Rescuers & the Search for Safe Haven

Repairing Childhood Losses through FEMA Work

Paul Salstrom—St. Mary-of-the-Woods College

When my daughter started working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), I had no psychological thoughts about it. She was one of the volunteer firefighters FEMA recruited in 2005 during Hurricane Katrina and was sent to coastal Mississippi to do individual assistance work—particularly providing trailers for temporary housing. She immediately liked FEMA recovery work. Since the first day of her deployment to the Katrina havoc zone, her commitment to FEMA's work has been ardent and driven. In retrospect, I realize that FEMA resembled her earlier jobs in mental health, hospital intensive care, paramedics, and her volunteer firefighting and crisis center work. Perhaps she was acting out a disposition to repair childhood loss and trauma.

I have been cataloging her childhood losses for many years. They make a long list, starting with losing her home at age three, and then at five losing her identity to some extent when her first name was changed (because in French, it is a male name rather than female), and losing her language because no one at her new school in Tunisia spoke or understood a word of English. Her mother, who had gone to Tunisia to act in films, still spoke English with her at home. But our daughter even lost her hair color, which went from blonde to black, for a film role. The black dye would not wash out and new blonde hair took a long time to grow out. As best I can determine, all of this she endured stoically, even her parents' separation, but further losses continued on through her childhood and within a few years she became extremely insular, spending most of her home time alone in her room even when she was visiting me back in the States. She even may have felt a partial loss of her little sister in Tunisia when I regrettably said her little sister was actually her *half*-sister. She was about 10 at the time, and a pained look appeared on her face when I told her that.

But losing her home at just three years old was perhaps the hardest for our daughter to handle. I've come to realize this while reading Elizabeth Danze's article about the psychological importance of one's home—the article appears on pages 400-403 of this issue. When she was three, she and I went for a long visit with relatives far away. One night at bedtime, she tearfully told me that little girls like their homes and don't like to leave them. She wasn't being dramatic, just inconsolable.

FEMA has become many things to many people, not least a political football. But perhaps it's also therapeutic—helping some of its most ardent employees repair losses, whether those occurred during childhood or later. I see great changes in my daughter these past seven years since her first FEMA deployments to Mississippi and Louisiana. Disaster recovery seems to be one of those occupations certain people love, for psychological reasons, since the pay, perks, benefits and predictability of employment are all low.

In another example, Moe Armstrong, whose article is on pages 375-378, suffered in 1966 from what he calls a PTSD "breakdown" after several months of almost continuous combat in Vietnam while he was in his early 20s. He spent nearly 20 years at loose ends, until going back to school, getting involved in veterans' peer-support work, and helping start Vet to Vet—a nationwide peer-support network focused on helping Iraq and Afghanistan veterans get to know Vietnam veterans. Armstrong is at least as ardent and driven about Vet to Vet as my daughter is about FEMA. Surely his work is assuaging, if not healing, what he calls the "psychiatric wound" he suffered in Vietnam.

My daughter remains stoic about things she can't change, but now she's passionately active about things she *can* change, like whether or not desperate people receive necessities, whether or not their homes get restored, and whether or not their daunting paperwork is done right. Her shifts can run over 100 hours per week, but she doesn't seem to mind, or even slacken her pace while there's still work to be done. I can recall a few phases like that in my own youth, but in her case, it looks to be more than a phase; it looks like major self-repair.

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A Journalist's Struggle with Natural Disaster and Her Emotions

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My first semester as editor-in-chief of the campus newspaper, *The Ramapo News*, was a busy one—we launched a website, we covered a presidential election, and we were forced to deal with Hurricane Sandy.

The superstorm hit the tri-state area on Sunday, October 28, and although we weren't set to produce a paper until Thursday, one day after Halloween, I already had a bad feeling about making our deadline. Sandy downed trees, flooded streets, ruined beaches, and left millions without power. Although it made a relatively quick retreat, the hurricane left our area the massive job of literally picking up the pieces.

Thankfully, compared to places like the Jersey coast or New York City, Ramapo College residents who faced the storm on campus had it made. Students were quick to joke about Hurricane Sandy cancelling classes and giving us all another week to study for exams, finish papers, and sleep in past noon, but we were lucky to have electricity, Internet access, phone service, running water, and heat. Our dorms were dry and our paths were clear. We had dining options readily available and a place to purchase essentials. In short, we were much better off than most of our parents, professors, and commuting peers, some of whom were without electricity for up to two weeks.

As a student, I felt comfortable and safe, even as I watched the storm wreak havoc outside my dorm window and called home often to check on my family, who were clearly miserable being cold and in the dark. But as a student journalist, in the wake of Sandy's disaster, I felt inadequate and worried about my place as a member of the news media. I wanted to do something to service