

Natural Disasters and Storytelling

Why do we turn to stories in the midst of a disaster? | Madeleine Wattenbarger, LitHub

Save the moments when it touches us directly—more frequently, perhaps, for someone living in the Gulf or on a fault line, but once in a lifetime for people like myself from the northeast US—we nearly always experience natural disaster as told by narrative [stories]. The media coverage follows familiar patterns and tropes: If it's a storm or a spreading fire or another more-or-less foreseeable event, we're shown, first, the people pouring into grocery stores to stock for the apocalypse, the hastily loaded cars brimming with supplies and, inevitably, those standing their ground because of stubbornness or disbelief or simply the lack of resources to flee. For a day or two, news programs dedicate themselves to footage of the real-time horror: stories of roofs blown off or property destroyed or people left bereaved [mourning]. Then comes the postmortem, the elegy, and the satisfying glimpse of hope in recovery. The case is deemed closed, save the occasional checking-in epilogue weeks, months or years later. In this version of the story, a disaster has a beginning, middle, and end, a narrative arc. It enters the scene like a villain and, though it leaves destruction in its wake, it eventually exits, not to be heard of again. There comes a denouement [a conclusion/final part]. In the communities where disaster strikes, however, disaster narratives are rarely so neat. Maybe the villain isn't nature's unpredictability, but human error; maybe there is no denouement, just a slow adjustment to a newly grim life.

Media reports lay down the facts: so many people killed and buildings collapsed, the telephone lines down, all normal activity suspended. They don't convey, though, the shroud of horror that fills the mind.

Weather (Partly cloudy tonight and Friday)
No Cincinnati paper has been able to give news of the Earthquake as quickly and accurately as The Post.

NIGHT EDITION
THE CINCINNATI POST
VOL. 51, NO. 92 CINCINNATI, THURSDAY, APRIL 19, 1906. PRICE ONE CENT. 10 Pages
The Scripps-McBee Press Association has had the first and best news of the Earthquake from the outset.

3000 DEAD; \$300,000,000 LOST SAN FRANCISCO IS OBLITERATED

THIS SHOWS THE EXTENT OF THE DEVASTATION IN SAN FRANCISCO

PHOTOGRAPHED FROM NOB HILL, RESIDENCE SECTION, NOW ON FIRE. ARTIST'S WORK SHOWS BIG BUILDINGS AND LANDMARKS AND THEIR FATE.

Thursday Sees Survivors Facing Death From Hunger and Thirst.
NO POWER ABLE TO CHECK FLAMES

EARTHQUAKE IN A LATEST BULLETIN NUTSHELL
SAN FRANCISCO is practically a city of the past. Almost all of what was left by the earthquake has been swept away by the fire. There thousand is a conservative estimate upon the total number of dead. The property loss is estimated at \$300,000,000 to \$500,000,000, 10 times larger than the entire damage done by the eruption of Vesuvius.

SOLDIERS PREVENT FUGITIVES' FLIGHT
SAN FRANCISCO, VIA OAKLAND, CAL., April 19.—(Sig.)—Drunken soldiers, with drawn

GOVERNOR DECLARES A STATE OF EMERGENCY

Frisco Transformed From a City of Joy to a Place of Death
HUNDREDS DIED IN THEIR HOMES

In the wake of disaster, storytelling can become a crucial coping device. Victims' narratives may not resemble the ones put forth by outsiders [i.e. news reports on the event], but after surviving a natural disaster, storytelling becomes a way to situate oneself in time and space. It can provide a powerful counter to media narratives that obscure reality.

After the earthquake, we couldn't stop telling our stories, at parties or chatting with taxi drivers or in line at the grocery store. Time split into before and after. I listened to my friends' stories over and over until I memorized them. For weeks, I couldn't figure out why I felt so compelled to tell my story. It was unremarkable; I am fine. But the immediate experience of fear brings out a primal sense of isolation, and storytelling is a way to undo that. And so I told my story over and over.

People express their feelings in many ways: in this activity you will use creative writing as a tool for telling a story about natural disasters.

Your task is to pretend you just lived through a natural disaster. You can pick whatever disaster it was, from a devastating hurricane to a dramatic flood to a terrifying tornado. Alternatively, you can choose to write about the COVID-19 Pandemic, which we have all experienced.

You will then express how you felt before, during, and/or after the disaster. Consider where you might have been during it and/or how you survived. How did it affect you personally? Your family? Your community? What comes next?

You can express yourself in a variety of ways, but consider using one of the following formats: a memoir, a poem, or a song. You can include artwork, but should primarily express yourself in writing. We will examine some examples of each style together, to give you some ideas.

"Life Goes On" by the Kinks

Tornado, cyclone and hurricane
Can batter the houses with the thunder and rain.
Blizzards can blow; the waves hit the shore,
But the people recover and come back for more.
Somehow the people fight back, even the future looks black.
Life goes on and on and on.
Life goes on and on and on.

Other Examples:

Memoirs/Personal Survival Stories:

Hurricane Katrina: <https://people.com/celebrity/one-survivors-story/>

Tornado Survivors: <https://www.weather.gov/safety/tornado-survivors>

Nepal Earthquake: <https://www.mercycorps.org/blog/nepal-earthquake-survivor-stories>

Boxing Day Tsunami: <https://www.bbc.com/news/30462238>

Destruction of Pompeii: <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/pfpompeii.htm>

Poetry:

Hurricane Irma: <https://powerpoetry.org/poems/irma-0>

Twister: <https://powerpoetry.org/poems/twister-1>

In Spite of the Storm: <https://powerpoetry.org/poems/spite-storm>

Tornado: <https://www.dkfindout.com/us/music-art-and-literature/poetry/shape-poems/>

Shape Poem Generator: <https://www.poemofquotes.com/tools/poetry-generator/manual-concrete-poem-generator>

Artwork:

Professional Artist: <https://www.stephartist.com/natural-disasters.html>

Young Students: <https://www.zartart.com.au/zartstatic/page/natural-disasters>

Songs:

- [COVID-19: 40 Songs](#)
- Global Warming: [Wake Up America by Miley Cyrus](#) | [Lyrics](#)
- Flooding:
 - 1927 Mississippi Flood: [Flood Water by Eric Bibb](#) | [Lyrics](#)
 - [Texas Flood by Stevie Ray Vaughn](#) | [Lyrics](#)
 - [The Waves by the Villagers](#) | [Lyrics](#)
 - At the Mercy of the Flood by Harry Gibson, written in 1913: [Sheet Music](#) | [Lyrics](#)
- Volcano: [Old St. Helen by Billy Jonas](#) | [Lyrics](#)
- Hurricanes/Cyclones:
 - Hurricane Charlie (1951): [Jamaica Hurricane by Lord Beginner](#) | [Lyrics](#)
 - Bhola Cyclone (1970): [Bangla Desh by George Harrison](#) | [Lyrics](#)
- Dust Bowl (1930s):
 - [Dust Bowl Children by Alison Krauss & Union Station](#) | [Lyrics](#)
 - [Dust Storm by Ramblin' Jack Elliott](#) | [Lyrics](#)
- Tornado:
 - [Little Tornado by Aimee Mann](#) | [Lyrics](#)
 - 1896 St. Louis Tornado: St. Louis Cyclone by Ren Shields (written in 1896): [Sheet Music](#) | [Lyrics](#)
- Earthquake:
 - [Of Pressure by Mirah](#) | [Lyrics](#)
 - [The Big One's Still Comin' by Black Oak Arkansas](#) | [Lyrics](#)
 - [All Going Out Together by Big Dipper](#) | [Lyrics](#)
- Tsunami: [The Big One is Coming by Ten Hands](#) | [Lyrics](#)
- Thunderstorm: [Stormbringer by Deep Purple](#) | [Lyrics](#)
- Windstorm: [Gale Blow by the Fiery Furnaces](#) | [Lyrics](#)