

COMPASSION IN CRISIS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL
ANALYSIS OF FLOOD SURVIVORS AND FIRST RESPONDERS

by

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DEDICATION

To the pursuit of compassionate understanding which enlarges and connects all of us.

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ABSTRACT

This research explored compassion as experienced by individuals and first-responders during and after a natural disaster. The participants for this study are those who were involved in the flood event which ravaged Wimberley, Texas, on Memorial Day weekend of 2015. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this study focused on personal meaning and sense-making of first responders and flood survivors, with particular attention to the experience of compassionate acts. During this flood event, news personnel and professional disaster responders classified individual and group acts of compassion as extraordinary. The research found that responders and helpers addressed the extended and relational selves of the survivors and thus exhibited compassionate care. These acts of compassion enabled the survivors to move forward during and after the crisis due to the acts of the responders and helpers.

I. INTRODUCTION: COMPASSION IN CRISIS

The flood event of 2015 was an unexpected natural disaster crisis in Wimberley, Texas. Wimberley is a small town with a resident population of 2,582 (2013 statistics). Situated in the Texas hill country between San Antonio and Austin, it is sometimes referred to as a tourist site, a bedroom community, and an artist and musicians' haven. Wimberley is an amalgam of retirees, longtime residents and new recruits to Texas.

During Memorial Day holiday of 2015, rains pelted the area. Rainfall totals at a rain gauge run by the Lower Colorado River Authority in Blanco, Texas, about 20 miles upstream from Wimberley, reached 9.41 inches over two days, with nearby areas receiving close to a foot of rain in the same period. The wall of water then moved downstream. In total, the river rose more than 33 feet in just three hours early Sunday morning, cresting at about 40 feet, which is 27 feet above flood stage. This broke the all-time record crest from 1929 by about 7 feet; at that point the gauge in Wimberley stopped reporting data. The local weather service explained that there are many reasons that flash floods occur, but one of the most common is the result of copious amounts of rainfall from thunderstorms that cause flash flooding. This can also occur when slow-moving or multiple thunderstorms move over the same areas. Steep, hilly, or mountainous terrain produces rapid runoff, since the water will travel downhill at greater speeds into rivers and over land. Rocky terrain can exacerbate the development of flash floods and raging waters since rocks and clay soils do not allow as much water to infiltrate the ground.

Similar dynamics, to an even more extreme extent, took place in Wimberley over the weekend, as the area received about as much as it can expect in several months during the span of just a few hours. The town sustained profound and dynamic changes as the

Blanco River left its bank engulfing homes, livestock and trees. Houses were literally lifted from their bulkheads and swept into the white water of a typically calm and peaceful river. Some 321 homes were destroyed by the flood and more than 1200 homes were left with extensive damage (Wimberley City Records, 2015).

The pounding rains continued for more than three days with little relief. For me the crisis brought fear and isolation, as phones were not working. Living close to the river, I stayed on alert through the night Saturday, watching as water levels continued to rise. It seemed as if the rains would never cease. Each moment of listening, watching, and being on alert increased my anxiety. Early Sunday morning the rains started to slow and I realized with relief that my home had been minimally affected with water damage; however, the anxiety of not being able to connect with others made me increasingly nervous.

Unsure of what was happening beyond my door, I ventured by foot to the Blanco River, left out of my house at the end of my street. In those silent early morning hours, I entered a chaotic world created by a gigantic wall of water that had come bursting down the river damaging or uprooting everything in its path. Broken trees lined the riverbank and those left standing were stripped of their bark. Strange objects were strewn on tangled branches. Old grandfather cypress trees were toppled over revealing root systems as wide across as an automobile. Odd items such as out of place equipment dotted the newly created landscape. Twisted pieces of metal dangled from trees in front of houses once thought to be out of range of the water. A road normally passable was now covered with rushing white water. Small cabins that had been visible across the river from this vantage point only the previous week were now missing. Only concrete stumps remained

where porches had once stood. It was nearly too much to take in, and I knew then that lives must have been lost in this tragedy.

I wanted desperately to connect with others, but was still unable to get a phone signal. The location of the low water bridge that was my standard transport over the river could not be seen, as it was completely submerged under a torrent of white water. There would be no travelling over it by car. Walking back to my house, I realized the road on the right side of my house was completely covered by water from a usually dry creek. This meant I was completely isolated. It would be several days before I could actually connect with others face-to-face. I was consumed with the need to know others were safe and the trivialities of life had evaporated. Life became a matter of moment to moment, the here and now, the important and non-important.

Later I realized this flood event coincided with larger world and national events of spring and summer 2015. Those events revealed the sociocultural, political, economic, and personal distress experienced by many. The main stream news featured stories of school shootings; police mistreatment, and violent world events. Stories of displaced refugees across the globe became the context for much discussion and concern. Conversations with cohorts at school and with friends during the spring of 2015 began to focus on the decline of fundamental goodness and the apparent lack of compassion and altruism in the world.

The contrast between the conversations at school about the apparent lack of morality in the world and the events happening in Wimberley was bewildering. I was sifting and sorting through the devastation around me as people told me their recollections of the flood event. Their warmhearted revelations of helping others comb

through mud in an effort to find even one piece of memory touched me greatly. Arising out of the chaos was an emerging similarity of experience in each of these flood stories: the experience of compassion. Story after story included illustrations of how people had come to the aid of strangers and neighbors, friends and others, quickly and intentionally.

Then in June 2015, the country was shocked by another act of violence. This was in Emmanuel AME church in South Carolina. Time magazine's June (2015) cover included: "In the wake of the murders...there is grinding grief. And as the months have passed, the survivors of Emmanuel and others in Charleston have continued to search for the meaning of this story..." (<http://time.com/time-magazine-charleston-shooting-cover-story>). The motives of this troubling violence seem incomprehensible, but it spoke to the commonality we all share. No matter what particular crisis one may have to face in life's journey, each of us will have challenges. The suffering and the search for meaning in that suffering are interwoven in a tapestry of personal development.

The distress people were experiencing in Wimberley seemed to spark a collective common humanity; people were responding to local events with a desire to help in extraordinary ways. While some offered to provide food and supplies for volunteers searching for the lost, I realized my most valuable skill as a trained counselor was in being present for those experiencing grief. I listened and assisted others as they shared their personal losses. The events of the flood were told and retold in quiet settings, one to one, shoulder-to-shoulder, while huddled closely together, as if by some elixir of understanding. They were also told in church gatherings, coffee shops, yoga studios, meditation groups, backyards and living rooms. Sorrow and unfounded guilt were evident as people described their difficulties and mentioned that they were not as bad off

as their neighbor. The important pieces of remembering were woven together stitch by stitch with kindness and generosity, compassion being the balm for heartache. This bonding of people showed me the power of vulnerability and fear, which obliterate trivialities and reduce us all to the present moment.

Professional responders and officials who came to aid the town (such as other EMS workers, state and local emergency service personnel, news reporters, and especially Team Rubicon), said Wimberley had galvanized local resources in the face of impending disaster more expeditiously than they had seen in other communities (Personal conversation, EMS, City of Wimberley, June 5, 2015).

Team Rubicon is an American non-government organization (NGO), founded by U.S. Marines William McNulty and Jacob Wood (teamrubiconusa.org). Team Rubicon's mission is to unite the skills and experiences of military veterans with first responders to rapidly deploy emergency response teams. Team Rubicon formed in January 2010, following the Haiti earthquake, when McNulty and Wood led a medical team into Port-au-Prince three days after the quake. Team Rubicon identifies their purpose as, "We bridge the gap between disasters and when traditional aid organizations get to work. Disasters are our business" (teamrubiconusa.org).

For me, the stories of people feeling others' suffering and stepping in to assist them were exceptional and very inspiring. The situation in Wimberley was drastic and the stories of peoples' kindness, generosity and compassion in the face of the disaster were compelling to me. This research sought to understand compassion in a natural disaster situation, and I hope that it illuminates aspects of compassion which have not yet been identified and discussed, in order to add to the professional development of first

responders and to contribute to the understanding of the construct of compassion. While the literature notes the evolutionary, social and emotional aspects of compassion, little research is available to understand the construct of compassion. Regarding first responders and other helping professionals, the literature is awash with compassion fatigue information and yet little is available to illuminate the individual experiences of compassion in a crisis.

Rationale for the Study

Many spiritual traditions have stressed the importance of compassion for our well-being and good relations with other people. For this dissertation, compassion will be defined from this most common and utilized definition: the ability to feel the suffering of another and the wish to mediate that suffering in some way. This definition is informed by Buddhist philosophy, which speaks of compassion as a fluttering in the heart (Goldstein, 2013) with the intention of relieving suffering. Furthermore, it complements the psychological and social psychological understanding of the concept (Keltner, Marsh, and Smith, 2010). Compassion is not the same as empathy or altruism, though the concepts are related. Compassion is the aspect connecting the feeling of empathy to acts of kindness, generosity and other expressions of altruism. While empathy refers more generally to our ability to take the perspective of and feel the emotions of another person, compassion is the idea that those feelings and thoughts include the desire to help. Altruism, in turn, is the kind and selfless behavior often prompted by feelings of compassion. However, one can feel compassion without acting on it, and altruism is not always motivated by compassion (Ekman, 2010). Compassion may be a part of our human nature, as contemporary researchers are suggesting at the University of California,

Berkeley's, Greater Good Science Center, an interdisciplinary research center devoted to the scientific understanding of compassionate individuals, strong social bonds and altruistic behavior.

New developments in science have included evolutionary studies of peacemaking among primate relatives (de Waal & Johanowicz, 1993); neuroscientific experiments on the chemical basis of emotions like love and compassion (Bernhardt & Singer, 2012), for example how oxytocin promotes trust and generosity (Rodrigues, Saslow, Garcia, John, & Keltner, 2009); and, psychological studies on how people can be moved to practice kindness even when it seems to be counter to their own self-interest (Rilling, Gutman, Zeh, Pagnoni, Berns, & Kilts, 2002). The research suggests that compassionate behavior carries great emotional and physical health benefits for compassionate people, their families and their communities (Keltner, 2010).

In the world of first-responders, crises are a constant reminder to act with awareness and professionalism and a significant portion of their training is focused on these qualities. The homepage for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), National Preparedness Directorate (NPD), National Training and Education Division (NTED) includes information on the nation's first responder community. The education division offers more than 150 courses to help build critical skills that responders need to function effectively in mass consequence events. NTED primarily serves state, local, and tribal entities in 10 professional disciplines, but has expanded to serve the private sector and citizens in recognition of their significant role in domestic preparedness. Instruction is offered at the awareness, performance, and management and planning levels (firstrespondertraining.gov). The

training these responders experience is instrumental – focused on the expeditious and calculated, rather than training focused on the relational dimension.

According to the University of Texas Medical Center, and the national EMT training and curriculum, the coursework for EMT's have four aims: (1) to familiarize candidates with the roles of an emergency medical technician in the health care system, (2) to give the candidate an idea about the scope of practice of an EMT, (3) to allow candidates to understand the medical terminologies, correctly, and (4) to enable the candidates to perform the job of an EMT more efficiently, and according to the standards of the respective state (<http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/education/school-of-health-professions/programs/certificate-programs/medical-technician-certification/index.html>).

Krista Haugen, RN, MN, CEN, speaks of first responders and their experiences: “A life in EMS can be a roller coaster like no other, and it must be noted that our current reality is that we are losing responders to compassion fatigue, burnout, post-traumatic stress and suicide. There is an immediate need to effectively address these very real and devastating issues...” (EMS World, October 24, 2015). The life of a first responder is inevitably challenging and responders and professional personnel must increasingly be aware of what they should be, as well as what they should know.

The professional training at present does not include a value system supporting the compassionate care of victims; instead compassionate care seems to be competing with expeditious and efficient care. However, while professionalism is an essential aspect of crisis personnel practice, the components of compassionate care are crucial for human development and an important element to be included in professional education, as the newly emerging research is proposing (Keltner, 2014). Research on compassion

suggests compassion strengthens bonds between people (Keltner, 2014), and neurophysiology research (Singer, 2013) identifies positive aspects of “tending and befriending.” According to this research, compassion is good for us, yet compassion research, with the exception of compassion fatigue, is sparse in the disaster literature.

Compassion fatigue has been defined by disaster sociologists as vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatization. Compassion fatigue is thought to be the emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events (Figley, 1995). Research relating to socio-cultural implications of compassion and disaster include the significant effects on nurses and medical personnel in times of crisis (Lombardo, 2011). A search of peer reviewed articles using search terms “compassion” and “disasters” returned roughly 56,800 results, roughly 87 percent of these articles focus on compassion fatigue and disaster fatigue, with the remaining focusing on compassion, comfort, faith, spiritual aspects of care, global compassion, disasters, and democracy.

According to the *Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges*, “Observers and critics of the medical profession, both within and without, urge more attention be paid to the moral sensibilities, the characters, of medical students” (Wear, 1997). This idea of instruction on particular moral values such as compassion may be becoming an essential core of medical training; however, it is not visible in the literature with regard to emergency medical personnel training.

Emergency personnel, as part of the medical community, may be socialized into a hierarchy that has broad implications for how individuals within that hierarchy relate with others. Within that hierarchy, one patient may interact with fifty different employees,

including physicians, nurses, technicians, and others. However, traditional medical education emphasizes the importance of error-free practice, utilizing intense peer pressure to achieve perfection during both diagnosis and treatment (Rosenstein & O'Daniel, 2008). This focus on error-free environments may be counter to the idea of compassionate presence in crisis situations.

Rules and protocols, policies and procedures, and professional systems are prevalent in EMS offices. There are necessary mechanisms in place for every situation. It is impossible to conceive of every possible situation, however, and according to Kelly Grayson, an EMS professional, “the only unbreakable rule is that every rule has an exception” (Grayson, 2014). Grayson, NREMT-P, CCEMT-P, is a critical care paramedic in Louisiana. He has spent the past eighteen years as a field paramedic, critical care transport paramedic, field supervisor and educator. A former president of the Louisiana EMS Instructor Society and board member of the Louisiana Association of Nationally Registered EMTs, Grayson writes about why EMS should put compassion before protocols. From the perspective of one who has seen any number of experiences that necessitated a compassionate response, he is aware that compassionate care is not the cornerstone of EMS or first-responder training (Grayson, 2014).

The literature relating to compassion overwhelmingly employs quantitative methodologies, as evidenced by the article, “*Compassion: An Evolutionary Analysis and Empirical Review*,” (Goetz, Keltner, Simon-Thomas, 2010). Current research conducted at Stanford University (The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education – CCARE) and the University of California at Berkeley (Greater Good Center) examines the effects of compassion and altruism on human functioning. This research suggests it

can have a positive change on individuals at different societal scales: individual, local, regional, and global. Although this positive change is being noted in the disaster field, the research on compassion and disasters is focused primarily on compassion fatigue and there is no research investigating the phenomenon of compassion in first responders and those they encounter. We lack a qualitative understanding of how people experience compassion both as the person who gives compassion and the receiver of compassion.

Purpose of the Study

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore peoples' experience of compassion in relation to a natural disaster crisis. Inasmuch as we are living in times of great climatological change, natural disasters are likely to be in our future. In times of crisis, the usual resources of technology and routine are augmented with a deeper intuitive sense of connection and humanity. The current study sought to identify the relationship between the crisis moments and the process of compassion on the part of first responders during a crisis event, as well as the victims who are recipients of compassionate care during the crisis event. Additionally, this study sought to contribute to the development of a construct of compassion.

Methodology

This is a qualitative phenomenological study. In order to understand compassion from the perspective of those who have experienced it, I will use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as both the guiding philosophy and the methodology. Interpretative phenomenological analysis approaches qualitative, experiential and psychological research with a focus on the "human predicament, people engaging with the world" (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p 5). In IPA research, there are interpretative

understandings of people's relationships to the world as well as attempts to make meanings out of their activities and the things that are happening to them (p 21).

The aims set by IPA by researchers tend to focus upon people's experiences and/or understandings of a particular phenomenon (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p 46). Additionally, in IPA research focal points include the "perceptions and views of the participants" (p 46). Primary research questions are focused on the phenomenological material. IPA is a focus on the interpretation of meaning. By focusing on people's understandings of their experiences, IPA research is focused on the examination of lived experience.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis involves "making sense of the participant, who is making sense of x" (Smith, 2014, p 35). In IPA, the researcher is wanting an "insider's perspective" (Conrad, 1987). Inasmuch as I am interested in learning about compassion as it arises in individuals, I hope to stand in the participant's shoes as well as standing alongside them, attempting to understand how they are making meaning of their compassionate experiences.

In IPA, primary research questions focus on the perceptions and views of participants. My primary research questions are: (1) how do first responders make meaning of their experience of compassion in a crisis? (2) how do survivors make meaning of their experience of receiving compassion? And, (3) how do people who behave compassionately understand the source of their compassion?

The secondary research questions can only be answered at the "more interpretative stage" (Smith, 2009, p 48). My secondary research question is: (1) how does this study add to the literature and construct of compassion? I will answer this

question by comparing the fit between the understandings of the individual experience of compassion by first-responders; people who were the recipients of compassion; how people who experience compassion understand the source of their compassion; and, the compassion constructs in the literature.

The context of this study is the historic flood in Wimberley, Texas, May of 2015. The participants are those individuals who had some direct experience of the flood event, as a survivor and/or as a first responder/helper in the crisis. After approval was received from the Texas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), (Appendix A), I identified individuals who had interest in sharing their flood experience. As a resident of Wimberley, the assemblage of participants who were first responders/helpers as well as those who suffered from the storm was facilitated through my community knowledge.

In an effort to capture the reflections of flood participants quite quickly after the event, before time made the recollections distant, I interviewed nine people as soon as the IRB request was approved. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Extended interviews lasted nearly an hour and a half; most lasted an hour. Conducted primarily at the Wimberley community library, the interviews were largely unstructured with semi-structured interview questions available should they be needed. The goal was to find out as much as possible about the phenomenon of compassionate experience from each participant and to be responsive to the participant and the phenomenon. Given the open nature of the IPA research method (Smith, 2009, p 48), the objective was to be able to describe the key features of compassion as it understood in persons during a natural disaster crisis.

Importance of the Study

The importance of this study is that it can provide meaningful understanding of compassion through a qualitative phenomenological inquiry. What is missing in the literature is an understanding and a depth of analysis of the experience of compassion, as it arises in first responders and those involved in a crisis. In order to comprehend compassion, we need to ground our understanding of compassion in lived experience to augment the theoretical and philosophical understandings of compassion. With an understanding of compassion, it is possible to contribute to the knowledge base information about the ability to respond more effectively in a crisis.

This research contributes to an understanding of the experience of the phenomenon of compassion in natural disaster situations. It contributes to the importance of professional development for first responders in that it describes the meaning survivors make of the compassionate acts of responders in the context of a natural disaster. It contributes to mapping the construct of compassion, which will inform future research.

Chapter Summary

Compassion, defined as feeling the suffering of another and wanting to act to alleviate that suffering in some way, is the center of this dissertation research. This investigation looked at the meanings people who received compassion as well as those who extended compassion made of their experiences during a flood disaster. The research literature in general understands compassion as an emotion, a virtue, and an evolutionary instinct, while the disaster research often discusses compassion in terms of compassion fatigue. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was the methodology used for this qualitative inquiry into the experiences of these survivors and responders.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this review, I will provide an overview of the current literature to situate the dissertation within the gap of current knowledge of compassion. The central research questions guiding the review of literature are: How do (adults) people experience compassion in the face of a disaster crisis? What are the compassion constructs in the literature? Currently, research has examined compassion and disaster, but no research has examined experiences of compassion during natural disasters.

Research on compassion is a burgeoning field for scholarly exploration. Literature relating to the psychological, spiritual, and socio-cultural aspect of compassion overwhelmingly employs quantitative methodologies. This evaluation is based on literature published from 2003 to 2015. One stream of research focused on compassion in helping professionals with a focus of compassion fatigue. However, another body of research conducted at Stanford University (The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education – CCARE), and the University of California at Berkeley (Greater Good Center), examines the effects of compassion and altruism. The research on compassion and altruism suggests it can positively change individuals at all different societal scales: individual, local, regional, and global. That is, compassion and altruism not only affect the well-being of individuals, but have the potential to strengthen the collective by encouraging awareness of common humanity (Kabat-Zinn, 2012).

Compassion is defined and understood differently. These different interpretations are often situated within different academic disciplines, and understood psychologically, sociologically, and/or phenomenologically. By understanding compassion as positioned within specific contexts, phenomenology provides a fruitful lens for investigation.

Compassion Theories

Compassion literally means to suffer together, to be moved in the innermost parts of our being. According to Nouwen (1982), compassion means full immersion into the condition of being human. For this dissertation, compassion will be defined from the most common utilized definition as the ability to feel the suffering of another and the wish to mediate that suffering in some way. This definition is informed by Buddhist philosophy. According to Buddhist scriptures, compassion is the “fluttering or quivering of the pure heart,” when we have allowed ourselves to be touched by the pain of life (Kornfield, 2011). The knowledge that we can do this and survive helps us to become aware the greatness of our heart. “We can open to the world, it’s ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows,” (Kornfield, 2011). Furthermore, it complements the psychological and social psychological understanding of the concept that has developed generally.

Compassion is expressed by a sense of concern that arises when we are confronted with another person’s suffering and are motivated to help bring relief to their suffering. From its Latin root, the word compassion means, “to suffer with.” It is deeply connected to our human condition in which people experience both pain and sorrow. Lazarus (1991) defined compassion as the feeling that arises when witnessing another’s suffering which then motivates a subsequent desire to help. This definition utilizes the concept of an affective state of being defined by a subjective feeling, which differentiates this definition from one in which compassion is identified as an attitude (Blum, 1980; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005).

Among researchers studying emotion, compassion is defined as the feeling that develops when we are confronted with another person’s suffering and feel motivated to

relieve that suffering (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). Although there are many definitions of compassion, Batson (1991) defines empathy as a group of responses, “that are more other-focused than self-focused, including feelings of sympathy, compassion, and tenderness” (p 86).

Compassion is not the same as empathy or altruism, though the concepts are related. Compassion is the aspect of human emotion that connects the feeling of empathy to acts of kindness, generosity, and other expressions of altruism. Thupten Jinpa (2015) suggests that when compassion arises in us in the face of need or suffering, three things happen almost instantaneously: (a) we perceive the other’s suffering, (b) we emotionally connect with that need or suffering, and, (c) we respond instinctively by wishing to see it relieved.

While empathy refers more generally to our ability to take the perspective of and feel the emotions of another person, compassion is the idea that those feelings and thoughts include the desire to help. Altruism, in turn, is the kind and selfless behavior often prompted by feelings of compassion. However, one can feel compassion without acting on it, and altruism is not always motivated by compassion (Ekman, 2010).

Three alternative theoretical approaches to compassion can be discerned in the literature and yield contrasting predictions in research. A first account holds that compassion is not its own emotion, but rather a variant or blend of sadness or love (Post, 2002; Shaver, 1987; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005; Underwood, 2002). Shaver’s analysis of emotion categorized words into groups based on their similarities. The words pity, sympathy and love, were categorized with compassion but these words were often grouped with sadness. Sprecher & Fehr (2005) found behaviors such as caring, helping,

and sharing were associated with most types of love.

A second account holds that compassion is another name for empathic distress (Ekman, 2003; Hoffman, 1981). People often mirror the emotions of those around them and vicariously experience others' emotions (Hatfield, Cacioppo, Rapson, 1993). The clear implication is that the state of compassion is then associated with the expressive behavior, physiological response, and underlying appraisals of the state it is mirroring, most likely distress, pain, sadness, or fear. From the empathic distress perspective, compassion is a label people may apply to their experiences of distress while experiencing or observing another person's suffering.

A third account holds that compassion is a distinct affective state, with a response profile that differs from those of distress, sadness, and love. The clearest case for this hypothesis is found in evolutionary analyses of compassion (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Darwin, 1871; Haidt, 2003; Keltner, Haidt, Shiota, 2006). The research by Bowlby, for example, situates compassion as a state of response different from distress, sadness, and love. Bowlby discusses the evolutionary roots of compassion as adaptation to survival and reproduction. Bowlby's (1969) work is furthered by contemporary research of Ekman (2010), Keltner, Haidt, and Shiota (2006) and others, which I will address in the next section.

Evolutionary Perspective of Compassion

Ekman (2010) suggests a deep evolutionary purpose for compassion. Ekman notes that in the fourth chapter of, *"The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex,"* that Darwin explained the origin of what he called sympathy (which today would be termed empathy, altruism, or compassion), describing how humans and other animals

come to the aid of others in distress. While he acknowledged that such actions were most likely within the family group, he addressed that the highest moral achievement is concern for the welfare of all living beings, human and non-human.

Keltner (2012) explains why Darwin thought compassion to be humans' strongest instinct in his essay, "*The Compassionate Species.*" Keltner also discusses Darwin's (1871) writings. He notes that in Darwin's, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), Darwin argued for the greater strength of social or maternal instincts than that of any other instinct or motive. His reasoning was that in our hominid predecessors, communities of more sympathetic individuals were more successful in raising healthier offspring to the age of viability and reproduction, which is the ultimate goal of evolution.

One year later, in, *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* (1872), Darwin countered claims that humans had been designed with special facial muscles to express uniquely human moral sentiments like sympathy. Instead, drawing upon observations of his children, animals at the London zoo, and his faithful dogs, Darwin showed how our moral sentiments are expressed in mammalian patterns of behavior. In his analysis of suffering, for example, Darwin builds from pure empirical observation to a radical conclusion. The oblique eyebrows, compressed lips, tears, and groans of human suffering have their parallels in the whining of monkeys' and elephants' tears. To be a mammal is to suffer. To be a mammal is to feel the strongest of Darwin's instincts – sympathy.

More recently, researchers studying compassion have argued for the emergence of an affective state oriented toward enhancing the welfare of those who suffer (Frank,

1988; Keltner, 2009; Sober & Wilson, 1998). These researchers find that compassion emerged because it was reasonable and productive for the survival of frail offspring as an attractive mating attribute. This likelihood to attract a mate would signify the strength of familial bonds and was more likely to ensure infant survival. Additionally, it allows for smooth functioning in the social system with kin and non-kin alike. The evolutionary studies of peacemaking among primate relatives by De Waal and Johanowicz (1993) further indicate the importance of rich social bonding.

Making the point that the human infant is born relatively helpless and is thrust into a world of developmental obstacles for which the infant is not well equipped, Harlow (1958) and Bowlby (1969) help guide an understanding that we are more dependent than any other mammal and require our social connections in order to develop. Harlow's experiments suggested that love is vital for normal childhood development and for the emotional learning of love and also attachment, which includes compassion (Harlow, 1958). Attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969). Attachment does not have to be reciprocal. One person may have an attachment to an individual that is not shared. Attachment is characterized by specific behaviors in children, such as seeking proximity with the attachment figure when upset or threatened (Bowlby, 1969).

Keltner connects the work of Harlow, Bowlby, and Darwin, arguing the feeling of compassion for vulnerable young offspring in moments of need or suffering would have directly increased the chances for offspring survival (Goetz, Keltner, Simon-Tomas, 2010). Keltner (2005) identified the evolutionary roots of compassion, kindness, and generosity as those essential aspects of our personalities rooted in survival. This research

suggests that when we feel compassion, our heart rate slows down, we secrete the “bonding hormone” oxytocin, and regions of the brain linked to empathy, caregiving and feelings of pleasure light up, which often results in wanting to approach and care for other people.

Psychological and Scientific Understandings of Compassion

Psychological inquiry suggests that our natural connectivity and compassionate instincts are monitors for us, and show us how our brains react to pain. We know that if our skin is pinched or burned, the anterior cingulate region of the brain will light up in response to that pain. However, if we see someone else suffering, that very same part of the cortex activates (Gallese, 2001). We have the same pain response to other people’s pain as we do to our own experience of pain. We are wired to empathize (Keltner, 2014). When exposed to pain, our own as well as other people, the amygdala (the brain’s emotion detector) activates. This alerts us to imminent threat. Another brain area becomes activated as well. It’s an old part of the mammalian nervous system called the periaqueductal gray. It is way down in the center of the brain. In mammals, this region is associated with nurturing behavior. We do not just see suffering as a threat, we also instinctively want to alleviate that suffering through nurturance (Keltner, 2014).

The autonomic nervous system component called the vagus nerve illustrates how human bodies are wired for compassion. Keltner (2013) describes the vagus nerve (vagus is Latin for “wandering”) as starting at the top of the spinal cord and wandering through the body, through muscles in the neck. It drops down and helps coordinate the interaction between breathing and heart rate and then goes into the spleen and liver, where it helps to control digestive processes. Keltner and others in his lab, at the University of California

at Berkeley, have conducted experiments in which participants are shown photographs of suffering and distress. Their results suggest that these images activate the vagus nerve. The findings suggest that if someone tells you about a sad experience, your vagus nerve fires. If they tell you an inspiring story, their vagus nerve fires. The more you feel compassion, the stronger the vagus nerve response. This result tells us that when we are feeling a strong vagus nerve response, we are feeling common humanity with others. When we are encouraged to feel strong identification with just our own group and not others, the vagus nerve dims (Keltner, 2014).

Neuroscientific experiments have identified the chemical basis of emotion like love and compassion (Bernardt & Singer, 2012), and how oxytocin promotes trust and generosity (Rodrigues, Saslow, Garcia, John, Keltner, 2009). Researchers have sought to document how a brief state like compassion is a proximal determinant of prosocial behavior (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hoffman, 1981). These studies have produced understanding of the empathy-altruism hypothesis discussed later in this review.

Science of Compassion – Tend and Befriend

Focusing on the science of stress and its relation to compassion, Taylor (2013) pointed out that until about ten years ago, in psychological research and literature, stress was believed to make an individual aggressive, certainly irritable, and mostly withdrawn. Taylor questioned this research because she found that during times of stress she had a different response. She desired to connect with others. Taylor's research team began to research and document what is now called, "tend and befriend" in all social species, human and non-human alike (Taylor, 2003). As oxytocin is released in stress, it fine-

tunes empathy for people we care about, increasing our ability to help others. It increases the ability to read others' facial expressions and notice the tone of their voice. The side effect is that this oxytocin release, which helps us connect with others, affects the conceptual idea of bravery. Given the understanding that bravery is action in the presence of fear, with higher levels of oxytocin in stressful situations, the fear part of the brain is minimized. Courage is part of the biochemistry of this 'tend and befriend' response, and Taylor (2002) finds that we have the energy and willingness to do things that are very difficult when flooded with oxytocin. We are wired it seems to, "step up and stay close" to suffering, even when we also have the instinct to run and protect ourselves (Mc Gonigal, 2014, p 43).

Tania Singer's neurological research has aimed to increase our understanding of the foundations of human social behavior. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, she and her research team (Singer, 2009) investigate the neuronal, hormonal, and developmental foundations of human social cognition, social and moral emotions such as empathy and compassion, envy, revenge, fairness, as well as emotional regulation capacities and their role in social decision making (Frith & Singer, 2008). Furthermore, scholarship conducted by Singer and her team suggest that a basis for empathy can be identified in the brain using transcranial magnetic stimulation. They found the role of sensorimotor components in empathy for pain in other people (Singer & Frith, 2005).

Mindfulness Meditation and Self-compassion

Mindfulness meditation practice encourages an approach of openness, curiosity and acceptance. When practicing this approach with regularity, it is believed that one becomes less reactive and more reflective in the midst of difficulty. Self-criticism fades,

since the thoughts and perceptions one experiences in the moment are seen as temperamental, fleeting and illusionary. The experiences in the moment are thought to connect the individual to the transpersonal sense that all beings have similar thoughts, perceptions and judgments, which reposition the stressful event into the field of human familiar conditioning (Salzberg, 2011).

Self-compassion is a relatively new construct in the western psychological literature that has garnered mounting attention in the last several years. Although the concept of self-compassion and compassion are central to Buddhist philosophy, and have existed for centuries (Neff, 2003b), self-compassion has only come under the scrutiny of psychological researchers recently, largely prompted by the writings of Kristin Neff (2003a, 2003b). A PsycINFO search conducted in June of 2014 found 290 hits for “self-compassion” since 2003, when Neff published two articles on the topic and included the self-compassion scale. Only four publications on self-compassion were published in the prior decade, from 1993-2002. This construct is a growing area of interest in the psychological literature and can inform further research about compassion in general.

Self-compassion is defined as a way of relating to oneself that is not reliant on evaluations of self-worth and is characterized by three components that combine and interrelate with one another (Neff, 2013). These include being kind with oneself instead of judgmental in the face of hardship, recognizing that one’s experience is common to humanity and thus not isolating or separating from others, and being mindfully aware of one’s experiences of pain instead of either denying or over-identifying with them (Neff, 2003a; 2003b). Neff states that feeling compassion for oneself is similar to feeling forgiveness for oneself, because both experiences involve a sense of interconnectedness

with others. Self-compassion is conceptualized as a prosocial, adaptive means of self-regulation related to, but independent of, spirituality (Mahoney & Graci, 1999; Neff, 2005). This construct appears to be related to healthy functioning (Maltby, Macaskill, Day, 2001; Neff, 2003b).

Buddhism is based on the development and cultivation of wisdom and compassion. His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote,

According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind, Wanting others to be free from suffering. It's not passive, it's not empathy alone, but rather an empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering. Genuine compassion must have both wisdom and lovingkindness. That is to say, one must understand the nature of suffering from which we wish to free others (this is wisdom) and one must experience deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings (this is lovingkindness) (H.H. Dalai Lama, 2005).

In Buddhist psychology, the concept of compassion is incomplete without compassion towards oneself (Hanh, 1998). Religious traditions tell us compassion is the overarching goal in all major religions (Armstrong, 2010). Armstrong notes that western religious texts have taught the importance of loving your neighbor as yourself, and western psychology has been interested in self-esteem and self-worth as reflections of this love. The idea of self-compassion is a newer focus of scientific research which stems from Buddhist philosophy and teaching (Neff, 2003a).

Davidson (2002) and others have important research on the effects of meditation at the neuronal level. Davidson is scientifically showing what feels innate to some, that by training the mind, we can change our brain. Contemplative practices and traditions have developed techniques to train the mind for positive qualities like compassion. Mindfulness meditation was introduced to the west with the pioneering efforts of Buddhist Americans, such as Kornfield (1993) and Goldstein (2013). They brought

mindfulness meditation to the United States after spending years in monasteries in Southeast Asia. The Burmese-Indian teacher, Goenka, and the Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, were also key in the movement (Thupten, 2015).

In early Theravada Buddhism, compassion is described as a power for deep mental purification, protection, and healing that supports inner freedom (Goldstein, 2013, p 315). Compassion is also characterized as a mental capacity that, when cultivated and strengthened, empowers all positive states of mind as we awaken to our fullest human potential (Thupten, 2015). In Buddhist psychology, the patterns of one's experience unfold based upon one's habits of intention and reaction. In Buddhist meditation systems, compassion is also closely connected to love, sympathetic joy, and equanimity; these are called the four immeasurable attitudes and are a basis for practice. According to Makransky (2012), compassion is viewed as a way of purifying the mind of confusion and for inner healing and protection of self and others. According to Makransky (2012), compassion is viewed as a way of purifying the mind of confusion and for inner healing and protection of self and others.

Mindfulness in scholarly work includes a two-component model. Bishop (2004) suggests the model consists of: (a) self-regulation of attention, described as bringing awareness to the focus of attention so that one is able to attend fully to the continually changing field of thoughts, feelings, and sensations; and, (b) orientation to experience which refers to the attitude or approach one takes in attending to the present moment. Mindfulness practice encourages an approach of openness, generosity, and acceptance. When practicing this approach with regularity, it is believed by mindfulness meditation practitioners that one becomes less reactive and more reflective in the midst of difficulty.

This regular practice of exercising compassion towards ourselves is one that eventually becomes integrated into our way of behaving to ourselves as well as to others in the world.

Other findings indicate that the amount of formal meditation practiced is related to reductions in worry and emotional suppression, which support the idea that compassion cultivation training affects cognitive and emotional factors (Jazaieri, Jinpa, McGonigal, Rosenberg, Finkelstein, Simon-Thomas, Goldin, 2013).

Meditation and Compassion

Research also suggests compassion is not a fixed trait. Compassion instead increases in capacity over time. Activities such as broadening social networks and actively trying to take someone else's perspective increase compassion capacity (Hall, Dalgleish, Evans, & Mobbs, 2015). This research also identified compassion increase in people who meditated. They noted that their findings indicate that certain brain signaling serves a core function to enable successful other-oriented concerns and in turn, prosocial behavior. One speculation is that individuals high in empathic concern make more altruistic choices because they have greater activation in regions key for signaling the motivational urge to respond. They note, "Extensive research has examined the dynamic interplay between empathy and social behavior, and yet the question of what motivates costly altruism action has remained elusive" (p 355). They discuss other-oriented empathic concern motivating costly altruism, and that individual differences in empathic concern-related brain responses predict such prosocial choice. Their research clarifies working models of empathy and social cooperation and aids in our understanding of how humans interact, connect, and relate with one another.

Disaster Research and Compassion

Compassion research is sparse in the disaster literature with the exception of compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue has been defined by disaster sociologists as vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatization, stemming from the emotional residue of exposure to those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. Research relating to socio-cultural implications of compassion and disaster include the significant effects on nurses and medical personnel in times of crisis (Lombardo & Eyre, 2011). Nearly all of the literature that I reviewed on compassion and disaster includes compassion fatigue as the inevitable outcome of high stress situations.

However, shifting the commonly held understanding of compassion fatigue, Ricard (2015) gives new insight, as he describes the illuminating differences between compassion and empathy. Definitions of compassion, whether religious, spiritual, psychological, or sociological, include the idea that compassion is driven by the motivation to act on behalf of the suffering of another. In contrast, Ricard argues, empathy is “feeling with the person” (p 61). Ricard explains that what we are really looking at, in the research on compassion fatigue, should actually be called “empathy fatigue”, which stems from the passive inability to act on behalf of the suffering of another.

In societies based on competition such as the U.S., we are often told the least altruistic often rise to the highest realms and that competition centers on inequality. This illustrates the most selective aspects of social Darwinism. The assumption that human motivation for others is based only on self-interest has been discussed in psychology and social psychology domains for many years. However, research suggests that this

assumption is incorrect (Batson, Ahmad, Lisher, 2009). The empathy-altruism hypothesis, which claims that empathic concern (concern for others) produces altruistic motivation, has been studied for the last decade. Results of over 30 experiments testing this hypothesis have proved supportive, leading to the tentative understanding that feeling empathic concern for a person in need, does evoke altruistic motivation to see that suffering relieved.

In another line of research, disaster sociologists discuss the idea that a disaster “creates disruptions of the social order and challenges to legitimacy” (Tierney, 2001). Research into social network studies in community samples along with self-reports of closeness in undergraduate populations reveal that we feel closer to those with whom we are closely related (Korchmaros & Kenny, 2001), and we are more likely to feel compassion for those to whom we are closely related (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, Neuberg, 1997).

Global and Heroic Compassion, and Altruism

Ekman (2010) provides his interpretation of different forms of compassion and the phenomenon from which they are motivated. These range from the most elementary to the most exceptional and heroic. Ekman notes “global compassion” is exemplified as people responding with outpourings of interest and sympathy to people around the world, and “heroic compassion,” he states, is like altruism with a risk.

Looking at heroic compassion, Monroe (1998), a political scientist at the University of California at Irvine, developed a set of criteria for heroic compassion: (1) you must act; (2) your goal is the welfare of the other person; (3) your action has consequences for that person; (4) there’s some risk to you involved; and, (5) you have no

anticipation of reward or recognition. In *The Heart of Altruism*, Kristen Monroe lays the groundwork for a social theory receptive to altruism by examining the experiences described by altruists themselves (Monroe, 1998). Monroe uses case studies to demonstrate the actual existence of altruism in contrast to self-interested behavior. Through interviews with people who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, she focused on the behavior and emotional antecedents to altruism and asked, “why do people risk their lives for strangers and what is the feeling behind the moral behavior?” (p 79). Monroe argues that compassion is not one simple thing, but many distinct things, and it is not adequately captured by models based on rational self-interest alone. Monroe’s analysis points to identity, not to religion or reason. The rescuers’ perceptions of themselves in relation to others made their extraordinary acts inevitable and thus left the rescuers no choice but to act. One German Czech rescuer said, “The hand of compassion was faster than the calculus of reason” (p 120). Her work is an illustration of how identity and action can shape our most basic needs, both political and humanitarian.

Looking at what motivates “costly altruism” or compassion with great personal risk, Hall, Dalgleish, Evans, & Mobbs (2015) tested two dominant views. Two competing theories emerged. One theory suggests that prosocial behavior is primarily motivated by feelings of empathic other-oriented concern, and the other theory holds that individuals help mainly because they are egotistically focused on reducing their own discomfort.

Stress and Compassion

Investigating the dynamics of stress and compassion, Inagaki and Eisenberger (2012) studied women’s reactions to stress, combined with compassion and care. The loved one would receive a series of painful shocks; the person who brought them in

would receive one to qualify their understanding of the painful experience. During the shock of the loved one, the participant was told to hold and squeeze the loved one's hand and to think of this action as an action of support. In the other condition, the participants received a stress ball with the intention of relieving their own stress. The most interesting finding from this research is that when women were holding their loved ones' hands, there was increased activity in the brain's reward system. It seems this act of caring compassion for others is, indeed, wired into our response systems.

Stress doesn't always lead to fight-or-flight. It can also activate brain systems that help us connect with other people (McGonigal, 2014). At its core, the tend-and-befriend response is a biological state engineered to reduced fear and increase hope. The best way to understand how the tend-and-befriend response does this is to look at how it affects the brain. McGonigal explains:

The social caregiving system is regulated by oxytocin. When this system is activated, you feel more empathy, connection, and trust, as well as a stronger desire to bond or be close with others. This network also inhibits the fear centers of the brain, increasing your courage. The reward system releases the neurotransmitter dopamine. Activation of the reward system increases motivation while dampening fear. When your stress response includes a rush of dopamine, you feel optimistic about your ability to do something meaningful. Dopamine also primes the brain for physical action, making sure you don't freeze under pressure. The attunement system is driven by the neurotransmitter serotonin. When this system is activated, it enhances your perception, intuition, and self-control. This makes it easier to understand what is needed, and helps to ensure that your actions have the biggest positive impact. In other words, a tend-and-befriend response makes you social, brave, and smart. It provides both the courage and hope we need to propel us into action and the awareness to act skillfully (McGonigal, 2015).

McGonigal identifies this compassionate action in the face of stress as related to positive neurochemicals like "hope." The support of holding the suffering one's hand created what McGonigal calls a "chemistry of hope" in the brain (p 167). During the

stress ball component, this positive neurochemical release was not present. When the participants felt that increase in hope, connectedness, and the brain's reward system, the corresponding activity in the amygdala (the stress center of the brain) became less reactive. The "fear" center of the brain became less activated while participants were providing the physical support. This finding about the tend-and-befriend system suggests that a chemistry of hope and compassion is present in individuals, and may be important to our understanding of how compassion is expressed in crisis situations.

Compassion and Suffering

Keltner (2005) argues that if we assume that all people are inherently aggressive or selfish, they will relate to others with apprehension, fear, and suspicion. Keltner (in press) identifies early conceptual analyses and recent empirical data revealing compassion arises in response to suffering and harm. This research also identified the extent to which another person's suffering may be in keeping with the personal goals (for example the torturing of an enemy) in which emotions such as *schadenfreude* (the relishing of another's suffering) will result (Ortony, Clore, Collins, 1988). It is important to note that with increased relatedness between the self and the other, research suggests compassion is experienced with increasing intensity.

Looking for predictors of compassion in people, Moore, Martin, and Kaup (2014) conducted a survey of 1000 midlife individuals. Participants were given a compassion survey. The findings of this research suggested the best way to predict high scores on the compassion scale was through the number of negative and traumatic life events individuals experienced in the prior year. The research indicated that having a recent experience of suffering appeared to activate a more compassionate side of the

participants. However, the survey did not look at lifelong trauma or versions of suffering that existed many years previously, but rather focused on people who had experienced suffering in the recent past. Those participants, who had experienced personal suffering in the recent past, felt more compassion and were more likely to embrace a more helpful version of themselves.

Additional research and psychological studies are showing how people can be moved to practice kindness even when it seems to be counter to their own self-interest (Rilling, Gutman, Zeh, Pagnoni, Berns, Kilts, 2002). The ongoing research by Keltner and Lerner (2010) and the Greater Good Science Center (Keltner, 2004) suggests that compassionate behavior carries great emotional and physical health benefits for compassionate people, their families and their communities.

Communities, Communitas

Discussing the “failure of modern society to fulfill an individual’s basic needs for community, sociologist and disaster researcher Charles Fritz (1996, p 78), and concluded that disasters provide a temporary liberation from the “worries, inhibitions and anxieties associated with the past and future” because they force us to focus our awareness on the “immediate moment-to-moment, day-to-day needs within the context of present reality” (p 63).

This universal character of disaster behavior suggested to Fritz (1996) that research was able to approach some type of central component of human nature. He saw that a careful analysis of the conditions and mechanisms “by which disaster-struck communities cope with danger, losses, traumas, and privation, might help to isolate and identify some universal features of social therapy” (p 15). Individuals experiencing

disasters and intense trauma situations are notably changed. The way in which individuals experience such situations have an irrevocable effect on their perceptions.

Disasters present a liminal time, according to Victor Turner (1969). The word liminal, from the Latin word “limen,” meaning “a threshold.” Ultimately, it means any place or point of entering or beginning. In psychology, the term “limen” means the point at which a stimulus is of sufficient intensity to begin to produce an effect. Liminal time, therefore, is that moment when something changes from one state to another. The individual in the disaster crisis is suspended between two states, in the moment between openness to the impending reality and to the transformation. Categories, assumptions and boundaries break down. In his work on structure and mega-structure, Turner (1969) explores the connection between two models of human interrelatedness. This is the dialectic between “communitas” (communion of equal individuals) and “social structures” (societies as a hierarchical system), which are both essential for us as individuals and for societies. Turner noted that liminal moments open up the possibility of communitas, the ties that are made when ordinary structures and the drives they enforce cease to matter or exist (Turner, 1969).

Whereas in most societal structures there is organization and the structure provides reward and cohesiveness, in contrast, communitas is not so legislated. Berman notes that, “...social relations are immediate but may not be enduring. Moments are precious and pregnant with possibilities. New forms of communicating and shifting values may be outcomes of communitas” (1988, p 302). This understanding the effects of communitas suggests it has regenerative and transformative power for people involved in times of intensity and crisis.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I examine the literature highlighting the current and emerging research on compassion which focuses on the psychological, spiritual, and sociocultural aspects of compassion. While these streams of research identify compassion as a human virtue and part of our genetic inheritance, there is little research on the benefits of compassionate care within crisis situations.

Research on compassion has primarily been carried out in three fields: psychology, neuroscience, and Buddhist studies. The psychological research tells us compassion can be measured and identified to be of positive consequence for the giver and receiver of compassion. The neuroscientific research has mapped the biological basis for compassionate behavior and identified the brain circuitry during compassionate acts. The Buddhist studies literature considers compassion the most essential element for human spiritual awakening. While these studies identify the physiological, intellectual and spiritual aspects of compassion, the construct of compassion is not well mapped. The literature that focuses specifically on compassion in disasters primarily addresses compassion fatigue. Nevertheless, a small but growing body of research, distinguishing between empathy, altruism, and compassion suggests that compassion may be bringing rather than draining energy from those who give it.

III. METHODOLOGY

To better understand the experience of compassion, this study used interpretative phenomenological analysis. Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927) described as a phenomenon that becomes manifest for us. To phenomenologists, phenomena are not constructed through the human mind separated from the world, as Rene Descartes suggested. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p 12). When one is studying something phenomenologically, one is studying how people are connected meaningfully with the things of the world. Because this event was a meaningful connection for people, and I wanted to better understand how compassion arises in individuals during crisis situations, a phenomenological research design was utilized as both the philosophy and methodology.

Phenomenology as a Philosophy

Edmond Husserl (1859-1938) as the founding theorist suggests experience should be examined in the way it occurs (Smith, Flowers, Larken, p 12). Husserl's phenomenology involved stepping "outside of everyday experience...in order to examine that everyday experience" (Smith, 2009, p 12). Although his philosophy of phenomenology evolved over time, the basic concept centered on the idea of examining an experience by getting to its very essence without any preconceived assumptions or presuppositions (Cohen, 1987).

Van Manen (1990) tells us, "Phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience" (p 10). Husserl believed that in order to get to the meaning of any

phenomenon, it is imperative to rid oneself of all preconceived judgments (Creswell, 2007). The use of bracketing is one method to identify any preconceptions or personal knowledge (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This idea is based on the possibility that an investigator may hold biases or notions regarding the phenomenon which may influence the data, and acknowledging one's preconceptions is important to achieving reliable data.

Speziale & Carpenter (2007) suggest bracketing can be accomplished through journaling and subsequent reflection. Husserl (Lopez & Willis, 2004) strategized the importance of scientific rigor when considering a phenomenological approach. He believed the lived experiences among participants contained certain similarities which should be identified and described (descriptive phenomenology) (p 43).

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a student of Husserl, further defined the philosophy of phenomenology by identifying the temporal concept of being and the need to not only describe one's experiences but to also interpret the meaning behind the experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This interpretation (hermeneutics or interpretive phenomenology), Heidegger believed, would allow for the truest essence of the phenomenon to emerge. Contrary to Husserl's understanding, Heidegger maintained that humans are so entrenched in their world that social, cultural and political considerations actually influence their choices (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

According to Smith, Flower, and Larkin (2009), interpretative phenomenological analysis's core interest group is people concerned "with the human predicament...people engaging with the world" (p 5). In IPA research there are interpretative understandings of people's relationship to the world as well as attempts to

make meanings out of their activities and the things that are happening to them (Smith, Flower, Larkin, p 21).

Theoretical perspective

The purpose of phenomenology is to describe particular phenomena, or the appearance of things, as lived experience (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). These life events experienced by people precede interpretation and are influenced by internal and external events. The lived experience gives meaning to an individual's interpretation of a particular phenomenon in the world and, thus, largely guides one's sense of reality and knowledge (Giorgi, 1997).

An analysis informed by phenomenology does not aim to explain or discover causes. Instead, its goal is to inform the clarification of phenomena from lived experiences. Phenomenology offers an important shift from a positivist cause-effect focus where knowledge about reality is discovered, external to the lived experience. Thus, this shifting is directed toward human subjectivity and discovering meaning in human actions (Giorgi, 2005). Thus, phenomenology practiced within a human science perspective can result in valuable knowledge about individuals' experiences.

Max van Manen tells us:

“The reward phenomenology offers are the moments of seeing-meaning or "in-seeing" into "the heart of things" as Rilke so felicitously put it. Not unlike the poet, the phenomenologist directs the gaze toward the regions where meaning originates, wells up, percolates through the porous membranes of past sedimentations—and then infuses us, permeates us, infects us, touches us, stirs us, exercises a formative affect” (Van Manen, 2007, p 43).

What distinguishes practice from theory is not that practice applies thought or concepts technically to some real thing in the world upon which it acts. The phenomenology of practice involves a different way of knowing the world. Whereas

theory "thinks" the world, practice "grasps" the world and phenomenology grasps the world with pathic knowing (van Manen, 1997). The term pathic allows for expressive understanding that we call "em-pathic and sym-pathic" (p 268). Generally, these terms illustrate the ability of one to imagine the situation of another and to be understanding about other's life situations (p 268).

Hermeneutics

Smith (1991) described the hermeneutic imagination as asking for what is at work in particular ways of speaking or acting to help facilitate an ever deepening appreciation of the world or lived experience. Through a hermeneutic response, the challenge in this research study is to ask what is meant by compassion and what makes it possible for us to speak, think, and act in the ways we do. In Heidegger (1962), hermeneutics is linked with phenomenology. For Heidegger, knowing and understanding are not fundamentally epistemological questions but ontological ones.

The responsibility of understanding compassion may be found through looking at relationships and how people interact with another. How do we meet each "other" in times of crisis and in our lives? Being authentic with others creates the experience of authenticity and then experiences of inauthenticity generate a longing for something more. Experiencing what is inauthentic allows one to hope for what is authentic. If this hope is the reaching forward of compassion, it may move us to believe in the possibility of compassionate responses. Hermeneutic inquiry begins with an attempt to question itself – learning to see what needs to be questioned. Hermeneutics offers insights for interpretative phenomenological analysis as it is interpretive and is focused on how a phenomenon appears and the analyst is "implicated in facilitating and making sense of

this appearance” (Caputo, 1987, p 36).

Phenomenology as a methodology

There are two methods of exploring lived experiences: descriptive and interpretive phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). Descriptive phenomenology, as defined by Husserl begins by utilizing phenomenological reduction. Similar to bracketing, this process requires the investigator to identify the phenomenon that is present. Then, personal feelings, assumptions and beliefs must be addressed. Finally, the phenomenon must be explored through a non-abstracting manner, which requires the investigator to lay aside all theories and conceptions that cloud her view (Van Manen, 1990).

In contrast, hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology views each lived experience as contextual and inclusive of individual world and life experiences (Creswell, 2007). For this reason, phenomenological hermeneutic interpretive methodology was chosen to guide this research study. When exploring the experiences of first responders, survivors of the flood, and support professionals, it was imperative to consider all possible influences and past experiences. Participants brought unique and personal experiences of the event. Individuals’ previous experiences, education, and personal psychology strongly influence who they become and who they believe they can be in their best moments. In accordance with Van Manen’s (1990) theory on phenomenological reduction, both the role of the researcher and her assumptions are discussed.

Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to recover a deeper understanding in which we already understand. Caputo says, “there is no hermeneutic recovery without deconstruction and no deconstruction not aimed at recovery (1987, p 65). Caputo speaks

of the schemas and foundations that have been in place shifting as:

Something breaks through because the constraints we impose upon things breaks down...what breaks down in the breakthrough is the spell of conceptuality, the illusion that we have somehow or another managed to close our conceptual fists around the nerve of things that we have grasped the world round about (Caputo, 1987, p 270).

The critical time of a natural disaster creates a shifting and recalibration. Radical hermeneutics arise at the point of breakdown and loss of meaning. What does this mean in relation to the action of compassion? Caputo says (1987) suffering exposes the vulnerability of human existence by creating an inverted world. In the face of suffering the once held constructs of ontological understanding change as one witnesses the look of one whose, “powers are withering, ...the familiar structure of our practices and everyday beliefs, practices, breaking down and breaking open” (p 278). Individuals caught in the myriad of possible responses to natural disasters may choose compassion in the face of suffering. Hermeneutics is a way of exploring these possibilities.

The aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis is to focus on people’s experiences and/or understandings of a particular phenomenon (Smith, Flower, Larkin, 2009, p. 46). Primary research questions in IPA are focused upon people’s “understandings of their experiences” (p 47) and as such questions are open with room for exploration. These questions will be focused on meaning instead of the causes of events. According to these authors, the essence of the analytical process in an IPA study lies in its focus, which “directs our analytic attention toward our participants’ attempts to make sense of their experiences” (2009, p 79). Related to hermeneutic approaches, it allows for a close examination of the interviews and the related information. Given the idiographic nature, the interpretation of these texts is located in

the participant experiences, in an effort to understand the meaning of these experiences, and thus placing their voices in the context of their lives.

Researcher's role

Qualitative data is closely connected to the researcher and this adds another aspect to the researcher's role. For me, living in Wimberley, the flood experience was right outside my door and I witnessed neighbors and friends in the midst of dramatic turmoil, dealing with the flood and the damage to their homes and environment. I also saw incredible acts of generosity and compassion amidst the chaotic situation.

Research Design

The theoretical foundations and epistemological groundings for this study have been explained; therefore, I build on that epistemology and outline the particular steps in the analysis here, providing an explanation of how features and themes were identified, named and grouped in order to present a clear picture of how the participants experienced and made sense of their interactions during and after the Wimberley flood.

Previous studies on compassion in crisis have focused on medical professionals and within that medical arena primarily the nursing professions. The vast majority of studies on compassion have been studied quantitatively and have not included in-depth personal experiences of the crisis situation. I chose IPA for this study because of my belief that the lived experiences of people during and after this crisis are crucial to the development of a clearer understanding of the unique experiences of individuals who may find themselves in any crisis and/or displacement, and the first responders who may be called to assist them.

Primary research questions

In interpretative phenomenological analysis, primary research questions are directed towards people's understandings of their experiences and the questions are "situated within specific contexts" (Smith, Flower, Larkin, 2014, p 47). Primary research questions in IPA are directed towards phenomenological material, therefore, this research study is focused on people's understanding of their experience of compassion during the flood event. In IPA the questions should be 'open' and not 'closed' (p 47).

Therefore, the primary research questions were: (1) how do first responders (in this situation as emergency personnel – EMS) make meaning of their experience of compassion in a crisis? (2) how do sufferers make meaning of their experience of receiving compassion? (3) how do people who behave compassionately understand the source of the compassion? Given the open question nature of the IPA research method (Smith, 2009, p 48), the objective was to be able to describe the key features of compassion as it is understood in persons during a natural disaster.

Secondary research questions

According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), secondary research questions can be only answered at the "more interpretive stage" (p 48). This is achieved by comparing the fit between the understandings of individual experiences of compassion by first-responders; people who were the recipients of compassion; how people who experience compassion understand the source of their compassion; and, the constructs of compassion in the literature.

Procedures

In-depth interviews were utilized allowing participants to tell their stories, in

their own words. After achieving approval from the Texas State University institutional review board (IRB) (Appendix A), I identified nine individuals who indicated interest in sharing their stories of the flood. In-person visits to community organizations, churches and other settings within the small town generated a list of additional interested participants. Face-to-face contact provided the opportunity to adequately describe the study and lay the groundwork for successful participant involvement (Seidman, 2006). Selection was largely by volunteer status and as a result of snowball sampling technique. As a resident of Wimberley, the aspect of being part of the community facilitated the assemblage of participants who were first responders as well as the community knowledge about those who suffered from the storm's impact.

To focus solely on the study of compassion, I identified participants with some direct experience of the flood event. Participants who had agreed to be in the study suggested additional individuals who met the qualifications. In all verbal communication, it was explicit that this was a voluntary experience. The participants were told there would be one interview, with the possibility of a follow-up interview. Each interview lasted no longer than one hour. Upon agreement, a date and time were arranged. Interviews took place for the most part at the Wimberley library, with two other local settings used for convenience. These familiar settings allowed for a quiet environment and represented familiar landmarks to participants.

Data collection procedures

The main concern in IPA is to give full appreciation to each participant's account. For this reason, samples in IPA studies are usually small, which enables a detailed and time consuming case-by-case analysis. With IPA, the aim is to produce an

in-depth explanation of certain phenomena, and not generating a theory to be generalized over the whole population. According to Turpin (1997), many clinical psychology doctoral programs recommend that having six to eight participants is appropriate for an IPA study.

In this study, I interviewed nine participants who were affected by the flood. After obtaining informed consent and providing participant's rights (Appendix A), I conducted interviews. Semi-structured interview questions were available (Appendix B); however, the unstructured interview was to be the strategy most often used for it tended to be the most open, and conversational. Because the principal goal of these interviews was the production of participant narratives, the ideal interview situation was one in which there was "minimalist interviewer intervention" (Wengraf, 2001, p 112). The goal was to find out as much as possible about the phenomenon of compassionate experiences from each participant and to be responsive to the participant and to the phenomenon.

This method of interviewing allowed the participant to expand and reflect through the interview. A list of exploring questions or phrases was also available to me as a way of gaining insight or clarification when needed. Times of quiet were also incorporated, allowing participants to fully explain or reveal their thoughts, opinions, or feelings without feeling rushed or constrained (Van Manen, 1990).

With permission, the interviews were audio taped and then transcribed verbatim. The audio recorder and subsequent transcripts were kept in a locked area at my place of employment. Field notes were also used during the interviews as a means of recording my observations and main content ideas without distracting from the interview itself. A

copy of the transcribed interview was sent to each participant to offer the opportunity to clarify or add information and to confirm the data (Creswell, 2007).

Demographics

Demographics results indicated a similarity of individuals in this study. The participants, with ages ranging from 35 to 91 years of age, had an average age between 45-60 years. Ethnicity was 100% white. Occupations ranged from Management, to Administration, Education, and Retired; with one participant in each of those preceding categories. Professional occupations included medical (3) and governmental (1).

In Chapter Two, I discuss the theories relevant to compassion and the understanding of first responders, emergency personnel and disasters as crisis situations. These theories ground my belief in the importance of understanding the physiological, operational, and psychological aspects of compassion and further directed me to the value in the personal, experiential, thoughtful and descriptive narratives individuals were able to provide during these interviews. I considered the impact of the context and how the participants chose to structure their discussions as I conducted the analysis.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological analysis has more than one accepted way in which to proceed. Inasmuch as I was new as phenomenological research, I relied on the steps outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larken (2009), as my guide. It was helpful to have the structure of this reference in order to manage the numerous amounts of data collected through the interviews. To that end, I relied on the steps outlined below.

Analysis in IPA The analytical focus is always on “the participant attempts to make sense of their experiences” (Smith, 2009, p 79). It is clear that in IPA, attention is

given to what is distinct about each participant poised against the commonalities among the group of participants. There are two aims in analyzing data in an IPA study. The first is to try to understand and describe the participants' world (Larkin, Watts, Clifton, 2006). In the first stage of analysis, my goal was as much as possible to get close to the participants' experience and to walk with them and even in their shoes as much as possible (Larkin, 2006, p 104). The second goal was interpretative and intended to provide a "critical and conceptual commentary" (Larkin, p104) on the way in which participants made sense of their experiences.

Analysis in IPA focuses on the participants' process of making sense of their experiences with the same measure as it focuses on the experiences themselves. While I had semi-structured interview questions available, each of the participants found their own path to telling the stories of their experiences. An informal process of analysis took place during the interviews, in that I quickly noticed that some pieces of the discussion seemed to be of greater importance to the participant. The participants' expressions of heightened energy, tone of voice, sitting upright or curved forward, hand gestures, and increased engagement with significant memories all were perceived by me as signs of their feelings about a particular course of question or topic. During each interview, I made notes of these instances and then after the interview sat in my car and wrote notes regarding these times, in order to be able to have as referral during my analysis.

I utilized the process described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) as "iterative and inductive" in that I read each transcript a number of times, identified the themes, created a framework in which to explore the relationships between themes, consulted

my advisor, and the development of a short summary describing the themes emerged. The following section presents a description of the process involved with each step in the analysis.

Analysis of experience. I began the analysis of each transcript by reading it through without making any notes. I then took one participant at a time and re-read the transcript and then read it a second time underlining passages in the text that appeared to contain something meaningful to the participant. I then made notes in the margins of the transcript. I then re-read the entire transcript. The next step was to create a chart with several columns. The first column indicated the emerging meaning units. These meaning units were chunks of text that held a comment or passage which clearly communicated a part of the experience the participant hoped to describe. The second column held a sentence or two, thus allowing me to create the ‘context’ for the emerging meaning unit. The third column held my reflections, reactions, and responses to these units. During this process, I included notes on the transcript and then on the columnar typed sheet such as comments about the particular choice of words or phrases or where they had communicated the intensity or engagement of the situation with much emotion or feeling. During this phase, I had multiple meetings with my advising committee chair in which this process was described, illustrated and elucidated to her.

Identification of emergent themes. I created a working chart from each of the transcripts, and compared them across all participants. I created small cards on which I made note of similar meaning units. Meaning units which seemed to identify a similar experience were combined, becoming the beginning list of themes through the comparison process. These themes were shorter phrases capturing the meaning of

participants' comments in a few words. These themes were shown to and discussed with my committee chair as my advisor, as I discussed the essence of the participants' meaning including their words choice, the way they may have said it and a more interpretative level that was emerging for me as well. This process continued as I processed through the theme names and wrote in my personal journal about the experience and then dove back into the participant words from individual participants and moved to the grouping of participants.

Phenomenology as the study of phenomenon and the attempt to understand the meaning of phenomenon, allowed me to engage with the data in a perceptual way, understanding that participants' experience could only give me their perception of that event. I could not see the actual event they were describing, but became aware of my conceptions of the event and as much as possible attempted to see through their eyes.

Dialogue with the data. One of the roles of an IPA researcher is to “attempt to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, 2009, p 3). This process was infinitely more successful when I was able to discuss with my committee chair what the actual transcript included and what inferences I was making along the way. During the times that I was “hit” emotionally by the depth of the data, I journaled about what I thought I would find and what was actually appearing in participants' spoken words. This process required me to spend a great deal of time with the data during the theme identification. I would also take breaks in order to allow myself fresh eyes in which to view the data. I knew that I was deeply immersed in the data analysis process when I found myself dreaming of the interviews and the participants' themes swirled as if on a tapestry unsewn but held

together by translucent threads. These themes became part of the finished tapestry and the structure which is described in the final discussion.

Member checking. An important piece of the analysis process was conducted shortly after the interviews. In sending the participants the transcripts, the participants all told me that they were happy with the transcript. Based on participant feedback, no additions or changes were made. After the analysis process, I was able to contact several of the participants by email and telephone telling them of this next step in the process. Having a summary for each participant, I was hoping to obtain feedback for my interpretations. There are two participants who have passed away (one from natural causes and one as result of a car accident) since the original interview, and two participants who have relocated out of state. I was able to connect with two of the participants and sent them a short summary of their interview along with a few groupings of text to illustrate the assumptions. These two agreed with my interpretations and naming of themes and said they were fine with the information.

Developing a structure. The structure of experience (Van Manen, 1990) created by these stories of the flood highlights the unique ways these participants experienced the events before, during, and after this epic experience. Refining these experiences into the themes that form this arrangement was moving, challenging at times, and somewhat daunting. While I may have intended to investigate one phenomenon in general and specific ways, I found a greater depth as participants shared stories and profoundly felt experiences with me.

Reflecting on the process. Throughout the study, I kept notes during my interviews, after the interviews, and as a part of my own process in dealing with the

events of the flood in my reflexive journal. It allowed me to pin my thoughts in some tangible form and to create memory which may be likely to otherwise fade over time. I also sketched briefly during and after the interviews which continued to be part of my reflection as I moved through the analysis process.

Supervision. I consulted with my advising committee chair weekly during the analysis portion, and was able to process the experience of the transcripts, the emerging themes and my construction of understanding with her. With my advisor, I received feedback regarding the process as well as the design for the main structure.

Developing a narrative. Chapter Five presents a description of the themes and structure.

Evaluation of validity. As discussed previously, Smith, Flowers, and Larken (2009) describe two methods applicable to qualitative methods. For this study, I relied on the model they describe (Yardley, 2008). This model presents four broad principles researchers may use as a means to assess the quality of their study. They are described as follows:

Sensitivity to context as the first principle requires the researcher to be aware and sensitive to the context, the existing literature on the topic, the material obtained from participants (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2014, p 180). Sensitivity is also demonstrated through an appreciation of the interactional nature of data collection within the interview. Sensitivity to context was carried into the analysis, with me paying close attention to the ways in which each participants' account unfolded and the elements that emerged as a result. This was very important in this study inasmuch as the context for the study in essence was the study. Using verbatim extracts from the interviews gave

the participants a voice in the analysis, providing the reader with the opportunity to check my assumptions.

The second principle is *commitment and rigor*. With IPA, commitment will be shown “in the degree of attentiveness to the participant during data collection and the care with which the analysis of each case is carried out” (p 181). On my part, commitment meant that each interview was conducted well and the needs of the participants were carefully considered and met. This was especially important in this study as the possibility for participants to be re-traumatized by the event was clearly present. Participants were informed of any potential possibility for this re-traumatization and at no time in the interview process did I move participants to areas in which they expressed any discomfort. In fact, participants for the most part shared stories of deep emotional significance easily and with clarity, articulation, and sensitivity. Careful recruitment of participants, high quality interviews, and a commitment to the analysis were needed to ensure this principle. With regard to rigor, I include examples in the next chapter of the participants’ differing and similar experiences.

Yardley’s third principle is *transparency and coherence*. Transparency refers to how “clearly the stages of the research project are described in the write-up of the study” (p 182). In this study, this was achieved by the presentation of the steps taken in the recruitment process and the steps of the analysis. Transparency is a way of ensuring that the voices of the participants were represented accurately. The most important check was through time spent with my advisor in which we read the transcripts and she offered feedback about my interpretations. Coherence refers to themes which were

logical and proceed to presentation in a logical manner. To ensure this, meeting and communicating with my advisor was also essential.

Yardley's final principle is *impact and importance*. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2014) believe the important point is however well a piece of research is conducted, a test of its real validity lies in whether it tells the reader something interesting, important or useful. Smith (2014) describes this final principle to be the important aspect of whether the reader finds something useful or interesting in the research. This assessment measure relied on input from my advisor and other committee members.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln & Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness includes four elements. These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I include detail of each of these criteria and address how my study complied with each.

First, credibility (internal validity) includes techniques of prolonged engagement; persistent observation; triangulation; peer debriefing; negative case analysis; referential adequacy; and member checks. Inasmuch as I live in the community in which the study and the event took place, I have prolonged engagement and was able to blend in with respondents. Due to this, respondents felt comfortable disclosing information, and I was able to build trust. Persistent observation was achieved in my study in that prolonged engagement with the situation, the context, and the participants allowed me to provide depth in their descriptions and understandings of the flood event. As I understand it, qualitative researchers generally use triangulation to ensure that an account is rich, robust, comprehensive and well-developed. During the course of my study, there were many opportunities to investigate other data sources of the flood event, and my study

indicated data consistent with other sources. Peer debriefing involves exposing oneself to a disinterested peer for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p 308). In this regard, I exposed my thoughts, preconceptions and emerging perspective and biases to my fellow students, associates, and colleagues. This process also provided me with an opportunity for catharsis. Negative Case Analysis involves searching for and discussing elements of the data that do not support or appear to contradict patterns or explanations that are emerging from data analysis. In my study, this analysis was highlighted with my committee chair as advisor as we went over the transcripts, coding and emerging themes in depth. Referential adequacy (archiving of data) included my process of taking each interview individually, working with one transcript at a time, and developing codes and themes from each interview. Lincoln and Guba describe member checks as data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions which are tested with members of those groups from whom the data were originally obtained. As noted previously, the participants were all included to approve the initial interview transcript, and the ones that were available accepted the interpretations and conclusions as offered. Finally, in my study, I offer a detail account of my field experiences in which I make clear the patterns of cultural and social relationships, the context and setting in which this event occurred, which meets the criteria for thick description.

Secondly, transferability relates to showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts. As noted earlier in this chapter, I kept a reflexive journal which allowed the thick description described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a way of achieving external validity.

Thirdly, dependability includes showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated, and Lincoln and Guba describe the use of external audits to examine the process and product of the research study. My interpretations and conclusions were reviewed by other colleagues and peers and with my advisor as dissertation chair.

Finally, confirmability is the degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest. In this qualitative research, I as the researcher was the instrument. Aware of that, I brought my assumptions, biases, and beliefs out in my journal and in my consultations with my advisor as dissertation chair to make this researcher effect clearly visible at every step of the research process.

With all these steps in place, I kept a reflexive journal, recording my thoughts about each aspect of the study. The journal also became a diary of my process through the analysis and emergent theme awareness. In it, I wrote about the psychological elements that were visible to me as I communicated with others during this crisis event, my own navigation through the stages of change in expectation of findings, and my personal feelings about the themes that were emerging. The commentary can play a key role in what Guba and Lincoln (1989) term “progressive subjectivity”, or the monitoring of the researcher’s own developing constructions, which the writer considers critical in establishing credibility.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter outlined the steps taken in the analysis process. I explained how

the themes were identified, named, and grouped in order to present a description of the elements of participants' experiences. This analysis noted the similar and dissimilar experiences of participants alike. I developed a summary about what I interpreted from the interviews and sent it to each available participant as a way of checking my assumptions. This member checking was helpful, and the most crucial assistance came in my work sessions with my advisor which allowed me to trust my interpretations and incorporate the feedback into the final narrative. In the following chapter, I present the stories from the survivors and the responders for an understanding of the experiences of these participants.

IV. THE STORIES

In this chapter, I tell the stories of each of the survivors and each of the responders. The stories focus on the harrowing experiences of nine participants who were present during and after the flood event and the three responders impacted by the disaster.

Some of the participants were able to maintain a certain amount of self and social awareness, and clarity of vision throughout the crisis, as evidenced by their articulate rendering of the timeline of events and descriptions and their intense emotional descriptions of the event. Others were more factual, with seemingly less emotional understanding and little self and/or social awareness of the impact of these events nor the distinctiveness of this specific hometown event.

Those who are identified as the helpers and witnesses included one professional EMS responder, one disaster recovery professional, and several individual citizens who found themselves in the center of crisis situations. I begin with the survivors.

The Survivor Stories

Kara

Kara is a 59-year-old White female. Kara and her husband own a home on the river. Further down river, they recently bought land and built a vacation compound for their visiting children and grandchildren. The main property consists of a two-story stone and glass home, a guest house, a swimming pool, an artist studio, and a vegetable garden. She describes herself as an energetic person, who enjoys “fixing” up properties. Kara describes life on the river as one of “*work around the properties.*”

From my journal: Kara arrived at our meeting which was arranged by a mutual friend.

Knowing that Kara and her husband had experienced quite a remarkable time during the flood, my friend gave Kara my contact information. Kara told me she and her husband were in their main house at the time of the flood, close to the river, but not directly on the riverside. Their three guest houses further down on the river property were literally lifted by the flood waters and placed some 1,000 feet upriver. The tall trees kept the light guest houses from being carried down river. The 40 plus feet of water came raging across their property quickly during the night of the flood. Their tin building guest houses floated off their concrete slabs into the treetops, and actually sustained minor damage in comparison to other flood situations. Except that they were removed from their moorings, the houses were all found without damage and with all the furnishings intact.

Kara was happy and excited about having an opportunity to share her story with me. Arriving a few minutes past our scheduled meeting time at the local library, Kara appears tousled and preoccupied. I think at first she may be nervous. We exchange pleasantries about the day and our mutual acquaintance. Kara immediately begins to tell me that this mutual friend prepared food for Kara and her husband the day after the flood and for nearly a week afterwards. Fidgeting a good deal of the time, she shifts her leg crossed one on top of the other every few minutes. She leans forward and back, and at some point I ask her if she is keen to do the interview. She readily says, *“Oh, yes! I think it will be good for me to tell you my story. I think this is good...this is good.”* It begins to settle in with me that this fidgety behavior is less about nervousness over this interview and more a pattern of her behavior. She asks me if I have specific questions, and then before I am able to answer, begins her story of the flood event.

Interview: Kara described the night of the flood remembering being downstairs in their modern designed home that Saturday night. She and her husband were watching the news and weather. The rains were on their mind, as it had been raining for days. She said she left her husband on the couch where he often now fell asleep. (Kara tells me this behavior began in the past year after her husband's son committed suicide on their property. The evening before the suicide, the son, she, and her husband had gathered to watch a television program together while lovingly chiding each other for their choice in programs). Saturday night, she recalls she went upstairs to call her daughter and to assure her that they were alright, even though *"a bit soggy with all the rain."* Realizing she was exhausted, she fell asleep quickly after the call.

Kara described waking up from a deep sleep with a feeling of extreme panic not sure if the sounds were real or part of her dream. She had fallen asleep with the shuttered French doors ajar. They had blown wide open to reveal her entire backyard which was now underwater. All she could see outside in between the flashes of lightning were, *"white caps downstairs where my deck and patio should be."* The sounds of the 800-year old cypress trees in the back yard snapping in two filled her with *"a fear she had never experienced."* Her description of the few moments in which she screamed for her husband who was not in the room, recalled her alarm. Kara said, *"I just broke out in panic, I screamed for Scott, I just screamed his name. I don't think I was moving – just looking out the doors to the swimming pool below. All I could see was white capped water. Where was he? That was all I was thinking. As he rushed into the room, I remember screaming and crying at the same time."* She realized that the sight of water down below meant that water was in the downstairs and their only

way out was to get to the cars which were down in the garage area below.

“Scott came into the bedroom and said we had to get out and he screamed, “NOW!” I got my purse by the bed and ran downstairs. The water was already half way up the car. His truck was parked behind me and he was in it, I was in my car. At one point he just pushed my car through the water with the truck. Thank heavens we had met with the neighbors in a community thing a couple of months before because the road was completely under water. We knew there was a way to cut through a neighbor’s property and that’s what we did. I don’t really remember much of it now, except that I was terrified. Terrified.” As Kara was escaping she had just enough time to grab the dog, purse, phones and car keys. Her husband retrieved the only important artifact for him – the ossuary which held the remains of his grown son who had died on the property.

As they escaped, Kara attempted to call her next door neighbor but couldn’t find the neighbor’s number listed in her contacts. She quickly called the housekeeper that she and her neighbor share and told her to call the neighbor immediately and tell them to get out of the house. It was too late. Kara found out the following day that the neighbors had to retreat to their roof where they were rescued. Kara described her other neighbors across the road. She told me the rains flooded their entire property and in the midnight hours they climbed the steep cliff behind their home in the rain. For them, it was a long dark night waiting to be rescued.

Kara indicated that at the time of our interview, *“I still have PTSD from it. I think of it 10-11 times a day; many things are a trigger for me. The rain, the sounds, the trees, the whole thing.”* Kara spoke of the significance of the event as clearly being one

in which the fear she felt was remembered in her body. She remarked on the fact that now when she hears the skies start to rain, she feels – as many people in the locale – fear arising in the possibility of another flood event.

Only the shell of Kara's main house survived. The water made its way to the second floor and only the possessions high on closet shelves were left undamaged. They are able to live in the artist studio while rebuilding. Kara had financial ability to recreate her stunning home anew and described her need to have a "*beautiful home*." Her expression of the loss of all contents and exterior of the home was much different than others. Her comments, "*Yes, we lost all the contents of the house and the guest houses. But it can all be replaced.*" She noted that she and her sister had already begun to create the ideas for the new furnishings that will be on the pool area deck. Several times during the interview, she relayed the awareness that she was able to do this because of financial ability. Her description of the loss was punctuated less with details about the experience of loss, what things had been lost, what feelings that may have created, and more about the sense of creating the new – living from the future pull of the next thing which will replace the lost articles. It was less clear to witness a sense of heartache or a sense of connection to the past, as it was most obvious to witness a dynamic desire to be "*busy*" as she called it. She noted, "*I like being busy. I just keep going that way. I'm an energetic person. This is just another job to do and I've been dealing with the details, the mud, getting the workers there and moving on. I like having a beautiful home. I just want to get things done now, in order.*"

Theresa

Theresa is a 60-year-old White female who lived in town for nearly five years. At

the time of our interview, she had just begun a new life and new career as a flight attendant. She had gone through a divorce the previous year and had downsized her life from the large home she shared with her husband to the small space she had at the time of the flood. She was living in a small home which backed onto the creek.

From my journal: Theresa meets me a few minutes early for our interview. She walks up to me and smiles a warm, serene smile. She is wearing a casual outfit with subtle pale green and cream colors, and comfortable shoes. She seems a woman contented in her skin. My usual place of interviewing at the library has been unexpectedly taken over by a special ad-hoc flood meeting, so we have been ousted from our meeting place. We end up agreeing upon a local diner quite close. We are seated, and immediately I am nervous about the sounds in the diner and the background noises. I wonder whether I will be able to capture all the interview on tape. I am taking notes as well. It all works out perfectly. As I may have been flustered about the accommodations, Theresa seems calm, centered and present. I write to myself to try to remember that! Theresa was suggested to me by a friend who identified Theresa as a woman “*who lost her whole house and her whole life really*” and I wasn’t sure how the story would unfold.

Interview: Theresa described her life prior to moving to the “*beautiful cabin on the creek*” that had been her “*respite, recluse, sanctuary, hide-away and nest.*” Theresa described, “*I went through a divorce. He and I lived in a really large home, and we had all the stuff, every kind of furniture you can imagine.*” Theresa had moved through some initiation during this time – prior to this flood event - as evidenced by her description of living “*in a big house, with all the stuff*” and her experience of finding a “*nest*” which suited her current needs so well. She was aware of her need to restore,

renew, and review her life path after her divorce, and had done a great releasing of objects that no longer served the new version of herself. She talked a little about the expectations she had held of her marriage, which included the belief that *“I thought I’d be married for the rest of my life.”*

After the divorce, she found herself in a place of inquiry which included the desire to find work that would allow her to travel and to experience new vistas. During her introspective sojourn into her next stage of life creation, she relocated to a small cabin - what was clearly her sanctuary. Theresa said, *“In my little nest, it was a beautiful place. It was a retreat – and a nest. The creek was down below - out the back deck. The trees, the birds, the quiet, it was wonderful. This little place...held all my special things. I’d downsized after the divorce to this little place. I loved it so much, all my special things were there. I had cast off my things – and really pared down so much...You know I had so many things that I just didn’t need anymore. Those things didn’t fit my life. I had created special things in my little place. I had my perfect pillow, my perfect blanket to curl up to watch TV, my favorite dishes and bowls. I had my perfect cup for tea every morning.”*

The weekend of the flood, Theresa had been out of town. She had learned of the flooding through news media and even though she had just begun a new job, her boss allowed her to travel home quickly to see how her home had fared in the flooding. Alone, she entered her home two days after the flood. Theresa described her arrival back home, seeing her *“nest”* now ravaged by 8-feet of mud and filthy debris from the creek below. She said, *“I just didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to do by myself. It was so hot, and I couldn’t take it all in. There was mud and stuff everywhere.”*

The water was still in there. It smelled and it was so hot.” The water had subsided but living sediment covered every possible crevice of her home. All her clothing, bedding, furniture, special mementos and art work were ruined. Her description of the scene included her seemingly unconscious facial grimaces and holding her hands over her stomach. As she was describing the scene, I could feel her disgust with the smell, the sludge, the filth and her disappointment to see her beloved belongings ruined. She said the only clothing she had was what she had on. She also had what was in the car, along with one pair of shoes that she had been recovered in the mud by the door. Theresa showed them to me with delight, saying, *“Yes, these shoes were by the front door, but I found them in all that mud and cleaned them up!”*

She described the torment of having to *“deal with all the mud and stuff in that heat, with the noise of helicopters and neighbors, and emergency sirens and all sorts of stuff.”* A self-professed introvert and one accustomed to peace, quiet, and retreat, this was an assault to her senses. She, a woman on her own, was not sure of where to start. Within a few hours of being home alone trying to slog through the mud, an acquaintance she had met recently arrived at her door. He said he was going to help her with the heavy lifting and removal of debris. She said, *“Now, this guy just showed up. I didn’t call him. I was just so surprised...and relieved.”* This arrival without request happened in many situations and poignantly speaks to the ability of individuals to realize the plight of another and to plunge in to do the necessary things that allow the person to recapture hold of some sense of rightness in chaos. This friend knew that she needed help and immediately went to work assisting her.

For Theresa, nothing was to be salvaged. She knew that all the things she had

held as guardians of her comfort would be thrown out. There was “*only one thing I have left of any value really. My parents are gone and I don’t have children.*” She had a few pieces of jewelry that her parents had given her and these were what she most hoped to locate in the sludge. The friend had been helping her with the mud which was getting harder and more solid by the hour. He told her that the heat was making the mud harden like concrete. In the living room alone, there were still areas of mud with marks on the wall up 5 feet. She told him of her desire to find the box with pieces of her family jewelry, and roughly the location. He spent half a day searching and clearing and was able to find the box. She described him pulling up a broken box with her collection of jewelry, perhaps not worth much in monetary sense. As she described this, she moved her hands away from her stomach and expressed her joy with a casting of arms wide open. She said, “*He was pleased to be able to find something that made me feel like myself in the midst of all the mess.*” This friend knew these symbols reminded her of another time, another place, and another self.

On the threshold of a new adventure: Theresa shared her story of losing all her belongings in the flood except for a few found objects, as she told me, “Everything I own fits in my car!” This loss was pivotal to her in that she described this flood as “*a messy, muddy, chaotic time.*” It was also, she realized, a time that put her face to face with a “*new adventure.*” She discussed her musings about the meanings she was trying to discern from this time of crisis. Her ability to look at the events in her life with a more “*philosophical*” outlook she imagined was partly due to her previous career(s) as a psychiatric nurse and in private practice as a professional counselor. Additionally, she discussed how surprised and touched she was to receive kindness and generosity from

people she didn't know well and others, *"There were so many people offering to help, everywhere. He spent all day working in the heat and I didn't really know him that well!"* In her life she learned techniques which she thought were ways to think and strategize which proved enormously helpful. In discussing her outlook, she described, *"I'm a very logical person. I think that helps. At some point these things can be replaced. More than that, though, I started wondering what all this meant? Like, what is this telling me? I can't do anything to change this situation and I can just try to figure out what's next for me. What is the next thing?"* She understood the events of the flood as happening to the larger community and was distressed about the magnitude of loss felt by those around her. Theresa discussed the fact that she was offered a gift card from the Red Cross for immediate supplies and she refused it. She minimized her own losses at every point in the conversation, indicating that her losses *"were not as bad as others."* She framed the experience as a way of adventure.

Theresa saw her divorce as an opportunity to see with new eyes into new places and new experiences through the lens of adventure. Her longing for connection with deep communion in a personal relationship was spoken, in that she said she hoped at some point to find a life partner. She expressed some natural trepidation of the future but more so an engagement with life and a belief in the rightness of her path.

Mary

Mary is a 58-year-old White woman, married, academic at the local university, has lived on the river with her family for 23 years.

From my journal: Mary arrives at our interview exactly on time at the library. She is neatly dressed, with an athletic frame. She moves with cat-like grace as we find a place

to have the interview. She first tells me a little about herself as a teacher of drama, and tells me she has written and produced a play at our local community theatre. She mentions that she finds my project interesting and is inspired to write a play about the flood. Quickly, she says that will probably have to wait - as she is still dealing with the clean-up of their house and property. Mary describes her house with fondness and detail, especially when she describes the trees on their lush river-front property. She moves when she speaks about things that appear to be particularly poignant and close to her heart. These movements seem gestures of meaning which I am unable to decipher at first. She elongates her legs in front of her – stretches and repositions herself, occasionally tucking one leg up underneath her thin frame in the seat. She uses her hands as a seeming expression of intensity; at times she smooths away painful remembrances of memories, artworks and furniture lost, then she holds one hand in another as she delivers the final thought on a difficult topic. I am somewhat distracted by her physical expressions in that I find myself trying to decipher their meaning at the same time I am asking questions and listening and responding. Leaving all that, I am soon aware of the articulate rendering she has for the events and follow her story.

Interview: Mary described the night of the flood in detail, marked by a time line of routine she and her husband shared. They both had been “*river guides*” and knew the “*power of the river, of water, of nature.*” She eloquently describes the series of events in which she and her husband found their home and life completely submerged.

Mary began, “*On Saturday evening, May, 23rd, Rick and I were monitoring the river and keeping up with weather reports on line and on TV. In between, for distraction, we watched the late night TV.*” She noted that the rains had been torrential

for what seemed like days, and the night of the flood they were receiving hourly messages on their phone about the river rising. Knowing they may have to evacuate, and their understanding of the river, she said they packed the cars and planned to take both cars packed with essentials. Mary said, *“As more phone and text alarms sounded, we put our musical instruments, photo albums, laptops, heirloom jewelry, phones, and wallets in the car. I called our neighbors to warn them about the rising river. They had been asleep and unaware of the rising river. We checked the river again and began to seriously consider evacuation.”* She continued, *“We put blankets, pillows, water, medications, bananas, protein bars, flashlights and headlamps, rain gear, and an overnight bag for each of us in the car. Rick sealed the back door (river side) with silicone caulk. Then the electricity went out. It came back on for a few minutes, then failed completely. We continued our evacuation preparation by headlamp.”* Mary said their text alert indicated residents on the Blanco River must seek higher ground immediately and they left.

Mary spoke of the intensity of a brief encounter, recalling the incident with eyes moistened by the recollection. In the early morning hours, she and her husband had fled their house for higher ground. The skies were pitch black and debris was everywhere. Rain was still falling and it was impossible to see. The emergency personnel had blocked off the streets and she and her husband were sitting on their car along a high point embankment. Cars began to fill the parking lot as more and more evacuees sought higher ground. There is only one main thoroughfare through town. That main road includes the RR 12 Bridge as the entry into town. They could hear the river, *“roaring as it poured OVER the RR 12 Bridge a short distance away.”* Volunteers had already

started to gather to form a make-shift recovery center for people at the local church, and a team of first responders were set up near the bridge. She said no one had much information to share. A news crew from the Austin television station interviewed her husband, and she said, *“My husband conveyed what we were feeling, which was shock, dismay, incredulity, and tempered relief. No one knew then just how bad it was or how lucky we were to be alive.”* A few moments later they heard a huge, muffled explosion. A huge second concussion followed and an odd blue light lit the night sky in the direction of town. The flood had dragged critical electrical wires down and the transformer had blown. The town was completely without electricity. She begins to venture off and tell me about some friends of theirs who, *“heard a woman...she was the woman who was in the house that crashed into the bridge. She was on a mattress or a part of the house or something...anyway, she was screaming, she was calling out for help. A couple we knew said they heard her call out. They call her their angel.... if they hadn’t heard her they would have been drowned in the water. I don’t know exactly when that happened.”*

About 2:00 AM, the flood had crested, and officials said it was safe for some to walk back into the neighborhood as long as one stayed on the road. She and her husband took a flashlight, crossing the main artery into town, and headed into the subdivision, uncertain as to what they would find. Mary said she and her husband saw a man begin to venture into the thigh-high water and into the neighborhood. She began, *“The waves had crested, the water had crested, so it was going down, but you don’t know what is in that water.”* The stranger explained, *“I’ve got to go back to the house, I can’t find my wife. If she comes here, please tell her that I’ve gone back to the house.”*

If I don't come back, please tell her I love her." Mary said in that moment she felt the intensity of that and described his comment as *"morbid practicality."* Mary called out, *"Wait! Tell me your name!"* For her, this exchange brought close the idea that the responsibility for telling his family about his demise may fall to her. She knew the water at this point was not raging, but standing water could have *"challenges and problems with electricity and all the debris that was floating about."*

Mary said they could not comprehend the immensity of the flood. Her husband and she decided not to venture into the dark neighborhood to get to their house, and walked back to the relief station. Mary said, *"Volunteers continued to arrive with blankets, water, snacks, first aid and compassion. We thought about staying inside the rest of the night but with the chaos mixed with despair, we thought we'd recline in our car seats in the parking lot. We knew we wouldn't sleep anyway."*

Mary described her experience in the make-shift volunteer center, *"They just took care of us; and I want to say that so emphatically, and I also want to say that I know they did the same thing for all others. But all of us felt we were being take care of and there was just this sense of being care for...enveloped...not...there is a way of helping people that makes them feel helpless..."* She described how this way of helping was not like that, it in fact, made them feel empowered. She said, *"Yes, they made us feel safe and cared for and worried about...but empowered...and one of the organizers, a woman, told me something important. She told us: Some of you are having a hard time accepting gifts and it's because so many people in our town are usually the givers. Take a breath and accept it with grace."* Mary said that she realized in talking about this memory now that there is something in the giving and receiving that is important.

The reciprocity from being able to give to others and to be able to accept the kindness, the generosity without pushing it away was important as well. Mary said, *“Yes, I think this is really important...I’m just starting to think about this now...the strength of this town and the generosity here was so strong because people who were not in need or who don’t spend their lives in need ...in fact...probably have spent ...through good fortune ...more of their lives giving to others...helping...we could...um...we could keep that energy up...I don’t want to sound like I’m taking any credit. This is important to learn, to know...how to receive...”*

At first light they drove to their house. Mary said she knows that *“shock has dulled my memory.”* Shock was expressed by many of the participants, and clear in Mary’s rendering: *“The water had receded but it was not evident from the front yard how much damage had been done. Rick pried the front door open and water gushed out and fish came out along with about 5 feet of water. Fish! I didn’t know where to “put” that. Our hearts sank. In that moment, the reality of the flood hit home for me. We went to the back door (river side) and broke the silicone seal and water gushed out from there as well. Mud was all over, in some places as much as 2 inches. Sodden furniture was upended and jumbled in a heap. Lighter items, slimed in mud, had floated and settled in unexpected places. Anything made of paper or fabric was a soggy mess.*

The water mark was about 3 feet high. The outside water mark was between 5-6 feet. Everything that was on the floor or at or below 3 feet was destroyed or incredibly damaged. We wandered from ruined room to ruined room, dully assessing the damage, too stunned to think, too numb to register our losses. I was in the kitchen and here I was thinking about where to empty the water that had filled up the pots and pans in the

drawers. Crazy, because the whole house still had a foot of water and I was wondering where to put that water. I just didn't know...I just didn't know." Mary described her state of shock continued as she was dazed by the destruction she saw everywhere.

Coping was a dominant feature in participants' recollections of the flood events and included the themes of friendships; mysteries of generosity; courage; and faith. Coping also connects with compassionate care as participants recalled the kindness of friends, relatives and strangers. Coping with this crisis event took many forms through participants' recollections. Some participants recalled being in shock, despair, frozen with fear at the impact and then as if released from a frozen state were renewed and reengaged with life through the kindness and generosity of others.

Mary described the kindness of friends, neighbors, and volunteers who all offered assistance when she said, *"I had no way of asking for what I needed. I was clearly in shock. I can't even remember how people got there."* Mary described how neighbors were sharing news bits and pieces of the neighborhood tragedy. She heard that at least 70 homes completely washed away and over 1,200 more were damaged. Every home along the river in her subdivision was flooded, some with as much as 7 feet of water inside. A grand piano washed out of someone's living room and was in the road below. The river, she told me, *"peaked at over 43 feet! The flood gauge broke with the surge. The previous record high was recorded at 33 ft. in 1929. In the 23 years that we've lived on the river here, we've never had water in our house, nor experienced a flood of this magnitude."*

Mary told of her ability to cope with the destruction and loss of belongings, memories and symbols of her family's life by leaning on her friends, and being able to

be in grief, shock, dismay and disbelief but also being held in the constant connection with other people. Friends, neighbors, volunteers all embraced her with their understanding of the fact that she was in a fragile state, all relating to her as if they could only imagine her devastation. This attendance to her included an atmosphere of assistance, generosity and abiding connection allowing her to get through this time.

“Sunday morning the rain still fell. But, before we’d even completed the first grim tour of our house, friends began to arrive. They brought coffee, shovels, willing hands and hope. I don’t know how these friends knew what to do or what to say. I never was in a place to be able to direct or to motivate myself let alone anyone else. They just showed up...you know...I couldn’t have called them...they just appeared. They checked on us every day and kept checking on us...and they seemed to know what to do next.”

Mary described the volunteers, neighbors and others coming to assist as “an energy...there was a symbiotic energy. That kept us going. We felt loved, we felt cared for, we felt the generosity of strangers and friends, family and those people.... people that came from like two hours away, bringing food. And the Mercy Chefs? Have you heard of them? They are a group of volunteers who came out of Hurricane Katrina, when the morale and energy was low. They realize that here we are eating cheese crackers and water, and day after day that wears on people. I can tell you that morale is certainly impacted by food! Food restores you!”

Mary said the experience of food delivery extended from the professional chefs and restaurants in town to the local communities. “People would drive up and say that they had heard what was happening so they made a car load of tacos and drive them to the subdivision in the early morning hours when the work was starting.” One

particularly touching recollection was when Mary looked out and saw a young mother with two toddlers pulling a top-heavy little red wagon loaded with two large containers of vanilla and chocolate ice cream. They had cones and napkins in the wagon as well. When they arrived at her door, the toddlers asked her which she would like. Mary indicated she was so touched by the tender display of generosity, and that this understanding of the physical self which required sustenance and nurturing was deeply important to her ability to move ahead.

Mary defined the organization of many hands at the front lines of the relief efforts and behind the scenes. The network of volunteers is difficult to capture. It includes the people who were cooking the food, but also the people who washed the dishes in hot trailers afterwards. Other people collected donations, providing daily fruits like watermelons, which were a relief from the scorching sun. Kids who were grown now, having moved away from town, returned with spouses and children of their own to the neighborhood they remembered. Mary recalled, *“that just gave me goose bumps. There was a powerful group of kids who all went to school together in town and they came HOME!”*

Mary described the flood experience in which her house sustained substantial damage as, *“I guess it did not hit me until a conversation with my husband when we were trying to think about picking furniture or something. (At this point in the interview, Mary began to cry.) I thought, I didn’t lose my house, I lost my **home**. The house is still standing...but the home. We’ve been there 23 years, and the family has been there. We created an ambiance and a sense of our family (in that house), it was our family history. I lost all the artwork that I’ve made myself or that we got on our*

travels. People would say to me: Look you get to start over. I thought, I don't want to start over!! All the kids would use our house as a place of honor celebrations, birthdays, events, graduations...all that stuff." Mary indicated that their home had been the family touchstone and was the location even family from out of state would venture to for holidays. When discussing the enormous trees that had lined their yard, harbingers of history they are, she was touched with grief. Mary said, *"We always had family celebrations under the branches of those trees. Our families live in California, so our house was the place to come for these things...out under those trees. They are just gone now."* She recalled how the hardest reality was seeing the demise of these historic trees. There had a certain cypress tree that was on their property quite near the river front. This cypress was estimated to be between 400 and 1,000 years old, and it now is toppled over. The enormous root ball is now *"way up in the air"* as a constant reminder of history gone. Like an ever-present gaping wound, she sees the tree as a symbol and marker of family times shared there. The times of gathering beneath the branches and boughs of these great trees are long passed and instead the river bank holds no partition against a future raging river. Mary said, *"My home was part of my identity. Part of me was/is tied up in that house. How we had created an ambiance... that was part of who I am...it is who I am..."*

These symbolic representations of home for Mary resonated with a felt sense in her body, as she moved and gestured in the telling. They also reverberated in my body as I felt gripped by the longing of her memory, and the visual reminders of great trees lost in the flood's wake. The stories of moments and memories shared under the great cypress tree seemed timeless and comforting. Mary said she learned that she no longer

wants to live so connected to her belongings, and yet she knows that is difficult. She said, *“I would say I am more mindful of small miracles. The big bad event happened...no one can take that away, but in the wake of that...and they are almost the result of someone’s generosity, someone’s kindness, someone’s thoughtfulness. Whether it is someone close to me in my family, or a friend, or in the wider circle of the community, neighbors or strangers...I am grateful.”*

On the threshold of a new self. Mary discussed her sense of a new self as she was borderless, without the edges that her previous life had given her. *Mary said, “Those memories of who I was before, they are gone. I’m not sure what is next. How I will create the next ... I know I don’t want to live in fear. Another flood could happen and we live on the river! These things are real. I just don’t want to have to go through this depth of feeling about my things, my memories. I will not be held hostage to my belongings.”*

Aware that she was at a new juncture in her life, Mary described the emerging reality for her now that her memories and sense of place she had held for so many years was now gone. All that lies before her is uncharted and unrecognizable.

Dorothy

Dorothy is a 91-year old White woman, has lived in the community for more than 45 years. Beloved by many, Dorothy is a funny, smart, quick-witted, generous woman who has piercing blue eyes and a love of friends. Dorothy is a widow, living alone with her small dachshund dog, on a large property on the river.

From my journal: Dorothy arrives at our meeting location at the church, and I am immediately struck by her soft, smooth, and round face. She is wearing a lovely bright pink Mexican blouse and casual pants. She is walking with a cane and her hearing aids

are evident behind her thick cap of white curls. She is bright, alert, smiling, and happy to be of assistance. Her first words are gratitude for being able to drive to our meeting on her own because she was able to get a new car in the last week. Her car was carried away in the flood waters and unrecovered. Since the flood, she had been relying on others to take her wherever she needed to go. Clearly a woman wanting to be independent; she was quite happy with her new car purchase.

Interview: Dorothy spent a few moments telling me the origin of her beautiful outfit, commenting on the fact that, “*All of my clothes and everything I owned was lost in the flood! This blouse and four others came as a gift on my doorstep! Can you imagine? I tell you, there are so many wonderful people that helped! I just cannot believe the kindness and generosity of people here. Well, it’s not just here, it is the volunteers that came to town as well. I also went the local high school and they had just the most amazing thing...stacks and stacks of clothes organized by size, color, and everything. I could go there. People donated all those clothes in several days! I mean I had nothing...I was rescued and those clothes were ruined, I didn’t even have shoes! There were people at the high school and the volunteer recovery center who had gathered up clothes and I didn’t even have a purse...I didn’t have any money...but I knew I’d need a purse...so I got a purse. It was amazing, all help.*”

Memorial Day weekend was the end of a very rainy week, as rain had been constant for a series of days. Dorothy said she was not worried about all the rain, as it had rained before in the 45 or so years she had lived on the property. She told me her neighbors had called her early in the day, on Saturday, worried about the weather. She told them she planned to stay put. She told them she had seen lots of rain over the years

and she and her house had always been fine. Dorothy told me, “*Where would I go anyway, really? I just thought this would like other rains! It just seemed like people were getting worried for nothing! (she laughed) ...Well, what do I know! (laughter).*” In past storms, the river had risen, but had never come near the house; she imagined this flood would be the same. Once nightfall hit, she described the water rising very quickly.

At first she said she kept thinking this couldn’t be happening. The rains pelted the roof. Trees on the river bank and then in her yard splintered in two – great river cypresses that she knew were hundreds of years old. The water had been high in previous years, but never entered the house – here it was in the kitchen. She described the darkness and her inability to connect with others. “*My phone was not working, and there was no power in the house. I was there alone with Honey.*” The experience of being in her house alone with her dog, Honey, was now filling her with a certain anxiety. She said, “*I saw the water in the kitchen! I knew then this was going to be a doozy. I still wasn’t really afraid. I mean, I thought “Wow” but not really afraid. Honey (her dog) was with me.*” Then the power cracked outside as a transformer exploded. She recalled hearing it and wondering how long it might take for them to turn it on again. Then she noticed how fast the water was rising; in the space of minutes it seemed. The refrigerator and other appliances were knocking together in the flooded kitchen. Water was up to the first floor. She knew this was bad. She and Honey had to make it up that stairway to the loft – her reading nook.

She said, “*I don’t think I really had any fear during all that time as the water outside was rising. I just kept talking to Honey (her dog) and telling her we would be alright. You know she was really afraid. She was shaking. I had to be okay for her. I*

knew she was upset by all this going on. Now, when the water had come inside the house and all the power had exploded outside, I knew this was going to be different. I remember thinking about why I had not left when I could. Why didn't I get out of the house when it was light, and when I could? I was alone here with Honey." Dorothy described, *"I struggled to get up the stairway to the loft; I knew we (she and her dog) were in deep trouble. Somehow I got up there and just watched the fridge swim around downstairs. The power was out – I'd heard it popping.* She said getting to that stairway was difficult. One can imagine the challenge of this woman wading through water to get to the stairs. Then up the circular stairs, holding her dachshund. Finally, up in the loft, she looked down to see the entire contents of the house submerged. Dorothy described with some difficulty, her hours of being in her loft, realizing this was a storm unlike any other she had seen in her 40-year residence.

Dorothy realized her fear was now rampant. She mentioned to me that she actually had an intense fear of water. She said, *"Now up there looking down at all that water in my house – with everything floating, I was getting scared. I knew I did not want to die in water – and especially dirty water. It was really hitting me - that this was it. I was going to die here alone with Honey."* The water continued to rise rapidly, engulfing her staircase and coming into the loft. *"The water had risen to where I was - on my perch - and Honey was floating on a cushion."* It was challenging to get a real sense of the time she spent in this state, but not difficult to feel her fear. Dorothy's speech changed as she was telling me these details. She didn't look at me directly, and tended to look down and speak quietly. From best efforts to coordinate the time Dorothy was rescued and the time of the intensity of the rains, it appears she was up in

her loft for several hours.

She said she had begun to look at the small window near the roof line and realized that must be the only way out. She knew she couldn't get there. The water was two stories deep. Yet, this was the only escape she realized since the entire two story house was submerged with water. She spoke quietly, quickly, with some difficulty. Her body became rounded, protected, and it seemed as if this memory was increasingly difficult for her to recollect. I sensed that she was anxious to move through this memory. She continued to describe her intent and actions at this time with reserved posture and clear rendering, and a shaky voice.

With her gaze permanently affixed to that small window, Dorothy recalled seeing lights and not sure if she was really seeing them. She had been focusing all of her thoughts and energy on that small window and then the lights appeared. They were the two emergency crew men who tapped on the window from the outside. Amazingly, the window broke and in swam a "*strong man*" with a gentle guiding hand. He said, "*We're here to get you.*" When she began to talk about these events, she shifted to using words of gratitude and was open in her gestures. Her body and arms reflected her relief. She remarked, in her fashion, that he was "*tall and strong*" and she was "*so very glad to see him!*" (He was tall to her, his 6'3 frame dwarfing her less than 5' body). "*When the young man (the EMS first responder) told me to come with him; I couldn't move. I just couldn't move. I just kept saying "I can't ... I can't."* When she finally swam with the aid of her rescuers to the window, she again realized she didn't think she could get through the small broken glass opening that was to be her passage to the raft outside – perched atop the roof of her house. She described the moments strung

together by rampant fear and worry about Honey and her own disbelief in her ability to get through that window.

Dorothy recalled her reactions in the intense moments of the flood, and the power of having someone close at hand who understood the present reality without words, without explanation. Dorothy said, *“That strong young man was telling me every time I said, ‘I can’t ... I can’t...he just said, ‘Yes, you can...I’m here to help you. He kept saying I could do this thing, I could get through that window and well, he’d gotten through that window. Still, I heard him and it was if his strength was coming to me with his words.”* And so she did. She was able to move forward and cope with the reality in front of her with the kindness, patient guiding and intentional ways of this first responder. *“He just kept telling me I could do this. I could do it. He just kept telling me that he was with me. You know what really did it for me was the way he handed Honey to the guy outside the window. He (the first responder) just handed her to the guy (the other was swift water rescue person) so gently - and that guy out there in that rubber boat was in the pouring rain - but he cradled Honey. He treated her so gently. I remember that so well. Him cradling Honey. He kept saying I could do this thing, I could get through that window and well, he’d gotten through that window. Still, I heard him and it was if his strength was coming to me with his words. I survived because of him...because of the way he did it.”* She remarked several times that she *“got through it! I did that! I got through that! Whew, what’s next I wonder?”*

Dorothy was able to move forward by realizing she was not alone, she was tended to, and would be able to cope with this horrendous ordeal of getting through that small window and into the waiting rescue. The first responder was able to communicate to her

that he acknowledged and understood her difficult situation, he knew what it must be like to be there alone and waiting for help that you are not certain will come. Dorothy's rescuers spoke with instructions clear and direct, but spoken with the intimacy of care.

She had managed to traverse the small second floor broken window opening with the aid of her rescuers' diligent and sustained efforts; however, she had also suffered injuries to her leg in the process. When she got in the boat she said, "*I was so relieved that I was actually being rescued!*" The hours of worrying and waiting for what seemed like impending death were now over. Even though she had wounded her leg exiting the window, she recalled that she wasn't really even aware of it in that moment. She described, "*The guy that was in that rubber boat ... it had a motor...well, we were in the water on top of my roof! He had cradled my Honey, and when he handed her to me...it was gentle. I held her. She was shaking. I realized that we were being rescued then. The guys told me to "sit down!" I guess I was squirming (she laughed out loud) and so I sat down! Then I said, 'I've always wanted to go on a cruise!' and away we went, in that little rubber boat. We went through the trees and down to the other side! Friends were there waiting. There were two trucks and one of them said, 'here come with us.'*"

Dorothy described the delight in seeing her friends and neighbors there on dry ground. The next phase of that rescue included taking her to the volunteer recovery center which had been set up in the late evening hours. She was able to get there because it was "her" side of the bridge. (The RR 12 bridge is the main thoroughfare through town and it was now completely closed due to the remnants and debris of a home crashing into it in the midnight hours). When she arrived at the recovery center, she said, "*I had wet clothes, no shoes, and a wet and scared dog. The people there were*

just getting sorted out and I was one of the first rescues to be brought in. It wasn't raining as bad, and I was outside under the porch shivering. A man who was a volunteer walked by and asked if I needed anything. I said I was cold. He gave me his coat! He just took his coat off and gave me his coat! I still have that coat! I've not been able to find him to return it to him. I wrapped up in that thing, I'll tell you. Then, they had chairs – like lawn chairs – in the big room with all sorts of bedding and things for people to sleep. I just kept thinking about Honey. She was shaking, and really – it wasn't going to be easy to get her to stay in one place. Another man came by and asked if I was alright. I said, 'Gosh, it would be great to have a leash!' A few minutes later, here he comes with a leash! It was amazing. And that man that gave me the coat.... I never saw him again."

Dorothy described the help she received from the caring, gentle, and patient first responders, noting that without their ability to help her she would have perished in the flood. The flood waters did rise in her house, engulfing the perch in which she had been rescued. All the books and special mementos that she had spent years gathering were washed away in the flood.

After her rescue, Dorothy spent a short residential stay at the rehabilitation center to heal from the injuries sustained as she was getting out of the window. She discussed her emotional state during that time as one of "*having a talk with myself*" and one in which she realized that she was now safe, well, tended to, and this was not the time to think of the difficulty, but to forge ahead. She said this time was made significantly easier because of the "*borrowed clothes and friends that worked to find some of my important things.*" During that stay at the rehabilitation center, she did not "*waste time*

on thinking about what was lost and what I was doing in that place. I realized I needed a project.” Dorothy discussed some of the “*projects*” on her mind, which included organizing the town “*better*” to have some sort of “*nice, attractive, retirement-type community.*” She described her thought processes while she was in the rehabilitation facility as thinking about who she would need to contact; and how to organize the plan.

Dorothy shared her recollections of being a young bride many years ago, and being shy, retiring and “timid.” She indicated that part of the reason for this personality trait could be traced to her culture as a woman raised in the south, during the 1930’s. She recalled hearing that girls should not be too assertive but be “*nice.*” It was a way for her to “*fit in.*” She said her husband was a man who was, “*ahead of his time*” in that his ideas about women were progressive. Her husband believed that she was intelligent and possessed a sense of wisdom. She remembered with fondness that he would often say to her, “*You can do anything you want.*” Growing up she had not heard messages that empowered her. This was perhaps the first time she had heard these words, especially words of this type spoken to her by someone she loved.

For Dorothy, her home represented years of marriage, family including children and much extended family and friendships. Her house had become the place out of which she entertained, nurtured others and herself. In her home creation she had included a special “*nook*” which was her library far away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the house. In order to gain access to her private domain, one had to scale a small circular staircase in order to find her private hide-a-way. In that domain, the space was hers alone, not frequented by her husband and children. Here she had prayed, read, daydreamed, watched shadow patterns on the high windows and

contemplated all things. This secret and special place was the opening to her spiritual journey and her place of refuge. For Dorothy, the reality of those hours spent in her upstairs domain, with her dog - watching and waiting - were about traversing a reality of the brevity of existence, the specialness of loved ones and the sacredness of safe havens. Dorothy recalled her home as a place that had been filled with memories and belongings. Her rescue had been dramatic and had precipitated her change in thought about her belongings. In the precious moments of being rescued, the outfit she had on had been damaged, but her most loved companion (her dog) had been saved.

A week or so after the flood, a trusted neighbor and friend was able to dig down bare-armed through more than a two feet of wet mud and debris to locate her wedding rings. As she was telling the story, her face alit with joy, along with renewed peace and possibility as she said, *“I knew it was all going to all right then. See... these are my rings! (She placed her hand so that I could easily see her display of her wedding ring set.) I do not know how he did it...how he dug down in all that mess. They wouldn’t let me to go the house during all of that. But he did. He found them. I knew as soon as I had my rings that I was going to be alright.”* She proudly displayed them to me. The husband she had dearly loved was gone. Somehow he was with her still, represented by her rings, and present with her as she was marking the new territory of her life. She knew that was the turning point.

Another neighbor located Dorothy’s wedding dress on a property some distance away, buried in muddy debris. The neighbor took the filthy ball of satin and lace to be dry-cleaned. It was delivered to her anonymously, freshly cleaned, in a lovely white box and tied with pastel ribbon. She remarked that these *“...things are important. I*

can't tell you why. They are important." She continued, *"The rings were the things that told me it was all going to be okay now. I am so grateful to have these things. People just worked in that hot sun to find things, people I didn't know, people I have never met. I mean they came every day, all day for weeks and weeks. I can't describe it. It's just wonderful."*

These acts of kindness and generosity speak to the depth of neighbors, volunteers, and friends and their understanding. It is evident they understood these relics of the past held healing power and sustenance. It expresses the understanding on the part of the neighbors, friends and volunteers who made it happen, and on the part of the recipient, as Dorothy now felt she could "go on" using these fragments of a past as her touchstones. It allowed her a certain grace of sorts to embrace the next phase of her life.

After the flood, both Dorothy and Honey were changed from the ordeal. Honey would become excessively agitated and anxious if she were parted from Dorothy for even short periods of time. Honey often cried and shook when the skies filled with rain. Dorothy, realized that she could not recreate the special haven anew in the flooded shell of her 40-year-old memory of home. Dorothy knew the energy and time the task of rebuilding her home would require were beyond her ability at the moment. She realized she wanted "a new space." The power in having a home, a container for her life, was the most important thing for her at the time of our interview. She recalled, *"I have to get myself a space. I could continue to live with my son, but he lives like a boy – I want to have my own space. I want to be able to have my friends come over, to be there. I have to get a little house. I know I can't recreate the house again; I don't have the energy for*

that now. I do want to have a little house, a house of my own. I want to have my gal friends over and have a dinner party. I love doing that sort of thing. I've done it for years."

She found meaning in the fact that her husband had instilled in her the capacity to move ahead, move on and move through difficulty. She said, *"Yes, I learned a long time ago that you cannot look back, you have to look forward. In my life, I've always believed that things would work out. Gosh, this thing was really bad, and all that damage. They still haven't let me go in and see the house, it's too dangerous. I know though that these things happen and a friend of mine was moaning and talking about all this...she was okay though. I reminded her of that. You're okay now, I told her. You just have to get up and go on. You can't dwell on this thing."* Dorothy's knowledge from her previous experiences had equipped her with a sense of knowing that whatever she may be called to do, she could. When Dorothy described her thought process I was struck by the astuteness inherent in this way of approaching crisis. Her ready wit, positive outlook, attendance to her own and others' suffering, and desire to create a new reality, spoke of a depth of wisdom and knowing that she had internalized through her life. This wisdom was not expressed in knowledge but in applied understanding, and the essence she left on this world.

The Christmas holidays had always been one of Dorothy's favorite times for celebrations with loved ones. In November of 2015, she had found the perfect house. She decorated it with the pieces found and restored from her home on the river. The week before Christmas, she breakfasted with a group of her friends one day, and worked to complete the last minute arrangements for her holiday party, to be held on

December 21st. Delighted to be in her own home, Dorothy was intent to be able to socialize and entertain her guests in her new house. She did so with unmistakable graciousness and love. Dorothy died two days later, on December 23, 2015. Her obituary noted her gratefulness for the “*borrowed clothes*” and her unrelenting praise for “*her determined rescuer who found her in knee-deep water, clutching her beloved dachshund, Honey.*”

First responders

Donald

Donald is a 59-year-old White male attorney, with a professional practice in town. He and his family moved to the area over 20 years ago. He did not live close to the river. Donald is valued and well-known contributor to the community through his membership in local civic and service organizations.

From my Journal: It is difficult for me to describe the gratitude I have for Donald, a man who in a moment of perhaps the greatest grief I have known, was present to see me through. It feels as if it is truly a debt I shall never be able to repay. I was working in his law office, as I received a call one morning that my little brother had been found dead. The memory of that phone call lingers as if time stood still and some great heavy weight was placed on my heart with no hope for removal. Donald quickly set into motion all of the events I cannot recall. He gathered me up, telling his workers and family that he would be taking me to the location. I recall only snippets of that drive, but remember his presence, his strength, and his support, as I was without any of that for myself. It was as if during those hours, I was only breathing, and all functions were automatic, beyond my recollection. For the time I was in that daze, I knew he was

present, caring with me, providing fierceness that I couldn't muster. Donald allowed me to cry without providing platitudes, he allowed me to grieve, to react, and to be myself, but he stood with me, not apart from the crisis, but with me in it. He understood the depth of this loss as this last remaining family member was now gone. Donald showed me how to be a cartographer of the terrain of grief, mapping the painful moments while feeling connected to his family then and now, as people who have experienced the depth of heartache together.

Donald's family property was not affected by the flood. He did describe an incident in which he was met with a crisis face to face, and in that moment spoke of his decision-making process, his internal conflict, and his decision to act.

Interview: Donald is not a professional first responder and was not operating in an official capacity as he was on his way home after attending a meeting in Austin. He was hoping to get home to secure his property for likely flooding. As he was driving, he heard up ahead, in the pouring rain - a car skidding off the road.

"The weather was horrific," he said. "It had been raining for days and the roads that night were just nearly impassable. I was hoping to get home before it was getting any worse, but had to really attend to driving." There were not many people on the winding roads as he was making his way home from Austin. He told me, *"As I was driving I heard up ahead the sound of a vehicle skidding across the road. It had crashed through a fence, and careened across a water-logged field and finally crashing into an embankment."* As he neared the site, he described the critical moments of his thinking process. Knowing this was a moment that could change eventualities and that he had little time in which to make this decision, Donald said, *"As I was driving home*

in the pouring rain, I heard a car skidding off the road up ahead. I heard the crash, and saw the lights across the field up ahead. I heard that crash. I knew there was a bad wreck there. The rains were just pelting down and I was wrestling with some part of me – my self - that for a few seconds was frozen to my seat in the truck. I knew that no matter how I dreaded it, going to that scene was mine to do. I hope to find my best self in these moments and thankfully, in that moment I did. You know we all hope we will find our better angels in moments of crisis.”

Donald described the intensity of the moments as he walked across the flooded field, soaked by the incessant rain. By the time he reached the wreckage, the moment of reluctance had disappeared. He described smelling the car and the smoke, hearing the skid, and the sounds of the crash, and the night lit by lightning. He said, *“I smelled the car and the smoke, and the acrid odor of electricity. The car alarm or something was blaring - I can still remember the smell of the crash, as I was nearing it. It was pouring with rain and the water was up to the middle of my leg I think, I don’t know.”* His suit was completely drenched as he reached the car and found the left side of the vehicle had crashed against the embankment. The right side passenger door must have encountered some object as it was also damaged and dented making opening difficult. He said that, *“While trying to think, I could smell something like the odor of electricity.”* The sounds from the car alarm of some kind as well as other noises were deafening. He said, *“That noise was everywhere and as I looked in I could see him. He was pinned between the front seat and the passenger seat with his head near the back seat. I just began to speak to him. I don’t remember what I said first. He appeared unconscious. He was breathing.”* Donald continued to say, *“You’re going be alright. I’m here now. I’m here.*

I've called for help. It's all going to be okay, man." Donald struggled to open the glove box and finally reached a few items which indicated the man's name. Donald said, *"I began to use the man's name as I spoke to him. I just talked to him."* Don knew the emergency crews were on route, but didn't have any idea how long this may take. Donald was unable to pry the man out of the seat in any fashion, and didn't think that would be wise. Donald said, *"I put my arm under the man's head to lift his head up. I thought this would aid his breathing and support him."* For some time, he *"talked to the man,"* and I am sure that the words he spoke were those of encouragement, but mostly of assuring this stranger that he was not alone and that there was a person sharing in this moment in time with great awareness. Donald said, *"I don't really know how long it was before the crew got there. I remember I was still holding him, still talking to him, when they arrived. They were discussing how they were going to have to get the equipment to open the door in order to release him from the front area. They were talking and discussing outside the car, and he died in my arms."* When Donald told me this ending sentence he was finished with the interview. His manner of remembering and describing the events had a visual effect on him, and he didn't have any more to say.

On the threshold of finding our "Better angels" - Listening to Donald, I was aware of the rapidity of fleeting instincts. His description told of the depth of those few seconds – not even minutes – in which he confronted himself and found his courage, strength, and ability. His ability to extend himself to the needs of this stranger, knowing that the stranger in crisis may need what he was unable to ask for – someone to witness, to be with him, to comfort and hold him.

Sandy

Sandy is a 59-year-old White female who has lived in town for only a few years, moving here with her husband with the intention of retiring. She did not live anywhere near the river at the time of the flood. At the time of our interview, she was going through a difficult divorce process. Sandy had spent all of her career life as a professional disaster coordinator, travelling all over the world. During her career life, Sandy was called to fly into disaster areas to navigate significant natural, commercial, and political crises.

From my journal: I arrive at the destination to meet with the official city disaster coordinator. She has become a fixture in town after the flood, sending out a weekly update from the church with whom she is affiliated. She attends meetings with city officials, government officials including city and county recovery teams, news media and others. For our first scheduled appointment, Sandy did not arrive at our appointment. I phoned her and she described an emergency meeting. We reschedule. She tells me this date will be the only one available inasmuch as she has decided to move to Florida. When I arrive at the meeting, there is some confusion about the forms that are required by the IRB as part of the interview participants processing. She is fearful, she says, that I may ask her private information about specific people and names. I reassure her that will be not used, nor will it be necessary. Sandy appears reserved, formal, as if guarded by years of paperwork that have created an invisible net of just-right language protecting her. Her clothing is striking to me as her bright purple top and purple stiletto heels, seem a contrast to her reddish hair with strands of gold. She wears purple earrings and a small gold necklace which she twists occasionally as

she speaks. Mostly, she sits without much movement and without much expression or emotion in her body or her language. Her way of speaking is clipped, short, one or two word sentences. I begin to feel this may be a challenge. We move to a small office that is being deconstructed as her tenure as coordinator is coming to an end. It is filled with half-empty boxes and computers unplugged from their power source.

Interview: Sandy begins to give me the time line of the flood events. She starts by saying that Sunday morning of Memorial Day weekend, she drove to her church unaware of the devastation that was to mark the new landscape. When she arrived at church, she learned of the flood and the make-shift ways in which people had been organizing volunteer efforts. She recalled, *“When I started to see that people had organized groups that were searching through the mud for people’s things and that they were bringing them to the church to wash in the kitchen sink, I was appalled! You just cannot do that. I mean I know this stuff; I’ve been a disaster recovery professional for years.”* She discussed her experiences with witnessing people in the community helping others and the outreach of those efforts.

Sandy indicated several months prior to the flood she had been going through the challenges of a divorce. She described the experience of the divorce as *“difficult”* and of her attempts to integrate this life change. She had moved from the main house she and her husband shared to a much smaller guest house. In my conversation with her, she indicated a difference in value between herself and her estranged husband about the importance and meaning or purpose of home. Part of the conflicts she experienced with her husband had been concerns over privacy, territory, and personal space. Additionally, she perceived her home principally as a symbol of status, whereas it was

left unsaid if her husband had viewed the home as a place of comfort, nurturing or enjoyment. Regardless, the home for her represented much resentment and conflict.

While Sandy discussed her career as a nearly 40-year career of disaster recovery in which she travelled the world “*putting out fires all over the world*,” she longed at this juncture to experience home in a different way although the only descriptors she gave were those focused on the comparison of herself and others in the community. The experience of not feeling at home in her shared environment was also the call to create a different situation for herself.

Remarking on the challenges and difficulties of “*finding a place in this town*” due to the fact that there are few rentals and it has become a much sought after resort location, she relayed her experiences of having to put belongings in a storage unit and living and sleeping in a very small and cramped guest house. During this time, she was unsure of the next steps in her life and was going through the legal steps required of the divorce process. Her comments reflected her desire for a sense of home as a mark of completion, of security, of outward appearances of success and as a relief. It also seemed this “*finding a place*” was an expression of a physical locale as well as a metaphorical home-coming for herself and her connection with the intimate and interior aspects of her present life.

Sandy would find the flood precipitated a great shift in her meaning-making regarding the next stages of her life. When I asked Sandy about details regarding her time as a disaster recovery coordinator all over the world, she commented, “*Well, I’ve been everywhere, and it was hard for a woman. I have been in all parts of the world, in all types of crisis, all types of crisis.*” Sandy never described the crises details in any

way, and never allowed a glimpse into the reality of her work life. It was clear that she felt her career had equipped her with skills that she could utilize to be of help in the present flood crisis. She was drawn to assist because she *“knew what to do with these things. You just have to move in an organized way. I’ve done this stuff and know how to do it. It is important that people were not just collecting all the plates and dishware they found (a group of volunteers had located some pieces of an heirloom 12-piece china service and had washed it off briefly at the site and then brought it to the church for pickup by the owners) and bringing them to the church. That just wouldn’t work, you know. These people needed to be using bleach and other things at the location, at the site rather than contaminating a multitude of sites. You just don’t know what is in all that muck.”* When Sandy spoke of these past jobs, she mentioned locations throughout the world, a bit off-handed, but with the directive to me that I not include them in this writing, and obligingly they are not included. Our conversation stumbled as she felt she could not discuss any details about any circumstances, helpers or victims, neighbors, volunteers or personnel who may have had any part in the flood crisis. When I moved our discussion to her time line of the flood events, she was able to capture it in personal terms. For her, the realities of this experience included her awareness, *“I had been living in a guest home – I so want to have my own home again, with family close. You need family as you get old.”* Sandy detailed her awareness of the importance of feeling secure in a home and in the community around as she noted the volunteers in this community had been *“older people, on their own, still some in their 80’s- were without water and were out there every day clearing debris.”* Sandy described the community as one in which, *“people were out there immediately helping*

other people, digging in that hot sun, day after day. There was no way you could have expected that. These people are retired, they are older, and they are not young people doing all this!" When I asked Sandy if this struck her as unusual, unexpected or different than the crisis situations she had seen in other parts of the world, she remarked, *"Yes. It is. I don't know what it is. I don't know how to explain it."*

For Sandy, it was clear she had worked hard for most of her life and had accomplished some public self that served as a positive image, but there was also a deep longing. She described the flood as an awakening to the reality that *"she needed to have friends close as she got older"* due to the fact that she had witnessed the importance of finding a group of sympathetic people to whom one can cleave in times of physical, emotional and psychological distress. This clearly illustrated to her the lack in her own life. She described not having a sense of connection to friends or family, which she believed were necessary in older age. A life composed of work, lacking intrinsic purpose and meaning was no longer satisfying to her, while at the same time this was somewhat still an unconscious longing. This small town event exemplified the community spirit and genuine caring for which she had never been a part. She had always served on the outside of community as disaster recovery personnel and entered communities with prescriptions for change and resolution that were part of her job.

Kal

Kal is a 45-year-old White male, married, and has lived in the community with his family for 18 years. He is the director of the local EMS. Kal heard about the flood through communications delivered by the Fire Chief.

From my journal: My interview with Kal, is punctuated with cell phone calls, blaring

alarms and a short interruption from his assistant. His office reflects his time as a local professional helper. It is decorated with plaques from local businesses, community organizations and county officials. He stops to give direction to co-workers and it is clear that there is a connection between the people here, there is intensity, and there is friendship. I notice there is a large barbeque grill outside on a new deck area. He tells me that is, *“for the guys”* and smiles. When I ask him how he takes care of himself he quickly mentioned that he also works as a volunteer at the high school, *“I love helping the school. It’s a great group of people. We have such a great school and I love doing music for their events.”* Kal tells me that the biggest way that he recalibrates himself is, *“I go to the woods to be in nature, in the quiet, having to fend for myself.”* Before we get started he admits that the recent flood experience was a string of 14 plus-hour days, held together with little sleep and caffeine. He credits his wife and his children as the foundation allowing him to survive during the stressful time. Sleep was impossible during that first week he says, as he would lie in bed thinking about what he needed to do; questioning what he did and didn’t do; and, created mental lists for the next days.

Kal tells me that last week he had some time with his eldest son backpacking in Colorado and camping. It has been the balm he needed to restore and rejuvenate himself and get back to a sense of normal. Kal describes the pleasure in being able to do what he likes; and he likes the woods. The landscape of solitude mixed with survival seems to be his way of reweaving frazzled parts of himself into an integrated whole. There is an element of free spirit as he speaks, unrestrained and certain that he will be able to master any ambiguous event that may appear. He communicates without words a knowing that he has the skill and knowledge to survive. He also expresses a desire to

increase that knowledge and capability in his son. I wonder how he deals with all the intensity of the stress, the care and responsibility for so many people, the constant cellphone communication. He acknowledges that time as one in which he was connected for more than 18 hours a day; needing to organize things quickly and efficiently. It is clear that Kal doesn't depend upon others to assist him with much, especially the processing of stress and tension from the recent events.

My thoughts swirl. How does he manage to devote himself so completely to the community? How is it that people who spend their lives devoted to the emergency care of others remain kind within each situation? What strikes me most about Kal, in addition to the voluminous amount of data he can quickly recall – data relating to the amount of calls, the types of calls and the outcomes of the individuals – is his description of the scenarios and his language. In each recollection, it is as if these people are personally known to him, important to him, valuable beyond the normal expectation. He puts other people first and gives much credit to the community, the EMS group as a whole, and all the other people he has been “fortunate” to have as friends and colleagues.

Before I actually begin to ask questions, Kal speaks of the importance of making *“scared, distressed, and hurt individuals as comfortable and comforted as possible. I think it's just what we do here. It's the job here. That's what we must do.”* He values helping people in need and spends a great deal of time doing that, often with great risk to himself during those crisis moments. I was wondering if he is unusual, or even remarkable in some way. Is there a difference between those who deeply value caring and who are engaged in helping behavior compared with those who do not manifest

these traits? Do others tend to be more focused toward self-interest and/or material success, and is it always about self-interest at some level? These questions may be beyond the scope of this study, but will continue to be questions I ponder. Kal typifies this type of rugged nature, one who enjoys being self-oriented, but also with an extreme focus on others, especially those in need.

When I ask Kal about his compassionate nature, he deflects much of it. His voice is calm, slow, and reserved at first, as he expresses some intimidation about the voice recorder. He is not sure if he will say the “*correct*” things. I quickly reassure him there is no “correct” way and whatever he chooses to tell me will be perfect. I begin by started to talk of the small town in which we both live, and the threads that connected him and me professionally some years ago. The connection creates a more open environment and we discuss the use of questions and the dissertation process in general. His comments are warm and supportive. He speaks of his joy and “*delight*” in being part of the EMS office. He likes being “*in the action*” and being “*the one that closes off the roads to keep people safe*” and the one “*that gets them through a very difficult time.*”

These multi-faceted duties and responsibilities are aspects of a professional in this small town. He carefully speaks of all these duties and responsibilities as benefits but quickly moves to the importance of creating space, comfort and genuine care for his charges – the people he assists in times of crisis. This is, “*just what we do.*” He does not ever address the fact that he may be compassionate. Instead, he uses the language of stories illustrating situations in which he highlights the importance of acting swiftly almost as if to say that anyone would do the same. He continues to tell snippets which

remind me of the importance of these genuine seemingly small but important acts of kindness and care.

He strikes me as a man who is able to exhibit caring in his language about others, his descriptions, his illustrations, and his articulation of facts. He gives me positive support about the following of my own dream to pursue this advanced degree, and wistfully says he would have *“like to have completed that for himself, although it is not in the cards. I’m so glad you are doing this for you. I’m really glad for you.”* He can easily talk about the ways in which he demands the best of his staff and himself when dealing with people in a crisis, but at the same time has a non-assuming way of doing so. There is a strength of conviction in his wording and tone, and at the same time no clear understanding of why that conviction is so important to him.

The interview

Kal described his own fear mixed with frustration while providing me a rough time-line of the events. Kal said, *“The storm was coming so fast. We knew that it was going to be a bad one and a bad flood. I was watching the alerts and in contact with the Fire Chief. I was going home for dinner because I knew it was going to be a long night. Before I got there, the phone started pinging with calls and the roads were impassable. As I was driving I noticed the roads were already impassable. It started pretty fast. I was answering calls one after another. I knew this was it.”* The next round of emergency calls made him confront the reality that there were many appeals that responders could not approach due to the flooding. He said, *“That feeling of not being able to get to people, I just can’t tell you...I was moving at lightning speed...still there*

was no way to get to so many people. I mean the water was rising so fast, the road that I had just marked 10 minutes before was now covered with raging water. There were lots of places we couldn't travel to..." He described a distress call in which a brother was frantically describing his brother and sister-in-law who were elderly, trapped in the second floor of their house. They had been able to telephone for a while, but he had lost contact.

Kal and a crew attempted to get to the house. They met the brother further out and quickly realized they had to fashion a new way to get close to the house, inasmuch as the road was not navigable. The firemen were in tow, with emergency rafts and men. Kal said, *"We couldn't get through the road to their house. I knew that because of the way the water was coming. We cut through fences on a bunch of properties. Then we waded through water about knee-high, in some places more.* They arrived at a location across from the house but were preempted from gaining access due to the river of water and debris passing in front of the house. Kal said, *"Cypress trees as big as buildings were crashing by, along with farm equipment, machinery, gas containers and heaven knows what else was in all that water."* He was able to talk to the two inside with the aid of a horn, letting them know help was there and they would be able to get them out. He remarked, *"Now, it was incredible. The water was rushing by and the fire rescue wanted to put that boat in and go get them, but I just couldn't risk that...there was all kinds of debris rushing past.... if they got in that water, I'd be responsible for them too. I just couldn't let them; it was just too dangerous. I had been watching the water by looking at a vantage point on the outside of the second floor of the house. The water was up that high, but I noticed that it wasn't rising any higher. It was a decision to*

make, but I knew that water was going to come down. I told the fire rescue to go off and I'd stay there and deal with this. We waited there, and I talked to the guy and the brother both. I just kept talking to them, telling them I was there. It was all going to be okay. I got this. In about half an hour, I with one other guy waded through waist high water and got into the house. We got to the house and in through all that debris and stuff into the water in the house. The downstairs was a wreck. We saw a dog had died downstairs. We got up there – upstairs, and got the man and his wife and their little dog upstairs. They had kept that thing alive by holding it above their head and out of the water all that time. I didn't know how to tell them the dog had died downstairs. Kal tells me, "I noticed that the guy had lost his shoes someone in all that water. I knew we were going to have to go out through the field and all." He tells me, "The man had lost his shoes in the event and the crew mentioned that they could take a moment to help him find some shoes, but when he was being rescued he said, 'No, please just get me out of here...I don't need any shoes!'" Kal said, "He was so frightened and had been so close to death, there with his wife and dogs and all. He just didn't care that he was going to have to walk over rock or whatever...he just wanted to get out and on safe, dry ground."

The team escorted the man, wife and dog to a neighbor's house. *"We drove them out of there. We had to go through the field and all. We knew we could get to a neighbor's place without flooding. We got 'em there. We got 'em warmed up and tucked into bed. You know while they were in the water they were warm, and yet out of the water the concern was hypothermia."* For Kal, the experience of fear was dominant, but his fear did not interfere with his need to organize, navigate and implement the recovery. For these survivors, the elderly man and his wife, they had spent hours trying to move to

safety in their own house, and has lost contact with the only person who knew they were in jeopardy. The brother was gripped with fear as he was unable to implement a plan to rescue them and was frantic as he felt all he could do was watch them drown from afar.

Kal told me of another woman who was caught in the unexpected flood. She had rented a guest house near the river for the holiday weekend. Surrounded by acres of trees and horse pasture, she was unfamiliar with the territory, terrain and/or flooding. The rains had been continual and quickly the entire area was under water. The electricity had been “*blown out*” and she indicated her cellular phone was no longer working. Unfamiliar with anything of this nature, she saw the water getting deeper and deeper in the downstairs part of the house and retreated to the upstairs bedroom. In the dark night, with the rain pelting on the roof she said she began hearing, “*bleating, and blaring sounds – not like anything I’ve heard before.*” Speaking with her briefly, she told me that she couldn’t make out that sound. She described making her way to the stairwell from upstairs, and then slowly down each step into the 4 or 5 feet of water in the room below. Light came in flashes from the lighting and she saw a horse trapped in the room splashing and moaning in the water. All the floor to ceiling windows had been “*blown out*” and the horse was trapped inside the confines. Her response about the incident seemed as swift as her response must have been then. She said she realized she needed to “*calm the horse down and get it upstairs since that was the only place of safety at that moment.*” The woman knew the horse was afraid, and used “*every bit of my strength to calm the horse – letting it know that it needed to follow me. And it did. It went up those stairs. You know horses when they are afraid need you to talk a certain*

way, they are looking for you to be the one leading them. They are afraid.” Incredibly, the horse spent the remainder of the storm upstairs and when the waters and rains subsided the next morning, the owner of the horse was heard calling for anyone that may have seen his horse.

On the threshold of another crisis EMS Director Kal discussed the possibility of another crisis, another flood, another disaster. The flood was larger-than-life in his mind, *“there have been lots of rescues, crises, but nothing like this. We knew it was going to be bad, because the Fire Chief told us...but not like this. Not like this. But you know there will be another. We just have to be aware that this was an epic flood, but there will be another...even another crisis event.”* Kal discussed the reality of the likelihood of future floods in this central Texas area. He discussed the challenges with regard to evacuating residents prior to the event and the idea that this was so devastating because the flood hit during the midnight hour when most were sleeping. Kal remarked that the reality is many people will need to rely on each other, neighbors and friends, in order to gain access to other ways of entry and departure during flooding situations. He said, *“You know, we can’t always get there to help people. The way so many people got through this was because their friends and neighbors called them and woke them up. The worst of the flood was midnight and a little after. People in the neighborhood helped each other.”* Kal tells me several stories of neighbors helping other neighbors with kindness and generosity. One story from a home owner who received a call from the Fire Chief’s wife in the middle of the night, telling her the river was rising rapidly and to alert her neighbors. The woman knew the cabins near her were rental cabins and they were occupied by guests. In the pouring rain, the woman knocked on the guest

cabin doors, telling them a flood was imminent. The cabins and the owners' homes were completely destroyed. Kal also reminded me of the local businesses that donated equipment and services to the community. One particularly poignant mental picture I saw as well was volunteers at the only laundromat in town. They would take anyone's mud-encrusted sheets and clothing for washing, free of charge. For weeks, they were standing in the stifling 100-degree heat, washing off the sheets with hoses, at the street's edge before taking them into the washing machines. The local hardware store became the central headquarters handing out free supplies for volunteers and those offering to assist with search teams. All the churches in town coordinated together to offer different services to flood victims, survivors, and volunteers.

A secondary narrative Kal uses in understanding his life reflects a psychological nature. He discusses his growing up time and having a father who was an alcoholic. This younger Kal is briefly seen in more generalized language of events that "*happened to him*" and the ways he chose to react. He joined the military service to get away from home and mentions that it provided him with the first sense of purpose he felt in his life. Perhaps I, "*need to help others in some way.*" He speaks of helping people as giving him a sense of purpose, and a strong sense of place. These aspects of helping and purpose are wrapped in gratitude for the good fortune to have the way of life he does. He says, "*This is a great life, and I am grateful to be here and to raise my family here.*"

John

John is a 78-year-old White male, retired academician, mathematician, and nature-aficionado. He is a community resource for all manner of knowledge about the planting of trees, conservation and water issues. He lives near the river, but not close

enough to be affected by the flood event.

From my journal: I meet John in the local library. I notice walking up to the table he shares with stacks of Texas Monthly magazines, notebooks and other writing supplies, that his black rimmed glasses are precariously placed atop a stack of reading materials. It is clear he loves to read. He is also a historian of the local area and loves to write. I sit with him and am amazed that this man is nearly 80 years old. He is spry, tall, with a lean athletic build, and hands that seem comfortable with the pen he is holding to write notes, but also with the hammer I know he wields to help his friends. In the last year, I have been fortunate to get to know John through our weekly meditation group. I've noticed him quietly gathering up the cups after our meeting, often a silent presence as he walks the lone person to her car; he is always the last to turn out the light. I did not realize until our interview that John has always hoped to complete a book he describes loosely as a history of the area as well as the Blanco River. It also will include important historical data related to water and water usage in the area. While I listen to him, I realize his encyclopedic understanding of the issues; issues so important at this moment relating to water rights, water conservation and political water issues. I find myself encouraging him at the end of our interview to pursue his dream, hoping to be able to boost his confidence and resolve to accomplish this important work. He expresses joy at the thought of support, and we agree to help each other pursue our individual dreams.

Interview: The flood hit during the midnight hours and as a result of the continued rains, telephone and electricity were disconnected for the majority of residents in the community. People who were alone during the events of the night

recalled being isolated; they were without phone connection and without the ability to know the extent of the circumstances outside their door.

John said, *“Yes, Saturday it had been raining all day, as you know. The boys (his grown children) called to check in early and of course everything was fine. I don’t watch television and so had no real idea the scope of the whole thing until much later the next day. At some point - I don’t know when – the phone went out. Then the electricity went out. Phones were not working, there was no power, and there was no way to know what was happening. On my ranch, I was in the dark. When dawn hit, I saw the debris everywhere. It was like a war zone. I couldn’t believe it.”* Fear wore a certain face in the inability to connect with loved ones, creating isolation and trepidation. The thoughts and possibilities running through the minds of those not being able to connect with friends and family provided a constant source of anxiety and bewilderment.

John described the next morning after the flood, *“I knew it was going to be bad. My gosh, the power was out everywhere. The cell phones didn’t work, so I couldn’t call and check on anyone. I just kept thinking of how I needed to go check on my friends. So, I loaded up my truck with some tools, and I went first to my friend’s house. He’s a retired judge. We’ve been friends for ... gosh, I don’t know how many years. We went to school together at the university in San Marcos. Well, you know! Anyway, we’ve been friends for so many years.”*

John said, *“First, I couldn’t get through my drive with all the trees and debris. It took me at least an hour to get to out of my property. The road was impassable due to all the trees – huge root balls and the cypress trees... I didn’t even get down to the river*

yet. I had to drive through a lot to get to my friend's place. I went to my friend's place...and just stopped cold. The house was gone. There was nothing there. The foundation was there...there was debris everywhere. There was nothing else. I was sick inside. I just felt like I was in slow motion. I walked around and there was my friend. He was sitting in a lawn chair holding his head in his hands. I came up behind him. I didn't know what to do. I just stood there, then touched him on the shoulder. I said, 'Oh Charlie'. He turned around. He looked at me and said that he and Margie had decided just two weeks ago to let the flood insurance go...they didn't renew it. I didn't know what to do. I just held him. I just held him."

John said, *"I mean I don't usually do that. I have known this guy for 50 years and I've never held him. I held him. What else could I do? I found another bent lawn chair and pulled it up...and just sat next him...for several hours I think."* John described this exchange as being fruitless and impotent in that he was not able to diminish his friend's grief, or to erase the tragedy. John described his understanding, his knowing and of the desire to attend to his friend in his time of suffering and turmoil. He had been for much of his life a man of action, and the action that he could perform in that moment was somewhat unfamiliar to him. The act of sharing his friend's grief was different, he said - from the circumstances they had shared through the years. He sat with his friend. He gave no advice. He did not mention that losing the house with no insurance was a tragedy. He did not offer suggestions. He said, *"Oh, Charlie,"* and held him. Then they both sat and passed the hours gently.

From my Journal: After my interview with John, I wrote again: Another participant, John, a man who was spry, energetic, in love with nature and others, exemplified

compassion in his description of grief at the devastation experienced by others and in his inability to do anything to relieve their suffering. Unbeknownst to his neighbors and his friends, John was the person leaving anonymous envelopes stuffed with hundreds of dollars to aid in their flood recovery. Quietly and unassumingly, he would visit his neighbors' and friends' flooded houses, clearing out debris and helping search for lost articles. He also went to the river every day, organized local groups and educated them on the importance of leaving the fallen trees as they were - to allow the proliferation of breeding areas and estuaries on the river, as well as environments for future trees. Attending his weekly meditation group, John often mentioned the difference in the river bank and the sight along his usual pathway to and fro. In these quiet talks, he often mentioned how he could no longer take his fond route by the river, because seeing the devastation upset him. Instead, he would use the high density trafficked road. That very road would be the site of his fatal car crash. A large truck collided with his vehicle on a rainy evening, the following November.

Lindal

Lindal is a 62-year-old White female, retired professional academic, who lives high up on a hill overlooking the river below.

From my journal: The reality shared by a majority of the survivors indicates the hours of concern, waiting for rescue, or wading to places of safety, that they were aware of the limitations of mortal time, and in that awareness every aspect of their reality became more poignant, more powerful. Lindal is a woman that portrays a certain standoffish presence. She is a tall woman, strong and stout, and carries herself with what appears to be a certain mood of disregard for others. She appears internally focused, carrying a

small notebook with her to community meetings, lectures, talks, and even small gatherings. I hope to ask her what she writes in her book, but the moment never appears. She describes only one event to me. I interview her nearly a week after the flood and she is quiet, reserved, looking downward a significant part of the time. She is willing to assist in the interview, saying that she really only has one thing she remembers. There is a wistful, struggling, sad, and deeply personal side that I glimpse as she tells me of this event.

Interview: When I ask Lindal about the flood event, I am not aware if her house sustained damage or if she has any personal experience of the event. She describes so clearly feeling the pain for others and having a sense of knowing what they must be experiencing. Lindal recalled the night of the flood, “*Yes, I remember the night of the flood. I will never forget it. I was watching the incredible rain. It had rained for days and days. That night, I was out on my deck looking at the river way down below. I live up on the hill off Flite Acres. It was getting worse. The power was out and the rain just kept coming. The lightening would illuminate the sky for flashes. I was looking out and had the sliding door cracked a bit...and heard something. It sounded like an animal or a baby or a scream. I couldn’t tell. It was eerie. I looked out and the lightning lit up the sky. I could make out something ahead. It was an image I’ll never forget. It was a figure and two smaller figures....she was screaming “help us” “help us” and then the lightning faded the sky. The next flash she was gone – the water was moving so fast. I could hear her though. I could hear her. I’ll never forget the sound. I’ll never forget that sound.*”

Lindal was describing what she would later learn was the mother of two small

children who had been vacationing with her husband and family in a house right on the river. The rains had dislodged the house from its moorings and it had crashed into the main bridge. The woman's body was found weeks later and the children's bodies have yet to be found.

Volunteer crews continue to search each weekend nearly a year from the event. The young father was in the house floating down the river at a high rate of speed. When the house crashed into the RR12 bridge overpass, the house split apart and he was separated from his family. His wife was heard screaming "help" by neighbors, and is described by many as the "angel" who woke them up the night of the flood so they could escape. He survived but was left with the loss of his wife and two small children.

Reflection on Hearing These Stories

From my journal: Moments of crisis, we ask deeply important questions, perhaps only unconsciously. We wonder about who we are and if we can handle what is in front us. In this crisis, people survived because acquaintances and strangers went door to door informing others that the waters were rising/had risen; called their friends if they couldn't get through, and connected through volunteers from nearby communities. In this crisis, the moments were intense, the gravity air-borne, and a felt sense of energy was unmistakable. This flood was highlighted by heroic and altruistic acts, of young men who risked life and limb to pull others from raging waters that I heard about in my talks with others in the community; people who rescued neighbors via boat, risking their lives in the rescue; sheltering those who lost homes, and feeding everyone from victims to volunteers. Certainly, people are more altruistic during a crisis, but the stories emerging from people as I listen to their grief and their astonishment seem to illustrate

the power of deeply bound commitments, connections and friendships between people, their families and groups. The networks are woven with threads of friendship, reciprocity and familiarity within this community. When all the ordinary dimensions between mine and yours are shattered, people stepped up embracing one another with generosity and kindness. Perhaps a crisis, an emergency, a disaster, shifts this focus. Perhaps it shifts for a moment, a day, a week, or a month as people are completely immersed in the goodness of helping. The dramatic energy of the implicit crisis pulls the “what ifs” to the background and the current moment becomes the compelling reality.

In the hours after the flood, people were engaged with one another, helping each other, and improvising a community resource center within a few short hours. This crisis created *communitas*, a ritual sense of community, in which people acted for others as themselves. They spent time together, eating together, sharing stories of tragedy and hope, they are not strangers or heroes; they are people engaged in the same moment to moment process of intensity of life. In at least ten homes of people I know, food became the way to assist in the circumnavigation of assistance. Food was shared freely, people offering donations to help with efforts, many donated anonymously. In the spontaneously launched centers, strangers became friends and collaborators, united together against the rail of the flood.

People talk about the importance of home at each of my interactions. One’s sense of home, of belonging, of being in a place/space which allows for the unfolding of the self, is key to their healthy development. The people with whom I speak tell me how home was a crucible for meaning, complete with symbols, images and memories that tie

person to place in a significant way. A crucible in that participants were able to express home as being a container allowing authentic self-expression to find a place within. Participants were able to describe how their home had allowed them to prosper, imagine, and in some situations create new identities as they may have found their previous sense of identity outgrown and too narrow. When volunteers, friends, or neighbors found the smallest shred of personal memory; rings, photos, torn wedding dresses, it revived the survivor. When the comforts and contours of home are long distant, perhaps a piece of remembering or a fragment of our former home becomes a shred of who we were there – offering solace and comfort now – shielding us from our aloneness. Home represented the tangible connection to belonging, as who we are is so clearly reflected in the choices we make about our things. Our home is where we ask others to join us, as Dorothy longs to do, to allow others to share in our loving all the things around us as part of us.

Dorothy described first responders who were gentle, guiding her with precision to the rescue exit. The responder's voice communicated a breadth of knowledge, experience, understanding and a knowingness. In the preciousness of the crisis moment, the experts communicated that all would be well. In those moments of overwhelming uncertainty there is something on which to focus, and in which she could believe. There is an essential ingredient of compassion in the moment of awareness, of the plight of another, of another's fear – spoken or unspoken – or another's disbelief in their own ability. Compassion is the hand that addresses the person with authenticity and reverence simultaneously; holding the tension between comfort and action with a loving touch. Too much pressure, too forceful - and the survivors would likely be plunged into paralyzing self-doubt, delaying the rescue and substantially increasing the possibility of injury.

Compassion and the sensitivity that is inherent in it is not passive – as in sitting in silent witness to the fear, but moved beyond fear to action.

The challenge in this research is to sift the trauma, pain, loss and grief, which are inherently part of a disaster from the unexpected soulful transformations occurring in the midst of the event. Those transformations may be the unseen gift in the painful reality. The social ties connecting us in pleasant times are seen in this group of individuals as the social ties that keep them alive in times of crisis. I look up the word, “emergency” and find it comes from “emerge, to rise out of” and is the opposite of merge. An emergency is a separation from the familiar, a sudden emergence into a new atmosphere, one that often demands we ourselves rise to the occasion. “Catastrophe” comes from the Greek, “kata” or “turning over.” It means an upset of what is expected. To emerge into the unexpected is not always terrible, as these words have evolved to imply. These survivors have found new ways of being. The word “disaster” comes from the Latin compound of “dis” or “away, without and star or planet; literally without a star.”

Disasters seem to require an ability to embrace a certain kind of suffering that will leave long lasting fingerprints. Moments are permanently patterned into a unique design affecting the person forever more. There are losses that will be felt as rippled scars. There are also connections and bonds which will be forever changed – deepened and multi-layered now. From my time at the community center, I heard these comments:

People were calm, watching the river, hand in hand, in disbelief, but hand in hand.

In the night, at the volunteer center, no one was crying, no whimper. All different ages and types, watched and waited.

There was no hysteria. There was no disorder.

The strong helped the weak. No money was needed as volunteers brought peanut butter sandwiches. Incredible.

People encountered one another as they clambered up into the hills. One group rescued a fawn from the river, carrying it with them.

Neighbors all stood together watching as one house floated away, then another, and another. They began shouting at the river in the dark.

Most of all of us who had damages to our houses have been all over the place in terms of emotion. Horror to sadness to grief to feeling connected and nurtured.

We all reported people in the river. I couldn't tell if the people were on a house, or a car, or a boat. There was no way to see until the lightning lit up the sky. One guy said they had a flashlight and were shining it, but we all hear the screams for help. "Help!"

They were on top of something...a mattress maybe? They came by really fast. They're screaming, Help!

Yes, when they found him he said, "I just got off the river - I just lost my entire family."

In these times of crisis, of disaster, is it easier to understand our common humanity? We are shaped by culture and circumstance, each of us polyhedrons that we are, exhibiting so many sides of our person/character and mentality. We may have parts of our personality that show up in disasters, and perhaps even the stronger, more responsible, brave and kind aspects. They suggest to us what we could be, parts often relegated to the background in our lives. In these times of great difficulty, solidarity exists, kindness and generosity exists, creativity exists, and hope and possibility exist. Do we wake up in a society suddenly transformed? Or do we ourselves wake up transformed? Officials warn the future holds more disasters because of risk factors

such as climate change and the vulnerability of people who move to areas of risk.

Disasters can be generative, and although people over and over show elements of altruism, there is no way to predict or control how people will react. It has a lot to do with who the people were/are before the disaster and the circumstances of community and support, aid and kindness surrounding them during and after the disaster.

Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle – Philo of Alexandria

V. THE THEMES

The data analysis indicated themes relating to the people who experienced help and assistance in the flood crisis, and those who were helpers by nature of their job or action (first responder, person on the scene, friend and neighbor). The themes highlighted the information participants offered in which they described a certain timeline of events. These included their initial awareness of the impending flood, in which they all experienced fear. After they were physically safe, they moved into surviving, and then as the weeks passed and restoration had begun, they all began creating a new life. The theme of home was consistent in all aspects and in all stages. Participants shared the experience of being in their home and fearing loss of home throughout the event.

The Survivors Experiences

This section describes the experiences of the survivors during the disaster. It includes their experiences of first becoming aware of the danger and their accompanying fear, their experience of surviving, their thoughts about creating a new life now that everything had changed, and finally, what saturated their concerns throughout the process, was the meaning home had for them.

I. Awareness of Danger and Fear – When people realized how serious the flood was, they became afraid and started worrying about the likely impact this event would have on them. When survivors talked about fear they talked about the fear of impending death, their physical experiences of fear, and shock as an aspect of fear. The event happened at night, there was no light due to the power outage and this increased their sensitivity to the fear.

A. Isolation - Everyone experienced isolation as a result of that initial fear. The flood hit during the early morning hours when connection with others was not possible. For example, Kara told of her feeling of panic as she was unable to locate her husband. Kara said, *“I just broke out in panic, I screamed for Scott, I just screamed his name.”* Theresa described isolation, *“I mean I was alone and walking in there I just didn’t know what to do. There was mud up to 5 feet in some places.”* said, *“I just didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to do by myself.”* Dorothy told me, *“I remember thinking about why I had not left when I could. I was alone here with Honey.”*

B. Impending death – Participants were fearful that the flood waters would mean their very lives were in peril. Some realized it through the experience of seeing and hearing others. Some realized it through their own harrowing experience of their flooding home. For example, Mary described, *“No one knew then just how bad it was or how lucky we were to be alive. With morbid practicality, the stranger told me to tell his wife he loved her if he didn’t return. I’m not sure I’ll see you again.”* Dorothy described, *“I thought I was going to die. I didn’t want to die with Honey in water...in dirty water.”* Kara described, *“I realized that water must have been downstairs. There was nothing but white caps outside where the swimming pool had been.”* She said, *“I didn’t think we would be able to leave the house. I had woken up out of a deep sleep and all I could see was water out the windows when the lighting lit up the sky. I just broke out in panic, I screamed for Scott, I just screamed his name. I don’t think I was moving – just looking out the doors to the swimming pool below. All I could see was white capped water. Where was he? That was all I was thinking. As he rushed into the room, I remember screaming and crying at the same time.”*

C. Physical manifestation -When the survivors talked about fear, they described heart racing and shortness of breath, and they all put their hands over their chest as they spoke. I interpreted this as protecting their heart. For example, when Dorothy described the waiting time in her loft, she said, *“Oh, my gosh, my heart was beating so fast and I didn’t think I could breathe.”* Mary said, *“We were just moving at such a speed, gathering things in the car to evacuate. I don’t remember breathing. It was the same when we were looking at that water in the night.”*

D. Shock – When the survivors described their feelings of shock they talked about disbelief, bewilderment, not knowing what to do. For example, Mary said, *“My husband conveyed what we were feeling, which was shock, dismay, incredulity, and tempered relief. Shock has dulled my memory. We opened the door (to the house) and fish came out! I didn’t know where to put that. I had no way of asking for what I needed. I was clearly in shock.”* Theresa had fear, but not impending death. She came to view her house two days after night of the flood. She described, *“I just didn’t know what I was going to see in all that mud.”* Dorothy did not talk about shock for herself. She feared impending death, but once she was rescued, she was relieved. Her dog, Honey, suffered from the effects of the stressful event. Dorothy described the dog’s behavior after the crisis, as shaking and reacting to being parted from Dorothy. She said, *“Honey is still in shock.”*

II. Surviving the danger – In the hours that survivors were in the midst of the immediate crisis, they found ways to survive. The ways included: The kindness of others, staying busy, and, coping through growth. They are included here as subthemes. Mary and Dorothy were rescued and the only ones who spent time in the volunteer center the

night of the flood. Kara and her husband fled their home, escaping minutes before the water submerged the property.

A. Kindness of others – Dorothy was alone with her dog the night of the flood. She was rescued by professional first responders. She explained how she was able to cope with paralyzing fear because of their kindness. Dorothy said, *“He just kept telling me I could do this. I could do it. He just kept telling me that he was with me.”* Dorothy described the gentleness of the first responder in the rescue boat, *“The guy that was in that rubber boat ... it had a motor...well, we were in the water on top of my roof! He had cradled my Honey, and when he handed her to me...it was gentle.”* Mary and Dorothy experienced the Volunteer Recovery Center. Both discussed generosity and kindness of the volunteers. Mary said, *“Yes, they made us feel safe and cared for and worried about...but empowered...”* Mary described, *“I can’t even remember how people got there. People just stepped in and did what needed to be done with kindness.”* Dorothy described being at the Volunteer center, *“It wasn’t raining as bad, and I was outside under the porch shivering. A man walked by and asked if I needed anything. I said I was cold. He gave me his coat! He took his coat off and gave me his coat! I wrapped up in that thing, I’ll tell you.”* A few days after the flood, Mary described, *“We felt loved, we felt cared for, we felt the generosity of strangers and friends, family and those people that just showed up without being asked – to help.”* Dorothy described, *“I had no clothes. This blouse and four others came as a gift on my doorstep! Can you imagine? I tell you, there are so many wonderful people that helped! I could go to the high school to get something to wear. People donated all those clothes in several days! I mean I had nothing...I was rescued and those clothes were ruined, I didn’t even have shoes!”*

B. Staying busy – Tara described her ability to cope with the loss of house and property by staying busy and organizing the recovery process and thinking about replacements.

Tara said, *“Yes, we lost all the contents of the house and the guest houses. I’m an energetic person. I like to stay busy. This is just another job to do and I’ve been busy dealing with the details, the mud, getting the workers there and moving on.”* Only one participant described this; however, the strength and importance of this for her merited inclusion.

C. Crisis as an opportunity for growth – Dorothy described her time shortly after the flood, *“I did not waste time on thinking about what was lost and what I was doing in that place [the rehabilitation center]. I realized I needed a project. You just have to get up and go on. You can’t dwell on this thing.”* Mary, Kara, and Theresa all described their sense of considering others as much worse off than they. Theresa illustrated her process of coping with the loss of all her belongings by asking the question, *“I just wonder what this flood is telling me?”*

III. Creating a New Life. After the moment of immediate fear and surviving had passed, they turned their attention to building their lives anew. The subthemes include: Adventure, and New Self.

A. Adventure – Theresa described this event as the beginning of a new adventure.

She said, *“I’m a very logical person. I think that helps. At some point these things can be replaced. More than that, though, I started wondering what all this meant.”* Dorothy also, as she described, *“Yes, I learned a long time ago that you cannot look back, you have to look forward.”*

B. New self – Mary described the new self as she said, *“Those memories of who I*

was before, they are gone. I know I don't want to live in fear."

IV. Home – The centrality of home permeated their concerns at every juncture of the crisis; whether they were gripped with fear, surviving, or creating a new life. Survivors talked about the things in their homes and the environment around their homes. As they talked about these elements, they connected them with speaking of memories and identity. Mary talked about home as part of her family and her memory, almost as an image of herself. For example, Mary said, *"I thought, I didn't lose my house, I lost my home. The house is still standing...but the home. We've been there 23 years, and the family has been there. We created an ambiance and a sense of our family (in that house), it was our family history. Mary continued by saying, "my home was part of my identity. Part of me was/is tied up in that house. How we had created an ambiance... that was part of who I am...it is who I am."* After listening to Mary describe her home, I said, *"It seems we curate our homes..."* and she quickly said, *"Yeah, yes, we do. That's it. You're right."* Kara described home – *a beautiful home* – as a place of retreat. She said she enjoyed working on and around the home. Kara enjoyed the sense of having a home for others. Kara described, *"I need to have a beautiful home. It is important to me."* Theresa described her home that had been her, *"respite, recluse, sanctuary, hide-away and nest."* Dorothy identified her home as a place of gathering and entertaining friends with her special mark and hospitality. Dorothy described, *"I want to have my own space. I want to be able to have my friends come over, to be there. I have to get a little house. I do want to have a little house, a house of my own. I want to have my gal friends over and have a dinner party."*

Helpers and First Responders Experience

The second categorical description includes the themes present for those who are classified as the helpers. These include people who assisted and aided others, including the first-responder. For the helpers and responders in this crisis, their involvement largely centered on the crisis event itself. Only the disaster recovery responder was responsible for prolonged recovery assistance in her role as the lead professional for the city disaster recovery program.

I. Physical and sensory awareness of the event – When helpers talked of their first experience of the crisis, they discussed physical and sensory awareness of the event. For example, Donald indicated, *“As I was driving home in the pouring rain, I heard a car skidding off the road up ahead. I heard the crash, and saw the lights across the field up ahead. I smelled the car and the smoke, and the acrid odor of electricity. The car alarm or something was blaring.”* Kal heard about the flood through communications delivered by the Fire Chief. The fact that the rains had been steady for days prompted his office to be prepared and alert for an impending crisis. Kal described, *“I was on my way home for dinner because I knew this was going to be a long night. Before I got there, the phone started pinging with calls and the roads were impassable. I knew this was it.”* John said he did not have television, so didn’t know of the crisis until the next morning when he surveyed his property and knew there must be devastation beyond his property and especially on the river. John said, *“Phones were not working, there was no power, there was no way to know what was happening. On my ranch, I was in the dark. When dawn hit, I saw the debris everywhere. It was like a war zone. I couldn’t believe it.”* Sandy was unaware of the crisis until she arrived at church the following day and found that people were organizing themselves into local groups of volunteers and those responsible

for helping others.

II. Called to Action – Quite quickly after hearing, sensing, or seeing the crisis, helpers were aware of the need to spring into action. Sandy said, *“When I started to see that people had organized groups that were searching through the mud for people’s things and that they were bringing them to the church to wash in the kitchen sink, I was appalled!”* For example, Kal recalled, *“I was moving at lightning speed...still there was no way to get to so many people. I mean the water was rising so fast, the road that I had just marked 10 minutes before was now covered with raging water. There were lots of places we couldn’t travel to...”* Donald told the man, *“You’re going to be alright. I’m here now. I’m here. I’ve called for help.”*

III. Action and post crisis recovery

The period of intensity where “called to act” and “action” intersect is difficult to distinguish. For the first responders, the time between was very short. For example, Kal sprang into action with the first call for assistance. He arrived at the scene after cutting through fences in order to get to a house with an older couple trapped in the second floor of their home. Kal said, *“The water was rushing by and the fire rescue wanted to put that boat in and go get them, but I just couldn’t risk that.”* For Donald, the time between hearing the crash, and turning off his truck is short. The few moments he described with intensity are described as *“searching for the strength to do what is mine to do.”* Donald was quite sure that what he was likely to see was going to be extreme and he described finding his best self or better angel in that moment. Donald said, *“I remember I was still holding him, still talking to him when they arrived. They were talking and discussing outside the car, and he died in my arms.”* First responder Kal and Disaster Coordinator

Sandy both engaged with the community, survivors, and other caregivers for months after the crisis.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the experiences of the survivors and the responders to the disaster. Survivors' experienced themes of fear, including impending death and shock, coping with the event with the kindness of others, and creation of new life after the event. For the responders, themes of being alerted to the imminent crisis, being called to action, and, action are highlighted. One responder, Sandy, mentioned the theme of longing as it related to longing for a new life, after witnessing the care and compassion in the community; however, the focus of this research is on the experience of compassion. The themes in this chapter provide a basis for looking at compassion as received by those who survived the flood and those who responded to their need in the context of a natural disaster. In the next chapter I will draw on these themes as a basis for understanding the experience of compassion.

VI. CONTRIBUTION TO THEORY

Secondary research questions, according to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), can only be answered at the “more interpretive stage” (p 48). This is achieved through comparing individual experiences of compassion by first-responders and people who were the recipients of compassion with the constructs of compassion in the literature. In this chapter, I claim that two dimensions of the “self” which showed up repeatedly in the stories my participants told me, are important components of the construct of compassion. Specifically, based on my data, I describe how the extended self and the relational self were central to the experience of receiving and giving compassion in the context of this disaster. I also argue that showing compassion to the extended and relational selves of survivors can contribute to post-traumatic growth.

Current Understandings of Compassion

Definitions of compassion in the literature highlight awareness of the suffering of another and feeling a desire to alleviate that suffering in some way. The definitions of compassion discussed in my Chapter Two literature review conflate feeling and action as ingredients of compassion. For this dissertation, I use the most common and utilized definition: the ability to feel the suffering of another and the wish to mediate that suffering in some way. This definition is informed by Buddhist philosophy (Garfield, 2015).

Most focused research on compassion is being conducted through the following research streams: Self-compassion (Neff, 2003) which identifies the role of self-compassion as a basis for compassion for others within a variety of settings; the neuroscience of altruism, which identifies the fact that altruistic and compassionate acts

benefit the giver as well as the receiver, conducted by Stanford University (The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education – CCARE); Neuroscience and neurophysiology research by Singer (2013) identifies positive aspects of tending and befriending, especially during difficult circumstances, helping us understand how compassion is beneficial; and, the effects of compassion and altruism are being studied at the University of California at Berkley (Greater Good). Keltner has conducted research on compassion at Greater Good, suggesting compassion strengthens bonds between people (2010, 2014). Self-compassion, psychology of altruism, and neuroscience research form an emerging body of research currently being referred to as secular Buddhism. This western-based literature, however, has not identified the connection between the extended and relational selves as elements of compassion.

With regard to disasters, a search of peer reviewed articles using the terms “compassion” and “disaster” returned roughly 87% of articles focused on compassion fatigue and disaster fatigue, with the remaining focused on compassion, comfort, faith, spiritual aspects of care, global compassion, disaster and democracy. Compassion fatigue has been defined by Figley (1995), a disaster researcher, as “vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatization.” This fatigue is thought to be the emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. Research relating to socio-cultural implications of compassion and disaster include the significant effects of compassion fatigue on nurses and medical personnel in times of crisis (Lombardo, 2011).

While compassion fatigue is dominant in the literature with regard to compassion and disasters, post-traumatic growth research is emerging. This growth

relates to the personal as well as the collective experiences of trauma, explaining the possibility of positive change as a result of the struggle with a major life crisis or a traumatic event (Seligman, 2014). Additionally, an element of understanding the psychological elements during and after a disaster is emerging from the psychiatric literature (Van der Kolk, 2014). This literature suggests that during trauma the ability to understand the crisis, have the ability to act in some way during it, and to be able to note that the crisis is separate from you, is psychologically protective (Van der Kolk, 2003, 2014). These new understandings have driven my research, with the possibility of insight into the positive elements during and after a disaster.

The research on compassion in general is largely quantitative, and suggests that compassion and altruism have benefits for individuals as well as their communities (Keltner, 2014). There is little qualitative research on compassion, and little research investigating the phenomenon of compassion in first responders and those they encounter in a crisis situation.

Analyzing Compassion in This Study: Dimensions of Self

None of the survivors or the responders spoke specifically of compassion. Rather, I am defining compassion as awareness of the suffering of another and the desire to assist to alleviate that suffering in some way as a basis for claiming that the survivors experienced compassion and the responders acted with compassion in this disaster. Specifically, the responders did not describe themselves as acting compassionately. Rather, they talked about physical and sensory awareness of the event, being called to action, and the action they took during and after the crisis. However, the survivors told many emotional stories portraying the importance of compassionate action in their

ability to survive the disaster. The survivors' stories of the actions of both the first responders, and later the responders in the community, are the basis for my claims that human compassion was an important part of what took place in this community during and in the aftermath of the flood.

Dimensions of Self in Compassion

The stories the survivors told spoke of two dimensions of self that were tended to by the responders. These include the extended self and the relational self. Those who administered to the extended self of the person were able to acknowledge the importance of belongings, significant items of personal history, and their physical body as representations of their self (Belk, 1988). Attendance to the relational self included the importance of family, friends, strangers and volunteers, as well as neighbors.

The Extended Self

In my study, the survivors relayed the importance of their homes, their belongings, their animals as close companions, and, their sense of identity as being connected to their place of residence. These are dimensions of extended self, as discussed by Belk (1988). Survivors explained the importance of their belongings and their ability to cope with their difficulties because of the recovery of their important articles. The idea that individuals may regard their possessions as extensions of themselves is one posited by William James (1890, p 291-292), who provided the foundational understanding for modern conceptions of self, "A man's self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house..." these conceptions of self, from James, help to clarify the significance of loss of these articles.

Survivors in my study spoke of their possessions as having meaning connected to memories of family, friends, the past, and their identity. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) found that as we age, the possessions people cite as special tend to increasingly be those things which symbolize other people. Survivor's possession represented these connections to other people. This understanding of the extended self is discussed by Rochberg-Halton (1984, p 335) as:

Valued material possessions act as signs of self that are essential in their own right for its continued cultivation, and hence the world of meaning that we create for ourselves, and that create our 'selves', extends literally into the objective surroundings. If possessions are viewed as part of the self, it would logically follow that an unintentional loss of possessions would be regarded as a loss or lessening of the self.

The survivors spoke of their homes as the place in which they experienced deep connections to their belongings and others. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) provide a psychological explanation for the sense of home being a place in which we experience meaning; suggesting we invest psychic energy in an object to which we have directed our efforts, time, and attention. This energy and its products are regarded as part of self because they have grown or emerged from the self.

In my research, the theme of home and place was dominant as each participant discussed the meanings that home provided them. These included place and personal history; home as image of self, curated with belongings and memory; home loss; home as a place of healing, and as sanctuary. Environmental psychologists have studied the influences that our sense of place may have on our individual personal development (Bell, Greene, Fisher, & Baum, 2001). Places where people spend time affects who they are, who they remember themselves to be, and who they become (Hiss, 1990). People experience feelings about their homes as a strong bond of attachment (Altman &

Werner, 1985), and this attachment involves a connection with particular objects (Giuliani, 1991).

In the research, “place identity” refers to the contribution of place attributed to one’s self-identity (Proshansky, 1978; Krupat, 1983; Sabine, 1983; Shumaker & Taylor, 1983; Rivlin, 1987; Korpela, 1989). Home contributes to one’s sense of identity, as Cooper (1976), Seamon (1979), and Duncan (1982), explore the meanings associated with one’s home and how these meanings supplement and signify one’s identity. In my study, a survivor described her home this way, “*My home was part of my identity. Part of me was/is tied up in that house.*” Therefore, there seems theoretical and empirical support for the proposition that place features serve as symbols or icons contributing to place identity.

Home was shared by survivors as a deeply meaningful connection and the loss of home was significant for them. Their sense of feeling connected to their home allowed them a security which Hiss (1990) described as belonging to an environment. This security comes from feeling grounded and rooted in the memories of who one is, who one was, as lived through this setting (Altman & Werner, 1985), and offers an empirical basis for home and our home interiors being an aspect of our psychological self (Marcus, 1995, p 25).

The Importance of Extended Self to Survivors

Survivors described home as, “*The place where I know myself. The things around me remind me of my place in the world. These are the pieces of my life, and they are me.*” Friends and first responders were able to recognize the importance of these aspects of extended self as symbols of meaning. They illustrated their knowing in the actions

they took, which were designed to help the survivors, “*get back to normal in their home*” as soon as possible. During the evening of the flood, Dorothy placed her wedding rings in a small container on the bathroom countertop. During the night, when the power was out and the house was dark, she could not make her way to retrieve them. Dorothy is a widow who finds great comfort in her wedding rings. After the flood, her house was considered dangerous to enter as it was filled with mud and debris. Neighbors knew how much she would appreciate her rings. One man dug through mud to get to the bathroom area, and through several feet of mud to find them on the countertop. Dorothy described the feeling of relief including her ability to move forward as a result of a neighbor searching through the sludge to find her wedding rings. She told me, “*Now that I have my rings, I know it’s all going to be okay. I can go on,*” as she proudly presented them for my viewing.

Theresa lost all of her belongings in the flood. Her cottage was inundated with debris, mud, and water from the creek behind her home. A volunteer was helping her in the attempt to remove the sludge and ruin. He spent half a day digging through the mud trying to locate a special box that her parents had given her. Theresa said, “*That box was not worth much but it means so much to me. It is all I have of my family.*” Friends, neighbors and first responders seemed to understand the unspoken need to have one’s things, one’s remembrances, and one’s symbols. These aspects of extended self helped to invest in the survivor a feeling of belonging and of connection with their family through these symbols.

Responders showed their understanding of the importance of home as friends and volunteers took actions to assist the survivors with the retrieval of routine functions

and comforts of home. Mary described the importance of volunteers recognizing her (and her husband's) need for nourishing food during the recovery process. She said while they were in their home shoveling out mud and water, *"We were working every day on the cleanup in the house. Somehow they realized we were there eating cheese crackers and drinking bottled water."* One of the volunteers organized the local restaurants to donate food, giving people in need a daily bevy of meal choices. Mary said they found themselves relishing the fact that good, nutritious and delicious food would be delivered to their home during the working process. She said, *"You know food is really a doorway to the soul and to healing. It's amazing how much we would look forward to that as being a highlight of the day. The food was delicious and it really allowed us to go on. These were 'Mercy chefs' you know..."* Mary also described being in her home the day after the flood. *"My friend knew how important our home has always been. She brought fresh linens and a huge box of cleaning supplies, a thousand black trash bags and I don't know what else. She brought things to make the house feel less like a disaster. She knew, she just knew."* Dorothy spoke of her desire to get to her home as she told me, *"They wouldn't let me see my house because it wasn't safe. Everybody knew how much that house meant to me. All those memories – all those years there. My friends were helping me find a new place."*

Responders Tended to the Extended Self

In a natural disaster it appears the extended self is brought to bear when we are displaced and without our touchstones of safety and memory. The connection between items of meaning and coping were evident through this study. Each of the participants told of experiencing kindness, generosity, and patience from others. Theresa described

the amazing action of one of the responders: *“It was such a mess...and it took hours to dig to find anything. Finding that box made me feel like myself in the midst of all that mess. It’s amazing that he would do that! He dug down in all that mud and heaven knows what else!”* When Dorothy was relaying the night of the flood to me, she was affected by the patience, kindness and encouragement with which her rescuer addressed her. Dorothy told me, *“He kept saying I could do this thing, I could get through that window and well, he’d gotten through that window. Still, I heard him and it was as if his strength was coming to me with his words.”*

Mary described the how responders seemed to know what to do even when she was incapable of knowing, *“I had no way of asking for what I needed. I was clearly in shock. I can’t even remember how people got there.”* Friends, neighbors, and volunteers all embraced Mary with their understanding that she was in a fragile state. Helpers’ and responders’ attendance to her included knowing what to do and doing it:

“Sunday morning the rain still fell. But, before we’d even completed the first grim tour of our house, friends began to arrive. They brought coffee, shovels, willing hands and hope. I don’t know how these friends knew what to do or what to say. I never was in a place to be able to direct or to motivate myself let alone anyone else. They just showed up...you know...I couldn’t have called them...they just appeared. They checked on us every day and kept checking on us...and they seemed to know what to do next.”

These expressions were mostly given when the survivor was not able to articulate what they needed. The survivors saw the actions of others as allowing them to “survive” in a literal and figurative sense. Dorothy said, *“I survived because of that*

strong man.” Participants who experienced these acts spoke of their rescuer, friend, family member and stranger as having a “*knowing*” and responding to every aspect of their self; whether that be their physical self/extended self, or emotional self. Mary said, “*They just knew what needed to be done, they knew what to do when I didn’t.*”

According to the survivors, the encouragement first responders expressed allowed them, as survivors, to move through very difficult circumstances. Dorothy described the way her rescuer’s words positively affected her by providing support and encouragement. “*That strong young man was telling me every time I said, ‘I can’t ... I can’t...he just said, ‘Yes, you can...I’m here to help you.’ He just kept telling me I could do this. I could do it. He just kept telling me that he was with me. ...and I did it.*” Amidst the pouring rain, these responders were able to be present, careful, gentle, sustaining, and engaged with the fragility of this woman during a life-threatening situation.

Kal described attention to both the extended and relational self of the other as providing love. He said, “*This is the most traumatic time of their lives, and so we love on them. I just let them know that even though we may be ‘freaking-out’ that we ‘got this’ ... we are able to do this...we got them. This is the worst time in their lives...we are there to make sure they know that we have this...even if we are freaking out inside, we are strong in our conviction that we will take care of this...whatever it is...and them.*”

This expression of strength, leadership, and compassion was addressed to the survivors’ fragile bodily selves as well as their emotional selves. Kal remarked that in his time with Emergency Medical Services he had picked up ladies “*of a certain age*”

and realized that before they were to go to the hospital they wanted to be able to “*put their face on.*” Kal said, “*So, you know, we let ‘em. Why not? I mean it will only take a minute anyway and unless that is really going to be an issue, I’ve been known to roll the ladies into their bathroom on the gurney so they can do whatever they need to do.*”

This unspoken understanding of the importance of presentation, of a certain way of being in the world is part of Kal’s professional practice. The importance of keeping intact some aspect of extended self while many other aspects of their lives are being torn asunder is a compelling part of this understanding.

The Relational Self

Achieved by assimilating with significant others (Sedekies, Brewer, 1996), our relational self is who we are both to other people, and who we are in the contexts in which we live. Survivors discussed the importance of relationships, infused with kindness and caring, as components to their ability to cope and endure the crisis. Responders spoke to survivors with awareness of the plight of the other.

There are many theories regarding the concept of the self. While one dominant concept of the self is that of the bounded individual, Jordan has conceptualized the relational self, which encompasses a one’s experience in relation with others (Jordan, 1991). Jordan considered the ways in which empathy provides an experiential sense of connection and compassion. The relational self has also been discussed by Anderson and Chen (2002), who propose an interpersonal social-cognitive theory of the relational. Their central argument is that the self is relational with significant others and that this relational aspect has implications for one’s personality. Mental representations of significant others are activated and used in interpersonal encounters in the social-

cognitive phenomenon of transference (Anderson & Glassman, 1996). This transference is illustrated when past assumptions and experiences in relationships with significant others manage to resurface in relations with new people. An individual's repertoire of relational selves is a source of interpersonal patterns involving affect, motivation, self-evaluation, and self-regulation.

Perlman (1983) has detailed the importance of relationship as being at the heart of helping people. In my research, responders attend to the relational self in a crisis situation. Brill & Levine (2002) have described how important having a relational understanding while moving people through stages of difficulty is for caregivers. This includes the way caregivers speak to the people they are addressing. Genuine dialogue, in which people feel safe enough to speak and listen in a non-defensive manner, requires skills and a specific life perspective, according to Umbreit (1997). That perspective includes speaking and listening from the heart, as well as feeling comfortable with another who is suffering.

Responders and the Relational Self

In times of crisis, individuals endeavor to connect with others. In my study, for example, Kara described trying to locate her husband and the realization that he may be in danger. *“I just broke out in panic, I screamed for Scott, I just screamed his name... Where was he? That was all I was thinking. As he rushed into the room, I remember screaming and crying at the same time.”* Each of the participants discussed their inability to connect with others and the anxiety that caused. Dorothy said, *“My phone was not working, and there was no power in the house. I was there alone with Honey.”* John discussed the fear of not being able to connect with others and his desire to

understand and know that friends and neighbors had survived this event. He told me, *“At some point - I don’t know when – the phone went out. Then the electricity went out. Phones were not working, there was no power, and there was no way to know what was happening. On my ranch, I was in the dark.”* As John was telling me about his friend who had lost his entire house and had let his home insurance lapse, he described being in such shock and dismay but wanted to support his friend. John said, *“I didn’t know what to do. There he was sitting there, with his whole house in pieces around him. I just held him. Then I sat with him.”* This speaks of sensitivity to another which is not invasive or immediately responsive with busy action, reflecting Umbreit’s (1997) notion of thoughtful attention while listening.

The key elements in positive engagement with people as they move through the stages of difficulty, is for caregivers to understand the relational nature of working with people. The relational context according to Brill & Levine, (2002), concerns such things as caregivers being aware of their client’s and their own tone of voice, non-verbal communication, facial expressions, demeanor, and physical touch. Dorothy described her rescuers as kind and patient. She was influenced by the speech of her rescuers, which communicated to her strength and possibility, *“When the young man (the EMS first responder) told me to come with him, I couldn’t move. I just couldn’t move. I just kept saying “I can’t ... I can’t. He was so patient with me.”* Once Dorothy was able to get into the rubber boat of safety, she said, *“...away we went, in that little rubber boat. We went through the trees and down to the other side! Friends were there waiting. There were two trucks and one of them said, “Here come with us.”* Dorothy described the importance of seeing friends and neighbors at her rescue point, all connecting her to

others in the community, and to herself as part of that group.

Kal told me how important it is as an EMS director to make sure that his staff understands the mission, which he told me is to make, *“scared, distressed, and hurt individuals as comfortable and comforted as possible.”* He told me that these experiences are *“part of their job,”* and with every story Kal told me there was a deeper understanding of the personal choice that comes with behaving compassionately. The awareness (of the self) of the other and the communion of understanding was expressed by the first responders and explained as part of *“just who they are”* and *“what they have to do.”* Kal said, *“It’s just the way to do things, you know. We have to love on them if we can. This is the absolute worst experience of their lives and if we can make it any better, then we are going to.”*

Importance of the Relational Self to the Survivors

Illustrating attention to both the extended and relational self, Dorothy discussed the relational nature of her first responders and the attention to her dog, who was her steadfast companion through life and this ordeal. She spoke of watching the first responders tenderly and patiently dealing with her dog, *“The one guy in the house with me handed Honey over to the guy in the boat outside. I mean it was raining and he was out there in that rubber boat on the roof. He took Honey and cradled her.”* Dorothy described being struck by the sensitivity and personal attention this responder gave to her dog. During this event, Dorothy was alone with her dog and believed that she would die in the rising water. The rescuer became critical to Dorothy as she described, *“That strong young man was telling me every time I said, ‘I can’t ... I can’t...he just said, ‘Yes, you can...I’m here to help you. He kept saying I could do this thing.’”*

Importantly, she continued throughout our interview to talk about the first responder who took exemplary care to save her from certain peril. She noted many times during the interview that without his “*kindness and patience and caring*” she would not have survived. “*He just knew what I was feeling,*” she said.

After she was rescued, Dorothy explained how significant it was for her to see familiar faces in the midst of the crisis. She said, “*It was so great to see those familiar faces. They were there as I got out of that rubber boat. They were calling my name!*” Dorothy, along with her dog Honey, were taken to the makeshift volunteer center. She was again in unfamiliar circumstances, “*A man walked by and asked if I needed anything. I said I was cold. He gave me his coat! He took his coat off and gave me his coat! I wrapped up in that thing, I’ll tell you.*” This volunteer’s actions reflect attention to her extended self (her body) as well as her desire to connect with another.

The relational self refers to aspects of self that are associated with one’s relationships with others. The retired participants described their lives as being connected by their families, their extended families, their activities in local church and civic organizations, and in some cases in their neighborhoods. Mary described her family’s home as, “*the touchstone for extended family and the kids’ friends. They would all flock here.*” Dorothy described her participation at the church and her need to continue to be able to entertain her “*buddies from church in my own home. It’s important to me to have them over, they are my friends and they keep me going. I can’t tell you how the support from all these people at church helped me. They fed me, and clothed me. Those volunteers found my dishes. They had washed down the river.*” All of the survivors described how important it was for them to have connection to people,

their homes, and their belongings, representing the concept of relational self as well as extended self.

The Construct of Compassion

Although the construct of compassion is not well-defined (Goetz, 2004), Paul Ekman (2010) has offered a taxonomy of compassion with the following categories: (1) Emotional Recognition; (2) Emotional Resonance; (3) Familial Compassion; (4) Global Compassion; (5) Sentient Compassion; and, (6) Heroic Compassion. Heroic Compassion has two forms: Immediate Heroic Compassion; and, Considered Heroic Compassion. Ekman's (2010) taxonomy draws similarities between the Dalai Lama's and Darwin's perspectives on compassion.

Heroic Compassion refers to altruism with some risk involved. While Immediate Heroic Compassion is impulsive, exemplified as someone impulsively jumping into the raging river to save someone. Considered Heroic Compassion is compassion done with thought. According to Ekman (2010), this considered heroic compassion can be maintained for many years.

Heroic Compassion, has been studied by Monroe (2014) and, includes these criteria: 1) you must act; 2) your goal is the welfare of the other person; 3) your action has consequences for that person; 4) there's some putting of yourself at risk involved; 5) and, you have no anticipation of reward or recognition. The first responders and helpers in this study meet the criteria for heroic compassion. They recognized the crisis, acted to assist others and thereby hoped to benefit that person's welfare; there were consequences because of their actions; there was some risk involved; and, they did not anticipate recognition or reward.

Criteria 1: You must act.

At least three of the responders talked about how urgently they needed to act. For example, Kal, a first responder told me: *“The storm was coming so fast. We knew that it was going to be a bad one and a bad flood. I was watching the alerts and in contact with the Fire Chief. I was going home to get dinner because I knew it was going to be a long night. As I was driving I noticed the roads were already impassable. It started pretty fast. I was answering calls one after another.” That feeling of not being able to get to people, I just can’t tell you...I was moving at lightning speed.*

John, one of the people in the community said: *“The cell phones didn’t work, so I couldn’t call and check on anyone. I just kept thinking of how I needed to go check on my friends. So, I loaded up my truck with some tools, and I went first to my friend’s house.”*

Finally, Donald, another community member, “knew” it was his responsibility to act: *“I heard that crash. I knew there was a bad wreck there. The rains were just pelting down and I was wrestling with some part of me – my self - that for a few seconds was frozen to my seat in the truck. I knew that no matter how I dreaded it, going to that scene was mine to do.”*

Criteria 2: Your goal is the welfare of the other person.

Kal was concerned not only with the welfare of the survivors, but the other first responders, too: *“The water was rushing by and the fire rescue wanted to put that boat in and go get them, but I just couldn’t risk that...there was all kinds of debris rushing past....”*

John was concerned about his friend who lived on the river, and had not been

able to contact him by phone. He was hoping to be able to assist his friend in some way. When he got to his friend's house he saw: "*There was debris everywhere. There was nothing else. I was sick inside.* [This also reflects Ekman's category of Emotional Resonance as John feels sick at the sight of the destruction.] *I didn't know what to do. I just held him. I just held him.*"

Donald intended to provide calming language to the stranger, as well as physical comfort to aid his breathing, as he said: "*You're going to be alright. I'm here now. I'm here. I've called for help. It's all going to be okay, man. I put my arm under the man's head to lift his head up. I thought this would aid his breathing and support him.*"

Criteria 3: Your actions have consequences for the other person.

Kal, again, was worried about both the responders and the survivors: "*I just couldn't let them; it was just too dangerous.*"

Inasmuch as I did not interview the friend that John comforted, I can only conceive that his action of comfort had a positive impact on his friend: "*I have known this guy for 50 years and I've never held him. I held him. What else could I do? I found another bent lawn chair and pulled it up...and just sat next him...for several hours I think.*"

Donald described actions which I imagine were of comfort to the stranger, as he was not alone at the time of his death. One can only hope that this stranger heard reassuring words and knew that he was being cared for, embraced, and acknowledged during his final moments: "*I remember I was still holding him, still talking to him, when they arrived. They were discussing how they were going to have to get the equipment to open the door in order to release him from the front area. They were talking and*

discussing outside the car, and he died in my arms.

Criteria 4: There is some putting of yourself at risk involved.

Kal was aware of the debris, floating gas and propane tanks in the water, along with untold other potential hazards: *“I, with one other guy, waded through waist high water and got into the house. We got to the house and in - through all that debris.”*

John was aware of the dangers that may be on the road, but still wanted to connect with his friend: *“The road was impassable due to all the trees – huge root balls and the cypress trees... I didn’t even get down to the river yet. I had to drive through a lot to get to my friend’s place.”*

Donald was close enough to the car to be engulfed by the explosion if it were to ignite: *“While trying to think, I could smell something like the odor of electricity.”*

Criteria 5: *You have no anticipation of reward or recognition.*

None of the responders spoke of anticipation of reward or recognition, or the denial of such anticipation. I can only infer from their interviews. For example, I believe that Kal did not expect reward or recognition as he was in the process of doing his job. Kal’s actions during the crisis are those of efficient leadership and professionalism, but also with a care and kindness specific to the person he is helping.

John did not speak of any reward or recognition from his interaction with his friend. Additionally, as noted previously, John was the person leaving anonymous envelopes stuffed with hundreds of dollars to aid in their flood recovery. Quietly and unassumingly, he would visit his neighbors’ and friends’ flooded houses, clearing out debris and helping search for lost articles. He also went to the river every day, organized local groups and educated them on the importance of leaving the fallen trees.

It appears to me that in this moment of crisis, Donald was moved to make the actions to assist with this person without regard for any potential reward or recognition. Donald, after realizing that attending to the car crash was “his to do”, did not recall an active commentary in his head. He walked up to the site in which a man had crashed his car, aware of the smell of electricity. He did not know the man, and was at risk in a car that could likely ignite, but continued to hold the man as he died in his arms.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERATURE ON COMPASSION

Compassion and the Self

This study showed the magnitude of embracing a person’s sense of self during and after a crisis situation. My study links compassion in the context of a flood disaster to the relational and extended selves of the survivors. The survivors in this study described the importance to them of the elements of their extended selves and their relationships, and their relief and gratitude when those who responded cared for those elements.

Study participants either felt moved by the discomfort and suffering of another and then acted to alleviate it; or, had the experience of receiving compassionate action from another. What I observed through the shared stories of their experiences in this crisis event, is that the participants all spoke to elements of their self, specifically to their extended self and/or their relational self. Survivors described being able to move forward as a result of other people’s kindness, reflecting the idea of growth during and after traumatic events. This emerging understanding of the way one is able to affect the crisis situation is crucial to our understanding of the development of programs aimed at assisting first responders deal with crises in the future, as well as scientific

investigation.

Post-traumatic Growth

The experience of a crisis, disaster, or a significant difficulty, may leave psychological effects such as fatigue and lingering distress. An alternative to these effects is illustrated by people who may actually be psychologically stronger than they were before the event. This is called post traumatic growth (Seligman, 2014). Most of this research on post traumatic growth is longitudinal, conducted at least a year after the incident.

In my study, I cannot make such statements of the inevitability of post traumatic growth a year out from the flood. However, several participants in my study exhibited characteristics of post traumatic growth which Seligman (2014) describes as understanding, “Human beings are ineluctably creatures of narrative, creatures who make meaning, tell stories about their lives. And to the extent that you can create a narrative of the trauma, a more mature way of viewing the world can arise.” Seligman indicates this is an important component of an enabling condition after trauma. Participants described their awareness of the severity of the event and their realizations after which included a focus on moving ahead: *“I want to get a house to be able to entertain my friends”* and *“... I know I don’t want to live in fear. Another flood could happen and we live on the river! I just don’t want to have to go through this depth of feeling about my things, my memories. I will not be held hostage to my belongings”*; and, *“More than that, though, I started wondering what all this meant? Like, what is this telling me? I can’t do anything to change this situation and I can just try to figure out what’s next for me. What is the next thing?”* Dorothy described being able to move

ahead with her life, after receiving her rings as well as the care and generosity of the community, and her first responders. Theresa framed her experience of the flood as an adventure calling her to the next thing in her life. Mary identified her desire to move beyond the materialism she realized her home had come to represent. These aspects after the crisis indicate elements of post traumatic growth. Each of these participants discussed the kindness and generosity they received from others as being integral to their ability to cope with this crisis.

Chapter Summary

All of the themes emerging from my analysis of the study participants' stories supported the claim that post-traumatic growth is social and relational, related to their extended and relational self. The importance of having volunteers who recognize that the personal memories contained in belongings are important reminders of our associations, past experiences, understanding of ourselves, and our relationships were illustrated in this research. The research on compassion in a crisis has not yet considered the impact of compassion with regard to the extended and relational self of people in a crisis. This study finds that the role of the extended and relational self is positively connected to the experience of compassion in a crisis from the survivors' perspective.

VII. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this research study was to explore how persons affected by a flood make sense of their experiences of compassion in such a crisis. In this chapter, I will summarize the focus of this study including the methods, findings and the significance of the study. I will address the limitations of this study, and conclude by suggesting further research opportunities in the field of compassion studies, professional development training, and policy.

Summary

This study investigated compassion experiences in a flood disaster from the perspectives of both survivors and responders. The purpose of this study was to explore peoples' experience of compassion in relation to a natural disaster, and to contribute to professional development of responders, as well as to the understanding of the construct of compassion.

Methodology

In order to understand compassion from the perspective of those who have experienced it, I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as both the guiding philosophy and the methodology. Interpretative phenomenological analysis approaches qualitative, experiential and psychological research (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009) with a focus on people in the midst of their world. Nine in-depth, face-to-face interviews were utilized allowing participants to tell their stories, in their own words. Because the principal goal of these interviews was the production of participant narratives, the ideal interview situation was one in which there was "minimalist interviewer intervention" (Wengraf, 2001, p 112).

Demographics

Demographic results indicated a similarity of individuals in this study. The participants, with ages ranging from 40 to 91 years of age, had an average age between 45-60 years. Ethnicity was 100% white. Occupations ranged from Management, to Administration, Education, and Retired; with one participant in each of those preceding categories. Professional occupations included medical (3) and governmental (1).

Findings

The data analysis indicated themes relating to the people who experienced help and assistance in the flood crisis, and those who were helpers by nature of their job or action (first responder, person on the scene, friend and neighbor). The themes highlighted the information participants offered in which they described a certain time-line of events. These included their initial awareness of the impending flood, in which they all experienced fear. After they were physically safe, they moved into surviving, and then as the weeks passed and restoration had begun, they all began creating a new life. The theme of home was consistent in all aspects and in all stages. Participants shared the experience of being in their home and fearing loss of home throughout the event.

This study showed the magnitude of embracing a person's sense of self during and after a crisis situation. The survivors in this study described the importance to them of the elements of their extended selves and their relationships, and their relief and gratitude when those who responded cared for those elements. My study links compassion in the context of a flood disaster to the relational and extended selves of the survivors. Study participants either felt moved by the discomfort and suffering of another and then acted to alleviate it; or, had the experience of receiving compassionate action

from another. What I observed through the shared stories of their experiences in this crisis events, is that the participants all spoke to elements of their self, specifically to their extended self and/or their relational self. Survivors described being able to move forward as a result of other people's kindness, reflecting the idea of growth during and after traumatic events.

All of the themes emerging from my analysis of the study participants' stories supported the claim that post-traumatic growth is social and relational, related to their extended and relational self. The importance of having volunteers recognize that the personal memories contained in belongings are important reminders of our associations, past experiences, understanding of ourselves and our relationships were illustrated in this research. The research on compassion in a crisis has not yet considered the impact of compassion with regard to the extended and relational self of people in a crisis. This study finds that the role of the extended and relational self is positively connected to the experience of compassion in a crisis. This emerging understanding of the way one is able to affect the crisis situation is crucial to the development of programs aimed at assisting first responders deal with crises in the future, as well as scientific investigation.

Implications Emerging from the Research

The implication emerging from this research is that the expression of compassion in a crisis, as well as how the beneficiaries of compassion make sense of their experience, is most effective when the compassionate acts incorporate and consider the extended and relational-self of the individual. This study's findings have several implications for scholars in the field of compassion studies, crisis studies, and professional development training for first responders. Attention to the compassionate

care, the quality and depth of regard for survivors heightened their ability to move on after the crisis. Additionally, it is possible that the patient and kind awareness of extended and relational selves allowed survivors to move through the immediate crisis. Furthermore, the method and methodology used in this study, along with the analytical framework used, have implications for scholars interested in interpretative phenomenological analysis and qualitative studies on compassion. Finally, this study has implications for scholars who have interests in community building, which focuses on relationships and specifically disaster studies.

Contributions of this Study

Contribution to Practice

Professionals are often trained with high focus on the constructs of productivity, efficiency and hierarchy, especially professionals within the medical and emergency personnel realms. Within this professional training, little preparation or attention is focused upon the aspects of compassion in general, and specifically compassion extended and received in a crisis. By illustrating the importance of responders tending to the relational and extended self of those they encounter, training programs may be designed with these important elements in mind.

Contribution to Policy

In terms of policy, the current research underscores the need for modifications in educational learning given to first responders in disaster situations which would include a psychoeducational focus on the multidimensionality of self in crisis situations. The conflation of compassion with acts of increased self-awareness and understanding of self would be aspects of this new direction.

Contribution to the Construct and Theory of Compassion

The current study sought to identify the relationship between the crisis moments and the process of compassion on the part of first responders during a crisis event as well as the victims who are recipients of compassionate care during the crisis event. Findings showed the impact of responders who understood the importance of relational and extended self to crisis survivors. This understanding of the construct of compassion from the survivors' perspective allows this understanding of compassion to contribute to the knowledge base information about the ability to respond more effectively in a crisis.

Limitations

This study illustrated the importance of attending to the relational and extended self in times of crisis. This phenomenological study was designed to understanding the meaning participants found in the compassion acts they gave and received. Transferability is an issue as this study was composed of White, midlife professionals living in a central Texas community, and therefore may not be transferable to other situations, crises, or disasters. This event was a single flood event occurring in a fairly affluent small town community, with an educated population of close-knit residents who know each other due to proximity and interests. These contextual factors may affect both how the survivors experience the flood and how the infrastructure of a small town emergency response team is able to operate with a sense of agency in such a crisis. Given the demographics of this participants in this study, this study lacks cultural and socio-economic diversity, and may have some bearing on how these individuals experience and describe receiving or giving compassion. Finally, disasters and crises are diverse by nature and the result implicated in this research may not be

applicable to all other such events.

Suggestions for Future Research

Previous research on compassion in crisis situations has focused primarily on the likely eventuality of compassion fatigue for first responders, care professionals and others involved in the experience of crisis. Further investigation into the benefit of responders having a sense of agency in the crisis as a buffer to the suggested likelihood of compassion fatigue in a crisis is necessary. Few emergency personnel receive any training on how to address the extended and relational self of the suffering, and how this awareness may contribute to the post-traumatic growth of the survivor. One way for these elements to become part of responder awareness would be by providing psychoeducational workshops for responders and staff. Such trainings should offer information about the role of individuals' belongings, their friends and family, as well as their home during the impact of the crisis and going forward to recovery.

For all participants in this study, social support appears to be protective, while fostering compassion. It is recommended that responders and caregivers develop and nurture connections within their communities. Supportive learning groups would provide opportunities for educators to discuss this important dimensions and to engage in collective sustenance for those in the path of crisis.

APPENDIX SECTION

Appendix A: Informed Consent

**Texas State University
San Marcos, Texas**

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Research: Art and Soul Stories of the Wimberley Flood, Memorial Day, 2015

Funding Agency/Sponsor: N/A

Study Investigator: Moira Martin/Principal Investigator/APCE, Texas State University

What is the purpose of the research?

You are being asked to participate in a study that is exploring the areas of hope, resiliency and learning in adults who experienced the Wimberley flood over Memorial Day weekend, 2015. This research study is built on several, general topic areas:

1. The relevance of learning that occurs in natural disasters
2. Resiliency and/or hope in the midst of such disasters
3. The role of community, common humanity and kindness (compassion) in such disasters.

To answer these questions, you will participate in an interview with Moira Martin, at locations to be determined based on individual needs.

How many people will participate in this study? I will interview between 10-20 individuals who have some relevant experience of this event.

What is my involvement for participating in this study? To participate in this study you will need to sign the informed consent document, which states that you understand the purpose of the study, and agree to participate. After you sign the informed consent document, I will ask you basic questions about yourself (age, race, ethnicity, etc.). These are contained in the general interview process. I will then ask you interview questions that are related to the topic areas identified earlier.

How long am I expected to be in this study? How much of my of my time is required? Your involvement in this study is to complete the interview. I expect this will take from 30-60 minutes. This is a one-time interview and it is not expected that we will meet again. We may, however.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will they be minimized? There is not physical risk for participating in this study. Because resiliency and hope and discussion of the flood events can be sensitive topics, it is possible you might feel some emotional discomfort as a participant in this study. To minimize the emotional risk, you can skip any question you do not feel comfortable answering and you can leave the interview at any time.

What are the benefits for participating in this study? A benefit to you is that it might feel good to talk about your experience in the recent events, especially how you stay hopeful and

resilient. A benefit to the larger community is it may serve as a way to understand the importance of involved community members to assist with individual healing, especially in crisis situations. With this information, we may better understand the important experiences and to validate the importance of kindness, compassion, and resiliency.

Will I be compensated for participating in this study? There is no compensation for participating in this study.

What is an alternate procedure(s) that I can choose instead of participating in this study? If you do not want to participate in this study there are no other alternatives.

How will my confidentiality be protected? You have a right to privacy, and all information that is obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential as far as possible within state and federal law. For this study, the only personal information I am collecting is your signature and printed name on this informed consent document. You will not be asked to disclose information such as your birth date, social security number, etc.

To protect your privacy, all signed consent forms will be stored separate from the other research materials in my Project Supervisor's office at Texas State University (Dr. Ann Brooks). All interview transcripts and questionnaires will be coded with identification numbers and I will store those on my password-protected computer. Do keep in mind that there will be a list linking the ID numbers to names, but this list will be kept separately from the other research materials in a secure place. The only reason I keep this list is so that if someone does wish to have her information removed from the study I am able to identify that person's specific information.

The interview will be audio recorded and will be used for transcription of the interview. If you choose not to have the interview audio recorded, you will just need to tell me and it will not be audio recorded. The tape will be stored in a locked file drawer in my office for recordings. Transcripts will be stored on my computer with no identifying information. I will use pseudonyms for all interviewees and will omit or disguise any identifying information. The research records will be stored for no more than 5 years.

The Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviews research studies to ensure that safeguards are in place for privacy and confidentiality. The Texas State University Institutional Departmental Review Board and University IRB #2015S5667 approved this study.

Is my participation voluntary? Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to stop the interview at any time or ask to pass on specific questions with no penalty.

Can I stop taking part in this research? Yes, you can stop taking part in this research at any time.

What are the procedures for withdrawal? If you wish to withdraw from the study, you can email Moira Martin at mcm166@txstate.edu, and make this request. Your information will then be removed from the study.

Will I be given a copy of the consent document to keep? Yes, you will be given a signed informed consent document to keep. You will also be given a copy of the RESOURCES information regarding local contacts for grief support, should you need it.

Whom should I contact if I have questions regarding the study? If you have any questions about the research study, please email Dr. Ann Brooks, at abrooks@txstate.edu.

Whom should I contact if I have concerns regarding my rights as a study participant? Texas State IRB Review Committee, Texas State University.

This project [IRB Reference Number 2015S5667] was approved by the Texas State IRB on July 13, 2015. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Jon Lasser (512-245-3413 and email: lasser@txstate.edu) and to Becky Northcut, Director, Research Integrity & Compliance (512-245-2314 and email: bnorthcut@txstate.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have read or been read the information provided above. You have received answers to all of your questions and have been told who to contact if you have any questions. You have freely decided to participate in this research, and you understand that you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Participant name (printed)_____

Participant signature _____ Date_____

Investigator Name (printed) _____

Investigator signature _____

Appendix B
Key Narrative Questions:

Ethnicity, age, gender

Place of residence

Tell me of your personal experiences of the event, as much as you are comfortable.

Was there one significant experience of (kindness/generosity/compassion)?

How did that feel? What was the feeling as you extended or received compassion?

How has this transformed you?

What did you learn about yourself in this event?

What kinds of challenges did you experience as a result of the event?

The experience undoubtedly has been really difficult. What is your attitude about the future in the midst of all these challenges?

How do you feel you are able to bounce back from this experience?

How was/is the community a factor in your response to this experience? Individuals?

What do you think has been the most important thing you've learned during this experience?

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