



Disaster Narratives

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Predisaster narrative elements:

Frame(s)
Normalcy
Prophecies
Anomalies
Symptoms

Disaster narrative elements:

Onset
Initial Impacts: Shock, etc.
Overt expression
Spread/Distribution
Individual stories
Diagnoses/"Cures?"
Natural disorder
Social Collapse
Community resilience/vulnerability
Official response, etc.

Disaster aftermath elements:

Dawn of a new day
Survivors
Recognition and recovery
Retribution
Residual after-effects
Rebuilding
Retrospect
Seeds of new disaster

Predisaster

Disaster

Aftermath

DISASTER NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

















Lisbon Earthquake





Albert Camus



Narrative Classification

	Disaster Type			
	Natural	Technological	Human	The Divine
Deep Cultural Narratives	N1, N2, N3	T1, T2, T3	H1, H2, H3, H4	D1, D2, D3, D4
Meaning Making	N1, N2, N3	T1, T2, T3	H1, H2, H3, H4	D1, D2, D3, D4
Adaptive Strategies	N1, N2, N3	T1, T2, T3	H1, H2, H3, H4	D1, D2, D3, D4

(*)With acknowledgement that there are serious methodological problems with this classification scheme (e.g. are there commonalities amongst the sub-elements; the phrase “natural disaster” is an oxymoron). The categories are used in this analysis because this is how disasters are commonly understood.

“Natural”

Narrative (“Natural”-1).

- **Fatalism and a lack of human agency.** Disasters happen because of nature or God (e.g. Greek mythology of the three Fates who assign destinies to mortals at birth).
- **Acceptance. Helplessness.** There is nothing we can do to prevent disasters. Victim mentality.
- Laisser faire.





Narrative (“Natural”-2).

- Human agency & human supremacy over nature; the war against nature. Heroes battling the forces of nature.
- We have the knowledge and power to control nature and therefore prevent natural disasters (control flooding through infrastructure).
- Social and physical engineering. Risk management.



Narrative (“Natural”-3).

- **Living with nature.** We are all part of the greater whole. Disasters are part of the natural system. (Ecosystem theory. Gaia Principle. Buddhism – being out of sync with how nature functions.)
- **We are part of nature.** Nature is not to be controlled, but to be lived with. (Environmental ethics. Don’t live in floodplains.)
- As much as possible, let nature be. Risk avoidance. **Precautionary Principle.**

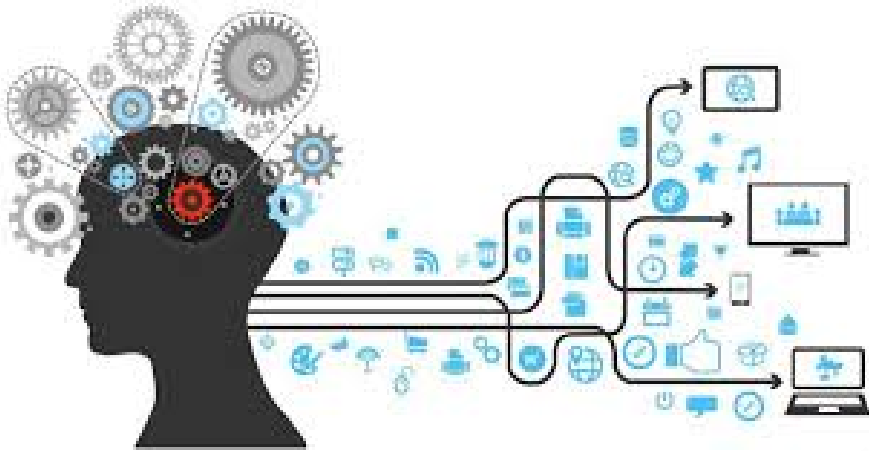
Technological



Narrative (Technological-1).

- **Humans in control** (similar to N2).
Man's control and use of technology leads to the best possible outcomes, but we must do it well, then disasters can be eliminated. (e.g. nuclear power)
- **All disasters can be prevented** and happen because of incompetence, lack of investment or lack of training.
- **The future can be predicted and controlled** (High Reliability Theory)
- More standards, investment and training.

Narrative (Technological-2).



- **Humans mostly in control.** Man's control and use of technology leads to the best possible outcomes. Unfortunately, disasters cannot all be prevented, and some will inevitably suffer for the greater good
- Disasters are unfortunate but are **the price we pay** for having the benefits of a technological society. The future can be predicted, but there are limits to what it is worth to prevent disasters. (Don't shut the economy down too much during a pandemic)
- **Risk analysis & cost-benefit analysis.**



Narrative (Technological-3).

- **Frankenstein and Pandora's Box.**

Human's use of technology will result in catastrophe.

- Through technology we have unleashed **uncontrollable forces** that will eventually destroy us. The future cannot be predicted in a deterministic way. (Normal Accident Theory. Chaos Theory. Tipping points)

- **Precautionary Principle.** Avoid systems with potentially ruinous outcomes.



Human

Narrative (Human-1).

- Disasters happen because humans are fundamentally flawed. (e.g. savage creatures, human error, and mental illness resulting in criminal behavior, looting, operator error, or mass shooting). Heroes battling incompetence and evil.
- We must protect ourselves against the dangerous “other” (Isolationism & Xenophobia)
- Increased security state.





Narrative (Human-2).

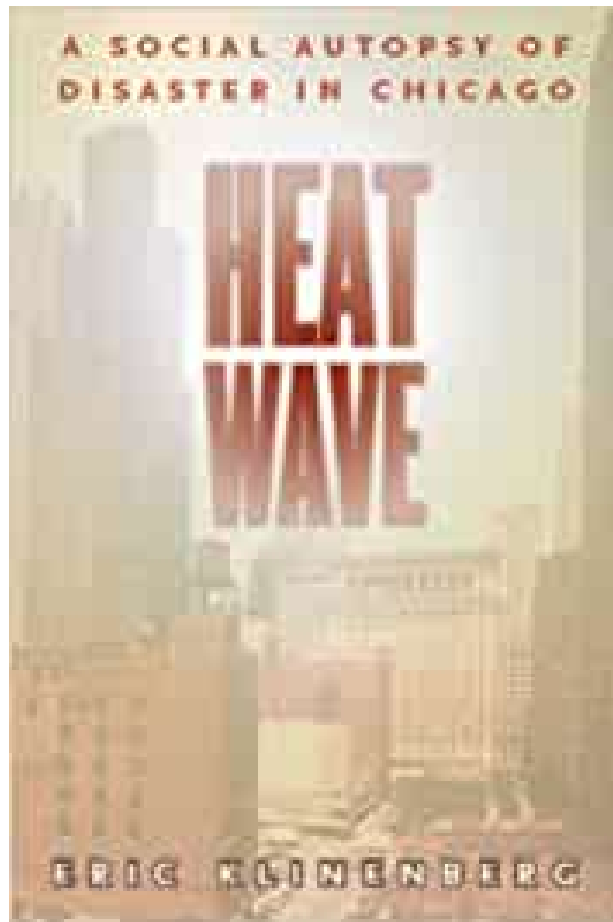
- Elites create disaster risk as they accumulate power and wealth at the expense of others. (Buffalo Creek Flood. Bhopal).

Type H2a: Social Darwinism. Elites flourish because it is **natural law** that they should. (Libertarianism. Neo-liberal economics)

- Free market system is the best solution to everything.

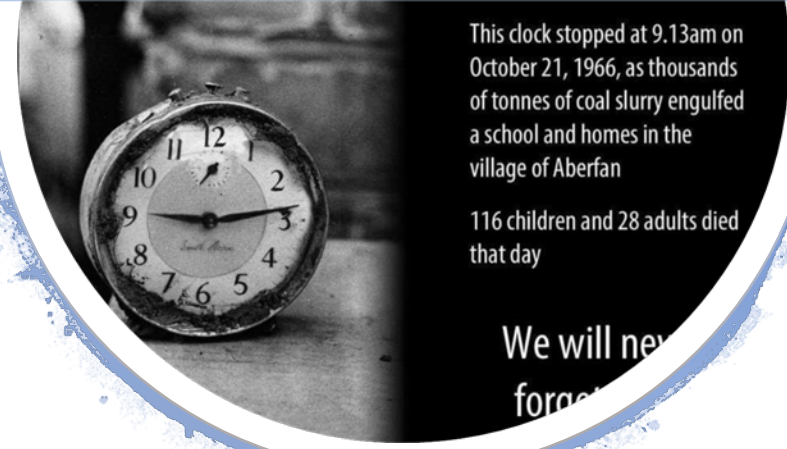
Type H2b: Social Justice. Disasters happen because those in power **unjustly choose** to be selfish. The price is paid by the vulnerable, who suffer disproportionately. (Communitarianism. Egalitarianism.)

- Socialization of risk



Narrative (Human-3).

- Disaster as a social autopsy that reveals the hidden underside of who we are (Chicago Heat Wave study by Eric Klinenberg)
- Disasters strip off concealing layers that prevent people from seeing the true nature of society, and reveal otherwise hidden injustices and vulnerabilities.
- Disasters are opportunities for social change and adaptive management.



Narrative (Human-4).

- Disasters as symbolism. “We will never forget...”.
- Disasters symbolize the best or worst of human nature.
- Commemorative books, statues, remembrance.



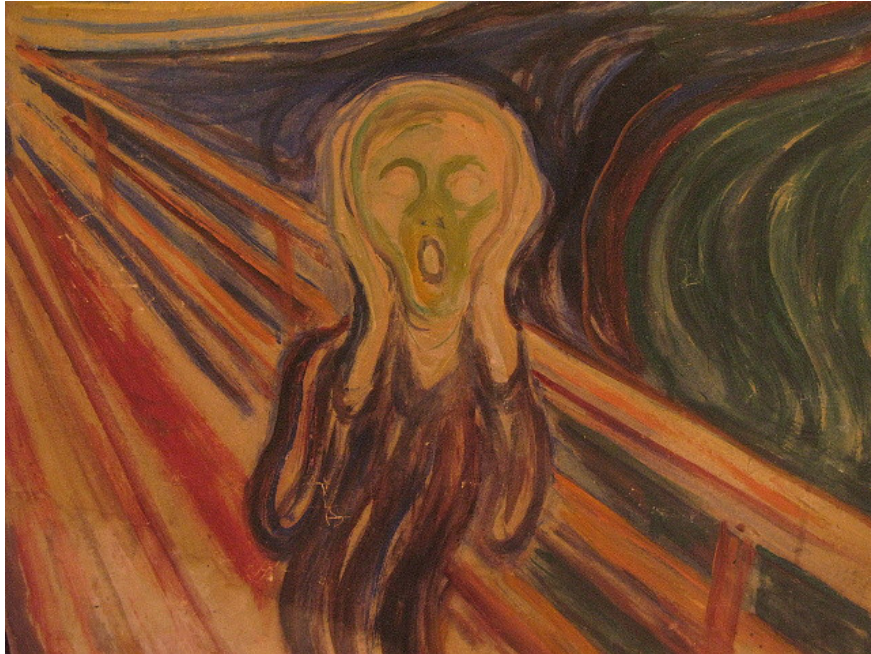


The Divine

Narrative (Divine-1).

- Are disasters part of God's plan?
- Disasters as punishment for our sins (e.g. Noah's flood, Sodom & Gomorrah)
- People **ignored God's laws** and therefore God sent disaster to punish us and to remind people to obey his strictures.
- Obey God's law.





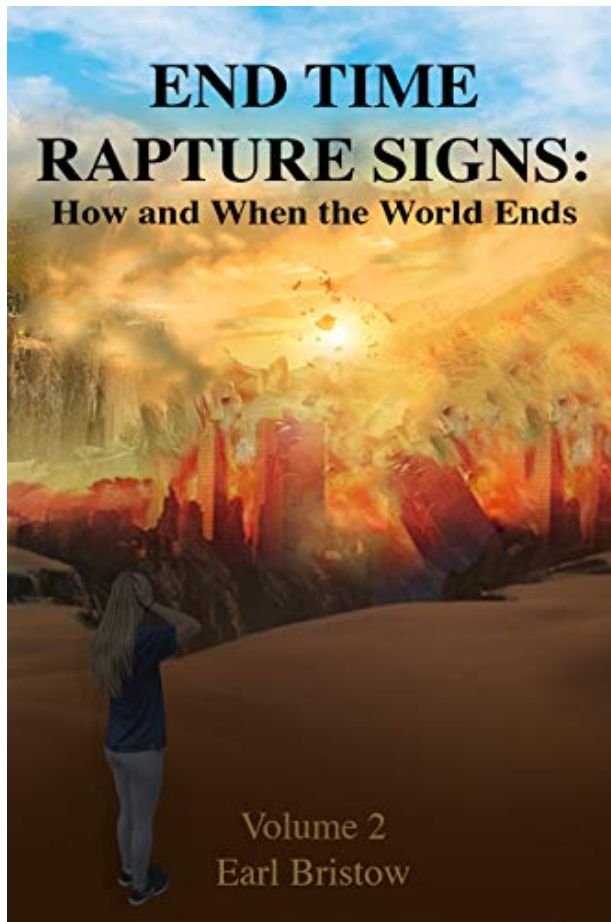
Narrative (Divine-2).

- Suffering that will be redeemed. (e.g. Christ's sacrifice and redemption.)
- Disaster is the price paid for a better future.
- Acceptance.



Narrative (Divine-3).

- Better things to come.
 - “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” by Rabbi Kushner.
- Through suffering, we become better people.
- Lessons learned.



Narrative (Divine-4).

- The end of times (Armageddon.)
- The present matters not; it is “The Rapture” and God’s plan that should guide us.
- Acceptance & obedience

Conclusion

- Disasters disrupt the narrative of the “normal”
- The disaster narrative is a way of making meaning of this disruption
- There are often competing narratives
- Lessons learned depend upon which narrative becomes dominant
- Within disaster narratives there are internal elements that are made up of and influence responses

