

We do not like to hear of personal experiences that challenge our beliefs about safety and justice. In modern civilization, collective interest is mirrored in the structure of systems of care, such as the legal, health, and welfare services that are the hallmarks of an effective democracy. Disasters are events that test the capacity of these social structures to effectively protect and support people. Ten Hove's account of the aftermath of the Martinair crash at Faro in Portugal is confronting because it holds a mirror up to our cherished illusions about the ability of these systems to work for an individual at time of legitimate need. He exposes the reality of what actually happens, rather than what is wished for, in the unfolding maze that disaster victims must negotiate to survive.

Such stories are not easy to hear but have much to offer if absorbed. Travelers accept the vast distances traversed by airplane without a second thought because modern aviation is safe. However, it is only safe because there has been an intense collective effort to learn from past accidents and to change the design of airplanes, the control systems, and the behavior of pilots. Unfortunately, the systems within society that deal with the human tragedy that follows aviation disasters are not so responsive to failure. What survivors find is different from what they expect when the initial reassurances that flow across the front pages of the tabloid press fail to materialize. The initial empathy of the media all too often is transformed into ambivalent suspicion. There is a limited tolerance in the modern world for suffering. When understanding requires committed action, on the part of those who watch, initial concern readily turns to dismissal.

The psychological trauma and suffering of victims has a peculiar silence that they struggle to unravel and articulate. These experiences are not readily captured by language that is the central bridge back into the rest of the world where the illusion of safety has not been shattered. Despite the deluge of disasters, war, and accident in the media, these events always happen to someone else. The readers of this book must actively engage their imagination to undo the natural distancing of the suffering of others. To challenge this tendency is not a comfortable journey. We see in Ten Hove's story that systems of care fail to deliver because they do not enter into the world of the victim. It is very easy to create other narratives to explain the behavior of victims; they are unreasonably demanding; they are just motivated by a desire for money; if they made some individual effort there would be nothing to complain about. Society expects stoicism and not complaint.

There are many ways of not hearing the cries of those who suffer but we are diminished by such deafness. *The crisis after the disaster* is one voice that opens up the experience of what happens when we realize that we cannot control fate and need the system that supposedly makes reparations for loss and injury.

Professionals from whom we expect more, often do not make some effort to walk into the world of suffering that is their bread and butter. The legal system deserves special scrutiny. The law, by its conservative nature, is one of the domains of society that is least touched by the consumer movement. It is an unresponsive system that can very easily turn upon the very people who chose to take up the process that it offers in the name of justice and the protection of individual rights. The struggling voice of one person seems to carry little weight against the inertia of bureaucracy.

Disasters are events that have dramatic effects and change societies. Although these events are rare events in a community, it is imperative to learn the lessons about threat and risk that they can teach. The lessons to be learned are not confined to the causes of the disaster, but also deal with the capacity of a society to repair and rebuild the damage to individuals and communities. This book is a very human story of one person's struggle to survive. Unfortunately, this is not the story of one man, but of many individuals who have found the path to recovery littered with unanticipated obstacles. The imperative is to hear this story and to face what it says about the ability of societal systems to meet their obligations to the individuals who make up a community. It is equally important to act on these lessons about how social structures function in the aftermath of disaster as it is to learn about how to minimize future risks in the physical environment which caused the disaster.