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A CONVERSATION WITH | LEE CLARKE

# Living One Disaster After Another, and Then Sharing the Experience

By CLAUDIA DREIFUS

**D**r. Lee Clarke, a sociologist and an author, works territory that is at once practical and current.

The author of "Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster," Dr. Clarke, 57, is an expert on calamities, those occurring naturally and those created by people.

He is in fact one of the founding fathers of a new discipline in sociology: disaster studies, which investigates the way people manage earthquakes, terrorist attacks, fires and floods.

By examining past disasters and how people responded to them, Dr. Clarke, known as Chip to his friends, makes policy recommendations that may save lives in the future.

"The mission of disaster studies is to go into environments that have degraded so precipitously that communal life is no longer possible," Dr. Clarke explained on an April morning in Manhattan.

"I study the conditions that give rise to calamity and how people respond," he said. "It's a melding of organizational sociology and the sociology of science and expertise."

Q. Would you describe exactly how you make your living?

A. The best description is that I'm a social ambulance chaser. I'm interested in social organization and disaster.

Disaster is interesting because it's a way of looking at patterns in a society. And there's a practical side to it: we can learn things that can relieve suffering, if public officials pay attention.



Frances Roberts for The New York Times

Dr. Lee Clarke, a leader in the disaster studies field, says, "We can learn things that can relieve suffering."

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Q. Isn't your work a bit ghoulish?

A. Some people think so. They often ask, "How do you sleep at night?" Well, the oncologist who works with cancer all day doesn't believe he is going to get it. You separate.

I think of disaster as normal. If you see failure and disaster as not special, you see that most people know how to cope with it.

How do we normally make our way through Times Square at 5 p.m.? There's organization there. People organize themselves so that movement can proceed. Those rules don't disappear because we are terrified, or because the environment is falling apart around us. Society stays with us, even in disaster.

Q. From all your decades of disaster studies, what are your most important findings?

A. That it's a myth that people are likely to panic in a disaster. Anyone who's studied past disasters will tell you that panic is rare. In fact, people have to have fire crawling up their backs for them to panic the way they do in disaster movies. Actually, people often do not become alarmed fast enough.

A second myth is that people can't handle bad news and can't be told the truth about real dangers. People will respond very well to warnings about bad news, if the person doing the warning is trustworthy. If they perceive they are being condescended to, they cut off.

Another myth, a really big one, is that in a crisis, people will automatically follow orders handed down by the authorities. That's a key problem with most disaster planning. Very tight command and control may work well in the military, where all the tasks are contained within the organization. In a disaster, that can't work because ordinary people are not a part of the formal organization.

Finally, the biggest myth is that firefighters and the police are first responders. They are official responders. The real first responders are ordinary folks. If an earthquake happens under us right now and this building starts to crumble, you and I are first responders. The most important first responders are school teachers. Twenty percent of all Americans are at school five days a week.

Q. What are the policy implications of what you've learned about disasters and people's responses to them?

A. In the United States, one implication is that our officials need to trust us, need to see the public as part of the solution rather than as a problem to be managed. Money, training, all need to be pushed downward. There needs to be devolution of authority: that's the key implication for policy.

I would summarize the findings as: People are resilient, organizations should not be trusted, the person in the street is generally quite trustworthy.

Q. Do your theories about disasters apply to all cultures?

A. No. I'm talking about our society. We don't have enough cross-cultural research. It may happen in other places. But every sociological bone in my body tells me that for this finding to be robust there needs to be an underlying level of civil society. Where that doesn't hold, I would predict that panic would be more likely.

Q. Why do we need to know about people's responses to disasters?

A. Because by buying into myths, many public officials become condescending and even, at times, untruthful. And in a real disaster, that's absolutely counterproductive. The way we plan for disasters now is top down and unrealistic.

I looked long and hard, for instance, at Department of Homeland Security documents on prevention, response and countermeasures. I've looked for some mention of the public. I found lots of references to "fear" and "panic" and to "first responders," i.e., organizations and officials. There's little recognition of the role of everyday people in disaster preparation and response — families, schools, church groups, people at their workplaces.

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If we were really serious, we would make plans that draw on the ways in which our lives are patterned. It would mean having parents intimately involved in disaster planning at schools so that they know what was going to happen. That was done in Montgomery County, Md., schools last fall when those D.C. sniper shootings were occurring. There should be concrete plans at every place of work, just like there are fire drills. Families should have communication plans.

Q. We first met at an American Association for the Advancement of Science panel on disaster plans for near-Earth events, asteroid collisions. Why should we be planning for them?

A. Because it's apparently a real risk. You could have a fairly small- size object. If it were to explode over a metropolitan area, it would spread havoc. It's not likely to happen. I'm not saying we should drop everything and plan for an asteroid strike. But if we can spend tens of billions of dollars deposing dictators in other countries, then we can spend a few million dollars thinking about an asteroid strike.

You can plan for that type of "event" and have a carry-over benefit to other kinds of events. There's no reason to think we've outgrown an asteroid strike. Not to think about it would leave us very surprised. If we could detect something a few years out, would we not want to have some thought given to the problem? We do that for earthquakes in Los Angeles.

Q. If an asteroid were coming at us, what could we do about it?

A. Assuming it is a city-killer, you would consider evacuating the city. If you knew a couple of years out that a big piece of space junk was going to explode over Miami, we should be talking about evacuating Miami.

Q. In all your studies, what have you learned about people?

A. That human nature is more benign and even benevolent given certain conditions. I believe that under the right conditions, human nature is selfless and not selfish. Human nature is social, not antisocial.

Q. Can you prove that human nature is selfless under the right conditions?

A. Exhibit 1: Complete strangers helping each other out of crushed buildings in the Loma Pieta earthquake. Exhibit 2: Otherwise unconnected people helping each other out of the American Airlines crash in Arkansas where they put their own lives at risk from fire. Exhibit 3: The World Trade Center, which was the largest waterborne evacuation in the history of the United States.

A half a million people evacuated Lower Manhattan by water and there was no plan for it. People in barges, sailboats and ferries with no instructions put into the port after seeing those buildings on fire. If you're out in the water in a pleasure craft and you see those buildings on fire, in a strictly rational sense, you should head to New Jersey. Instead people went into potential danger and rescued strangers. That's social.

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