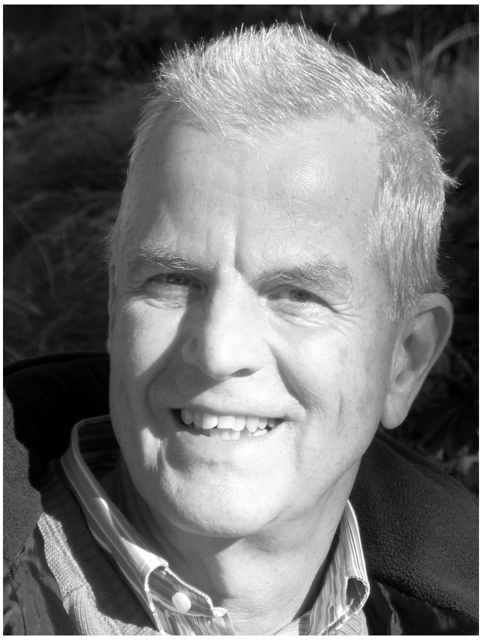
Kia kaha: a personal account of the New Zealand earthquakes

Herman H van der Kloot Meijburg
PhD
Director
Centre for Loss and Healing
Christchurch, New Zealand
hermanmeijburg@live.com

Natural disasters bring many losses – loss of life, but also loss of home, possessions, even control over one's existence. Herman Meijburg describes surviving the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes in Canterbury, New Zealand.



Kia kaha is Maori for 'be strong'. Ever since the big earthquake that struck Christchurch on 22 February 2011, this greeting has been used by local people to encourage and support each other.

Some disasters you can see coming: hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, floods, bush fires and, to some extent, even tsunamis. People can take precautions, lock up their houses and secure windows, build temporary dams, bring in fire equipment, set up temporary shelters, go to higher ground and, if necessary, evacuate the area. Some of these disasters are 'one off': when fire has ravaged an area or the floodwaters recede, people can assess the damage and start to think about repairing and rebuilding. However earthquakes belong in a category of their own.

The Canterbury earthquakes

The first earthquake to hit the Canterbury region of New Zealand's South Island occurred on 4 September 2010. This measured 7.1 on the Richter scale; it is a miracle that no one died. It struck early in the morning, which may have been our saving grace.

The second, on 22 February 2011, measured 6.3 and cost 181 lives, with many more injured. It struck close to the heart of the city, New Zealand's second biggest conurbation, and occurred in the middle of the day when people were at work: many buildings, already weakened by the previous quake, collapsed. It was this quake that received most worldwide media attention.

For me, the 4 September earthquake came as a thief in the night. At 4.35 in the morning I found myself lying on the floor, face down, a metre or so away from the bed, surrounded by total havoc. I was completely disoriented. Did I pass out for a moment? I don't know, I can't remember. A black eye and bruised and sore legs seem to indicate I was thrown from my bed. It ran through my mind that, if this was the end, I might as well resign myself to it. Actually I didn't care. What I do remember is Sarah, my wife, pulling at my shoulder, shouting 'Get up, get up! We have to get out!'

Earthquakes leave you no time to prepare. You are immediately caught up in the middle of it. There is no build up, no knock on the door, no telephone warning; you can only scramble to safety – but what is a safe place when the ground beneath you starts to bounce like a trampoline? Where is 'safe' when you can hardly get to your feet, when the noises that surround you totally disorient your senses?

The quake was also accompanied by a strange phenomenon – a mysteriously lingering lightening strike that lit up the darkness

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outside and the room inside for some seconds. Apparently big earthquakes are accompanied by the release of high levels of energy that manifests itself in the form of light. This would account for many accounts of 'dry lips' and 'sun-burned' cheeks after the event. In addition the noises that come with an earthquake are unlike anything you have ever heard: deep groans that swell like a herd of stampeding horses or a train pulling into a railroad station, followed by the deafening sound of houses bumping, jolting and shaking. Then come the cracks – ceilings come down, walls crumble and buildings collapse as though they are fainting before your eyes. They behave like cardboard boxes: they lose their cohesion, their bracing fails and they simply fold up.

Another phenomenon is the liquefaction of many square miles of land. Thousands of tonnes of sand and silt are forced to the surface of the earth, especially in low lying areas where the groundwater level is high. There is no mercy: water mixed with sand and the silt push through roads, cellars, foundations, gardens, sports grounds. The force of this mixture is mighty.

To give some idea of the magnitude of this aspect of an earthquake, an estimated eight million tonnes of disaster/demolition waste have been created by both earthquakes, and 500,000 tonnes of silt and sand. Up to 85% of that waste will be recycled on site and the products will be used for the reconstruction of the Canterbury region. It will take 50 years to process.

Another defining characteristic of an earthquake is that the quake itself is just the start: the catastrophe does not end on the day itself. I am writing this in May 2011. In the eight months since the September 2010 earthquake we have had 7,147 aftershocks – about 890 a month. Within 24 hours of the September quake itself, we counted some 129 aftershocks – an average of more than five an hour.

One of the consequences of the aftershocks means that repairs to infrastructure or attempts to commence rebuilding are futile. The question then becomes: when is the shaking going to stop?

Help me sleep

'Can you help me sleep properly?' was all Pauli wanted to know when we visited him at his home. It was a week after the 22 February Christchurch earthquake. On that day he had been awoken by the quake shaking and rattling his home, bringing the shelves down and dumping his belongings into the middle of the room. As a foreman of a construction team, Pauli had been on night shift, repairing one of the main highways leading into Christchurch City that had been damaged in the previous quake. He did not yet know that all the repairs he and his team had done since 4 September had been undone by this latest earthquake in a matter of seconds.

As Pauli ran outside for safety, he saw two policemen running towards him. They knew each other. The policemen asked him whether they could use his car, as their police car had been crushed by falling debris. The policemen had been instructed to go to one of the most badly affected areas of the city. The city centre was now engulfed in a cloud of mist formed by the dust created by falling debris. This added to a sense of surrealism. The closer they came to their destination the more devastation they witnessed, until they were forced to abandon the car and proceed on foot.

When they reached their destination they found people already digging in the rubble using their bare hands, in the hope of finding survivors. Pauli is a big, strong man and was able to lift large chunks of masonry with relative ease. In sheer desperation he threw himself into the task of clearing away rubble as they could hear someone in pain, crying for help. They succeeded in pulling a man out from underneath the rubble, badly wounded but alive.

The police called an ambulance, but there were no ambulances available. And even if there had been ambulances, they would not have been able to drive into the area. So they looked for something on which to carry the injured man. Pauli spotted a door lying half buried in the rubble close to his right foot. It could serve as a make-shift stretcher. He began to pull it from the rubble and, as he did so, realised he was staring at a hand and arm sticking out from underneath the bricks and masonry – a body buried by fallen debris.

At that very moment his mobile rang. It was an emergency call from his employer to report to his team immediately at the Canterbury Television building. This building had collapsed and was now on fire, with many injured and many more feared dead. Pauli was to take charge and cordon off the area as soon as possible. So he was forced to leave one scene of disaster and head off to another. There he worked tirelessly until the early hours of the next morning. It was there that he learned that all the repair work they had done on the roads after the September earthquake had been undone in matter of minutes. That news upset him very much. At the CTV building he saw the triage centre being set up. He was there when the first body bags were brought in. He was there when they started to take the body bags with corpses out. Pauli worked 18 hours continuously that day with hardly a break. Others had to tell him to go home and have a rest. He finally did as he was told. He picked up his car and drove home to find his house broken into – his flat screen tv gone, laptop, drum set and other valuables all gone. His home had been looted.

Meeting needs

Search and rescue is, obviously, the first priority in the aftermath of a major earthquake, and getting people out of the danger areas, setting up cordons, and responding to emergency calls. Once the immediate needs are identified and temporary relief is organised (alternative accommodation, the distribution of food parcels), an inventory has to be made of the visible and not so visible damage to services – drinking water supplies, hospital beds, power, sewerage, and organising temporary alternatives (portaloos, drinking water depots, additional hospital beds etc). Access to the affected areas needs to be restored as quickly as possible, requiring roads and bridges to be repaired and built.

Volunteers, locals and the authorities pull together to provide the essentials for survival. In those early phases there will be displays of great heroism and utter chaos. The challenge is to provide the greatest good for the greatest number. With this comes the implication that individual needs may be set aside for the greater good (of which see more below).

But there may be a 'misfit' of needs and resources. For example, at great cost a group of 60 therapists/counsellors/ social workers were flown into Christchurch to offer their services. Frankly, they arrived too early; people were in a different state of mind in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. They were in a 'pulling together', 'let's fix this first' mode, sorting out what needed to be done now. While doing so, they were sharing their stories and sorrows with family, neighbours – anybody who would listen. To listen to and exchange their experiences was more helpful than the support of experts flown in from outside. The feeling was: 'How could these people possibly understand what we are going through?' 'You had to have been there' – this is what bonded people together in those early days. A woman put up a sign in her garden offering a 'free hug'– that seemed all the support people needed in the immediate aftermath.

Another example of mismatch was 'Project Suburbs', although I shouldn't be too harsh in my judgement as it did provide many people in Christchurch with an opportunity to do something to help their fellow citizens. Immediately after the 22 February earthquake people in the eastern suburbs of Christchurch started to complain that they felt forgotten and that all the efforts were concentrated on the Central Business District. Indeed, the eastern suburbs had been the epicentre of the quake and it was the second time in six months that they had been badly 'bashed'. All services were down; many of the repairs that had been carried out were once again in ruins. Their homes and streets had been flooded with water and thousands of tones of silt caused by liquefaction. Sewage was flowing freely through the gardens and streets, creating a serious health risk. There was shortage of food and safe drinking water. The inhabitants felt they had been left to sort out matters themselves.

The local authorities, together with the Civil Defence service, set up an earthquake response team for the eastern suburbs and those living on the hills of Banks Peninsula. Every day some 470 teams spread out over the area to conduct an inventory of the damage and mental health status of the people in these areas. It was a massive operation. Approximately 11,000 homes were visited each day. Rapid response teams were set up to provide support – food parcels, portaloos, alternative accommodation for pets, and emotional support in the form of a Flying Squad (see box – This house is our home). The whole programme was organised from the Westpac Centre, a huge sports hall where all the officials and the 4,000 volunteers met every morning at 6.30am to receive the day's briefing. My wife and I were part of this massive emergency response operation.

However the residents experienced the programme as too centralised; they reported back that the help provided did not meet local needs. The centralised project was disbanded after 10 days, and local response centres were set up in the communities where help was most needed. What proved most effective was to support and facilitate local communities in the area to get themselves organised. Ultimately, facilitating community-based self-help worked best, as the local people had the local knowledge and the contacts.

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After a catastrophe of this magnitude, it is essential to work as closely as possible with the people who live and work in the affected areas. No matter how fragile the surviving networks, the local people know best what has happened to their communities; they know the immediate needs of those most affected; they know which resources are available and accessible; they know how best to share and distribute them fairly. With support and facilitation, local people can be helped to provide the vital 'emergency shelter' (emotional and practical as well as physical) for the whole of their neighbourhood. Moreover, individual resilience is fed by the resilience of the local community. Local communities organise themselves around schools, the local convenience store, child care centres, churches, sports clubs, streets, the petrol station, health centres, etc. These public facilities become an indispensable network of resources in the emergency phase following a major catastrophe. These, along with more individual services (setting up a notice board for messages, for example) and the 'free hugs', formed the first aid posts for the neighbourhood.

Ongoing effects

As previously mentioned, one of the specific characteristics of earthquakes is their ongoing effects. The people of Canterbury have been kept on edge, sleep-deprived, short- fused and mentally affected, for many months now.

This house is our home

My wife and I were sent to talk to an elderly couple in their 70s who refused to leave their home up in the Port Hills area of Christchurch. Their home had been 'red stickered' by the Civil Defence, indicating that the house was absolutely unsafe to enter. However, when the Civil Defence team had gone, the man had climbed onto the roof with a couple of tarpaulins to make it weatherproof, with the help of a neighbour. He and his wife then moved back into the house. When the Welfare Team visited the couple they were astonished to find them still living in a house that could easily collapse with any aftershock. The elderly couple were determined that they were not leaving, and so we – part of the Flying Squad support team – were called in to talk to them.

When we arrived at the address we could see from the roadside that the house was in a shambles and uninhabitable. Another shake of magnitude 4 or 5 could easily bring it down. The bricks were loose, just waiting to tumble down the bank. We asked them to sit down with us for a chat, providing them with an opportunity to tell their story. It was a story we had heard many times before: 'This house is our home, we have lived here for many years, we are now retired and we expect to grow old here, it is all we have … we really don't want to leave this beautiful spot, it is so dear to us. We don't have any family here. Yes we have friends, but we're not the sort of people who ask for help.' Pointing to the tarpaulins, the man said that the house was now weatherproof and that they had set up their beds in the living room in the back of the house. 'There is no need for us to leave.' He was adamant and angry.

When we explained that their place was absolutely unsafe to even enter, let alone live in it, they said they had nowhere to go. When we asked their daughter, she said that this wasn't true. Friends had already invited them to come and stay. As we continued our conversation it turned out that the couple found it unbearable to accept help. 'We are used looking after ourselves and we don't want to be a burden to others.'

To admit that you need help, to allow yourself to ask for help, to open yourself up for help, can be very difficult for people. During that week we encountered this problem on a number of occasions. We left the elderly couple with some telephone numbers and urged their daughter to call the friends she mentioned. In the car we reported back to the Westpac Centre that finding them alternative accommodation was urgent.

Prolonged fear

There is the prolonged fear that every aftershock is the start of another major quake. After the September quake my wife and I slept with our clothes on for the first few nights, ready to jump out of bed and run for our lives. Now we lie in bed and calculate how severe the aftershock is before jumping out. We park our car away from the house and never drive with a half empty tank. We have also stowed a survival kit outside in the garden shed. 'Whenever I look in the mirror I don't recognise my usual self. I see fear,' I heard a friend say. When we go shopping we avoid big shopping malls and our visits to supermarkets are still brief. Inside buildings we note the exits and the quickest escape route. There is this constant fear that 'we might be in for another big one'. A serious case of death anxiety? I think so. Every big aftershock reawakens this fear. As long as the aftershocks keep coming, these feelings feed that anxiety.

Loss of home

Many people have been affected by the loss of their home. Since September 2010 we have been staying with my father-in-law. Our own home is yellow stickered, meaning that we are only allowed in it to collect belongings, mitigate further damage and look after pets/animals and the garden. There is no water, no sanitation, no sewerage. Yes, fortunately, we have had electricity restored so we can make a cup of tea, cook a meal and check our emails when we visit, but that does not make our house a home.

Due to this experience, we have now acquired a better understanding what it means for people to be 'homeless'. A home is not just about a roof or chimney. Home is a place where you can keep warm when it is cold outside; a place where you can warm yourself in the company of others, your partner and children. Home is a place where you can 'chill out', watch a favourite television programme or walk about in your underwear. You are free to laugh, shout and cry in your home; there are no restrictions. The photographs on your desk remind you of your forebears, your children, cherished moments in your life. The furniture often has a family history attached to it or represents some personal choice. The art on our walls speaks to us in moving ways and reveals what fascinates us in life. In this sense 'home' is a spiritual place.

That there was so little loss of life is a miracle, but people's experiences of other losses caused by catastrophes like the Canterbury earthquakes also have something to tell us. These losses are of a different kind: houses, cars, contents, work places, businesses, cherished belongings, collector items, a handbag, cared for gardens, recreational assets, to name a few. We can dismiss them as trivial in comparison with the loss of life, but for many these items may well hold a special value. We become attached to what we often take for granted – the house we live in, the wedding album, the vintage car, a stamp collection, keepsakes. Some of these belongings have travelled with us throughout our lives; they have a special status; they are of spiritual significance. A disaster may instantly strip us of this subtle personal support system. The impact is very possibly enormous, but often thought of as of secondary importance. Think of those photographs in the media of desperate people searching for their belongings in the rubble after a bushfire or a tsunami. For us 'home' has become the ultimate metaphor for these kinds of losses. To live a life without a place to call 'home' is a tremendous loss and a source of grief. It hurts every day.

It is my understanding that there is little research into the existential perception of the home, and what it means to have to leave one's home. For example, elderly people who are transferred to a retirement or nursing home provide us with valuable information in this respect – so too do refugees. The feeling of 'being without a home' is another way of saying that our life has been uprooted. 'No surprise', people said, when we both developed shingles. Ugly, awfully itchy, nervy and sometimes painful, shingles is all about stress. We desperately want this ongoing calamity to stop; we want to get on with our lives like anybody else living in normal circumstances.

Life on hold

Another of the characteristics of an ongoing and unfolding disaster such as a quake and its aftermath is that normal life is put on hold. You cannot move anywhere else if the house you live in is one of your main financial assets. Some 80,000 people walked away after the 22 February earthquake. But that proved a very impulsive reaction to the event. How easy is it to step out of your job? Will your children enjoy being enrolled in another school far away from their friends? The losses multiply: loss of work, loss of friends, and loss of familiar surroundings. Many have now returned. In the end there is no place like home. Ultimately, many may decide to leave the city, but meantime, life remains on hold.

And for how long? The timeframe seems to stretch endlessly ahead into the future. Most of the damaged homes are still either too unsafe to live in or do not have sanitation or means of adequate heating. Some now say it will take up to two years to get all the necessary repairs done; others are talking about five to 10 years.

These stretched timeframes are very unsettling. Even more unsettling are the arguments used to justify the delays. We are told: 'As long as the earthquakes are still coming, it is no use to start repairs or rebuilds.' Repeatedly people have been told by authorities to 'hang in there', because there is not much anyone can do. The slow response of the insurance companies makes me wonder if they realise what an important part they play in the re-establishment of normality to the city and to the community. If our experience in Christchurch is anything to go by, the insurance industry has much to answer for in the prolonging of people's suffering. As one person told me: 'My future has been sabotaged, initially by an earthquake and now by an insurance company … It is as though I am sitting at a bus stop waiting for a bus that never seems to arrive.'

And the longer the aftermath of a disaster of this kind and magnitude, the more difficult it becomes to get attention for your individual problems. Unless yours is a truly extraordinary circumstance, your difficulties are put on the waiting list along with those of everyone else. Your personal story becomes a mere illustration of just how big the catastrophe was – it doesn't mean your individual needs and personal concerns will be met any time soon.

> Where suffering is prolonged, it becomes difficult to close the circle of grieving

Summing up

As I write, in May 2011, aftershocks are still occurring on a daily basis. Some say it is likely the aftershocks will continue for another year or so. We, people of Canterbury, are still caught in the middle of this ongoing and unfolding disaster. Fear of another 'big one' stays with us. On 13 June these fears were confirmed when a third major quake struck the Canterbury area. This time there were only two casualties.

It is hard to summarise the effects of an event of this magnitude while it is still affecting people in so many different ways. People are grieving over the multiple losses they sustained. At the same time they are living with multiple uncertainties over what will happen in the future. Our lives are on hold: there are no timeframes to hold on to. In these circumstances, where suffering is prolonged, it becomes difficult to close the circle of grieving. I believe that the resilience of the population is being tested more now in the aftermath of the earthquakes than in the quakes themselves. Kia kaha – 'be strong'. ■

This article is dedicated to all the brave people of Canterbury/Christchurch who, shaken by the event, did not hesitate to help each other survive during those initial days after the big quakes. I am also indebted to my wife, who helped me through the brunt of the September earthquake, made valuable suggestions towards the contents of this article and helped to edit the final text.