

## **In the Beginning**

Alex Lubet, Ph.D.

University of Minnesota

Welcome! Christopher Johnstone and I are proud that *RDS* has selected us to guest-edit this timely forum, “Parting the Waters: Disaster and Disability.” The forum includes contributions from a diverse group of scholars and professionals. We thank the authors for the privilege of facilitating the dissemination of their vital work. Thanks also, of course, to our third partner, *RDS* Co-Editor, Megan Conway.

Beyond our obvious interest in disability, many of us also love this field for its interdisciplinarity. As our editorial team’s “arts and humanities guy” I cherish what social scientists and clinical professionals teach me. Especially admirable in these fields is the near-mandatory appraisal within a study of its limitations. The arts and humanities could surely benefit from more such introspection and humility.

We can certainly rejoice in offering many fine essays on recent events. As the obvious inspiration for this forum, they should dominate its pages as they do. But we had also hoped for a broader historical perspective. My essay must suffice – for now – with the encouragement to Disability Studies (DS) scholars of the more distant past to share stories and thicken this plot.

I am not alone in valuing highly not only what DS (obviously) has to say about disability, but also disability’s value as a standpoint. Disaster, disability’s partner theme in this forum, shares that attribute, as a view that yields broad enlightenment about both life and ways of knowing. Disaster, like disability, is not only something that happens and is experienced; it is also an assessment, a valuation, an attitude, a perspective.

Standpoints such as these may become even more unique when several are juxtaposed. Disability and disaster thus become a set of lenses which together offer much broad sociocultural understanding; both about the way things work and, apparently and unfortunately, how they mostly don’t (at least for now).

If two lenses are good, how much better might three, four, or more be? Every essay in this collection brings at least one additional perspective, that of methodology, to the questions of disability and disaster. I suspect I share with many DS folk that I am often asked to lend opinion – sometimes editorial opinion – to matters far from those intuitively associated with my professional expertise. When this occurs during an editing project, I “test the waters” to see if my methodological skill set offers something that warrants an essay of my own.

It seems that disability studies sheds insight upon everything. I believe historian Douglas Baynton who said that, “Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write” (2001, p 52). It took no time to find a place in our forum for both music, my discipline, and my secondary affiliation, Jewish Studies. Disaster and disability are focal themes in Jewish history, religion, and culture. Music has always figured prominently in Jewry’s self-identity. In particular, attitudes toward music have served as a barometer of Jewry’s appraisal of its own well-being. It is exciting for me to have my essay paired with Marcy Epstein’s “update” of events in Israel and Palestine, in which she critically examines the discursive politics of disability and disaster as the concepts are strategically deployed by both

Israelis and Palestinians in their seemingly, sadly irreconcilable confrontation. The more things change...

It was essential that some of the *Waters* be the deluges left behind by Hurricane Katrina and the great Southeast/South Asian tsunami. Both are regarded from afar by Laura Hemingway and Mark Priestley, from the distinguished DS program at Britain's University of Leeds. They offer lessons of both theory and praxis. A very different and far more experiential kind of lesson of Katrina comes from Professor Barbara White, a deaf/Deaf social worker from Gallaudet University, who offers a firsthand account of "deaf helping deaf" that is at once riveting and rigorous. When Barile et al part very different and much colder *waters* in their account of the Montreal ice storm, their use of survey methodology combines the best of Hemingway/Priestley and White's scholarly worlds; a large *n* that includes some very moving prose responses to open-ending questions.

One theme that runs continuously if not always explicitly through *Parting the Waters* is that, like disability, disaster is a social construct. In Thomas and Grace Christ's study of protocols for dealing with the grief and recovery of children with learning disabilities who lost parents in the 9/11 tragedy, we are painfully reminded that disasters are sometimes also social destruction. Cataclysms are not always simply the consequence of the collusion of powerful environmental factors and immense human failings, but sometimes sheer, unambiguously calculated and cruel violence visited upon the innocent. Although the HIV/ AIDS crisis in Africa that is the subject of Laura Behling's discourse analysis originated in a virus writ pandemic, like 9/11 and the Middle Eastern events chronicled by Marcy Epstein and myself, there is an element of social agency different from the more overtly ecological disasters that rightly dominate this forum, one Behling interrogates thoroughly.

Finally, two of the essays, Christensen et al, and Ballan and Sormanti, transcend individual events in the interest of developing larger theories of crisis management. They do this in very different ways from one another that obliquely and interestingly parallel the past/present dialogue over Israel between myself and Marcy Epstein. Through the window of built environments, Christensen and his colleagues review the literature to critique, from a social model perspective, what has been done thus far to accommodate people with disabilities in disaster situations. In an entirely different and equally compelling manner, Ballan and Sormanti assemble a comprehensive set of best practices for meeting the needs of adults with intellectual disabilities. While their work is of the present, it offers the additional gift of directing us to a more humane future. That brighter, more empathetic time is, of course, the pragmatic intent of the entirety of *Parting the Waters*.

Shalom/Salaam/Peace,

Alex Lubet  
St. Paul  
June 20, 2006

References

Baynton, D. (2001). Disability and the justification of inequality in American history. In P. Longmore & L. Umanski (Eds.), *The new disability history: American perspectives*. New York: New York University Press.