do those who act violently against others do so under the alien control of compulsions engendered by mental illness or various substances that impair their judgment and capacity for positive fellow-feeling? Or are their actions somehow made understandable, and even rendered moral, because they are responses to prior victimizing social conditions of abuse, trauma, marginalization and even oppression? Were the Columbine shooters also victims in some way — whose deeper cries for help were missed by those most responsible for hearing them — or were they examples of two evil human beings whom society failed to identify and restrain? All of these considerations are examples of how

catastrophic disasters brought on by fellow humans against one another might interrogate our views about human nature.

Furthermore, we can ask ourselves the following questions: “what kind of human society and culture produces people who are so alienated and hostile that they kill innocent people?” “What is the moral quality of a society that allows guns and explosive to be available to the most dangerous and unstable among us, and legitimizes violence as a response to threat or injury?” “What questions are raised to a society that keeps certain races and social classes disproportionately vulnerable to natural disasters?” Interrogating the devastation of Hurricane Katrina discloses the longstanding injustice of racism and classism that locks a large population of persons into poverty and marginalization. While Hurricane Katrina was a unique event, it was not an isolated event. It was tied to personal and corporate realities that both preceded and follow it. (Brinkley, 2006; Horne, 2006). How do we confront a political and economic system that gives tax breaks to the wealthiest in our country, while arriving with too late with too little to meet the survival needs of the most displaced and marginalized?

When belief systems, theological meanings, and moral codes become public discourse for the purpose of interpreting catastrophic disasters, the results can be extremely contentious. They may contribute to further injury and dislocation. For example, President Bush called the perpetrators of 9/11 “evil.” At the same time there were telecasts of Middle Easterners dancing in the street for joy at the blow against the satanic United States. New York City and the rest of the U.S. valorized the firefighters and other first responders who tried to save innocent victims in the twin towers of the World Trade Center, who gave their life in saving others. Ward Churchill, a Native American activist, did not regard the workers being rescued as innocent victims, but likened them to “little Eichmann’s” whose daily work made them participants in global evil against marginalized persons. When a compassionate citizen erected fifteen crosses in Clement Park in honor of every person who died at Columbine, outrage from some members of the community forced the removal of the two crosses symbolizing the life of the shooters. Pastors reported that it was in some cases impossible to preach on forgiveness without generating outrage among some members of their congregations, and that their ministry to members of Eric and Dylan’s families had to be clandestine. Franklin Graham caused widespread offense when he used the podium of the Colorado-sponsored memorial service, held in honor of those killed at Columbine, to invite persons to accept faith in Christ so that they would go to heaven when they died.

Political and sectarian speech about religious teachings and assumptive worlds can be expected to come into contentious interaction when corporately interrogated by catastrophic disasters. Lament and outrage are not very far apart in interrogating public tragedy publicly. Pastoral theologians and caregivers do well to choose their words with care, and struggle to find a variety of ways to engage these contentious discourses with sensitivity and wisdom.

So, what do I say, as a pastoral caregiver and theologian, in response to these interrogatories? Since I am asking others to more explicitly address these questions, let me briefly profile the theological thinking that would guide my response as appropriate to the context of care.

With respect to the question of responsibility, I believe that catastrophic disaster results from a combination of human and natural powers braiding themselves into destructive configurations. The classic theological distinction between natural evil and moral evil no longer holds for me. Natural processes, whether in the form of viruses, hurricanes, volcanoes, or the like, are vehicles of moral evil inasmuch as they have disproportionate consequences for longstanding victims of racism and other forms of social and economic injustice whose lives chronically stand in a vulnerable relationship to their natural and social environments. Catastrophic disasters are therefore the result of conflicting values and social embodiments of good and evil in relation to natural forces, and when violence is an element, it is always the result of a combination of individual and collective human actions. In this view, the universe is an incredibly precarious place for all of us, and especially for those most vulnerable to the power of others. All human beings, by a mixture of choice and circumstance are capable of becoming agents as well as victims of catastrophic disasters.

Stated more clearly, interrogation involves on the deepest level the questioning and reconfiguration of our religious and theological understandings, including most importantly how we conceive of God. Real-life engagements with catastrophic disasters force this engagement and reinterpretation, even when it is not explicitly stated. When pastors, ranging from the most liberal to the most conservative, did not attribute Columbine to God's will, they reflected a shift of which they may not have been aware in views of God in relation to tragic events. For my part, God can not be viewed as the agent of catastrophic disasters. God's power, being ordered in all circumstances by loving and just compassion, is not capable of acts of violence and violation. Neither is God able to

prevent such acts, because God's power is not unilateral nor omnipotent, but is always limited by other genuine powers operating at all points in the universe. Though God's power is ordered in all things by love and compassionate justice, it is not able to overpower the freedom of the world in order to prevent suffering or to bring about some higher purpose. God, however, suffers loss when the world suffers catastrophes, and laments human and ecological destructiveness. God is the power of life and through loving and just compassion always works to oppose forces of destructiveness, even when they are rationalized by a sense of a higher good by human individuals and communities. God is also experienced as the power of the loving solidarity and transformative advances forever available to the world in its terror and brokenness. For these perspectives I am indebted to insights from Wendy Farley (1990), Kathleen Sands (1994), and David Ray Griffin (1991).

Reclaiming Goodness

In addition to lamenting and truthfully naming losses, as well as interrogating one's world and belief systems as a result of catastrophic disaster; we are also compelled to help ourselves and others reconstruct lives that are meaningful in the aftermath of disaster. The pastoral care provider is challenged to help persons and communities productively to "reclaim goodness." Goodness is defined by James Poling as "the existence of truth and beauty that are harmonized within actual community practice." (2002, p. 210). For Poling, goodness is a personal and communal spiritual practice characterized by generosity, search for inclusivity and justice, and a commitment to transform the conditions that force some persons into perpetual vulnerability.⁶ (2002, 234-36)

The idea of reclamation comes from my reflections on the work of Michael White and David Epston as presented in their book, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. (1990). Their approach involves creating a new narrative in relation to a problem that has befallen a person, couple, or family so that they may reclaim their lives from the power of the negative situation and fashion them more positively. To do so, as in lament, one must first honestly name the losses and the many ways that the problem has diminished or taken away goodness in living. The parties must then explore the ways in which their lives have survived or have not been taken over by the problem. When they see where they have resisted, survived, and perhaps even defeated the power of the disaster that has befallen them; individuals and communities discover a basis for continued recovery. Based upon recognition of these strengths and resources, pastoral caregivers can then help those diminished by

disaster to reclaim their lives by writing positive interpretations of their identities. Reclamation involves both regaining something that was lost, as well as writing a new story on which to base and expand their successful strategies for recovery.

Moving beyond the ideas of White and Epston, I would like to profile some other resources available to caregivers. These resources may be drawn upon to help individuals and communities in reclaiming their lives in the aftermath of tragic disasters.

First, the pastoral caregiver recognizes and draws upon the natural human solidarity that emerges intensely in the first response to disasters. I reflect on 9/11 where the country suddenly felt unified and we saw countless heroic responses, even at great risk, by firefighters, police, and other emergency personnel. There is a kind of magnetic pull to assist when catastrophe strikes. There is a heartfelt outpouring of money, food, resources, and sympathy. This is a common feature in response to disaster, and has enormous influence in the process of reclaiming and rebuilding lives. David Hogue (2003) reports that the human brain is constructed in such a way that it empathically connects to the distress of others and mobilizes positive responses to persons in distress. This human solidarity, based in the very way our brains autonomously function, has a significant influence upon rescuing, providing safety, and helping persons reclaim lives worth having in the aftermath of horrendous loss.

Second, the capacity to protest the “wrong” disclosed by catastrophic disasters mobilizes anger against the injustice and neglect that contributed to the disaster, and it provides the basis for a spiritually vital and ethically viable way to create conditions of healing and well-being. Andrew Lester (2003) and Kathleen Greider (1997), among others, have shown us how pastoral caregivers can draw upon anger and aggression as bases for empowering spiritually mature and ethically appropriate responses to problematic circumstances. Turning private and communal anger and despair into corporate action is also a necessary form of pastoral response.

Third, pastoral caregivers may help individuals and communities reclaim their lives from catastrophic disasters by participating in the establishment of public memorials and rituals of repentance, remembrance, and hope. Catastrophic disasters are examples of mass trauma and tragedy. As public events that endure in history, they call forth memorials and rituals that demonstrate lament, interrogation, and the capacity to rebuild lives individually and corporately.

The power of memorials as a source of lament and hope has become very personal this spring. Our daughter Emily was nominated and selected to be one of thirteen persons to receive a college scholarship in the name of one of the persons killed at Columbine. The “Never Forgotten” scholarship fund was established in perpetuity after the shootings by the local Denver media. Emily received a scholarship in the name of Kelly Fleming, a ninth grader at the time of the shootings who was killed in the school library. Kelly was interested in journalism and poetry. The “Never Forgotten” fund hosts an annual dinner in which all of the Columbine families meet with families of those being honored. We had dinner with Emily’s High School Principal, Don and Dee Fleming, and two persons from local radio and TV stations. We learned about Kelly, and they learned about Emily. The presentation of the awards was very moving. At first, a large picture of the person killed was projected on a screen while the presenter read about their lives. Then the presenter read about the person being given an award in the name of that student (or, in one case, teacher).

This public memorial is reported to be the high point each year in the lives of the Columbine families and the media who sponsor it. It was apparent to us that the Columbine families found this paradoxically to be a joyful time. The families have become very close knit over the years. They find it very meaningful to see the lives of those whom they have lost tied to the lives of persons who signify the dreams they had for their loved ones. For us, this event was a way of deepening our participation in the tragedy of Columbine. It assisted with our ongoing process of reclaiming lives worth having in spite of this evil in our community. This public event enabled all of us to relive the terrible day and to share its devastating costs as fellow citizens of our community. But it also enabled the memories of those killed to remain alive and their hopes to carry on in the lives of others. It was one of the most moving experiences of my life to have been a part of this wonderful gift of the community to the families of those who were taken, and to receive the gift of love and hope from these families to other children that are now a part of their lives from here on out.

Fourth, for pastoral caregivers, the capacity to claim one’s life from the ravages of catastrophic disaster is made possible by imaging a compassionate God who “never fails nor forsakes” the world. While that God remains hidden and seems remote or indifferent, the pastoral caregiver affirms that without such a divine reality the capacity to endure, heal, remember, grieve, protest, and realize new possibilities would be senseless and impossible. The power of life to reclaim life

from catastrophic disasters is the compassionate and vitalizing power of God made palpable in lamentation, interrogation, and reclamation.

Conclusion

Catastrophic disasters take many forms. They are cataclysmic intrusions that rip and destroy. They are comprehensive in their impact, have ongoing evil historical consequences, and are tragic. There are always multiple causes and shared responsibility. They evoke lamentation, interrogation, and reclamation. They call every element of our lives into question, and generate the possibility of an intense human solidarity by which we are sustained and from which we might generate meaning and hope. It might seem better to live in a world that is not capable of producing catastrophic disasters. Unfortunately, that is not the reality of our world. As human beings choosing to be pastoral caregivers and pastoral theologians we look for a way to prevent the onset of disaster, to stand in the face of its destructiveness, to memorialize and cherish those who were lost to its cruelty, to find comfort in one another and sustenance in a God who never fails us nor forsakes us, and to discover deliverance from its evil.

Endnotes

¹ Howard Clinebell himself actually wrote on this subject. See Clinebell, 2002.

² “Elemental powers” is a term used by Kathleen Sands (1994) to designate tragedy-engendering clashes between competing goods rather than between good and evil.

³ I am indebted to Ed Wimberly for first articulating in a telephone conversation in the winter of 2006 that lamentation was a core element in responding to catastrophic disaster. As I thought more fully about lamentation, I turned to the pastoral-theological work of our colleagues, Kadie Billman and Dan Migliore, to explore this theme.

⁴ See Herman (1992).

⁵ See Zacharias (2006), and Grider www.temple.edu/isllc/newfolk/shrines.html.

⁶ Poling (2002) and I share the centrality of goodness in reclaiming the lives of those most vulnerable in the world. We develop our view of goodness independently.

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