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The Loss of Material Self in Three Recent Disasters

The centrality of the material world to the self is not a new idea. William James discussed the material, the social, and the spiritual parts of the empirical self (James, 1890), noting in reference to the social self that it is possible for to have multiple selves. He writes,

In its widest possible sense, however, a man's self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account. (p. 291).

Mead thought of what makes up one's whole being as including the things that the person owns or possesses (1934). Acknowledging the shoulders on which he stood, Belk writes that "A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard possessions [including places and experiences] as parts of ourselves" (1988, p. 139).

In the three studies we share in this paper, we use the concept of extended self (Belk, 1988) to examine what our home and possessions contribute to the biographical meaning we make of our lives. We examine the loss of place, things and relationships as both destructive and liberating. Belk defines extended self as "The concept of extended self (Belk, 1988) comes from consumer science and has mostly developed in relationship to marketing and technology (see Brooks & Anumudu, 2016 on extended self applied to social media, self-branding, and adult identity development). In some ways this is particularly appropriate to life in the U.S., where consumerism is so deeply built into the social and economic fabric and the idea of the individualistic self is fundamental.

We also look at spontaneous acts of compassion and their meaning to disaster survivors as well as responders. Drawing on Buddhist philosophy (Goldstein, 2013), Martin defined compassion as "the ability to feel the suffering of another and the wish to mediate that suffering in some way" (Martin, 2016). She notes that compassion is not the same as empathy or altruism. Empathy refers to taking the perspective and feeling the emotions of another person, but compassion that those thoughts include the desire to help. Altruism

is defined as the “Disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others” (OED) and implies action. However, Ekman (2010) points out that altruism does not always include compassion and compassion does not always lead to action.

Finally, we look at extended self and extended community together with the role of image of the material world in anchoring individual narratives of self.

Three Studies of Human Responses to Disaster

What follows is the description of three case studies on the meaning people made of their lives in response to surviving natural or manmade disasters. Study I documents how a web of relationships, developed over generations and characterized by intergenerational abuse, were held in place by a house (Holcomb, 2017). For this paper, Holcomb focuses on the transformation of identity that occurred when this house was destroyed in Hurricane Ike. Study II focuses on stories of survivors and responders in a small town at the time of the biggest flash flood in recorded Texas history in 2015 (Martin, 2016). She highlights the nature of compassion as experienced by both survivors and responders. Study three examines the stories of survivors of a fire that destroyed the lofts and community they had built in an historic warehouse district when a contractor installing fiber optics for a telecommunications company hit a gas line and ignited a fire in one of the buildings’ basement. Here, Brooks looks at the narrative patterns present at the levels of the individual, neighborhood, and city, forming an ecology of interdependence among system levels (Bateson, 1972).

Hurricane Ike.

Study I documents the transformative journey of myself (Michelle) and my mother after our family house and web of relationships, developed over generations and characterized by intergenerational abuse, were destroyed by Hurricane Ike in 2008 (Holcomb, 2017).

Galveston, TX is an island that has seen its share of natural disaster. My family is Galvestonian, and my mother continued to live there after I moved on. Our family home held over two decades of memories for me. It formed the place that established my childhood. On September 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike sent its 18 foot surge levels and 110 mph winds into its walls – leaving behind a molded shell of history and memories.

Methodology.

The purpose of my study was to understand how the consequences of natural disaster loss led to identity development for the individuals affected. I situated this study in a constructivist philosophy. Using life history research methods with my mother, I added my own understandings of happenings within our family system to arrive at a thick description of personal and interpersonal experiences before and after Hurricane Ike. These stories provided places for me to look for patterns of identity change.

Drawing the concept of extended self, I thought of our house as part of who we were through the interactions and memories we made within. The result was an autoethnography where I took my mother's stories and inserted my learning to paint a broader picture. I arrived at the following: my mother saw the Sycamore house as a possession of control, as a receptacle for memories, and as a reflection of my grandparents.

Housing family relationships.

My Popo bought the Sycamore house in 1957. Grandma did not come from a wealthy family, and a significant part of her life was spent within the Galveston projects. On several occasions through her early childhood, Grandma had placed my mom in an orphanage. This time, Grandma had fallen into the graces of a wealthier man, and they were trying to fit the mold of the stereotypical 1950s "American" couple. To make the picture complete she needed a child, so mom, Grandma's child, was now a resident of 7018 Sycamore Drive, and my Grandma could take all of the staged family photographs she wanted.

I have the feeling that Popo truly wanted to be a supportive and loving stepfather to mom, but his feeling for my grandma—and her feeling toward my mom— always took precedence. In mom's own words: Grandma was never a very loving parent. When Mom was 24, I came along. Grandma and Popo were anything but supportive when she showed back up at their front door with a child. It was not my mom's first choice of residence, but considering the circumstances, returning to live with her parents was her only option. When she had me, she was living in her car on the streets of San Antonio. Her biggest hurdle: coming home.

Full controlling force ensued. They allowed mom and me to move in, but she was continually bombarded with negative displays of support. Comments such as, "You needed a kid like you needed a hole in your head!" were Grandma's weapon of choice. She and Popo even went so far as to take mom to court seeking legal custody of me. The judge sided with my mother. However, the social infrastructure, with them ruling the household, continued.

I took orders according to the chain of command. Popo may have been the man, but Grandma was the real boss. My grandparents definitely placed me on a pedestal, and this served as a constant reminder to my mom that I was her biggest mistake. When I got older, I found out mom worked so much because she had to pay my grandparents rent and for babysitting. When I reached kindergarten age, my Grandma found the perfect private school for me to attend. I would be sent there, mom would pay for it, and our Sycamore household would once again look like the perfect, although extended, family. Our household would be forced to grow again when Nanny moved into the Sycamore house with non-severe medical issues. Popo was still working for National Cash Register Corporation, so it became Grandma's job to take care of Nanny. And then came the bruises.

When I asked Grandma about the marks on Nanny's face, hands, and legs, I was first told that "little girls should speak only when they are spoken to, so it was my place not to ask such questions." But, this would always be followed with "she fell." As a child, I accepted the answer. She was old, and nobody else seemed to be concerned. Not the neighbors, not my mom, not my Popo. Then one day I heard the bruises happening. "Bessie...Bessie...Bessie. No! Stop Bessie," Nanny begged in her 82-year-old voice. I saw the bruises happening as Grandma pulled Nanny, naked, down the hallway. "Stop, Bessie...please stop." I felt the bruises happening, and it was something I could not unfeel. The bruises stopped on January 14, 1978. In my little mind, one of two things had happened: either the bruises had killed Nanny, or Nanny had finally found a way to get Bessie to stop.

The relationship between the house and mom was negative and vile. And, when connecting the study to a bigger picture, cultural patterns such as the desired conformity of the 1950s era, the shame of unwed mothering, and the indignity of poverty, are evident. All of this, including the abuse, was held in place by the house. Mom's transformation in identity was linked to the house being destroyed and then leaving it: a transformation from incarceration to liberation.

I came from a place of struggle and destruction, a situation concerned with power, lacking the concept of nurturing. But to change such deep roots, the entire system needed to be destroyed. I learned that slicing away at the bark or cutting off a branch would not stimulate the change needed. I learned that Hurricane Ike was not only needed, it was essential.

The Wimberly Flood.

On Memorial Day of 2015, rains pelted the central Texas hill country. In Wimberley, the river rose more than 33 feet in just three hours early Sunday morning, cresting 27 feet above flood stage. The Blanco River left its bank, engulfing livestock and trees. Houses were lifted from their foundations and plunged into a typically calm and peaceful river. Some 321 homes were destroyed and more than 1200 homes were left with extensive damage (Wimberley City Records, 2015).

Purpose and methodology.

This study sought to identify the relationship between the crisis moments and the process of compassion in first responders as well as the victims, who both received and in some cases enacted compassion. Moira used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as both the guiding philosophy and the methodology (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009).

She lived in the community at the time of the flood, and although her own place was not flooded, some of her friends were not so lucky. The entire community was affected by their friends' homes and lives and the destruction of parts of town, surrounding countryside and roads.

The importance for survivors of extended self and the compassion of others.

The centrality of home permeated survivors' concerns, whether they were gripped with fear, surviving, or creating a new life. Survivors talked about the things in their homes and the environment around their homes and connected them by speaking of memories and identity. Mary, for example, talked about home as part of her family and her memory, almost as an image of herself. She said, "I thought, I didn't lose my house, I lost my home [the interior of her house had been flooded]. The house is still standing...but the home. We've been there 23 years, and the family has been there. We created an ambiance and a sense of our family (in that house), it was our family history." She continued, "my home was part of my identity. Part of me was/is tied up in that house. How we had created an ambiance... that was part of who I am...it is who I am." Another woman, Kara described her home as "a beautiful home" – as a place of retreat. She said she enjoyed working on and around the home. Kara enjoyed the sense of having a home for others and told me, "I need to have a beautiful home. It is important to me." Theresa said her home had been her, "respite, recluse, sanctuary, hide-away and nest." For Dorothy, her home was a place of gathering and entertaining friends with her special mark and hospitality. Dorothy explained, "I want to have my own space. I want to be able to have my friends come over, to be there. I have to get a little house. I do want to have a little house, a house of my own."

Friends and first responders seemed to be able to recognize home and possessions as important aspects of survivors' sense of personal meaning. For example, on the evening of the flood, Dorothy placed her wedding rings in a small container on the bathroom countertop. During the night, when the power was out and the house was dark, she could not make her way to retrieve them. Dorothy is a widow who finds great comfort in her wedding rings. After the flood, her house was considered dangerous to enter as it was filled with mud and debris. Neighbors knew how much she would appreciate her rings. One man dug through mud to get to the bathroom area and then through several feet of mud to find them on the countertop. Dorothy described the feeling of relief and ability to move forward when she got back her wedding rings: "Now that I have my rings, I know it's all going to be okay. I can go on."

Mary described volunteers recognizing her (and her husband's) need for nourishing food during the recovery process. One of the volunteers organized the local restaurants to donate food, giving people in need a daily selection of meal choices. Mary said they found themselves relishing the fact that good, nutritious and delicious food would be delivered to their home during the working process. She said, "You know food is really a doorway to the soul and to healing. It's amazing how much we would look forward to that as being a highlight of the day. The food was delicious, and it really allowed us to go on. These were 'Mercy chefs' you know..." Mary also described being in her home the day after the flood. "My friend knew how important our home has always been. She brought fresh linens and a huge box of cleaning supplies, a thousand black trash bags and I don't know what else. She brought things to make the house feel less like a disaster. She knew, she just knew." Dorothy spoke of her desire to get to her home as she told me, "They wouldn't let me see my house because it wasn't safe. Everybody knew how much

that house meant to me. All those memories – all those years there. My friends were helping me find a new place.”

Responder’s recognition of extended self and compassionate action.

One of the first responders, Kal, director of the local EMS, described survivors as though he knew each one of them. In describing his work he spoke of making “scared, distressed, and hurt individuals as comfortable and comforted as possible. I think it’s just what we do here. It’s the job here. That’s what we must do.” He went on to tell Moira about getting to one couple trapped in their home:

We waited there, and I talked to the guy and the brother both. I just kept talking to them, telling them I was there. It was all going to be okay. I got this. In about half an hour, I with one other guy waded through waist high water and got into the house. We got to the house and in through all that debris and stuff into the water in the house. The downstairs was a wreck. We saw a dog had died downstairs. We got up there – upstairs, and got the man and his wife and their little dog upstairs. They had kept that thing alive by holding it above their head and out of the water all that time. I didn’t know how to tell them the dog had died downstairs...He was so frightened and had been so close to death, there with his wife and dogs and all. He just didn’t care that he was going to have to walk over rock or whatever...he just wanted to get out and on safe, dry ground.

Kal told the story of a woman saving a horse. She was not a first responder, but had rented a cottage near the river for the holiday weekend. As Kal told it, the woman told him the electricity had “blown out and [“I heard these] bleating, blaring sounds – not like anything I’ve heard before...”. She slowly made her way down the stairwell into the four or five feet of water in the room below and saw the horse trapped in the room. She realized she needed to “calm the horse down and get it upstairs since that was the only place of safety at that moment.” Knowing the horse was afraid, the woman used “every bit of my strength to calm the horse – letting it know that it needed to follow me. And it did. It went up those stairs. You know horses when they are afraid need you to talk a certain way, they are looking for you to be the one leading them. They are afraid.” Another man, John, a retired academic, told of the harrowing drive in his pickup with tools through his own destroyed property to go help his friends.

I went to my friend’s place...and just stopped cold. The house was gone. There was nothing there. The foundation was there...there was debris everywhere. There was nothing else. I was sick inside. I just felt like I was in slow motion. I walked around and there was my friend. He was sitting in a lawn chair holding his head in his hands. I came up behind him. I didn’t know what to do. I just stood there, then touched him on the shoulder. I said, ‘Oh Charlie’. He turned around. He looked at me and said that he and Margie had decided just two weeks ago to let the flood insurance go...they didn’t renew it. I didn’t know what to do. I just held him. I just held him.

Explaining his actions, John said, “I mean I don’t usually do that. I have known this guy for 50 years and I’ve never held him. I held him. What else could I do? I found another bent lawn chair and pulled it up...and just sat next him...for several hours I think.”

Moira wrote in her journal, reflecting on the people and community around her:

Moments of crisis, we ask deeply important questions, perhaps only unconsciously. We wonder about who we are and if we can handle what is in front us. In this crisis, people survived because acquaintances and strangers went door to door informing others that the waters were rising/had risen; called their friends if they couldn’t get through, and connected through volunteers from nearby communities.

The Old Market fire.

Study three examines survivor stories of a 2016 fire that destroyed their lofts in an historic market/warehouse neighborhood in a U.S. city. A contractor installing fiber optics for a telecommunications company hit a gas line, igniting a fire. The study’s purpose was to understand the meanings survivors gave to home and things when their lives were suddenly and violently disrupted. Becoming clear from this study was that the residents’ extended selves of art and relationships were entangled in an “extended community”.

Methodology.

Using narrative methodology, I focused on visual images (Reismann, 2008), including media stories about the fire and neighborhood. Interviewees were family members and friends. Other stories came from online news sources. My strong ties to the narrators and the community brought intimacy to the interviews and an historical experience of the community, making me privy to a particular way of framing and telling the stories (Hallqvist, 2014). I use pseudonyms for all interviewees and referents.

Individual and community biographies.

The Old Market evolved during the 19th century as an epicenter of produce dealers, buyers, and transporters responding to Omaha’s role as a railroad center connecting the settled U.S. East with the unsettled West. Its importance ended when the grocery industry changed in the 1950s. One warehouse owner, faced with a condemnation notice, decided to renovate. He turned the ground floor of one building into The French Café. More businesses began to develop. His son, Mark, grew up in Paris, married a painter and photographer from Berlin, and moved back. They owned and lived in the building that had burned. His family is often credited with the vision for developing the neighborhood. In his words, [we] “evolved this never-planned but organically developed area... We knew these warehouses had possibilities...and to tear them down to construct contemporary buildings would have been like painting over the Mona Lisa.” (History of the Old Market, n.d.)

The analogy with art is telling. Art and creativity drew people to the lofts, which they filled with art from the community and places they had lived in other parts of the world. Paintings, photography and sculptures flowed into the hallways, many their own creations. Mia talked of Mark and Vera giving the building across the street and ongoing fees from the nearby parking lot to the Artists Cooperative Gallery. Madeleine, an interior designer, had “done” other lofts in the building. She had wanted to live there, but her “husband didn’t care for it.” When he died, 20 years ago, she moved into and ran her design business in one of the lofts. Madeleine lost her design tools, art and workspace in the fire. She was 86 when I interviewed her, practicing her profession and rebuilding her loft.

The neighborhood’s character was pivotal. Mia, a former CEO for a large technology company before contracting multiple sclerosis, explained, “Where else in Omaha would we have lived? ...I had lived all over. Omaha was where I grew up. I thought the Old Market was one of the neatest places around.” Asked to describe an image that was quintessential “Old Market” for her, Mia became pensive:

...so many things...walking back from Plank...everything shrouded in fog -- and street lamps -- a group of young people in front of CupCake around the corner from our loft. One of them was hula hooping and others were singing – not well – but singing and laughing -- a guy across the street playing the saxophone with his case open – that’s what I would think of.

History pervaded the neighborhood. When looking to buy a loft there, Mia had imagined, “...we could sit and look at the fruit and vegetable market across the way that Pop used to visit to get our Christmas tree, and they would give him a lug of oranges. Remember? We would wrap them in tissue paper and roll them around the kitchen floor.” Going back earlier in the century, Mia’s mother had told her that *her* parents had driven to the Market for Christmas oranges from their farm 30 miles away. Hallie, who had come to the US from England years before, described bringing her teenage children to The Market.

Relationships were important. Brian, Mia’s partner and a former airline pilot, wanted their loft to be rebuilt exactly as it was because “this was the first place Mia and I started making a life together.” Mia continued, “Also, there is a whole neighborhood of people that know one another, live in the building, own and work in businesses.” She illustrated her point: “Garrett called me from Chicago just to talk. He’s there with his daughter who has pancreatic cancer...Sean –we had a glass of wine last night, and he really wants to come back to The Market. He and Javier were going to get married...they broke up.” Thinking about that she added, “Tragedies are hard to come through intact...Javier is redoing the loft they no longer share...Madeleine is helping him – they fight all the time – she tells him if he doesn’t shape up, she’s going to call his mother in Venezuela...(laughter)”. M’s Pub was an iconic restaurant on the ground floor of the loft building. Many in the city wrote on an online news site of times there with people they loved: “So sad!! This was my Mother's favorite place...when she had to stay in Omaha for an organ transplant 17 years ago. She loved the rubens... Many good memories eating

there with my Mother.” “My wife... and I were engaged at M's and were planning on celebrating our ten year anniversary there tonight...So sad....” “M's has been such a huge part of my life...” (‘A Special Place in Our Heart’, 2016). Brian described M’s Christmas Eves when the owner stopped seating customers and opened it to the neighborhood, serving up oyster shooters, eggnog, vodka...the place filled up with Old Market folks.”

Finally, the financial impact of the fire had become a constant topic of conversation as the shock of the disaster lessened. But rebuilding in the shell of the building that was left was not a question for residents, even though they described it as costly and entangled in city inspections and permits, insurance, and work with contractors.

Discussion

Belk writes that “We impose our identities on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us” (141). He goes on to say,

If involuntary loss of possessions causes a loss of self, one of the primary reactions following such loss should be an attempt at self-restoration. This phenomenon has been observed in psychoanalysis and has led to the hypothesis that, along with body loss, object loss is the fountainhead of creativity... (Belk, 143).

In Michelle’s “Ike” study, rewriting identity as a result of the loss of a house on Sycamore Drive that held a history of abusive and constraining relationships, which themselves were a form of extended self, served to liberate two of those who lived or had lived there. The author and her mother then went on to develop new identities and understandings of themselves that included more clearly understanding how the Sycamore Drive house held the memories of relationships and events that had come to comprise their identities. Thus, as Belk points out, we might hypothesize that object loss was a source of creativity as at least two of the occupants, moved to a new home and developed their identities in a way that consciously did not replicate the extended selves held at the Sycamore Drive house.

Maira’s interviews for the “Wimberly Flood” study captured the intensity of immediate survival. In her study, bodily survival, life over death, came first. Then survivors spoke of the importance of their homes and possessions, all symbolic of close relationships. Compassion was expressed in material ways, tending to the extended selves of the survivors, and both survivors and responders told stories of meaning of what someone else had done or the meaning of what they had tried to do. Their feeling of connection to their home gave survivors a feeling of security, which Hiss (1990) describes as belonging to an environment. It comes from feeling grounded and rooted in the memories of who one is, who one was, as lived through this setting (Altman & Werner, 1985), and offers an empirical basis for home and our home interiors being an aspect of our psychological self (Marcus, 1995, p 25). Sensing this, responders tended to the things they sensed were important to the survivors, such as wedding rings or a pet. Maira quoted one respondent as saying, “scared, distressed, and hurt individuals as comfortable and comforted as possible. I think it’s just what we do here. It’s the job here. That’s

what we must do.” Whether this indicates a spontaneity to compassion or the statement of a vocational role is hard to say. But research is beginning to document a pattern of compassion and altruism in people (see for example, Meyer et al., 2013; Keltner, Marsh & Smith, 2010; Zaki, J. & Ochsner, K., 2012).

Finally, Ann’s “Old Market Fire” study also documents the disruption of extended selves and the compassion people feel for the material selves of others in disasters. However, this study also picks up the narratives of history and art as extended individual selves and extended community identity, thus linking through shared images the entanglement of personal histories with community. The narratives of both are present in both individual interviews and in the media and other online sources. The Old Market and the lofts and businesses provided a unique space for creativity. They served as places where relationships were developed, becoming entangled with peoples’ biographies. Importantly, image, both as art, the creative, evolving ambiance of the Market, and relationships came out in the memories people shared. Images of relational encounters and of the special ambiance in the Market became a container for personal stories both told and yet to be told. Ethnographers have long asked participants to show them important artifacts in their lives and tell their meanings. But the importance of images here is that they link our memories to our identities through invoking our extended selves. They accompany the biographies we tell, and whether or not we actually describe the images themselves, we hold them in our minds as we tell them.

Final Reflections

The violent loss of our extended selves is increasingly important as we witness the struggles of refugees, survivors of natural disasters, and those displaced by conflict and war. Our identities are in great part secured by our material worlds and the life stories we tell others to help secure. Bakhtin (1990) writes, the author must take a “position outside himself...He must become another in relationship to himself, must look at himself through the eyes of another” (p. 15). As we tell of our lives in the wake of disaster, do we have the chance to see ourselves “through the eyes of another” and the open the possibility to rewrite ourselves. Can understanding the importance of our material selves, their embeddedness and resonance with our surrounding communities and environments, the images we hold of them, and the compassion their loss engenders in others be a key to the human evolution of which Gregory Bateson writes (Bateson, 1972)?

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