

Kim Fortun: WHY STUDY DISASTERS

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Kim Fortun

Well, I often ask why we think and talk about the problems that we focus on as disasters, rather than merely as problems, and there are a number of reasons for that. One is that disasters. I think it's easy for people to recognize that there's many different kinds of disasters. Earthquakes can be the cause of disasters. An extreme storm can be the cause of a disaster.

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Kim Fortun

A chemical plant releasing a massive cloud of toxic chemicals into the air can be a disaster. And each of those kinds of disasters requires different people and organizations to respond.

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Kim Fortun

So disasters call upon us to think, who needs to show up, and then what kind of work needs to be done to address the problem.

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And some of it is immediate and corrective. If people don't have drinking water, they need drinking water. They don't have blankets and shelter. They need blankets in and shelters. But they also need to fix the problems that led to the disaster, what we call compensatory work, where if the chemical plant released a cloud of toxic gas, where were there insufficient safety systems for workers insufficiently trained to maintain the plant?

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Kim Fortun

So you fix those problems so that the disaster doesn't occur again, and then the most critical kind of engagement is saying, could we do things so differently, that this type of disaster isn't even a possibility in our society. So it requires you to think in very practical terms, like who needs water? Who's going to deliver it, how much do you need?

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How much gas do you need? Or diesel to track the water in? You need people that can look at the system, the factory system, the regulatory system around the factory and say, like, what didn't work? Like what led to this harm? And then you might need to say, should we be having massive facilities processing fossil fuels into plastics and other kind of petrochemical outputs?

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Kim Fortun

Is there a way to produce the materials and things we need in our society without having to depend on those trends, those dangerous processes? So disaster makes you think about all of those levels and allows us to think about different kinds of disasters. Fast disasters require different kinds of responses than slow disasters, which in turn require different kinds of responses than combo disasters.

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And in many ways, combo disasters require the most kinds of response and diversity of expertise. People from different disciplines working together to understand and redress the problem. Yet another important reason that I think in terms of disaster is if you say something is a disaster, I think a lot of people feel a responsibility to pay attention, to respond, to help.

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Kim Fortun

And I think that's really important because a lot of environmental harms aren't dramatic, they're slow. they're what researchers have called slow violence. They hurt people. But it's very hard to see the source of the problem because the, the, the impact might be seen years later in cancer rates or in other kinds of health outcomes. And so reminding that it's a disaster, even if it's slow, can cause people to think and respond in all those ways that an urgent disaster would.

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Kim Fortun

That, I think, is especially important in attending to environmental problems.