

# Beyond Belief: A Human Strategy For Survival

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by Paul Valent - The Age

**Disasters help us to learn more about ourselves, and our responses, writes Paul Valent.**

Where was God during the tsunami? Where is God in Darfur? Where was God in Rwanda? Cambodia? The Holocaust? My own religious phase ended when my father, the only one of nine siblings who survived the Holocaust, died 12 years later of prolonged, painful cancer. I then joined the majority of Holocaust survivors who abandoned belief in God. No believer has been able to convince me since then of the existence of a just, benevolent God.

It seems hard to accept the self-evident logic: there is no benevolent God guiding human affairs. Some may fear a chaotic amoral universe without God. I do not believe that the fear is justified. On the contrary, a scientific view of disasters diminishes their chaos, and may even give clues to the origins of morality and religion.

Pursuing the more fruitful scientific path, akin to the way geologists have observed tectonic shifts of the Earth, so traumatologists in the past 20 to 30 years have observed tectonic shifts of the mind in disasters. Looking scientifically into the eye of trauma, they saw how physical nature and human nature interact in primordial conditions; how some core aspects of human nature manifest and develop.

Briefly, what they saw was that in life-threatening situations people mobilised certain basic survival options. Fight and flight are two such well-known options. Others are rescuing and preserving others, attaching to others who might save one, competing and struggling for scarce resources, co-operating with others for mutual benefit, striving for essential goals, and surrendering previous goals while adapting to new circumstances.

Humans share the above survival strategies with other social animals. Where they differ from them is in the possession of fine feedback mechanisms on their chosen strategies in the form of judgements. Examples are: "You cannot run and leave your friends!"; "She gave you bread, now give her something in return!"

These judgements are themselves instinctive half-thoughts that arouse emotions - guilt, shame and a sense of justice - that tend to motivate action. Thus morality begins with juggling of survival needs of self and others. The result is the constant observation in disasters: that survival strategies fluctuate according to circumstances, always finely honed for maximum survival in the community.

Religion and God play no part during survival activity. Only when no survival strategy is available is God evoked in fantasy as an omnipotent parental helper, who in exchange for being good will help. "If you get me out of this, I'll go to church." On the whole, though, people are realistic enough to hope for Hercules planes, not angels.

The second appearance of religion is after disasters. Then religion may offer comfort through belief that the dead are alive in another form and not really lost; and that religious rituals and expunging non-believers will prevent future disasters. But generally past beliefs crumble, such as that the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. Understanding these principles has enabled traumatologists to help prevent a second round of psychological hurt common after disasters, and to promote healing. They do this by clarifying for survivors how their biological, psychological and social post-disaster symptoms (pains, digestive disorders, emotional outbursts, depression, alcohol consumption); harsh judgements ("How could I have let him/her die?!"; "Why did I survive, and others died?", "I must have done something wrong, and now I am punished."); meanings ("I am a bad parent"); and shattered beliefs ("I should not be on this Earth.") gelled from specific disaster experiences in which they could not promote survival. But it was the disaster's fault, not theirs.

In time, survivors' experiences and their consequences become part of subjective and general human knowledge. Deepening wisdom can help survivors in their subsequent lives, and all in future disasters.

A small example: we know from past disasters that the wave of sympathy and generosity for the tsunami victims is likely to be short-lived. Yet survivors' needs require more than one flush of generosity. Knowledge of our altruistic and selfish human nature can help us to fashion now an appropriate giving plan for the long haul.

If we seek a redemptive silver lining in the tsunami, it is increased knowledge and wisdom. Ultimately it is we who are the containers of our evolution, our morality and our fantasies. It is our responsibility to know ourselves, to iron out our distortions, and enhance our natures for human benefit. And we have the potential to do so.

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