

The Invisible Wound

For years I have simply explained to people that the Penn. State campus where I teach was located just outside of Harrisburg - not even bothering to mention Middletown. From now on Middletown will suffice. And for the sake of all of us, I wish this quiet and friendly town could have retained its anonymity.

The events at Three Mile Island have affected people in this community in ways that will take months, if not years, to comprehend. The crisis has left an invisible wound. No one can say with any certainty precisely what happened; why the accident occurred; or the actual seriousness of it. How was the hydrogen bubble created? Why did it disappear? How close were we to meltdown? What would a meltdown have involved? Who was harmed? How serious was the "radiological insult," as some papers described it, that the area received?

But the real mysteries are emotional and psychological. As the debate rages and consumer advocates, the people of the surrounding area who were, in fact, the real victims of this accident remain in a state of psychological limbo. Such a state cannot be sustained for too long without taking a considerable toll. People are no accustomed to receiving a shock to their system and not knowing what the effects, if any, will be for 20 to 30 years.

In the absence of any tangible evidence that damage was done, numerous human reactions stand out. Perhaps the strongest impulse of people is to deny the worst, to insist that life go on as before, and to hope that soon all will be forgotten. A church ad that appeared in the Harrisburg papers soon after the accident proclaimed, "Nuclear power is part of the creation of the universe. It was meant to be discovered." A poll taken by a local sociology professor immediately after the event showed that an overwhelming number of residents near Three Mile Island supported re-opening the plant.

A second impulse is to lash out immediately at those who are viewed as responsible for this intrusion into their lives - namely Metropolitan Edison and the nuclear industry in general. This may represent a minority viewpoint but it is spoken by a determined and vocal number of people. These are the people who go to community meetings and staff campaigns. For them the nuclear power question has assumed an importance almost equal to that once held by the Vietnam War. They may well require that all candidates for public office insist that TMI remain closed and that Pennsylvania place a moratorium on additional nuclear power plants.

A third reaction is to turn what may have been an incomprehensible tragedy into an opportunity, as groups of social science researchers crawl all over the countryside bombarding the populace with questionnaires - sensing a field day for survey research. While indeed there is some legitimate research to be done here by social scientists, one wonders about those who are more anxious to be the coroners of this community rather than its conscience.

And then there is the usual gallows humor. A flyer circulating in Middletown advertises, "a recreational property - unique pricate island on the Susquehanna complete with radiant heat (free of charge) and total electric living (includes own electrical generators one operable, the other needs work)." The song "You Light Up My Life" has become a hit all over again.

But most of the talk here is serious. There is the inevitable conversation as to "what precisely did you do" during the crisis - meaning did you leave or stay. Those who stayed take a sort of macho satisfaction in their capacity to look adversity in the eye and not flinch. These people are slightly contemptuous toward those who left for safe ground - wherever that uncertain place could be found. In some cases their contempt is justified. This is particularly true in the case of those doctors whose services could have been needed and who were nowhere to be seen for many days after the nervous hours of Friday, March 30th. But with the exception of those who could have been of assistance in the event of an emergency evacuation (civil defense people, doctors, national guardsmen), one must wonder just how does one make an heroic and defiant stand

against that unseen enemy - radiation. In fact for those with young children in their care, staying around while radioactive gases were being vented carelessly and without notice from the reactor seemed belligerent and irresponsible. One cannot fight a war with children at one's side.

The people of South Central Pennsylvania are among the most loyal, hard-working and law abiding people in the country. This is middle America on the East Coast. Any government or any industry that loses their trust is in deep trouble. They are not comfortable being dissenters or, for that matter, being at the center of attention. The effects of Three Mile Island will not register on these people in any immediate or dramatic way. But register on them it will. They want to believe the best about those who hold positions of responsibility. Their trust is not forfeited lightly. But once forfeited, it is not likely to be won back easily, if at all. Harrisburg has not, as Mary McGory put it soon after the accident, gone into "a cold shut down of the spirit." It simply takes a while for such people that live here to comprehend that anyone could be so careless with their land, their lives and their children, as the people responsible for Three Mile Island apparently were. When the full dimensions of this affair become unraveled (an the Nuclear Regulatory Commission transcripts already speak volumes), the depth of the people's anger and resentment will become clear.

In spite of Hiroshima and continual stockpiling of nuclear weapons around the world, the "nuclear age" was to symbolize the promise of modern science. In the hopeful Eisenhower years there was much talk about "the peaceful atom." It was difficult to imagine such an imposing technology not bringing immense benefit to mankind. Yet during the Three Mile Island crisis, Bernard F. Erlanger, professor of Microbiology at Columbia University could write in a letter to the *New York Times*, "Now I am afraid that aside from the use of isotopes in science and medicine, the development of atomic energy must be regarded as an event totally without socially redeeming value." Such a view of a technology without "socially redeeming value," particularly of one so loudly proclaimed, does not fall comfortably on American ears. We, of the post World War II generation, may be suspicious of how certain technologies are developed but find it hard to fathom that any technology can inherently dangerous. But, it may well be that in nuclear power man has uncovered a technology the dangers of which far outstrip his capacity for restraint.

Politically and economically nuclear power has brought together powerful elements of industry and government to shroud this science with an unparalleled secrecy, bordering on mysticism. Nuclear power is indeed an issue from the marriage of big government and big business - a creature of state capitalism. Like the political and economic system that produced it, it is both awesome and alienating. Once nuclear power was symbolic of our potency and was practically synonymous with American supremacy. To oppose it may require a painful re-examination of a myth which has in the past decade already been painfully re-examined. Nuclear power is perhaps more deeply ingrained in our national psyche than we realize. The debate on its future will not be easy.

In places like Middletown and Harrisburg the debate already is underway. As the people of South Central Pennsylvania rushed out from under the specter of Three Mile Island on March 30th and 31st, surely many must have thought how peculiar and alienating it is to be a refugee in your own land. For 30 years Americans thought that if they were ever forced to seek refuge from the atom, it would be because of the Russians. But here we were running from ourselves and Walt Kelley's admonition that, "We have met the enemy and it is us," never seemed closer to the truth.

--by robert j. bresler

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