

COLUMNISTS

Earthquakes, issues have sub-surface tensions

I decided today to skip the sex-abuse scandal and the war for a while and focus on something else that shook us up: the earthquake. Like many of you, I awoke to an actual earthquake a week ago Saturday. I was very excited by this since I had never before experienced that sort of natural event. I've been through snowstorms and hurricanes and maybe even once a mild tornado, but I had never been in an earthquake.

This being the case, and since no one else seemed awake at that early hour to talk about it, I reflected on earthquakes for a little while.

First I thought about the causes of earthquakes. One cannot stay on the surface and discover the source of an earthquake. Earthquakes occur because of faults hidden far below the surface. They are subterranean. I never even knew that western New York had any faults, or fault lines as they are also called. I think faults are actually separations between gigantic plates of rock in the earth. Apparently, huge tension develops as these plates shift or as volcanic pressure develops. When an intolerable amount of tension has finally built up, the pressure is released through an earthquake.

I suppose it is really important, then, to know where the faults really lie. My presumption that there weren't any in my region of the world was wrong. Truthful investigation of where the faults are must be pretty important. Detection of faults enables us to adjust to them and make arrangements so that we



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

can limit the damage that may be caused when the stress becomes so great that an earthquake occurs. That sounds like common sense.

Our Saturday earthquake measured 5.1 on the Richter scale. I am not familiar with this gauge, but I do know that it is used to register the strength of an earthquake. Different earthquakes can have different strengths. Furthermore, earthquakes spread all over the place. Our earthquake had its epicenter, as they call it, way up north in Prattsburg.

I know that one needs a seismograph to determine the ranking of an earthquake on the Richter scale. That machine registers the level of disturbance caused by the quake. Yet the numbers seem obscure to me and hardly matter when one is looking at the actual damage caused by the shaking.

Still, the Richter scale alerts us to the fact that there is enormous power buried below the surface of our planet. It doesn't really matter much to us which plate shifted in the disruption or why it moved. What matters to us is the level

of violence we feel and how it affects the people and things around us. Obviously, we have made very careful arrangements to care for and protect the people and objects that support our lives. Even small disruptions and changes can cause us anxiety.

The fury associated with an earthquake involves a rebellion and revolt under the very ground we walk on. This goes directly against our instincts, since it opposes all our purposes and expectations. It's the kind of thing that shatters our confidence. After an earthquake the world appears newly uncertain to us, and we really are shaken to the core. In our great American and human instinct to try to "fix" an earthquake, we quickly learn (from California of all places!) that you can't stop an earthquake. The only way to deal with it is to adjust to it. In earthquake-prone regions of the world they build their structures to be more flexible than usual so they can sway to the motion caused by an earthquake without fracturing. The power of a quake is so strong, that we simply can't resist it — only adjust to it.

As I concluded my little mental sojourn into earthquakes, I decided that what seemed most frightening of all to me was the presence of so much raw power, right below the surface and otherwise invisible to us. Right under the place where I stand, really! The raw exercise of power by this planet or on this planet is frightening. It scares all of us. I have now concluded that my attempt

to escape the scandal and flee the war so I could think about my little experience of the little earthquake led me right back to where I started. I suppose that with the church scandal, we're all arriving at some important discoveries. Much about the scandal lies deep beneath the surface. Attempts to name a quick fix won't work. Detection of faults in this matter is an important exercise, too, as long as we realize that there are more fault lines than we had originally thought. Do they involve the church's attitude toward women? What about the isolation of the clergy and the concentration of power? Do they relate to homophobia, or the denial of our need for human intimacy?

In the cases of the scandal and the war, as with earthquakes, we will learn over time that one raw exercise of power directed at another simply will not work. Adjusting in a more flexible way to forces we cannot control will be much more effective in the long run. There are tensions below the surface in our church and in the world of international politics. Pretending they aren't there and failing to address them has deadly consequences. Ignoring the ways in which we are ourselves involved in the faults is denial and only compounds the problem. Raw power trying to repel raw power is ineffectual. It seems to me that we are in grave danger these days of ignoring the truths learned from earthquakes and life's other deeper shake-ups.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry.

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Thoughts to Consider

EDWIN SULEWSKI
Funeral Director

What are some ways to help a child who has lost a parent?

First it is important to make sure the child is honestly included in all information and planning. This means being honest about the death and answering the child's questions. It also means allowing but not forcing children to go to the funeral or visitation as they wish. Secondly, a child needs love and security. Let a child know they will be cared for, take an interest in schoolwork and include them in play. Some children resent being pressured to accept burdens beyond their reach. "Taking over for Dad or Mom" may be too much responsibility. Naturally, changes will occur but a child needs time and help in adjusting to them.

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Kids' Chronicle Answers from page 12: 1. Jew, 2. Eden, 3. Solomon, 4. unity, 5. sin