

## **Recent disasters in New Zealand and how we are coping in a humane way.**

Margaret Jefferies

Thank you for inviting me to your country.

I have watched the videos of the sinking of the Sewol ferry and was deeply saddened seeing the pain from so much loss of life, as a result of incompetence, lack of information and lack of truth telling. My heart goes out to all who were affected – the whole Korean nation but especially to the victims and their families. I hope what I can share with you about experiences of disasters in New Zealand may be helpful.

I'm going to talk about two disasters in New Zealand and how they impacted on the victims. As I was preparing this paper I was amazed to see commonalities emerging between the two events that I am going to present to you today especially around the effectiveness of kind, human scale actions. In the Maori language this is encapsulated by the word aroha – love. However in Maori this word has a deeper meaning. Aroha encompasses the breath of life and the creative force of the spirit, and it assumes that the universe is abundant and that there are more opportunities than people. It seeks and draws out the best in people, it rejects greed, aggression and ignorance and instead encourages actions that are generous.

So I'm going to share with you our experience in Lyttelton of the Earthquakes and the role that Timebanking played in our recovery.

And I will talk more briefly about the Mosque shootings earlier this year in Christchurch.

Lyttelton is the port town of Christchurch – connected to the city by a 1.97 km tunnel through the Port Hills. Lyttelton is part of Banks Peninsula which has two large harbours formed by volcanic eruptions - Lyttelton being one of them.

In the early hours of the morning 4 Sept 2010 we experienced a 7.1 magnitude earthquake. Probably we were fortunate with the timing as no one was killed as the city had not yet woken up. There followed a series of smaller aftershocks. Every few months we would experience a large earthquake such as the one at midday on 22 February 2011 (magnitude 6.2 – but shallower so more damaging). The buildings already weakened by the first large earthquake succumbed and this time with loss of life (187 lives- 2 from South Korea). It was devastating.

60% of the buildings in the centre of Lyttelton were badly damaged. Stringent building codes in New Zealand prevented an even greater disaster throughout the city. From the 4 September to the present day we have experienced 21,451 quakes. This continual shaking was quite unique worldwide.

I'm going to talk to you about how our small town of Lyttelton (about 3000 population) was helped in the recovery process by its Timebank. I know you have Timebanks in South Korea but for those who may be unfamiliar with the concept here are some brief details.

It is a system where people share their skills with one another – either between individuals or with groups and each is acknowledged for the time taken. The trades are measured in time with every person's time being regarded equal. Timebanking is built on reciprocity. Everyone can get his or her needs met through this system. Even if you are so unwell that you are unable to reciprocate we have a community chest where the Timebank co-ordinators can supply people with time credits if they need them. No one should be left behind. Our system is recorded online.

There are some basic values underlying Timebanking. These are important. It is these same values that allowed Timebanking to be successful in the time of our earthquake disaster. Professor Edgar Cahn the founder of Timebanks worldwide outlines the values as...

### **Asset**

We are all assets.

We all have something to give.

### **Redefining Work**

Some work is beyond price.

Work has to be redefined. To create "the village" that raises healthy children, builds strong families, revitalizes neighbourhoods, makes democracy work, advances social justice, and even makes the planet sustainable is valuable work. It needs to be honoured, recorded and rewarded.

### **Reciprocity**

Helping works better as a two-way street.

The question: "How can I help you?" needs to change so we ask: "How can we help each other build the world we all will live in?"

### **Social Networks**

We need each other.

People joined in shared purpose are stronger than individuals. Helping each other, we reweave communities of support, strength and trust. Community is built upon sinking roots, building trust, creating networks. Special relationships are built on commitment.

### **Respect**

Every human being matters.

Respect underlies freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and everything we value. Respect supplies the heart and soul of democracy. When respect is denied to anyone, we all are injured. We must respect where people are in the moment, not where we hope they will be at some future point.

At the time of the first Earthquake in September Civil Defence didn't see us in Lyttelton as having urgent needs, all help was directed towards the city, we were more or less left to our own devices. BUT people did need help – often of an emotional nature, support. So the Timebank stepped up into the void. Extra help came from people from all around who hadn't been Civil Defence trained and therefore not selected to help. There is a strong human need to be kind and look after one another which comes to the surface in times of disaster- contrary to what block buster movies would have us believe with screaming mayhem. Rebecca Solnit in her book *Paradise Built in Hell* sees this as a common phenomenon. At this time

people may not have needed a new roof over their head but they definitely needed emotional support. There was a degree of friction between Civil Defence and the community of Lyttelton, but over the coming months this was resolved. The time gap between the September Earthquake and the 22 February event enabled healing to occur between Civil Defence and our community – and gave us all an opportunity to improve how we did things. At that time the Lyttelton Timebank facilitated many small acts of kindness and connection.



So by the time the February earthquake rolled around the relationship with Civil Defence had been healed somewhat. It was as though the September earthquake was a trial for what was to come. We had more systems in place.

On 22 February we had the Navy in town – they were on a joint Australia-New Zealand task force for disaster-relief operations and were coincidentally in port at the time of the February earthquake, we had police, Civil Defence, ambulance, fire services and Timebank. Each brought their particular skills to the task in hand. These groups formed the task force for the community. The navy had the capacity to feed the community – and we enjoyed avoiding being isolated in our homes – coming together for meals, support and information. The navy was great – they were compassionate, open and friendly – and when later they left the port there were tears as people watched with gratitude for what they had done for the community. Skills that the Timebank had to offer the team were that they had a large data base of community members (about 20% of local population) and a list of skills that people had and a knowledge of where to source materials. Each day there were a number of broadcasts going out to members – we still had internet connection – asking for specific skills such as helping the fire brigade take down brick chimneys that were in danger of falling, supervising the water tankers, checking on neighbours, and through the local medical centre Timebank members phoned all elderly people in the area to check everything was OK – or what might be needed – like delivery of medication.

In events like this there is a huge amount of work to be done – but the problems can be exacerbated by government type authority and decisions. Many communities have the ability to self-organise and this top down authority is often less than helpful.

It is easy to take decisions out of the hands of the people involved and this is damaging.

Our experience with Government appointing New Zealand's largest building firm to do the repairs was problematic – people became frustrated and angry with the bureaucracy. The results were far from perfect too. There seemed to be an underlying premise that authority is superior, that big is more important. Timebank (which is the people themselves organised) was able to deal with the relational, the personal, what seems small, but it's what lifts spirits and the power to endure. I'll give you some examples. An elderly couple whose house was damaged beyond repair – homeless, dazed were directed to the Timebank centre where another Timebank family offered to house them for several weeks, other Timebankers were able to find them new accommodation – but before that could be done the existing tenant had to get the place up to scratch for the landlord – Timebankers did this – negotiations with lawyers who were in the city and hard to get to -was done by Timebankers – the final shift of the elderly couple into their new home was co-ordinated with the fire brigade -the only ones with authority to move into the damaged building and with a chain gang of Timebank organised people the house contents were shifted into their new home in 20 minutes!

Now the people who were helping in these types of situations also had their problems but helping others in company relieved their focus on themselves. It gave them an opportunity for connection and hence healing from the trauma.

One person who I interviewed for the newspaper at that time and again several years later to see what his overall thoughts were was that these were the best years of his life – people were connected, compassionate, the community was creative and kindly – we were like a huge team. Compared to the city Lyttelton people landed on their feet running. Whereas in the city there were comments that people were getting to know their neighbours, Lyttelton people were saying– 'that's odd we already know our neighbours' (and the Timebank helped facilitate this state of being). Project Lyttelton which umbrellas the Lyttelton Timebank continued with a town party that was organised before the February quake meeting on a public open space. The authorities closed the tunnel to any non Lyttelton people so we had a large in-house party! The navy again provided all the food. I have never seen so much hugging between community members as we collectively held one another. We understood the importance of being together supporting one another with the element of fun which is often absent in difficult times.

In the initial period there are some big jobs to be done – clearing dangerous rubble and unsafe buildings – but in that early stage reconstruction is not so important, it is the human scale that is more important. People are in shock – and to this day Christchurch has the highest rate in New Zealand of mental health problems among its population – the constant rocking unhinges and the body's ability to bounce back is compromised.

Another example of a small endeavour that built strength into the community was the two Timebank women who looked at what they could offer – which was stitching – they sat in the main street stitching hearts out of old blankets and giving them to passers-by. Soon many people joined them for the company – whether to talk or just

to be with others, a local café whose business was damaged provided free coffee – others baked at home and brought it down. There was a strong need to be with others – not necessarily solving the problems - that was being done by the emergency team – but for company and to calm ourselves. This became quite a place to see the needs of the community. Out of that team has emerged Christchurch's largest concentration of art therapists – people who saw the value in art as healing.

In the city what people began to notice over time was that people in community leadership roles were starting to burn out. Leadership in Community was formed – a strong network of people from all sectors keen to explore what leadership is and how they can develop themselves to be of service. This is still going strong to this day with now hundreds of people of all ages more aware of what true leadership is. In times of disaster there is room for both the heroic type large scale actions AND the human scale compassionate people focussed activities. Both are needed but sometimes big overpowers small. But we are learning.

A few months after the horrific Mosque shooting of March 15 where 51 people were killed and 49 injured, I was asked to facilitate an Open Space forum for the Muslim community in Christchurch. People loved this process – they felt safe, heard, held and they appreciated being able to create their own agenda under a broad-brush stroke question of how could their community thrive. They had experienced being pushed out of their space. They needed space to sort themselves out. Ngai Tahu, the local iwi, with its governmental level influence helped provide this space too by making themselves like a wedge or barrier to all the different interactions that faced that community as droves of people visited the mosque. And why did Ngai Tahu do that? They come from a strongly values based culture that embraces manaakitanga which loosely translated means hospitality.

The Muslim community's experience of all governmental interactions was that they were humane. For example after the shootings all mosques throughout the country had police with machine guns standing watch – but the community could see that these police people were uncomfortable in this role, almost embarrassed. It was as though these agencies had learnt from the Earthquake experiences about grand moves needing to be tempered with the humane.

When talking to Ben Gresham in preparation for this talk he suggested that perhaps there is a need for a template that communities could use in times like this, what is culturally appropriate, what are the religious needs. The hospital was an intense experience for people and with the numbers involved it was hard for cultural nuances to be observed – the Muslim community needed to have a trusted voice. In the grieving period the community needed time for that in their own way - with no media around. The Muslim community agreed though to work in with the powers that be around the burying of their dead – they had to wait much longer than their customs dictate for burial after death.

Some of the things that Ben has noticed with his community since the event is the coming together of Shiites and Sunnis who traditionally have not been the closest –

this is being modelled by their members and people are noticing. A recent forum hosted by the Government – a neutral body- brought together people of different sects. This is helping. Ben sees New Zealand has having an important role in doing this reconciliation work. Their community also felt supported by the national hijab day where many non Muslims took to wearing hijab to show solidarity.

Our Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern set the tone and reassured the community –by affirming that the Muslim people are of us – one of us. She calmed the nation. She was at the hospital visiting all the people. New Zealanders were proud of her compassionate leadership in this situation. There was goodwill between the Muslim community and the New Zealand Government as a result. Many of the Muslim community have only been living in New Zealand for a relatively short time – they see something intrinsically good about New Zealand – they see people at grassroots as genuine. The support of the Christchurch community was overwhelming as they came out in their thousands to acknowledge the pain of the horror. At this memorial service the Iman later said it felt like he was making the call to prayer at Mecca – it felt like the centre of the universe it was so profound. Muslims in New Zealand experience the natural beauty of our land which feeds their souls. The Muslim community want to be living here.

Ben also thought that having a country with a treaty - the Treaty of Waitangi which honours all people – lays an important foundation for harmony. With the Treaty comes an intent underlying all processes. Lianne Dalziel Christchurch's mayor also reacted with compassion – she mentioned that her decisions seemed to come from somewhere else – her heart talking.

Ben finished by saying this event was not a national disaster but an international terrorist event. Muslims have been facing ugly situations since 9/11, but as a result of the way this event finally unfolded much of that anxiety of being 'other' has dissipated for Muslims in New Zealand.

In times of disaster there is the need for large scale decisions that are outside the scope of the individual or small community, but our experience is that if you want the best outcome over time you must look and act with compassion at the level of the people involved. We must embrace the spirit of aroha. We need a society based on this value – to allow us to become fully human and more able to deal with life's challenges.