9.1 Collective response to terrorism and disaster

Sudden community disaster evokes some of the most intense communal sharing relationships — relationships that extend to strangers, even to members of outgroups that previously felt antipathy or denigrated each other. When a hurricane, flood, earthquake, explosion, devastating fire, or major act of terrorism strikes a community, or it is subjected to sustained aerial bombing or an atomic bomb, survivors tend to be extraordinarily compassionate, rescuing or taking in strangers and generously sharing resources and shelter (James 1906; Wallace 1956; Lessa 1964; Fritz 1965, 1996; Quarantelli & Dynes 1973; Oliver-Smith 1979, 1986; Drabek 1986; Johnson 1987, 1988; Mawson 2005; Jacob et al 2008; Solnit 2009). These extraordinary CS relationships arise immediately and commonly endure for at least several days or weeks. Natural disasters, technological disasters, and massive acts of war or terrorism all generate this extraordinarily inclusive CS. Famines and epidemics foster just the opposite: antagonistic, selfish behavior and dehumanization of others. Only sudden disasters evoke intense, generalized, prolonged CS in most survivors.

It is plausible to suppose that this extreme CS is mediated by the experience of kama muta, but evidence is lacking. Research has focused much more on how people acted in the aftermath than what they felt in the moments after the disaster. In any case, few interviews have been conducted soon after disasters — social scientists are rarely present, and if present, they and all potential informants have more urgent matters to attend to. However, when the 1906 San Francisco earthquake occurred William James was at Stanford, where there were strong tremors and moderate damage. He reports an immediate feeling of euphoria which is congruent with the buoyancy, exhilaration, and invigoration that sensitive informants sometimes report right after strong kama muta (James 1906). However, neither he nor other disaster survivors have described tears, goosebumps, being choked up, speaking in a creaky voice, feelings in the center of the chest or gestures of hand to chest. No one has thought to ask survivors about or report these transitory sensations, so we just don’t know. However, among the public who were never personally in danger and may not have known anyone who would be, kama muta responses to disaster are definite and widespread, complete with all the typical sensations. People often have kama muta responses even if they are far away and of different nationality, religion, race or ethnic group.

Survivors of disaster and the general public are extraordinarily compassionate. Rather than looking to their own individual needs or dwelling on their losses, people in the community, immediately – and effectively – begin to rescue others and take them to shelter of hospitals (Fritz 1965, Quarantelli & Dynes 1972, Oliver-Smith 1986:76ff, de Ville de Goyet 1991, Solnit 2009). Typically, many survivors make great efforts and some take considerable risks to rescue not only loved ones, but total strangers. They tend to do so calmly and rationally (James 1906). Injured people, including children, are typically calm and quiet, often asking that others more severely wounded be tended to before themselves (Fritz 1965). In the September 11, 2001,
World Trade Center Attacks, occupants helped each other escape, and people from the neighborhood and beyond rushed in to search and rescue; monetary and material donations poured in from all over the world (Schoch-Spana 2003). About 500 blood donors arrived and organized themselves that day at the nearest trauma center, and an enormous number of New Yorkers and people from all over the US donated blood in the ensuing weeks and months. Professional fire, rescue, police, medical personnel and officials almost invariably stay at their posts as long as needed to take care of the myriad needs, and those who are off-duty come in to join them.

Survivors commonly take in and feed strangers for a considerable period of time. Moreover, in a community disaster, people are communitarian: people recognize what needs to be done for the welfare of the community and spontaneously start putting out fires, directing traffic, setting up public kitchens, securing resources, and contributing their skills or labor to address collective problems. For some days, grocers, butchers, and others with needed resources often give them away to everyone who needs them: “concepts of personal private property. . . literally disappeared right after the impact” (Oliver-Smith 1979:45; see also Oliver-Smith 1986:76, 86; Solnit 2009). Although media and political authorities typically expect breakdown into a war of all against all, with savage individualistic mayhem unleashed, just the opposite emerges: a spontaneous communitarian collectivity flowers. People are friendly and tolerant, supportive and sympathetic: they have a strong sense of primary group solidarity that incorporates all survivors (Fritz 1965, Oliver-Smith 1979, 1986).

The community typically quickly organizes itself, informally yet effectively: people see what needs to be done and either do it themselves or direct willing volunteers to take on the necessary tasks (James 1906, Solnit 2009). Contrary to popular mythology, very few people exploit the opportunity to loot, although people sometimes do break in to pharmacies, grocery stores, or other sources of critical materials — to obtain and distribute essential resources to others in need (Fritz 1965, Quarantelli & Dynes 1972, Solnit 2009). Myriads of volunteers pour in from outside to help, and donations of food, clothing, and material start streaming in from all over, often far in excess of what can be used (Quarantelli & Dynes 1972). All in all, for a while the community of disaster is an anarchist utopia.

“Townspeople draw together, feeling a sense of something unique and historic. The differences of class, race, religion, rank and age dissolve as they work side by side to clear debris and rescue the injured” (Quarantelli & Dynes 1972:69; see also Tooney 2007 and especially Fritz 1965). In the Peruvian Andes where ethnic and social class antagonisms and prejudice had been pronounced, a massive landslide buried much of a community and cut it off from the outside. “The crisis has an immediate status-leveling effect on the nascent community of survivors which it had created. A sense of brotherhood, cutting across both class and ethnic lines, prevailed as Indian and Mestizo, lower and upper class, collaborated in the collective efforts to obtain immediate necessities” (Oliver Smith 1979:45). Lessa (1964) reports that
immediately after a very destructive typhoon in Ulithi (Caroline Islands, western Pacific), taboos that had rigidly separated menstruating women from others broke down.

Often the community of disaster “creates a wall that excludes outsiders . . . .” Townspeople often see Red Cross and government rescue teams as ineffectual, impersonal, unsympathetic, cold and insensitive to local problems and issues” (Irving 1951). Sometimes “the victims feel that it is their disaster and they do not want outsiders coming in to take credit for the work done during the emergency period” (Quarantelli & Dynes 1972:70). While disaster management officials commonly try to impose an AR structure ‘to control the chaos’ they expect and imagine, the disaster community often ignores this official direction, continuing to function in a CS mode. People often disparage, ridicule, or resent what the perceive to be slow, inept, or inappropriate aid from outside government officials (Oliver-Smith 1986). Clearing of damaged structures or mandatory relocation often evokes anger against the authorities who impose them. Outside aid often either neglects pre-existing AR relationships among survivors, or explicitly imposes EM distributive operations. This may evoke resentment from survivors who feel that the distribution violates proper AR respect for their elite, or true need-based CS, or MP distributions proportional to, for example, number of family members (Oliver-Smith 1986). Also, differences in the ways that the same disaster affects different people can be the basis for the formation of distinct CS communities in the ensuing months; shared needs, especially, can catalyze new CS subgroups (Oliver-Smith 1986).

Survivors of disaster commonly report experiencing intense feelings of almost euphorically joyful solidarity, identification, and belonging during the hours, days and weeks after the disaster (James 1906; Wallace 1956; Lessa 1964; Fritz 1965; Oliver-Smith 1979, 1986; Drury et al 2009a, 2009b; Solnit 2009). Indeed, survivors frequently describe this period as the most intensely, joyfully meaningful experience of their lives. For example, Gardiner (2010:182, 370) describes the nostalgia many British felt after the blitz for the camaraderie of the bomb shelters, along with the sense of unified determination that the bombing generated. Likewise, despite all the horrors of war, soldiers often greatly miss the intense CS (and AR) relationships that combat generates (Elder & Clipp 1988). Both in their statements in the ensuing days and in letters, writings, and interviews many years later, survivors report that emerging from the disaster and for many days or even years after they felt more connected, more in and of the community, than at any other time in their lives (Solnit 2009). Soldiers often report that when in combat “Your group is all there is at the time” (World War II veteran quoted in Elder & Clipp 1988:180). Members of a platoon or crew on an aircraft or vessel often take huge risks to help each other without reflection or even fear, and indeed they are fighting primarily for each other, to protect each other, dedicated to not letting each other down. A US Marine who fought on Okinawa said years later “Those men on the line were my family, my home. They were closer to me than I can say, closer than any friends had been or ever would be” (Elder & Clipp 1988:1981). After being treated for wounds, the Marine insisted on rejoining his unit: “They had never let me down, and I couldn’t do it them. I had to be with them rather than let them die and me live with the
knowledge that I might have saved them.” When I (ApF) met with two groups of veterans who had returned from the horrible combat of Iraq and Afghanistan, they reported that while feeling relief and enjoying the safety, comfort, and renewal of old relationships at home, they often greatly missed the intensely absolute CS and AR relations of combat. Some soldiers re-enlist in order to return to these relationships, which cannot be matched in ordinary civilian life. And combat can be the basis for more or less enduring CS relationships among those who fought together. A significant minority of survivors of combat trauma, especially those whose comrades died, form relationships of greater or lesser closeness with survivors of their unit that endure for 40 years or more (Elder & Clipp 1988). In a group that experiences a single disaster, however, the intense CS bonds often begin to diminish somewhat after a few weeks. But very little is known about the factors affecting the temporal course of the motives. Oliver-Smith (1986) provides the only good ethnographic account of the transformations in the following months and years, although his account fails to provide clear dating of most changes. As time passes, disasters form the substrate for the formation of new AR relations, such as newly constituted relief authority and responsibility; new EM relations, such as the matching housing provided for each family; and MP relations such as markets for reconstruction materials and labor.

The intense CS evoked by disasters is remarkable, but it does not invariably erase all social differences, end all exploitation, or preclude all violence (Tierny 2007). The pre-existing culture and society are not totally suspended, and indeed often strongly shape their motives, emotions, and actions at the time (see especially Quarantelli & Dynes 1972, Johnson 1987). While people often make extraordinary efforts to help strangers, typically they are even more motivated to help family, friends, and organizational associates. Family members and others with close ties to likely victims often go into the disaster to search for and attempt to rescue loved ones. Members of the threatened group who have formal organizational roles, such as waitresses, busboys, or tour operators, commonly take special responsibility for helping patrons. Doctors, nurses, or firefighters in the group threatened by a disaster typically use their expertise to aid others, often working to exhaustion or taking great risks (e.g., Hersey 1985). Within the disaster community, people often continue to respect and follow pre-existing or emergent leaders (e.g., Oliver-Smith 1979:45, 1986:76–78). This suggests that while disaster-induced CS is incredibly strong and incredibly inclusive, it does not necessarily weaken or entirely replace existing relationships based on other relational models.

It is also important to recognize that in a disaster, while many survivors heroically aid and care for those who are endangered, injured, or needy, other survivors do not do so. In general, in tornados and similar disasters, most of the rescue and transport to hospital is performed by local residents (Barton 1969:132–133). In the 1952 White County, Arkansas, tornado 47 people died, 615 were injured, 600 buildings were destroyed and 800 buildings seriously damaged. According to survey responses, in the first 12 hours 27% of the residents of the impact area worked to rescue others, 47% provided shelter or food, and 43% searched for others (Marks &
Fritz 1954). Of the residents of the impact area, 50% engaged in at least one such activity for non-relatives (calculated from Barton 1969 table 3-3 and 3-6 & 3-7, all based on Marks & Fritz 1954). It is difficult to interpret these figures, because many who did not help nonfamily members were injured, lacked the physical capacity to help, were occupied taking care of their own injuries or rescuing and caring for family members, or did not encounter anyone in need. Others are in shock and unable to even take care of themselves. In the four 7 July 2005 bombings of London public transportation, in samples collected with different methods, between and one third and two thirds of those caught up in the bombings helped strangers, despite their perceptions of continuing mortal danger (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher 2009b). The study found that few people acted selfishly, even in small ways. In contrast to the isolation they typically experienced as London commuters, those caught up in the 7 July bombings felt a strong sense of unity with the strangers around them. Those who reported this CS sentiment were especially likely to help others (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher 2009b).

Most of the accounts in the disaster literature describe US and Western European disasters, but studies of a typhoon in the western Pacific, the Mexico City earthquake of 1985, the 1970 Peru earthquake and landslide, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the few other non-Western cases that have been investigated seem to be consistent with the patterns observed in the West (Janis 1951, Lessa 1964, Oliver-Smith 1979, Hersey 1985, Solnit 2009).

The intense CS relations catalyzed by a sudden disaster do not seem to emerge consistently in more gradual or prolonged collective traumas such as plagues, droughts, and famines; it may diminish when aerial bombardment is prolonged over years (Janis 1951, Turnbull 1972, Gerlach 1993, McNeill 1977). However, some epidemics, such as the AIDS pandemic, seem to have enhanced the solidarity of those infected, or at least those in the gay community afflicted—though not without simultaneous conflict and derogation (Shilts 2000).

But it is not clear what aspect of sudden shared disaster evokes CS bonds. Is it the instantaneous termination of habitual routines and everyday practices? Loss of control and safety, or uncertainty about the future? Destruction of familiar surroundings? Seeing others who are suffering, dying, maimed, and dead? The loss of those with whom survivors had CS relationships? The sense of relief from nearly being killed but surviving instead? The awareness of the pressing interdependence of ‘being in the same boat’ where people desperately need each other? The sense of having all had the same life-changing experience in common? How is the emergence of CS affected by physical pain or injury? How is affected by the experience of rescuing others, or failure to attempt or succeed in rescuing others? How is it affected by being rescued or receiving crucial aid? We don’t know. It is intriguing that many of the salient features of disaster—shared uncertainty, loss of control, radical rupture with routine, fear, pain, injury, privation—are all characteristic of the severe initiation rituals that activate intense and enduring CS relationships among initiates, with their age set, their gender, and their community (Dulaney & Fiske 1994, Morinis 2009). But we don’t know whether
traditional initiation rites or their modern parallels such as boot camp evoke kama muta; these experiences are often prolonged over days or months, so they may not. As we considered in the contexts of poetry readings, support groups, and oratory (and as we shall see in Chapter 19 when we explore laments) it is clear that moments of recognition of common affliction or distress (whether in the past or present) frequently evoke kama muta. And responses to cuteness suggest that people may also tend to feel compassionate kama when they perceive others’ need or vulnerability. So the perception of affliction or distress may be a key factor in response to disasters, too.

Sudden collective calamity instantaneously intensifies communal sharing relationships, evoking extraordinary euphoric feelings of belonging to an inclusive community. It is a peak experience, sometime profoundly changing survivors. This may be one of the most thrilling of all kama muta occasions. That’s an hypothesis consistent with the motives that disaster evokes, but not yet confirmed by accounts of kama muta’s characteristic sensations.