

GREAT DISASTERS

Prologue - The Fascination of Disasters

Imagine this; you're driving along the motorway when all the traffic in front of you starts to filter into the outside lane. Up ahead, you can see flashing lights in the inside lane, and a column of smoke. As you get closer, you realise that somebody's car has caught fire. You might notice something else, too; the traffic has all slowed down to pass. And if you've got passengers, they might be pulling out their phones to take a picture or even a video as you go by. You might be tempted to take a look, too. It's only human, after all.

But what is it about a tragedy that makes us want to look?

I'm Kari Fay, and this is Great Disasters.

It's a phenomenon so common it has a name; rubbernecking, from the way people crane their necks to get a better look. The term was first coined to refer to American tourists in the 1890's, but in recent years it's come to be particularly associated with this sort of morbid curiosity.

When it comes to traffic accidents, particularly on big motorways and highways, rubbernecking is common - and it can be a problem. Drivers who pay too much attention to the scene of an accident, and not enough to the road that they're driving on, can actually cause accidents themselves. A US study in 2003 found that rubbernecking was responsible for 16% of all distractions. In 2009, the Highways Agency here in Britain started trials of giant screens to be erected around any motorway incident that would take more than a couple of hours to clear, to hide the scene from other motorway users. Were they effective? Well, maybe - but a report in 2015 stated that they had only been deployed 77 times in the intervening six years, so there's really not enough data to say for sure.

Rubbernecking is taken pretty seriously by the police; after an incident on the M40 in March 2016, Warwickshire Police prepared to summon more than eighty drivers to court for filming the scene on their phones. This wasn't the first time that prosecutions for careless driving had come out of rubbernecking, but people still do it, putting themselves at risk for a good look at something awful.

Take almost any kind of tragedy, and you'll find a crowd gathering to look. Some of them have a really good reason to be there, of course - they may be friends or relatives of possible victims, waiting desperately to hear news of their loved ones. And there are plenty of people who run to the scene of a disaster to help. But there are also those who are just looking. Perhaps they happened to be there when it began, and they're frozen in shock. Perhaps they came over from somewhere nearby to see what the sirens were for, and now they can't bear to leave. There's nothing for them to do here, no reason for them to stay, but they just keep looking.

Hollywood plays its part, too, with movies like Gravity, The Perfect Storm, or the 1970s classics The Towering Inferno and The Poseidon Adventure, drawing crowds to the box office and even winning Oscars.

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These fictionalised disasters hit the same nerves as the real ones, but in a more comfortable way - you can walk out at the end in the knowledge that it's all special effects.

At the same time, modern technology is making it easier than ever for us to stare at the face of real tragedy; from the World Trade Center attacks on 9/11 to the Boston Marathon bombing, to the Manchester Arena bombing earlier this year, we don't just have witness accounts, we've got video, taken as the horror unfolds and immediately sent around the world on TV and the internet. With millions of people watching.

And I can't blame them. Everything about disasters holds a fascination for me; from the minutiae of what went wrong to the devastating human accounts of people suddenly caught up in a situation they could never even have imagined, to the way people respond in the aftermath. And somewhere, forgotten in a drawer, there's a photograph I took as a kid, nearly thirty years ago, from the back seat as we passed a car burning on the side of the motorway.

One of the most obvious things that makes us look at a disaster is the sheer spectacle. Whether we're talking about a fire, a tornado, or a plane crash, these are dramatic and shocking incidents that you just can't ignore. Swirling storm winds, bright flames, explosions - these are terrifying things, and just as you wouldn't turn your back on an angry bear, you keep looking because you know what it could do to you. It's a sort of rabbit in the headlights effect. It can even be exciting; footage of the Bradford City Stadium fire in 1985 shows spectators cheering and dancing in front of the cameras, presumably unaware that the blaze behind them was taking lives.

When we see disasters on TV, read about them or hear about them, that primal instinct is somewhat distilled, but it's still in effect. From a distance, we are able to deal better with what frightens us, look at it with more logical eyes, and start to understand it.

There is also, of course, the human aspect. Disasters come with victims, witnesses, and in some cases survivors. These are ordinary people, just like you and me, suddenly thrown into extraordinary situations, forced to make split second decisions that could literally make the difference between life and death.

Confronting these stories often makes us look a little harder at ourselves. What would we do, if we were in that situation? I think we would all like to believe that we would be the hero charging back into the flames because they heard a baby cry, the cool headed person who takes charge and leads others to safety, or the selfless individual handing a lifeline on to others so that they can be rescued first. But would we? It's hard to know.

But the more we know, the better prepared we can be, so understanding past disasters can lead to prevention or mitigation of future ones. Formal investigations are not a matter of placing

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blame; they are intended to identify and correct errors, to ensure that what went wrong cannot happen again.

Despite this, no matter how much we learn, disasters keep happening; whether through acts of nature, technological malfunction, human error or even malice, every year brings its own share of tragedies. Every year, every day, is another roll of the dice of fate - what's going to happen, where is it going to happen, how will we cope if it happens to us?

From a personal point of view, whilst I don't think you could ever be psychologically prepared for finding yourself in the midst of a sudden catastrophe, understanding how other people dealt with similar situations could be the key to ensuring that you make the right decisions, should you ever find yourself in that awful split second.

And that's what I hope to bring you in this podcast; not just the drama of the world's greatest disasters, but also the human stories within and the lessons learned.

Great Disasters is written, researched and produced by me, Kari Fay. For more information, transcripts and further reading, check out the Great Disasters blog at greatdisasterspodcast.wordpress.com, or if you'd like to start a conversation, you can find the Great Disasters Podcast on Facebook, that's [facebook.com/greatdisasterspodcast](https://www.facebook.com/greatdisasterspodcast), and on Twitter @great_disasters.

Thanks for listening, and stay safe.