

Can Disaster Relief Work be Life-Enhancing, Or Must it Deplete the Energy of Trauma Workers?

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They can be downright bleak or frantic.***

People in the Indian Ocean perimeter fought with the 2004 Tsunami, but many did not have the energy to survive. The waves forced themselves past natural and artificial barriers without asking permission. In thousands and thousands of instances, the tsunami's waves did what they chose; many humans had to comply. But we know the people who came in contact with the tsunami's waters are not the only ones affected. Relief workers who arrive from elsewhere are one such group that encounters negative effects as an occupational hazard. Using a phenomenological method, I wish to highlight here the contradiction in relief work between its intent and manifestation.

Energy and intention mismatches are everywhere in human life. They manifest as a lack of integration, or more simply put, problems. A person intends to live life beating to one drum beat, but puts energy into another, dissonant beat. I treat these problems of integration in my holistic psychotherapy practice all the time. I believe this mismatch can be the cause of gross illness, vague unhappiness, and sometimes, disaster. Relief workers work to do good (and are recognized as such), and yet their energies are often depleted or negative. It is time that we imagined a more healthy and authentic alignment, or entrainment, between the outer and inner worlds of relief work.

More often than not, relief work environments are that of grief and anxiety. The headquarters and field offices can be outright bleak or frantic. We generally think of this as understandable. However, this

naturalistic, taken-for-granted attitude limits us from learning, or re-learning, what relief work is about and what it does to its practitioners. Workers are publicly somber, appearing to be doing something they do not want to do. It seems obligatory to feel rotten. A phenomenological perspective asks how the world of relief work is constituted by its conscious acts, including how they feel about doing the work in the midst of misery. It interrogates how it is that the essence of relief work (I want to do this work, to help) can be contrary to the appearance (I do not like having to do this work).

What is it exactly that makes people who are trying to ameliorate misery, feel miserable? Are they entrained to feel this way? Is there a subtle script for workers to be affected by disasters in a negative way? Do they have to comply with such an inflexible script? Are these energies operating beyond our grasp? Is it acceptable to feel good about working in a disaster? Do we have choice about how disasters affect us?

12/30/04—My email inbox:

Dear S, Blessings to you on this beautiful mission. I will keep you in my prayers. Love, Martha

S, So many thoughts have gone your way in these past few days since the disaster struck Southeast Asia. I'm not surprised to know of your being in the midst of the rescue effort. Stay safe and well— people need you May blessing go with you, Margaret

Siddharth

When the tsunami struck the perimeter of the Indian Ocean, I was in Ahmedabad, India, nowhere near the Indian Ocean coast. My extended family was treating me to delicious food and laughter. I was taking singing lessons. I was also following up on trauma counseling I had done there two years ago. That work involved a good deal of contact with relief workers, many of whom I was asked to evaluate and treat. December 26th brought the tsunami, and with it an influx of emails of concern.

From my previous work in India, I was in touch with a number of humanitarian organizations. Within hours I connected with groups in South India that were moving to help with relief. With a platform forged by others, I was invited to attend some planning sessions in Chennai for the mental health responders. I purchased my ticket. There were donations for medical supplies and medicines to choose and package. My family rallied to help me prepare on short notice. I was filled with energy and purpose.

*Dear S, I think it is no coincidence that you were drawn to India at this time. You are a beautiful person with so much to offer. The world is a better place with you in it. Take good care. I do not fear for you.
Your friend, Cindy*

S, I know you will do good work and help those who suffer around you make the best they can of their situation. The world is an infinitely better place because of your caring and love. Love, Niti

I composed an email to let my friends and family around the world know that I would be going to South India to do whatever seemed right. I specifically wanted them to know that I would not go headlong into dangers that were thought to exist there. This was important to me because I did not want my presence there to be just one more worry for people, especially family. I did not want communications to me saying “Be careful” when I was confident of my own very good standards of caution. I did not want a situation in which I would feel moved to comfort those concerned parties in a time when I needed to focus on the directly affected people and myself. The email satisfied that purpose, but as I review the responses to it, there is a trend of language and spirit that speaks to the positive energy I feel in disaster management. I include them here as a narrative of others’ feelings regarding relief work.

Please know that many prayers and blessings are with you. How wonderful for all of us and for you that you are there now. I’m sure you

*can see blessings shining even in the midst of this horror. I do feel you are protected, and I trust your good sense. I feel quite maternal towards you at this moment—it’s both personal and not at all. Let me know if you would like Reiki.
Much love, Pamela*

*Dear S, Very happy to know you are well and off on such a mission. God Bless YOU!! What a gift for all the people you will be helping.
In love and gratitude, Debra*

To be sure, disasters have their own energy. Due to their awesome power to interrupt lives, comfort and expectations, we focus on their negative energy. By and large we are overtaken by their negative energy. In Chennai, I helped to train volunteers who were going to work with more bodies of the dead. In Nagapattinam, I counseled fishermen who were angry at the ocean. There is indeed negative energy. Still, what about the positive energy involved with relief efforts? “Some good is coming out of this,” or “Look at how people are willing to help each



Siddharth counseling relief workers.

Siddharth

other.” This positive energy is hardly evidenced among relief workers.

Of course among small groups there is the occasional instigator of light laughter, the comedian that we all so appreciate. Or there is gallows humor that acts as a defense against unacceptable discomfort. There are smiles between workers and volunteers—attempts to display love for each other. But the smiles subside quickly. The energy dissipates. There is a default loop to sadness or anxiety. Despite the view [examples of which are in these emails] that relief workers are doing something good, blessed, or desirable, they typically do their work in somber moods. There are hushed voices and feelings of grief for the tragedy of others. Tears may brim over. Feelings of identification with the human family abound. And this is correct. It is right to feel these feelings. But if there is any pleasure in doing the work, relief workers do not show it. Were an intelligent being from another planet to visit and observe relief work, it may not guess that such work is positive.

Some of the somber demonstration is due to our notions of respect. Quiet and solemn attitudes allow us to pay respect to the dead and suffering. However, are relief workers subtly expected to shun positive feelings during this time? It is not a written rule, of course, but there seems to be such a script. Through such a script, the tsunami waves also forced themselves into people's minds and hearts. Not only those who were directly affected and

their communities feel pain, but also the people who come to join in the rehabilitation process. The contagious nature of psychological trauma has been described elsewhere, so I will not belabor this here. There is burnout or compassion fatigue. Workers can be traumatized due to their work with trauma. The psyche is a territory with permeable barriers.

Dear S, One hears so much bad news that it's quite a gift to be reminded of hope and generous action. I will be thinking of you

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We are doing work that we feel called to do.***

and wishing you safe travels, but I agree, I think you will be very well looked after. And on a subtler level, I hope you get to keep up the high level of self-care you are committed to. Sincerely, Vienna

*Dear S, May God be with you on your important Journey.
Warmly, Shoshana*

I am not suggesting that people choose to feel bad in a disaster. Still, there is a type of automatic compliance with solemnity. There is little permission to publicly demonstrate good feelings. And this compliance is contrary to the view that doing relief work is, and I will repeat, something good, blessed, or desirable.

I am not suggesting that relief work be done with a cosmetically sunny attitude or that press

conferences about disaster management be done in a chipper tone solely to counteract 'compliance' with a somber script. I only wish to point to the energetic mismatch between what we think about relief work versus what we express.

As I was doing the mental health work, I had a tremendous support system. My healer friend and teacher Ranjan was sharing a room with me. His loving energy held me up like nothing else I could imagine. Two years ago I had gone to Sri Lanka to learn princi-

ples of energy healing work with him. He taught me about entrainment, how to resonate with vibrations in different forms.

I wonder now whether relief workers often vibrate with somber feelings as an entrainment that can be traced back to primordial traumatic reactions in the human family or whether they are pulled to feel that way because it is thought to be in harmony with everyone else. I also wonder whether it would be possible to entrain to a more positive core of satisfaction when doing this work.

Hi S! I hope your good heart is helping find happiness and healing as well. All the best, ratna

S, my thoughts are with you! It is strange, but I feel comforted that

Siddharth

someone I know is over there trying to deal with this unfathomable disaster. Jane

Clearly, people can entrain themselves to energies despite large physical, geographic distance. They can feel comforted by good things happening elsewhere. They can feel an extension of themselves if they identify with the activities of someone on the other side of the globe.

A number of my colleagues in the American Group Psychotherapy Association expressed care and concern. They offered a consultant to me, and I replied that I was interested in speaking to a trauma recovery expert whom I like and admire, Dr. Nina Thomas. From New York City, Nina called me in Chennai. We spoke at some length about technique, my feelings, and life in general. She suggested I not pass up any opportunity to write field notes, to keep a journal. I did this. Many nights when I finished writing, I reflected on how I had

not written much about the pain and suffering. I had worked with those subjects all day, but in the final analysis I felt good about the work. Not just the work, but I myself felt good.

I was standing shoulder to shoulder with some of the finest people I have known. In doing relief work, we are doing work that we feel called to do. I recognized that I was doing this work because I want to do this work. Accordingly, my journal is full of gratitude, pleasure, and satisfaction.

Hey there! I really wish I could be there to help in some way. However, it feels good that someone I know is there helping out. You are in my thoughts and prayers. Take care and stay safe, Manisha

When I returned to the United States, I got an email from Nina Thomas. In speaking to her on the phone, I reluctantly told Nina, "You know, I don't feel drained or distressed about the work. I'm doing fine, actually." She emphatically said: "It's OK to feel good and like your work!" I could feel my energy and intention finding alignment when she said this. We

have gone on to have a deeper discussion of why we therapists do what we do. I believe this is a move toward bringing the appearance and essence of relief work into closer alignment.

Entrainment and matching energy/intention are abstractions for very subtle and specific maneuvers of the heart and mind. Relief workers do work on everyone's behalf. They deserve attention and resources that allow them to integrate their inner and outer worlds. On one level, this includes mindful selection of missions, trauma response training, and appropriate crisis support. On another level, there should be a continual renewal of self-understanding [in both individuals and institutions] regarding why they do the work they do. In this manner, greater integration and entrainment will give us both pleasure and peace.

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Giving comfort.