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# PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAPS OF RESCUING

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Many Czech psychologists were able to deal with the rescuing operations associated with the catastrophic flood disasters that hit Central Bohemia in the middle of August 2002. Yet, psychologists are mostly interested in the mental state of the primal victims, therefore, the following text is focused on those who approach the theatre from the other side, not as the victims, but as the armored heroes saving the innocent ones with their „weapons“ of magical words. We present our article as an introspective view to our own experiences, feelings and emotions, which arose during the floods; especially those we tend to suppress or rationalize in various ways.

Wanting to describe a rescuer's personality, we have to ask which sorts of people are interested in this kind of occupation and who finally chooses it. Although it seems that these two groups are the same, it isn't actually true. To be a fireman or a soldier is not an occupation itself. Both terms are too general and in need of specialization. It means there are drivers, engineers, chemists and others professions within the title of rescuer. Not every rescuer is a man or woman who sees his or her occupation as a service, not every one of them joins rescue teams to be a so-called „pure“ rescuer. Their motives may be very prosaic - accommodation, social insurance, or even the lack of other jobs in the region where he or she lives in. This basic recognition is necessary to make clear that the following text is mostly about the „clear“ rescuers, meaning, people who chose this profession only to be deployed in the limited situations.

So, who exactly are those volunteers that may be endangering their lives or health? What kind of man or woman makes sense out of rescuing victims from natural or technological disasters?

If we want to find the answers to such difficult questions, we have to make clear what a disaster concerns. Fire, flood, technological crashes, terrorist's attacks or wars have one common sign – destruction: damage of one's possessions, ecosystem or even human lives. This destruction is magnetic. No matter if we like it or not, all of us are subjected in various ways to a natural or man-caused disaster. To search for evidential reasons for them, in our opinion, is in vain. Only the statistics seen in the disaster reports of the media ensure us that we are right to claim that destruction can fascinate any human being. Moreover, all of us know famous „disaster tourists“ who risk their lives and health just to be immersed in the tragedy. Yes, we may look for a lapidary explanation, like a need for the people to be informed or to see the danger with their own eyes, but we still feel that such a cognitive explanation is not sufficient and testifies more about our fear to look for the answer deeper in our minds than about our trying to find a real reason why we are so fascinated when watching violent elements.

It is obvious that the destructive character of a disaster resonates within our deepest processes, especially with our aggression and death instinct, or Thanatos. Freud explained human aggression and destructivity as a result of the fight of our libido, respectively Eros, and our death instinct, Thanatos - which tries to turn every living cell of an organism into an inorganic state. Libido never wins over Thanatos but it achieves a compromise - split up and turn against the external objects (Freud 1924). Disaster symbolizes this fight, which may also be seen as an eternal battle between good and evil. Rescuers fighting against disasters unconsciously become an allied partner of his or her Eros; he or she even personifies it and externalizes a similar battle, which is taking place inside of him or her. Fighting against an element or eliminating the consequences of a natural disaster is aggression, and respectively, a transformed sense of death is always present. The rescuer meets destruction through his or her own destruction. In the right sense he or she destroys destruction, eliminates elimination, beats evil and thanks another evil, which serves in the name of the good, meaning life and Eros.

Our internal fight between Eros and Thanatos is never-ending. Eros only succeeds in negotiating a particular concession, but the claims of Thanatos appear repeatedly. If the armistice is too fragile and the joy arising from Thanatos is too attractive, then it is

necessary to find heavier and heavier outlets. However, it may be quite dangerous and unbearable for the Superego, which will raise a halting finger. While destructivity is definitely about destruction and eventually even death, expansive and aggressive activities needn't be cruel, painful or injurious, but should escalate delight as well (Thoma a Kachele, 1985). Cumulating aggression must be transferred to the less destructive targets to keep a fragile mental balance. Obviously, the process of sublimation takes place in the case of aggression as well as the prohibited sexual power that is taken across to new innocent aims. Professions like firemen, rescuers or soldiers might be a good example of this transfer.

Another factor represented in the personalities of rescuers and in disaster working psychologists is a desire to reach the ideal object relationship. The ideal relationship, which means the relationship toward the whole object, is rather rare in human life. In fact, for the most part, we aren't able to integrate our past experiences with an individual to the common frame, which is not sureness, but a safety and belief. As in our particular object relationships where we are dependent on immediate mirroring, we are still endangered by frustration. Then we try to escape before it causes any short or long-term effects, which we fill by heroically searching our doubtless core, which is the base of the sense of our life; it is like looking for "The Holy Grail" to bring a safe and eternal life. During the disaster a rescuer feels the happy illusion that everything makes sense, his or her life goes as it should, the core has been found and so the feelings of frustration are definitely gone. On a symbolic level, the disaster represents our own problem, and our battle with it is just our own wish of minimalism of the losses and changes of the external reality not to the state before a disaster, but to the state, which will have better quality than it had before. It resonates with our desire for climax and definitive relaxation. It seems that just like the water took our houses, it swept away our worries as well. Just here, on this mythical level we can find reason for these suppressed feelings, which many people had during the summer flood, and which meant something like "there still isn't enough water". It isn't a wish for more destruction, but to the contrary it is a desire for all "bad" and "evil" to quickly disappear. It was associated with the vision of a final peace, a hopeful rainbow and a new, better life.

The real danger associated with disaster overshadows our own "funny" problems. External objects control the theatre (Mahler, 2002). Disaster, and our fight with it, has a large capacity for offering the large screen for many of our problems and depth. It becomes a symbolic target for our aggression, so that we can rid ourselves of our long-lasting fury and anger and allow the others to gratefully accept our hidden but still aggressive behavior. Our Superego has no reason for any repression. Maybe it only puts all these hidden motives deep into our unconsciousness to prevent endangering our narcissistic illusions of heroism, bravery and altruism.

This state is supported by of lack of intellectual work. Meanwhile during normal life we are tired of never-ending thoughts like, "what if...", "what should I..." or "if I would..." etc., whereas, a person is free from these thoughts while rescuing. All problems are solved at this time, and there are really only two possibilities, right or wrong. We don't devalue the facts of responsibility, but we need to know that it isn't very experienced during this state. Moreover, the previously tested and trained ways are predominantly used, and most rescuers try to prevent any improvisational tactics. Besides these factors, stress also helps people involved in a disaster because it initiates many physiological processes, which are mostly positively experienced.

The relationship toward the victims is a very important moment during the rescue process. Except for pity, empathy etc., there is a power *sui generis*, and desire for the ideal object relationship, here as well. An even larger level of responsibility experienced by a rescuer is when the victim befalls bad luck. The more helpless a man is, the better the object is for fulfilling his wishes. Poor defense of this object to revolt against our power supports satisfaction of our object relationship's needs. Infant omnipotence is revived during disaster. *Gestalt*, or area, again assumes the character of the primal environment, which is dependent on our will and, of course, we like it. Problems of the effected population, which are incapable of coping, contrarily represent a challenge for the rescuers' confirmation of their importance and feelings of superiority above the others. States of misery lift the rescuers to magic heights and build under our legs an imaginary monument. Only a few of us may doubt how the feeling of power is delightful, and know that it would be wrong to criticize people who experience it. The problem is how we should manage this power. The scale of possibilities is quite wide, from a simple rejection of the power when the Superego strictly prohibits any use of a power that may cause confusion, shiftlessness or even service failure, to a useful handling of the power and an acceptance of our responsibility for abusing this power when rough motives of libido win over the Superego correction.

The attitude of the rescuer to a disaster must be ambivalent. He or she feels the natural sympathy with those who were hit by it; in the limited situations he or she may feel fear, anger or sorrow, which means emotions similar to the primal victims. On the other hand he or she is an individual with his or her own unconscious processes, and a disaster may agree with them well. A professional, which means a psychologist dealing with the victims too, enters the theatre from the position of a strong, brave and responsible hero, who isn't weighed down by his or her own loss and misery and realizes his or her own value during a rescuing operation much more than in his or her ordinary life. He or she feels satisfaction in his or her duty and can accept the positive feedback from the target audience.

It is very hard to be resilient to this attractive offer. A problem doesn't usually represent a rejection of the rescue mission, but contrarily, it is a tendency to be present in this kind of situation, experience the maximum moments and even provide risky behavior, which isn't motivated only by a heroic drive but by the unconscious factors as well. They may distort their perception of reality to the volume of the objects, which are able and ready to be manipulated with. It brings on relaxation from the pressures of our internal world, or even an illusion that our problems of yesterday are solved today. Unfortunately, the development of the external reality's events usually doesn't lead to any definitive climax or relief (Mahler, 2000). Research of the lateral motives leads professionals to their duty, which is not to devalue and not to criticize, but to critically accept as the task for deeper psychology. Evaluation and

open discussion about the unconscious aspects of psychotherapy and consulting during mass disasters must be an undividable part of the education of those who are involved in this part of psychology.

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