

An Invitation to Understand Oklahomans' Experience of the Bombing

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On April 19, 1995, the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, was struck by a terrorist bomb that destroyed the structure and killed 168 people. Most Americans learned about the catastrophe from television and other media. But, the experience of Oklahomans was more immediate and more traumatic. Thus, as the local population moves through rehabilitation it needs empathic understanding from outsiders. This piece describes the experiences of four locals in the hope it will help to bridge the gap between the immediacy of the bombing situation and the remote consequences of that tragedy.

The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was the largest act of terrorism ever perpetrated on American soil. To most Americans, it is a series of pictures and television sound bytes but to Oklahomans it is up close and personal. In order to help others understand the reactions of local people to the bombing as well as to the subsequent trials of the accused perpetrators we have described the experiences of four Oklahoma Citizens who granted us interviews. The purpose is simply to share their experiences with the hope that they may enhance others' readiness to cope more effectively with similar tragedies (floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, accidents, etc.) in their own vicinity.

The Site

We first visited the site of the Alfred P. Murrah Building 37 days after the bombing that killed 168 people. We were considering a move to Oklahoma City and we wanted to understand as much of that tragic experience as was possible for someone who did not live there on the day of the blast. We wrote this response immediately after visiting the bomb site.

Oklahoma's Heart Bleeds

The Oklahoma wind ruffles your clothes and wraps you in a welcomed privacy when you visit the hill where the Murrah Federal Building stood. The sun forces you to squint but even then, the lingering signs of the tragedy seize you. Buildings marred by boarded-up windows and scarred walls bombard you with a panorama of destruction.

In your solitude you try to make sense of the events reflected in your visual circle but the soul of mindless savagery floats like gray clouds suspended in space refusing to fit into a tidy picture, yet offering no completeness of their own. They taunt you with allusions to the same vengeance that consumed the victims of the searing blast. The malignant fury is still there and you greet it with both fear and anger at the power of its lingering presence. You want to command it either to vanish or show its full form so you can riddle it to shreds and doom it forever to its deserved life of public shame. But, it eludes you while issuing a haunting threat of its return. Somehow you know it will reappear, if not here, then somewhere else.

You stand amongst stunned visitors who speak only reverent, muted whispers that invade the sacred separateness of the moment. Heads bow in stirring tribute to those who perished in that flashing inferno. You are caught in a collective

search for some appropriate act that will heal the gaping wound that tears at your soul. But, there is only frustration born of the awkward grasp for some deed that will satisfy the unspoken demands of this burdened place.

The moment revives thoughts of the Viet Nam Memorial and gives painful re-birth to deeply repressed memories of the family that stood weeping as the members took turns running their fingers along the grooves that marked a loved one's name engraved on that venerated black marble monument. Those loved ones searched too for some answer which would gather the fragments of their shattered world. Like them, you cannot find the balm that will make it right. You feel a loving kinship with them and with other seekers of solace who have felt the cascade of whirling events that remind you that you are a temporary inhabitant of this world and that you live on it at the mercy of forces far greater than yourself.

As you depart with your family you embrace each other as if impelled by a new appreciation of your tenuous privilege of sharing a portion of the gift you call life. The spirit near the remaining pile of rubble temporarily muffled the voices of your children. But, leaving the place, your children resume their play. You lovingly hush the little ones but you are refreshed by their reminder that beyond the hideous scars atop that knoll in Oklahoma City there is life and reason to live. You give thanks for hope but the unmassaged agony remains a heavy burden. It hurts till it numbs.

Exactly three months after the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Building we moved to Edmond just 10 miles north of Oklahoma City. All of our new acquaintances were working through their own experiences of the blast and as we talked with them it became clear to us that we had to try to gain a better view of what they had been through. Thus, we began a series of interviews with

people who we believed could take us into the experiential world of those whose lives were affected directly by the bombing. They were not families of the victims. But, they knew some of the victims and they physically had felt the vibrations of the explosion.

The following passages are summaries of those meetings which took place during the fall of 1995. We are sharing them with you so that you too might better understand some of the reactions of Oklahomans to the bombing and the trials of Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols.

The Businesspeople

Our first interview included two businesspeople, Joann and John, who we met at Trapper's Restaurant, a Cajun styled eatery near the Will Rogers Airport in Southwest Oklahoma City. Waylon Jennings, Lukenbach, Texas, waiked in the background and portraits of Will Rogers and Gene Autry were prominently displayed on the walls. The aroma of mesquite-broiled steaks saturated the air.

A waiter interrupted our introductory chit chat to deliver our food and after a couple of bites John said, "If you really want to hear about the bombing we got a real story for you." We smiled and said, "Fire away."

John said, "We were almost smack dab in the middle of it. Our business is right downtown and on the way to work I saw what looked like an atomic cloud. During the last few blocks I had to drive over broken glass and rubble that was scattered all over Robinson Street. When I got to the office I still didn't know what had happened until Jim told me somebody had blown up the Federal Building. We decided to walk the two blocks over there to survey the damage. What we saw almost shook our fillings loose."

"All along the streets and sidewalks people were holding their heads. I remember a lady, probably a secretary, whose face was cut in what seemed like a hundred places. Blood was dripping through her fingers and her clothes were soaked red. She didn't

cry. She Just sat there bewildered. There were dozens of others just like her."

"We didn't know what to do so, we did nothing. We kept walking. Glass crunched like ice crystals under our shoes and those two blocks up that hill to the Murrah Building seemed like a hundred miles of uninterrupted agony. I will always remember the people's faces. Their glazed eyes stared aimlessly into endless space. They all needed help but we couldn't tell who needed it most so we just kept walking. We didn't even talk to each other. I don't understand why we acted that way. But we did. I wonder what that says about us."

John continued, "When we turned onto Sixth Street where we could see the front of the Murrah Building I froze. The whole front wall was blown away. Rubble was dropping like an avalanche of black snow. Smoke bubbled from everywhere. Cars exploded randomly. People moaned. When we looked up we saw two women covered with blood standing at the edge of the ninth floor crying for someone to rescue them. For about five minutes I was a human statue. I don't know why. Maybe there's something wrong with me."

John paused and breathed deeply before beginning again. "Sirens started to wail and we knew the EMS people would handle this situation so we left the scene. All through the walk back to the office we didn't talk. That still surprises me. I wonder if someday the sight of that horror will explode in my head. Man, I hope not but I'm not sure it won't. I'm afraid it will. I often wonder where I'll be and what I'll do. It's like being a walking time bomb."

John recalled, "I was a Navy bomber pilot but they never trained us for an inferno like that. There I was, right in the center of a calamity and all I could do was stand like a post. I didn't have any thoughts about any thing. I was petrified.", Joann commented, "Our walk back to the office was a nightmare come to life. There were people with more blank stares and more frozen faces. When we got back to our building I said, 'I'm getting the hell out of here,' and staggered water-legged to my car."

I've walked through bombed out cities all over Europe where I saw people shooting at each other and falling in the gutters but never did I see anything like that. Hell, it was my hometown where everything was supposed to be safe. It was in ruins! It shook my foundations. I can't get over it!"

John said, "I couldn't talk when Joann left. I figured that there was nothing I could do for the victims so I decided to do some paperwork. But I couldn't erase the memory of that scene down at the bomb site so I just scribbled mindlessly until a guard told me that they suspected another bomb was planted somewhere in the city. He said you'll have to go. I remember hesitating and the guard told me to get the hell out."

Fumbling for some comment, I (David) said, "You were right at the site and I'm not sure exactly what froze you in place." John almost yelled, "It wasn't just one thing. It was everything! It was crazy! Our whole world blew up right in front of our faces without a tornado. Cheryl asked, "Why is that worse than a tornado? You've had lots of them." John answered, "Because we expect tornadoes but we didn't expect a bomb right here in Oklahoma City. It was killing people, lots of people, our neighbors. That's a mile from natural tragedies. Hell, they killed more people here than they did in the New York Trade Center!"

Joann said, "It gets worse as time goes along. We're still having aftershocks." She took a pillbox from her pocket and said, "See these pills? They're tranquilizers. I have taken them everyday since the bomb. That event changed my life forever. I can't shake it." Tears welled up in the eyes of this articulate young, successful business woman and we were surprised by her outburst. Cheryl said, "I've heard so many things about Oklahomans helping each other. Aren't you getting assistance from your friends?" Joann answered, "Not much help for the pain you can't see. When I left the office on April 19th I was a statue, almost frozen with nameless fear. I didn't feel anything. It was like I was on a cloud floating into eternity. It was easy. I offered no resistance

I was anesthetized with pain. I was literally dead on my feet. I'm afraid that part of me is still dead."

Joann continued, "I couldn't sleep. I knew I needed help, so I asked my doctor for some tranquilizers which he quickly ordered for me. They were handing them out like candy. I did just fine on those pills for about three months until one day I was driving down Northwestern Expressway and out of the blue all the pain of that whole experience crushed me. I thought I'd die on the spot. I made an appointment with a counselor and I've been seeing her ever since. I don't know when it will end. It just hangs over me."

Joann fell silent and we wanted her to know that we cared deeply about what happened to her. So, Cheryl touched her hand while we all sat silently for a few moments and she regained some composure.

As we left the restaurant we wondered how many others would be overwhelmed while they drove along a busy street. It was clear that the bombing was not a momentary thing.

The Firewoman

Jane is what they call a born competitor, so firefighting came naturally. In high school, Jane was a state champion golfer and an all-state soccer player. She even toured Europe with a soccer team. The firechief recognized her inward toughness and strength before inviting her to apply to become only the second lady fireperson in Oklahoma City history. Actually, Jane wanted to be a policewoman but the fire chief was persuasive.

Jane passed her qualifying tests in stride and graduated in the top half of her recruit class. By April 19, 1995, she was a veteran firefighter, a pro who was able to do her duty in that crucial time.

After the blast Jane was assigned to the Public Information Office where she was to deal with the national press. She was briefed daily by the Chief before she met with the press to relay the information and to answer questions. The original press room,

which had no mikes, consisted of a golf cart and the chiefs car in a parking lot across from the Federal Building.

For her briefings, Jane learned the details of the situation by crawling into the rubble where various areas were given names:

The Pile, the Crater, the Pit and the Cave. The Pile was the stack of rubble that stood about two stories high in front of the building. The Crater was the gigantic cavern made by the bomb blast. The Cave was a hole toward the back of the western edge of the building.

The fourth area was the Pit where Jane could see body parts and blood scattered about. She encountered immense danger during each of her three or four daily trips into the Pit. The whole building was unstable. Columns 20 and 22 were the main supports that remained in the Pit area and they had been eroded by the explosion so that the friends met like the points of two pencils. The rescuers placed a cast around that juncture in order to shore up their remaining strength. Still, it was dangerous.

After each 14 or 15 hour day Jane went home to rest but she slept fitfully and ate sparingly. Occasionally she spoke about her experiences with her friends, but most of the time she just kept to herself. Mostly, she tried to relax and to deny the whole event. This defense had worked many times in the past, in fact, she had developed a personal rule: Don't cry until 4 of the men firefighters do.

Jane was sustained by the thin reed of hope that other victims were still alive but, after talking with the Chief on the 12th day, she acknowledged to herself that it was futile to expect that more live people would be discovered. That evening she went home and wept bitterly by herself. She thought, "The main purpose of all that hard work is over." That was the first time she had let her emotions out and even then she shut them down quickly for fear her feelings would overwhelm her.

The entire rescue effort was terminated on the 15th day when the chaplain and several officials gathered for a final service.

There was a prayer. Bagpipers played. Governor Keating said a few words. Mrs. Keating gave roses to all the rescuers and Jane placed hers by the sign that read "Bless the children."

The closing of the rescue effort brought relief and sadness everywhere. Jane thought, "Even though the work was futile it was sustained by noble purposes that gave us a zest to keep going. All of us were energized by it and then we had to go back to our normal lives. The beauty will be lost in routine duties. I can already feel the contrast. The bombing gave us a chance to experience our nobility and even though it was overwhelming it was worth the doing. Maybe that was one of the good things about the tragedy. That's an awful high price."

Jane had become skilled at dealing with the press so she was assigned to appear on a local -rv show that was designed to help kids handle their trauma caused by the bombing. The format included a panel that would answer questions phoned by kids. Jane was joined by two kids who helped respond to the callers. Jane did very well until one of the callers got emotional and it tapped into her experience. She almost lost it. But, she held it together until she got home where, for the first time, she allowed herself to cry completely.

The Physician

About 9:00AM on April 19th Tom was sitting at his desk ten blocks from the Murrah Federal Building. He underlined a couple of phrases he wanted to emphasize during his upcoming lecture to 150 medical students who were already gathering in the assembly hall below. Tom had lectured to similar groups dozens of times and while it was somewhat routine he was getting the usual pregame jitters that always came about 15 minutes before he faced that group of would-be physicians. He smiled slightly when he thought of their youthful enthusiasm.

Tom prepared to go through his pre-game routine---check his tie, put on his coat, gather his notes, stop by the restroom, check

his fly, and catch the elevator to the lecture hall. He knew it by heart.

Just as he was ready to make that little lurch to get out of his chair his office rocked. The large modern paintings swung back and forth. Papers on his desk jumped as if momentarily alive. The entire building swayed and rumbled. Tom paused and moved only his eyes while listening carefully to the events unfolding around him. Obviously, there had been a huge explosion somewhere in the vicinity.

Tom thought, "There must have been an atomic accident at Tinker Air Force Base. I heard they are working with atomic stuff." Tom was well versed in atomic catastrophes and he remembered that the effects came in successive waves. He figured he didn't have time to get home and calling was not an option because the lines would be clogged or out of commission. He thought, "I'm probably going to die and there's not anything I can do to stop it."

Reflexively, Tom walked to the window to see if a large cloud was rising in the direction of Tinker AFB. Surprisingly, the sky was clear. Tom thought, "Maybe the bomb went off downtown. Some terrorists already have hit New York." He ran across the open area outside his office and sure enough he could see a huge black cloud bubbling up from the ground around the Federal Building. Tom gasped, "There must be thousands of injured and dead people." He stood frozen while contemplating what might be happening at the scene—bodies would be strewn all over the place, the injured would be screaming for help, doctors would be scrambling to get to the injured, and the dying would want someone to hold their hands while their last few moments of life ebbed away.

In the madness of the moment, Tom reflected on his responsibility to his students already gathering in the lecture hall. As young prospective physicians, those folks probably would volunteer to assist the victims of the tragedy and yet, they were not equipped to be very helpful. Most of them had never dealt with

dying people and they were not trained to do emergency treatment. Yet, they would feel the need to get involved.

Toni weighed his alternatives and decided that his major responsibility was to the medical students so he grabbed his notes and raced to the elevator for his descent to the lecture hall where he expected to find a group of people all excited about the bombing. Instead, the group was engaged in small talk. Things looked and sounded normal. They hadn't heard about the blast.

"Good morning. I am sorry to tell you that someone has set off a bomb at the Murrah Federal Building and it looks like there are many victims," said Tom. Then, he watched the group carefully and felt the tension flow across the room. He could feel their urgency. It was real drama.

Tom sensed that the students wanted instructions so he said, "Some of you may be involved in this crisis and you may have to talk to dying people. So, I am going to talk with you about how to do that."

Tom had talked to many student groups about dealing with dying patients and their families but this time it was for real. Tom's words were all that could be heard in the hall and the students listened as never before. Almost everyone felt a knot in their gut and some wondered why they had gone into medicine in the first place. Self-doubts converged with courage and the ongoing, internal struggle mirrored the life and death battles being played out in front of the Murrah Building.

As soon as Tom completed his lecture his beeper sounded and a local official asked him if there was a mental health component of the local crisis plan. Tom answered, "No." The official said, "Let's start getting one together." Tom said, "OK."

Another call came momentarily. This time it was a second official warning of a bomb threat on the building. Tom assembled all the professors available and organized a plan to evacuate the building. All personnel except Tom and two colleagues were

cleared in 10 minutes. Then, throughout the afternoon Tom received serious calls of bomb threats and they sounded authentic enough to cause him to stay on the premises until midnight when he and one remaining colleague finally went home.

On April 20th, Tom began responding to calls for assistance from victims of emotional trauma caused by the bombing. For instance, workers at the coroner's office thought they had seen just about every type of trauma possible but even they found their limits when the collection of broken bodies, especially children, filled their facility. And physicians who had sewn bodies together for years were shaken by that tragedy.

Tom listened to them all. On one hand he heard cries of pain from colleagues, victims, families, physicians and observers. On the other, he responded to calls to organize Oklahoma City's resources into an effective response team. Meanwhile, some people were returning to their normal activities. For Tom, it was like seeing a three-ring circus. In one ring, the people were untouched by the bombing. In a second ring, the people were recovering from it. In the third, the people were still overwhelmed by the tragedy. He knew it was taking a toll on him.

Six months after the bombing Tom sat at his desk and leaned forward as he had on April 19th. He said, "We don't sit around and talk about what we did during the bombing crisis. That would only hurt us. It would be like scratching around in an old wound. But, it still hurts. It was awful and I believe that in order to stop that kind of activity we are going to have to give up some of our rights to privacy. We're going to have to allow police to get into those fringe organizations and find out what they're planning. If we don't do that there will be a lot more scenes like the one we had here. They're too horrible to describe. We must stop them." His eyes filled with tears and he turned to go to another class. Life was going on in Oklahoma City but there still was pain.

Discussion

Generally, invitations are considered good things. That is, they are classified as positive aspects of mental health. But, they sometimes involve difficult, even risky tasks such as entering another person's painful world so that a counselor, teacher, or parent may respond empathically to the person. People in tragedies, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, often extend invitations to others in the hope that they will find someone who will offer a constructive hand. In this sense, listening empathically is often critical to the *practice* of an invitational philosophy.

Oklahoma City was struck by the nation's largest act of terror and its people have reached to each other as well as to those beyond their borders. The national response has been heart warming and helpful. The need for that understanding is equally important during the legal trials when Oklahomans are dealing with issues of justice and forgiveness. The hope always is that civility will prevail and that everyone will emerge from this experience with a greater dimension of decency. That end will be achieved only if it begins with both empathic listening and empathic responding. Toward that end this statement has presented the real experiences of four Oklahomans whose lives were touched profoundly by the bombing. It asks for understanding.

When we first moved to Oklahoma we knew some of the local people. But since our arrival we have come to love them as our friends and neighbors. We have seen their struggles with the bombing tragedy "up close and personal." The pains are real and the hurts are deep but the local resolve to move ahead is strong. It's important for the nation to respond to that spirit as well as to the pain. You are invited to do so.

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