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Altruism, not panic, prevails in disasters

By Lou Marano

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 23 (UPI) -- The events of Sept. 11 confirmed 50 years of research showing that disasters rarely produce

group panic and self-interested hysteria, but rather that people are more likely to risk their own lives to save others, a Rutgers University sociologist reports.

Hollywood disaster movies showing people running wildly from catastrophe, knocking over their own grandmothers to save themselves are "dead wrong," said Lee Clarke. In his article "Panic: Myth or Reality?" which appears in the fall issue of Contents magazine, Clarke wrote that even when people feel great fear they are often models of civility and cooperation.

"The rules of behavior in extreme situations are not much different from rules of ordinary life," the professor wrote. "People die in the same way they live, with friends, loved ones and colleagues -- in communities. When danger arises, the rule -- as in normal situations -- is for people to help those next to them before they help themselves."

People escaping the destruction of the World Trade Center did not disregard the needs of others. "We now know that almost everyone survived if they were below the floors where the airplanes struck," Clarke said. "That is in large measure because people did not become hysterical but instead facilitated a successful evacuation."

In his article, Clarke wrote that panicky behavior was rare even among residents of German and Japanese cities that were bombed by the Allies in World War II. An "enormous amount" of investigation by the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware shows that -- whether in floods, earthquakes or tornadoes -- people bind together and work "to restore their physical environment and their culture to recognizable shapes."

Clarke examined several cases where people might have been expected to panic but did not. One occurred at a rock concert on Dec. 3, 1979, at the Riverfront Coliseum in Cincinnati, when 11 people were killed in a crush that was popularly perceived as a panic. Approximately 8,000 people were waiting for the concert in a building that was not built to accommodate that many people waiting at once. After the doors opened, about 25 people fell.

"Witnesses say there was little panic," Clarke wrote. "In fact people tried to protect those who had fallen by creating a human cordon around them," but the push of the people behind was too strong. "The crowd trampled the 25 people out of ignorance rather than panic."

Regarding a tragic nightclub fire, Clarke wrote that "had people developed a sense of urgency sooner, more would have gotten out and fewer would have died." On May 28, 1977, the sprawling Beverly Hills Supper club in Southgate, Ky., burned to the ground, killing 165 people. The Cincinnati Post called the incident the third-worst fire disaster in U.S. history.

The roughly 1,200 people in the club's Cabaret Room tried to escape through two side exits, which led outdoors, and the front exit, which led to another part of the club. Those who tried to get out the front entrance were turned back by smoke and fire. "Survivors reported feeling frightened, but few acted out of their fear," Clarke wrote. "People were initially calm as they lined up at the two side exits, near which all of the deaths occurred. When smoke and fire started pouring into the Cabaret Room, some began screaming and others began pushing. As fire entered the room, some people jumped over tables and chairs to get out."

Clarke called special attention to what those trapped in the Cabaret Room did not do. "They did not pick up those chairs and use them to strike people queued up in front of them. They did not grab their hair and shove them aside in a desperate rush to get out. They did not overpower those more helpless than themselves. They did not act blindly in their own self-interest."

When American Airlines Flight 1420 crashed on landing at Little Rock, Ark., airport on June 1, 1999, it burst into flames, and 11 of the 145 aboard were killed. Survivor testimony in the National Transportation Safety Board's report showed that passengers and crew helped one other, delaying their own escape. People who could barely see or breathe in the smoke-filled cabin lined up single file with no pushing or shoving.

That people in great peril usually help others, even strangers, seems contrary to common sense, even irrational. But, Clarke wrote, "human nature is social, not individually egoistic. ... Calamities often strengthen social bonds."

Clarke believes the myth of panic endures because it provides an easy explanation for complex things and detracts attention from institutional failings. In the case of the rock concert, those included "an engineering failure (the building could not accommodate so many people waiting at once), a management failure (not forecasting the demand for entry into the concert), and an organizational failure (once the disaster began it could not be stopped)."

He also criticizes politicians and corporate managers who issue litanies of "public pacifiers" after some mishap, as if the public cannot be trusted with bad news. These include such bromides as: "There was never any danger to the public. Everything is under control. There is no reason for concern."

But, like Winston Churchill, Clarke believes this sells the public short. (Few remember that on June 17, 1940, a month after he delivered his "blood, toil, tears and sweat" speech to the House of Commons, Churchill began a British Broadcasting Corp. broadcast with the words: "The news from France is very bad.")

In fact, Clarke delivers good news. Research into human behavior during disasters "leads to optimism about people," he wrote. "If people generally act well under the most trying of circumstances ... it gives us reason to look for the good and the sensible in them at other times as well."

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