

Gator News Opinion Piece

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Since the events on last Saturday, Internet news sources have been dominated by two tragedies—the earthquake in Nepal and the riots in Baltimore city. Of course, these two news pieces call the public's attention because of the extreme nature of the events and the implications that they have for our humanity.

For me, they also have special import, for I am a U.S. citizen, born in Akron, Ohio, who has been living in Kathmandu, Nepal for the past four years. Like most people, I have a special interest in stories about the places that I have connected with, the people who live there, and the significance that it has to my own life. In watching how these two seemingly unrelated news pieces have developed over the past days, I see a strikingly similar perspective arise out of the rubble and devastation left in the aftermath of these events. Both appear to teeter on the singular issue of helplessness and how people deal with forces outside of their control.

Experiencing a 7.8 earthquake is a phenomenon that goes beyond the understanding of the human mind. I don't mean that in a scientific or cognitive sense, for we are able to analyze tectonic plate movements and record the minutia of seismic activity on detailed global maps that give a clear image of the earth's activities. What I refer to is the actual experience of being in an earthquake and the awesome (I use that in the literal context) experience of having the ground beneath your feet turn on you and fail you has never done before. The ground turns to soup and the footing you've become accustomed to for your entire life is instantly gone. And in the midst of the deafening noise and rumblings and screaming, your senses become honed so that your perception of time and space are transformed too. All of this is outside of your control, imposed upon you by a force with which you could never contend—Nature herself. To differing extremes, the people of Nepal live with this reality on a daily basis. This time, it was an earthquake, but there is a myriad of natural calamities that loom over the people of Nepal—landslides, monsoon flooding, avalanches and water shortages to mention a few. This is the way it is in a country that continues to struggle with poverty, political uncertainty and long-standing social differences. This is their *status quo* that they must confront head on.

Although I don't know anything more specific about the Baltimore riots than what I have been able to read in the mainstream media, I have a sense that many people involved in the backlash about police violence share a similar sense of helplessness with the people of Nepal. The same might be said for the people of Ferguson, or New York City, or even Cleveland who have also suffered cases of injustice at the hands of those who maintain the *status quo*. Though the causality of these two disasters is quite different (one being of nature, the other being of human conduct) the outcomes of how they are consequently dealt with point to the common crisis of institutional failure in both of these nations.

When confronted with adversity, people depend on existing institutions to help where the individual cannot. Their failure leads to this very same sentiment of helplessness, which inevitably plays into the counterpart feelings of victimization and destitution. In Nepal, the tragic earthquake that has claimed so many lives and altered many others is a symptom of the country's institutional

failure on various levels. The disastrous images in Kathmandu that have dominated international media are only part of the story being told here, for there are the untold backstories of social inequality, little or no enforcement of building codes, lack of city planning, political corruption, insufficient diffusion of architectural technology and the long-standing issue of poverty, which extends well into the countryside of Nepal. All of these issues have added to the devastation and the underlying feeling of helplessness that the Nepalese people compart.

Not dissimilar to Nepal, the problems that have arisen in the cities across the U.S. also have backstories that need to be overtly confronted with a resolute spirit of addressing the growing shortcomings in U.S. culture. Issues of racial inequality, growing economic disparity, distancing power structures in government, an accepted culture of violence, disproportionate military spending, inadequate and unequal educational systems, lack of purposefulness among citizens and other factors have all fueled the situation, which has culminated into something volatile. As I look into the fishbowl of the United States, I see a country in crisis that has been largely unresponsive to these issues. I will even go as far as to say that in some cases the cultural response has been weaker than in places like Nepal, a nation that many consider to be an 'underdeveloped world'. Ostensibly, it begs the question, 'what does it mean to be in the 'developed world'?

It is irrational to blame Nature for her misgivings, but it is simply misguided to ignore the ones we have created for ourselves. When existing institutional paradigms are no longer sufficient, what is the appropriate course of action? When institutions are not holding up their end of the bargain, how can they be ameliorated in sane ways? The United States of America has an established tradition of democratic change, but cracks in this infrastructure are becoming ever more apparent. The inability, or unwillingness, to confront the inadequacies of our systems will consequently lead to their very decay. I sincerely hope that this is not what I am witnessing and my assessment is erroneous.

As a newly democratic nation, Nepal is learning how to address similar questions, but they will need help along the way. The aftermath of Saturday's earthquake is one of those times when it is the responsibility of the world to aid in their process and to help them on their path towards 'recovery', while not acquiescing to the shallows of the word.

From this, I believe, we can all reflect on how to move forward in addressing the more profound institutional problems that are embedded in both countries.