

# Rebuilding Identity After a Natural or Human Generated Disaster

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## Rebuilding Identity After a Natural or Human Generated Disaster

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What follows is a description of three case studies in which natural or manmade disasters destroyed survivors' homes. For several of the survivors interviewed, the destruction of this material dimension of their identities led them to review their lives and rethink other dimensions of their identities and particularly how their relationships and communities were woven into whom they had become.

### Hurricane Ike

Study I documents the transformative (Illeris, 2013) journey of Michelle and her mother after their family house and web of relationships, developed over generations and characterized by intergenerational abuse, were destroyed by Hurricane Ike in 2008 (Holcomb, 2017). Using life history research methods with her mother, she added her own autoethnographic understandings of happenings within their family system to describe the family's personal and interpersonal experiences and identified patterns of identity change before and after Hurricane Ike. In the Michelle's words,

The relationship between the house and mom was negative and vile. Mom's transformation in identity was linked to the house being destroyed and then leaving it. To change such deep roots, the entire system needed to be destroyed. I learned that Hurricane Ike was not only needed, but essential. 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 her parents.

This study is important in that it shows how social, family and personal histories, and patterns of relationship are symbolized by a house (qua home) and embedded in the identities of two family members. The materiality of identity becomes evident in the liberation of the mother and daughter from the history of dysfunction and abuse that occurred when Hurricane Ike destroyed the house.

### **The Wimberley Flood**

Study II tells of the meaning of home to survivors when their houses were lifted from their foundations and plunged into a typically calm and peaceful river during a flash flood in Wimberley, Texas (Martin, 2016). Moira used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as both the guiding philosophy and the methodology (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009), sought to identify the relationship between the crisis moments and the process of compassion in first responders as well as the survivors.

Survivors talked about the things in their homes and the surrounding environment speaking of their relationships and identities through their remembered stories. Mary, for example, talked about home as part of her family, and almost as an image of herself. She said, "I thought, I didn't lose my house, I lost my home...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." On the evening of the flood, Dorothy placed her wedding rings in a small container on the bathroom countertop. When the power was out and the house was dark, she could not 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. One neighbor dug through mud to get to the bathroom area and then through several more feet to find them on the countertop. Dorothy told me, "Now that I have my rings, I know it's all going to be okay. I can go on."

The study is significant in identifying the materiality of home and possessions to personal identity and the seemingly instinctive compassionate responses of first responders and neighbors as they sought to save important possessions, pets and animals, and joined with the survivors in grieving the loss of their homes.

### **The Old Market fire**

Study three examines survivor stories of a 2016 fire that destroyed their lofts in an historic market/warehouse neighborhood in Omaha. A contractor installing fiber optics for a telecommunications company hit a gas line, igniting the fire. Using narrative methodology, Ann focused on visual images (Reismann, 2008), including media stories about the fire and neighborhood. The first business to develop was The French Café.

History pervaded the neighborhood. The Old Market evolved during the 19th century as a center for produce dealers, buyers, and transporters responding to Omaha's role as a railroad

center connecting the settled U.S. East with the unsettled West. History pervaded the neighborhood. Mia, a former CEO for a large technology company before getting multiple sclerosis, explained, "Where else in Omaha would we have lived? Pop used to visit to get our Christmas tree. They would give him a lug of oranges. And when Mom was little, Grandpa used to drive to The Market for Christmas oranges from their farm 30 miles away." It was also a hub of creativity. One long time business and loft owner explained, "[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 halls in the building that burned and many of the lofts were covered with art, much from artists in the Old Market. Finally, relationships were important. One of the survivors shared this: "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..."

The importance of the study is to document history of place and materiality in the identities of those who lost their lofts in the fire. Many of them, including an 86-year-old interior designer, were recreating or creating anew the places that were so integrated into their identities.

## **Discussion**

These studies highlight the disruption to material and relational identities in the experience of disasters that destroy homes. While some adult education research exists on disaster preparedness (for example, Fisher, 2014; Preston, et al, 2011) fewer studies have focused on adult learning and disasters (e.g. Fang & Yusof, 2013; Höfler, 2014; Preston, et al, 2015; Tuohy & Stephens, 2011). What our three studies do is begin to understand the learning and identity development that can occur when a home is lost in a natural or human-made disaster.

Belk (1988) developed the concept of extended identity (1988), linking possessions to stages of human development across the life cycle. For example, citing Csikszentmihalyi (1982) he suggests that owning nice things equates to "having passed the test of personhood in our society" (p.5). Our own research suggests that one's home is a symbol of a history of place and family and of community relationships. It can imprison growth and learning as in Michelle's study; it can provide the security of knowing the object and thus a core part of identity as in Moira's study; or it can be a creation in which the creator retains an identity in the creation and the possibilities of all one might have and do as in Ann's study. Each of these suggests a starting point for linking learning to identity development for adults (Kroger & McLean, 2011).

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