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**Thinking in an Emergency**

- an Interview with Elaine Scarry

*David V. Johnson*

Elaine Scarry / Photo by Rick Friedman

*Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was fond of noting that the Chinese character for “crisis” also means “opportunity.” In this era of disasters both natural and man-made, governments threaten to seize these emergency “opportunities” to augment their authority at the expense of democracy. In her latest book,* [Thinking in an Emergency](http://www.powells.com/biblio/9780393078985?&PID=35607)*, Harvard social theorist Elaine Scarry examines in concrete detail the many ways citizens and communities can prepare for emergency situations in order to preserve themselves and their autonomy.* BR *Web Editor David Johnson spoke to her recently about the Japanese earthquake-tsunami disaster, Swiss nuclear fallout shelters, and how not to respond to emergencies.*

**David Johnson:** What inspired your interest in the topic of emergencies?

**Elaine Scarry:** I have been working for many years on the problems that arise from the population being willing to suspend its own responsibility for self-governing actions. One of the things that has seduced people into giving up on their own actions is the claim of emergency—the government will often make the spurious claim that because certain things require very fast action, there is no time for ordinary processes of deliberation and thinking, and therefore we have to abridge our normal protocols.

I find exactly the opposite to be the case. Thinking and emergency action are deeply compatible. Sometimes that thinking takes the form of very recognizable deliberative processes, and many other times that thinking takes a form that may be less easy to recognize—protocols, procedures, laws that we deliberate about in advance, and we build all the deliberation into the protocols, and then that allows us to act very quickly.

**DJ:** In the book you’re quite critical of the United States, and how we prepare for emergencies, and how our government is structured to cope with emergencies.

**ES:** Right now I feel that we in the United States have let these abilities lapse, though I think that traditionally it was something we, along with other countries, were very good at. For example in the book I talk about the incredible mutual aid contracts on the plains of Canada’s Saskatchewan region, and then I look at mutual aid pacts in countries as different as Japan, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe. Does the United States have mutual aid? Does it have the kind of neighborhood groups Japan had that allowed its civilian population to respond so effectively in the 1995 Kobe Earthquake? I think the answer’s no, and we can see that from Katrina and other disasters. But, in the past—let’s say in the nineteenth century—I think we did. Tocqueville in his account of America just marvels at the number of voluntary associations in the United States.

**DJ:** You mentioned your discussion of the voluntary community associations in Kobe, Japan, and how they responded to the Kobe earthquake. I assume that you followed the recent events in Japan and the continuing worries about the nuclear reactors. Did you learn anything new?

**ES:** The media understandably has focused a lot more on disaster than on rebuilding and rescue. For example, it’s followed very closely all the stages of what’s happened at the nuclear reactors, and perhaps hasn’t given as much attention to how the damage from the tsunami and earthquake are being handled. But here and there, there are stories. For example, from the very beginning a journalist named Martin Fackler at *The New York Times* seemed to be very alert to the subject. Immediately following the tsunami itself he had a story about people trying to get to higher ground, to a higher floor of a shelter, and the stairway being blocked by elderly people who couldn’t climb the stairs: the residents immediately formed a human chain and passed the people up the steps, and therefore got those elderly people to a position of safety, and also cleared the steps so that the passage wouldn’t be blocked. He later did a story about a town called Hadenya that was cut off from the rest of the world by tsunami waters for twelve days before it got any help from outside. He described how the people, by making to-do lists and divisions of labor, were able not only to survive but essentially—I can’t think of the right term. I don’t want to say they survived in style, but they had procedures for cleaning up dishes and distributing food and so forth, and organized themselves into relevant kind of task groups.

**DJ:** One thing I noticed in the coverage of the Japanese disaster was commentators saying how stoic and calm the Japanese were. I wouldn’t want to deny that there are cultural differences between peoples and nations, but if you have the right procedures and institutions in place for a disaster, then people will tend to be calm, because they’re calm when they know what to do.

**ES:** That’s exactly right. When we look at our own emergency surgeons, they also would look very calm even during a hair-raising procedure to try to save someone’s life, because exactly the result of prior preparation for emergency is that it allows some space in your mind for thinking. You’re not trying to invent everything on the spot; you may have to invent one thing on the spot, but nine of the ten things you have to do you’ve already rehearsed mentally. And so yes, I think you’re exactly right, that calmness is something that would accompany a society that has practiced. You know, in some spheres of emergency action people have described how time seems to slow down. Even though only minutes are involved, it can seem as though the whole event is taking place in slow motion. Surgeons have sometimes said that.

**DJ:** You compare the United States unfavorably with other countries and cultures, but it seems as though there might be local communities across the country that might have community organizations and procedures in place that would score highly or compare more favorably. I wonder whether one of the messages of the book is that, apart from what we have to do politically to make the federal government more democratically responsible, we can also act locally, to prepare ourselves.

**ES:** Absolutely, that is a central message of the book, and you know, I even contemplated, “Could I give a copy of this book to everyone on my street?” We use the term grassroots, but mutual aid or self-defense really is highly local—it requires knowledge of local ground, the concrete texture of civilian life, the gradient of the hillside of your street, the kind of trees that are there If we go all the way back to the Revolutionary War, we see that people could defend the country because they knew the exact terrain; they knew the bend in the forest and contours of the farmland. If you go out to Concord, Mass., and follow the Battle Road of the Revolution, or read the great descriptions that we have from historian David Fisher of Paul Revere going house-by-house, street-by-street, you see that acts of protection are highly concrete.

It’s important to recognize the capacity that ordinary citizens, today as in the past, have for self-defense. The book I did for *Boston Review*, [*Who Defended the Country?*](http://www.powells.com/biblio/9780807004579?&PID=35607), shows that on 9/11 it was the ordinary citizenry that was able to protect the country by bringing down Flight 93—whereas all the military arrangements did not enable the Pentagon to bring down Flight 77. The Pentagon was not able to protect even the Pentagon, let alone the rest of the country. And there are many other examples that show the ordinary citizen as very crucial to American defense. For example, the Shoe Bomber in December of 2001 was stopped by ordinary citizens on the plane. The Christmas Bomber—the Christmas would-be suicide bomber on Northwest Airlines in 2009—was stopped by citizens on the plane. The vendor in Times Square in 2010 who noticed something was amiss and alerted the police, and it turned out to be a potential car bombing.

That capacity of the ordinary citizenry to carry out high-level acts of perception and awareness is visible not just in the realm of terrorism, but elsewhere. For example, one historical event that’s very striking to me is that when the Columbia Space Shuttle burned up in 2003, NASA was able to recreate logistically the whole flight of the shuttle as it entered the Earth’s atmosphere, because amateur astronomers across the United States were watching the heavens that night and taking pictures. One NASA scientist called the skywatchers “our heroes.”

But getting back to your question, it’s often a tale of people on local ground working together. I had the chance to talk at a couple of bookstores, and at one point I spoke in New York. Somebody came up after my reading, and said, “You know, in New York following 9/11, people did rise to the occasion.” That’s certainly true, and I’m sure there are wonderful stories here and there throughout the United States of communities that, because of the special chemistry of that neighborhood, really do act together, make repairs together. They don’t wait for somebody else to come and sweep their own sidewalks—they sweep their own sidewalks. It would be interesting to collect stories from around the country of places that are exceptional.



**DJ:** When they say that people in New York responded to the occasion, they did, and it was wonderful, but it seems as though in America everything’s very ad hoc. I don’t think we can say we were as prepared or organized as we could be.

**ES:** Yes, you’re right, and I want to come back in a minute to that division between ad hoc and practiced. I was on a radio program this week, and the interviewer, Leonard Lopate, complained that in his workplace they have to do fire drills, and New York often has city-wide drills. I told him that I didn’t think he should complain, that I wished Boston or Cambridge had those rehearsals. Practice reminds us that we do have the power to perform protective acts—a reminder that is very important.

Back to the issue of the ad hoc, and the interesting question of when something is spontaneous and when it’s really practiced: In the case of the Kobe earthquake, people poured in from other communities to help the residents, because Japan had 300,000 neighborhood associations, something I learned by reading Robert Pekkanen’s book, *Japan’s Dual Civil Society*. It’s crucial to see that those voluntary associations had not practiced what to do in an earthquake; all they had done was sweep their own streets, take care of the streetlights, take care of the children and elderly in the neighborhood. But that sense that this is my world, I’m responsible for it, translated into the later act of clearing rubble. Should we say it was ad hoc or should we say it was practiced? We could debate this, but I think it is a matter of practice.

**DJ:** I was reminded in reading the book how commentators talk about how there was this “9/11 moment,” that after the terrorist attacks, Americans not only had a lot of shared sympathetic feeling, but were more active and engaged in helping each other out. It seems that one of the morals of the book is that if we really treasured that moment when we had mutually sympathetic feeling and were more engaged, we need to prepare for that all the time.

**ES:** Yes, absolutely. And we sometimes refer to a 9/11 moment as though that feeling of camaraderie is unusual, but actually that feeling of camaraderie would be the norm if, for example, we followed the Constitutional rules about war-making. We’ve allowed the Executive to do everything. If we restore to the population both the responsibility and the obligation to oversee our entry into war, then there would be this sense of esprit and responsibility, and we would have the power to put a brake on war. It might also be that the population would agree to go to war, if there were really strong arguments, but the way it is now, the whole war-making machinery is decoupled from the larger population, making its consent or dissent irrelevant.

There’s a reason why we’ve allowed the population to be excluded from the military, and that is because joining the military and ever having to go to war are so aversive and so much against the grain of civilized behavior. Charles Sumner in the nineteenth century correctly predicted that a civilization that comes to think of itself as too high-minded to take care of military responsibilities is going to stop being a democracy because the heart of democracy is in that adjudication of the issue of whether we go to war and whether we injure other people.

**DJ:** It seems that these debates about Libya—at least we’re having a debate—but it seems that we’re well past having Congress decide whether we go to war. What’s it going to take to get us back to where we were before?

**ES:** I think that the path could take a number of forms. I strongly believe that we absolutely must get rid of nuclear weapons, because once you allow nuclear weapons, then they seem to require putting aside the Constitution. Somebody might say, “But wait a minute, in the Korean War and the Vietnam War, in the invasions of Haiti and Grenada and Panama or the former Yugoslavia, we weren’t using nuclear weapons.” Well, that’s true, but Presidents, knowing that they have assumed the power to fire nuclear weapons, look with great impatience on having to get any authorization for merely using machine guns, tanks, and aerial bombing. They know that they have at their disposal this vast arsenal, and it’s therefore not at all coincidental that the disappearance of the requirement for a Congressional declaration of war is exactly timed to the invention of nuclear weapons. We haven’t had a declaration of war since the invention of nuclear weapons, although we’ve occasionally had something that looks a bit like one, such as in the first Gulf War, where we had a conditional declaration of war. But that, by the normal standard of Congressional declarations, would not count as a legitimate declaration of war.

**DJ:** One thing the book made me recall was that, in the years after 9/11, the government had its own website telling people how to “shelter-in-place” in case of nuclear, biological, chemical attack and things of this sort. What struck me at the time was that this program, rather than prepare the population appropriately for possible terrorist attack, almost seemed designed to scare everybody into submission.

**ES:** I think your way of saying it is very plausible, that it actually acted to immobilize people rather than to empower them, since after all they weren’t taking measures of their own—they were instead once again being asked to follow instructions. But I think the second problem that’s involved is that, in general, the population has become so unused to civil defense and emergency procedures that practicing any kind of emergency procedure is wrongly perceived as just an awkward form of habit, and one of the major tasks of the book is to show that actually those kinds of emergency preparation involve very high level thinking.

To give a specific example, the book contrasts the extensive fallout shelter system in Switzerland with the complete absence of a civilian fallout shelters in the United States. That Swiss shelter system is not just a remnant of the 1950s or ’60s or ’70s. In 2003 the country had a referendum and 80 percent of the Swiss population showed up and voted to continue to have a law that gave every citizen the obligation to either build a fallout shelter in their home, or to provide money for a place in the public fallout shelters. In the United States, all the money for fallout shelters was spent only on the President—a huge cavern inside Mount Weather—and then one for Congress as well, although Congress didn’t know that it was being built.

**DJ:** How is that even possible?

**ES:** Good question. They had allocated the money, so how could they not know? The fallout shelters required billions of dollars. One door alone is nineteen inches thick, and its two hinges weigh over a ton. Both Switzerland and the United States spent vast resources on fallout shelters. One country spent it on the full citizenry and the other country spent it only on a small number of government officials. By putting so much into the Presidential fallout shelter, it was giving the shelter to the very people who have the ability to fire the weapons. But here’s the more telling part: they not only spent more money on the President that on the citizenry—billions for the President, zero for the citizenry—they spent more on the President than on all the money spent for all emergency preparedness in the United States, whether from fire or flood or a landslide. So that what we were looking at in Katrina is just symptomatic of this complete disregard for protection of the homeland. As I had occasion to say in the other book I did for *Boston Review*, [*Rule of Law, Misrule of Men*](http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=12082), the populace’s wellbeing—the safety of the people—is the only reason for having a government; but our government has gotten very separated from the wellbeing of the people, and from the requirement for enlisting people into the defense of the country.