



Playback and the Landscape of Disaster

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From a day we thought far away, disaster strikes in one of its myriad forms. Perhaps it is through fire, flood, or earthquake, perhaps a major gas pipeline explodes, a plane crashes, or a community experiences an event involving violence. Gone are the sweet comforts of safety and predictability. Our lives suddenly disrupt; coping mechanisms fail; we go on emotional alert ready to deal with the impact and duration of the event. Disaster rips through lives out of the blue; no one is immune. People who moments ago stood strong suddenly now are confronted with the terror of their vulnerabilities. The sense of disorientation is profound ~ as are the stories.

These stories describe a break in the skin of the world – a great cutting of the soul. Despite heroic initial attempts to numb, wall up or forget, they remain, etched vividly into the psyche. When impact and loss are great, nothing will ever be the same. Actions taken in the days and years ahead reference these moments. The results are far reaching, influencing critical choices on the path ahead.

Experiences and stories within the landscape of disaster are of vital importance, opening both teller and audience to complex and difficult feelings. The emotions unleashed by such events encompass polarities and paradoxes of the human condition, one of the great pairs of being – life embodies both strengths and vulnerabilities.

Yet with all the creative applications the Playback Movement has generated to date, it is somewhat surprising that we have made but a few tentative forays into this territory in

spite prevalence of natural disasters that befall us. While not hard to imagine the power of the landscape, we, as practitioners of the form, have yet to walk this much of this terrain with our tellers and actors.

In the last *Interplay* (Volume XI Number 1 August 2000) Jonathan Fox made an inquiry about initiatives involving playback in emergency situations. As our company in Wenatchee was founded in response to wildfires that struck Chelan County in 1994, I wanted to offer a description of our experience that summer. Beyond this, I felt it useful to carry out an active imagination that would explore disaster and its possible Playback applications. In turn I hope others might place themselves in service to their communities during such times of need.

The first use of Playback and natural disaster arose from the Roanoke River Floods of 1984. On the flood's anniversary, the City of Roanoke in North Carolina sponsored a Playback performance. Called *High Water Tales*, company conductor Anne Hale invited those who had helped in the relief effort to the teller's chair. Their stories described aid given to humans, pets and farm animals during that difficult time. One particularly poignant story came forward; an emergency responder described finding the body of a relative in the raging waters.

Our own company's effort was again an anniversary commemoration. Funded by the Washington State Commission for the Humanities, we performed in five different communities over a six-day period in the summer of 1995. The previous year's fires burned more than 200 square miles of forestland, deeply impacting each of these communities. So intense were the fires that authorities placed the entire county on evacuation alert. The fluids covered a spectrum of feelings typical in disaster situations ~ *denial (lack of understanding that something big was happening)*, *fear (losing contact with a daughter)*, *panic (just buying a house that was threatened by the fire)*, *urges to escape (wanting to run from the fire)*, *uncertainty (wanting to reach out but unsure how)*, *excitement (of being close to danger)*, *joy (seeing the fire and wanting to put it out)*, *intensity (knowing that life could be lost)*, *anger (that everything could be taken by the*

fire), desperation (*not being able to save animals*), and sorrow (*over the fire's devastation*).

Through six days of performances, community members shared twenty-one stories. A sample of them includes: Donna's story (rushing home from work, animals in a panic, being carried along by friends through the ordeal), Al (incident commander grieving over not being able to save the old Lucas homestead), Edith (the fire bringing back memories of her home burning in the early 1940s and being helped by her renters), Becky (caring for an elderly resident who was forced against her will to leave home), John (being astounded by his seven year old daughter's astute and energetic responses to the fire), Bill (disgust with the ways that fires are being fought today verses "the good old days"), Dan (making the decision against advice of the incident commander to light back burns in a successful effort to save his home), and Terra (celebrating her "fire birthday" when turning four years old). Imagine the fun as audience and company alike sang Happy 5th Birthday at the conclusion of her story. Performing on the anniversary dates of the fire added freshness and immediacy to their telling.

As with all Playback, following the particular alongside the universal led to the heart of the story. Our company rose to the occasion and acted with inspiration. Each of us felt privileged and honored to give voice and memory to our region's trauma. Working with our own fire stories in rehearsal was in itself a moving experience. Chevy, an actor from Lake Chelan, shared hers. For several days she kept thinking the firefighter sent from the other side of the mountain to protect her home looked vaguely familiar, only to realize this same man helped put out the fire that had destroyed her previous home twenty years earlier. At times, fate threw us great and unexpected curves such as when we performed in Entiat. We had arranged for fire trucks to provide the stage lighting in this outdoor performance, but to our surprise they were called away in the middle of the performance by a new wildfire (we ended up using flashlights). The highlight for many of us centered on Corey's story told in the very small community of Lake Wenatchee. A respected elder of the community was dying of cancer as three separate forest fires crested the mountain ridges above his home. On hearing the news of his death, those fighting the fire stood

silently for a few moments to pay their respects, but were unable to take time away from the fire fighting effort to attend the funeral. Following the enactment of Corey's story one year later, everyone in the room was in tears, mourning the loss of this man who stood like a grand old cedar in their midst.

In the same year (1995), *Interplay* reported that members of the R&C Company of Japan invited child survivors of the Kobe Earthquake to tell their disaster related stories in a summer camp context. Company members found reluctance in the children to come forward with their earthquake stories but indicated they enjoyed telling stories on a different subject. A counselor later offered an explanation that the children had not yet recovered from their shock. Perhaps there were other reasons. Emergency mental health research indicates that timing is crucial in diminishing the post-traumatic troubling effects of people's traumas. Without opportunities to immediately ventilate and validate certain experiences, a natural tendency to "wall up" sets in, making emotional recovery work that much more challenging. The summer camp experience proves useful in that we can come learn how to proceed in this complex landscape.

In a far different context, a friend attending the York Conference learned of a Playback Company in India who responded immediately to community crisis. I was amazed to hear him share that Playback practitioners had taken the huge risk of performing in a village where police had brutalized and raped its citizenry. According to his account, the performance/event took place shortly after the incident itself. Knowing more of this important story would be useful to all of us in the Playback movement.

These reports constitute my present understandings about the body Playback's interface with disaster settings. Perhaps other companies will come forward with their stories. It would certainly seem that much more can be done. In a recent phone conversation Jonathan Fox discussed learning of interest in Italy, Hungary and Washington D.C. for some form of a Playback Emergency Response Team to address community needs during a period of crisis.

A number of considerations and questions come to mind when thinking about applying Playback to natural and social disasters. I offer them as a preliminary way of beginning this discussion.

Entire infrastructures such as International Red Cross and in the United State's FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) address the needs of disaster victims by ministering to the injured, maintaining life-support services for the community and assisting affected areas in returning to normal. In addition, emergency mental health literature has paid a great deal of attention to addressing victim and caregiver needs, most notably defusing and debriefing work spearheaded by Jeffrey Mitchell and a system of care called Critical Incident Stress Management. CISM work, done usually in small groups, helps individuals ventilate stories immediately (within 24 to 72 hours after the event) and provides self-care education and other information that normalizes responses in what is clearly an abnormal circumstance. As such interventions are well known to reduce the frequency and intensity of trauma responses, CISM is fast becoming a standard of care in the field of trauma recovery. It would seem important that Playback interventions might coordinate with other efforts under the guidance or auspices of programs set up to administer services in these situations.

Our local Playback experience suggests Playback's usefulness in anniversary commemorations, but can Playback be useful in a disaster situation itself? Perhaps so. Imagine, if you will, a Playback Network Emergency Response Team. The team could be regional, national or international in scope and would, of necessity, be culturally diverse. Members of the network would, of course, be able and willing to travel to the scene of a disaster on short notice. To aid effectiveness, team members would benefit from receiving training in the area of disaster relief, emotional triage, and emergency mental health services. In addition, training might focus on working collaboratively under pressure and dealing with issues of loss

Let's say a natural disaster occurs. Perhaps a typhoon struck in Japan, a cyclone in India, an earthquake in South America or a hurricane had just landed in Louisiana. In each case large numbers of residents are, in all likelihood, displaced, set up temporarily in a school gymnasium or other emergency housing. In many cases the people would be waiting long hours, perhaps feeling bored or frustrated. Might a Playback event be used here that to help individuals turn their focus toward positive ends? Skillfully done, community members could ventilate their stories and begin the difficult work of placing the event into the context of their lives. At the same time the conducting role might include providing community members information that may help them cope with the disaster. As we in the Playback Community know, this powerful form of theatre creates community out of the shared experiences of its audiences. In this case the community is already gathered. All are struggling with similar kinds of issues; all hold enormous strength and can offer support to others. In such a situation it is likely that stories drawn from the audience would rise from a deep need for their collective telling. Writer Barry Lopez shares that sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. Perhaps this is particularly so during times of disaster. One can see how in these conditions the community might give itself the stories its members need to hear.

Stories told within two weeks of a disaster may be far different from those told later in time. Perhaps more events that carry the stories forward might be held. Might it be possible to design Playback events that assist people in healing over the course of a year? It would be interesting to explore how different types of natural disaster situations might call for different applications of Playback that fit the social ecology of the particular people and place.

Victims of disasters of course have hugely differing needs depending upon a complex interplay of factors. The list includes but is not restricted to, demographics of the community, kind and severity of disaster, duration of disaster, effectiveness of the disaster relief effort, developmental stage of those impacted by the disaster, particulars of the victims life story and circumstance, and elapsed time away from the disaster. Great sensitivity to the unique needs of each situation would be requisite to effectiveness. If

Playback were done when people are in the midst of the crisis, what skills might we need to assure the emotional safety of the Playback environments we create? It is not difficult to see that performances/events of this nature would place a great weight and responsibility on conductors and actors alike as energies involved within an audience are likely to be considerable. Yet, Playback practitioners the world over have demonstrated time and time again their courage and competencies in service to their communities.

Developing such a response capacity, such as a Playback Emergency Response Team, would require a Playback infrastructure that could mix the tasks of managing personnel, situations and budgets. Elements of the planning process would include: assessment of the disaster, determination of how Playback might be useful, coordination with other forms of relief, securing funding, assembling the team, setting up publicity, doing the event and evaluating its effectiveness. If the value of using Playback in this manner were powerfully demonstrated, then networking, developing partnerships and funding to establish pilot projects might follow.

Imagining disaster responses on such a scale certainly has the power to engage, but translating such efforts into reality would be hugely challenging. It is good to know though that we do not need to go that far. On stage we are often reminded that less is more. Designing responses to disasters can be done with far less effort, such as a holding single commemorative observance/performance that honors a community's story. The rewards are great. Company members here in Wenatchee continue to draw energy from the fire stories shared more than five years ago. In a way our company is now a keeper of the community's stories. Even our internal name, *The Firestorm Players*, reminds us of those intense times. Having shared that summer's stories so deeply, we remain connected to one another and to the place we live.