

Globe Life

Timson on the Haiti crisis

Does watching Haiti's pain change us?

Absorbing the Haitian horror on TV each night, I can't help wondering if there will be any lasting or profound effect on viewers



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The other night I came home from a social function and, as I have done for more than a week, sat on my couch in front of the television and absorbed the horror of Haiti.

The images and stories change every night, and yet somehow stay the same: sobbing, lost children in acute physical pain; adults tormented by grief yet also galvanized into action; shockingly under-equipped medical facilities; distraught people lining up everywhere to escape the ruin, and reporters trying to keep their own anguish – and sometimes anger – at bay.

My reaction to watching all this televised suffering has stayed pretty constant as well: horror, anger, a desire to help and, let's face it, a profound gratitude – and even guilt – that this is not my reality. Not to mention a sense of futility about it all. How on earth do we fix this mess?

And yet, after days of watching, I wonder: Does seeing so much suffering on our TV screens – or in the newspaper or on our laptop monitors – permanently affect us in any profound way? Does it spur us to change the world, or even to live our own lives differently?

One influential thinker about natural disasters says that, despite our no-doubt heartfelt audience participation in watching coverage of the earthquake, he's "sad to say it won't have a lasting impact."

Lee Clarke, author of *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination*, and a sociologist at Rutgers University, told me in a telephone interview that most of us

will eventually view this as "just another disaster."

Sure, there's been an outpouring of donations to Haitian relief, he says, but we tend to judge other people's suffering in terms of "how closely we identify with them." And the sad truth is that most of us, unimaginably comfortable in our middle-class North American lives, simply do not see ourselves in Haitian shoes.

For many of us, there isn't what Prof. Clarke calls "social similarity."

"They're poor, they're black, and they speak with an accent," he says flatly.

So does that make us racist? Prof. Clarke says it's a complicated question because, of course, Canadians and Americans have dug deep into their wallets to help (Canadians to the tune of more than \$40-million).

But for lasting emotional impact, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, will have had far more resonance, precisely because we believe that that tragedy could have happened to us.

Is this really who we are? It's a bleak view, but I think it's at least partly true.

One of the last major natural disasters to transfix the world was the 2004 Indonesian tsunami, and I remember how it seeped into that Christmas season, with both the rush to donate and the constant conversation about the awfulness of it all.

Five years later, I can still summon up the image of that catastrophic wave approaching shore, but I have little idea how the reconstruction has gone, or how the survivors are faring.

A year later came Hurricane Katrina, which was infuriating in a different way: a human tragedy shockingly mismanaged in the world's richest country. It spurred more political than personal feelings in many of us. The coverage and commentary of Katrina no doubt influenced the decision of voters in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. After that, they simply wanted a more compassionate – and efficient – government. (Whether they got it remains to be seen.)

And now Haiti. Most people I've asked say they have donated money for relief. I've heard friends bemoan the disaster-tainment aspect of the media coverage – with gruesome images disturbingly accompanied by theme music on some networks – and the seeming incompetence of some of the relief and rescue missions. Some say they can't watch the coverage at all.

I also went to one dinner party expecting the subject to come up, but it didn't. Later, I wondered why.

"It's too hard to talk about," my hostess said. "Besides, there is only one point of view –

the compassionate one."

In an interview this week on CBC Radio's *The Current*, Rebecca Solnit, author of *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, was riveting as she talked of the good that can come from large-scale natural disasters – from the "improvised communities" people form "to pull each other out of the rubble" to the feeling of purposefulness, self-transcendence and even "deep joy" people experience in places where disaster hits.

Ms. Solnit deplored the media coverage that traffics in stereotypes of looters and chaos, and said that ordinary people, while helping each other to survive, sometimes find "a deep connection that is often missing" in their ordinary lives.

In a disaster, she said, "we not only do extraordinary things; we feel extraordinary things. A lot of the things that trouble us every day – whether we are lonely or feel bitter about the past – a lot of those things are brushed away."

It may be a stretch to extend that description to those of us who are merely watching, but we do have a choice about whether to watch at all. There's far more humanity and connection to be found in steadfastly sitting there in front of the horror than in turning away.

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