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Paranoid - or prepared? Pondering worst-case disasters leads to better planning

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One of the most memorable criticisms members of the 9/11 commission made in their 2004 report was that the biggest failure of agencies across the federal government was one of "imagination."

Imagination, and what Lee Clarke calls "possibilistic thinking," is still largely missing among those whose job is to protect America from and respond to a worst-case disaster – whether a terrorist attack, nuclear warfare, pandemic flu, industrial accident or clash with a mile-wide meteor. Hence, private citizens must take some safety matters into their own hands, Clarke argues in his book "Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination" (University of Chicago Press, 2006). Clarke is an associate professor of sociology in New Brunswick/Piscataway.

To engage in possibilistic thinking is not to become paranoid or anxious about disaster. Critics say that focusing on things likely to happen – deaths from car accidents or cancer, for example – is more productive. Those things are important, Clarke argues, but policy-makers and other leaders often lose sight of the big picture and leave communities and the planet at risk of devastation in the event of a worst-case disaster. "Most people seem to have spent at least some time imagining the worst thing that could happen to them," Clarke writes. "But having the thoughts, and controlling them or perhaps even working them into a plan, is considered intelligent and wise."

He's no survivalist, but Clarke says he has the ability and is prepared to quarantine his family for up two weeks in the event of a disaster – say, a pandemic illness.

"I'm pretty confident that I could keep my family safe in that kind of situation for a week, perhaps two ... Is that overreacting? It's worst-case thinking," says Clarke. "I'm not living on the edge of fear. There is a larger principle with this idea of arming ourselves with knowledge, with taking control and taking more responsibility over our own well-being."

Disasters are occurring with greater frequency over time, and they shock fewer and fewer people. Worst cases, Clarke says, are beyond most people's imaginations. But months before Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, Clarke wrote for his book that "New Orleans, right at the mouth of the Mississippi, is so far below sea level that a storm surge from a large hurricane could submerge a large proportion of the city under 20 feet or more of water. Such storms don't happen often, but they do happen." Elsewhere, he notes that being poor in New Orleans can be fatal.

Many government officials and Gulf Coast residents said they could not have anticipated the damage Hurricane Katrina would wreak upon the region. "I do think it was within the imaginations, and responsibility, of some people – especially in FEMA – to anticipate what happened," Clarke says. "One can only hope that before the next catastrophe, they'll stretch their imaginations to encompass the worst."

Clarke's studies of risk and disaster grew from his fascination with the forces that hold society together – and those that can tear society apart. "Off-standard conditions, a nuclear accident, a plane gets into trouble – things are not going as we usually expect them to go," Clarke says. "It tells you about human

natures." Clarke's research often delves into the technical, requiring that he understand chemical reactions, combustible temperatures and the inner workings of airplanes.

Much of the material in "Worst Cases" follows from Clarke's 1999 book, "Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster." That book garnered Clarke's work much attention after Y2K and particularly after Sept. 11, 2001.

Though the discourse at the time focused on the possibility of a more devastating attack on the United States, Clarke's foremost security concern is America's rail system, particularly freight transportation. He places a 2001 train fire in Baltimore on his list of "Worst Case Disasters of the Past." Although few remember the accident, he says the fire is notable not for what happened, but what could have happened.

"Not enough [people] know about it. A train was traveling through a tunnel in Baltimore when it caught fire. The train was carrying some very dangerous and very inflammable materials ... Baltimore officials even sounded the city's civil defense sirens. Only luck prevented major loss of life. What if a 90-ton chlorine car had been in that tunnel? Worse, what if the train had been carrying high-level nuclear waste?" Clarke asks. "Had the worst case happened, people would say, as they usually do, 'Who would have thought of that?' "

To prepare for worst-case disasters, emergency specialists, first-responders and government officials should engage in possibilistic thinking and not lose sight of the big picture. That will take a sea change in policy-making, Clarke says. Likewise, individuals ought not to wait for help in a worst-case scenario. In the aftermaths of most disasters, people often exhibit resourcefulness and selflessness, and they should capitalize on that instinct.

"Look at the World Trade Center. Thousands of people were saved," Clarke says. "How did that happen? That happened because regular people took responsibility for not helping just themselves, but for helping other people as well."

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