

Chapter 9

The Flood

Hurricane Mitch and News of Disasters

Hurricane Mitch was a particularly devastating storm. Spawned in the Gulf of Mexico in late October 1998, Mitch became a huge hurricane with wind speeds of 180 miles per hour. It was ranked as Category 5, making it one of the top four storms of the century. Then things actually got worse. Rather than moving swiftly over sea and land, the hurricane stalled off the Central American coast. That area suffered deluges of rain and days of misery. Rivers cascaded over their banks. Floodwaters rose to the top of trees. Huge mudslides roared like avalanches down mountainsides, wiping out entire villages. In the span of a week, more than 10,000 people were killed. The Central American floods became one of the top news stories of 1998.

This book began by suggesting that comparisons could be drawn between news coverage of the flood and myths of the Flood. Many societies, from the Choctaw tribe to the Incans, have told themselves tales of the Flood. As I noted previously, the stories are quite similar. People stray from the right path and they are punished by the devastating waters. A select few survive to rebuild and renew society.¹

The purpose of this chapter is to closely study news coverage of the 1998 Central American disaster in terms of the Flood myth. After briefly looking at research on the Flood myth, I will explore how the myth can provide insights into *New York Times* reporting. Those insights then can be used to take up broader issues. The Flood myth belongs to a larger family of myths that uses calamity and catastrophe to instruct and inform. Likewise, news reports of floods can be seen as part of a larger body of natural disaster stories that include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, blizzards, and fires, and perhaps even man-made disasters, such as airline crashes and train wrecks. These disaster stories are a staple of news. Similarities between these stories and myths of catastrophe thus allow us to consider again the important subject of news values. Do U.S. journalists make decisions regarding coverage of disastrous events guided by stories as old as humankind?

THE FLOOD

Stith Thompson demonstrated in his multivolume *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* that the myth of the Flood has appeared across centuries and cultures.² Alan Dundes, who edited a book on the subject, argues that “the flood myth is one of the most widely diffused narratives known.”³ Many reasons have been put forth for this wide diffusion. Some writers argue that a real, cataclysmic flood did occur on Earth. Fundamentalist Christians continue to search for Noah’s Ark. Others find in Flood myths the human need to explain our origins. They say that humans are mostly water. We are born into the world on the waters of the womb. We need stories that dramatize and explain the life that flows within us. Other scholars find that the Flood myth serves as the ultimate morality tale. They say that humans are warned to mend their ways or the cleansing waters will come to inundate an impure world. Freudian scholars see more fundamental drives at work in the Flood myth. They attribute the prevalence of Flood myths to humans, in every culture and time, dreaming with full bladders.⁴

Though the Flood myth has many interpretations and permutations, some basic characteristics or themes can be established:

1. Flood myths almost always are based on the premise that humankind has sinned or that a particular people have erred or strayed from the path of righteousness.

2. The Flood comes and is total in its devastation. The Flood does not discriminate in choosing its victims or evaluate their fine gradations of evil. Whole populations are destroyed.
3. Humans are helpless against the power of the Flood. The Flood humbles. People struggle futilely.
4. Humankind, once purified, is regenerated and renewed. Some few worthy or fortunate individuals live to rebuild society, solemn and chastened in the wake of the Flood.

The following sections explore whether these characteristics and themes really can be found in the *Times's* coverage of the 1998 Central American floods. In attempting to describe and explain the disaster, did news stories draw so precisely upon the myth of the Flood?

THE FLOOD MYTH IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

To study such questions, I looked at coverage by the *Times* from October 26, 1998, when the first reports on Hurricane Mitch, which spawned the floods, appeared in the *Times*, to December 6, 1998, weeks after the disaster, when the cleanup was under way and the intense coverage waned. I scrutinized every *Times* article, editorial, column, letter, and photograph—some 125 news items in all.

As will be shown in detail below, I found that the myth of the Flood could indeed be found in its entirety in the *Times's* coverage. All four of the myth's primary themes played a dominant role in *Times* reporting. Humans were shown to have erred and strayed from a right path. The flood came and was complete in its devastation. Human efforts and ingenuity were helpless in the face of the flood. And in the wake of the flood, people began the slow process of rebuilding.

Though the myth unfolded in its entirety, the structure of the story was somewhat different in the *Times's* coverage. Myths often begin by relating the wrongdoing of the people. This shows why the flood must come. In the *Times's* coverage, reports of the devastation came first. Then humanity's futility was shown. Next followed reports of survivors found. And then, in the aftermath of the flood, stories looked back and began to consider why the flood had come. Only then did they suggest that the flood had come to those who had erred or strayed. The following sections

disaster relief effort in Central America.”¹² Another source said, “It’s total, pure devastation. I’ve never seen a human drama of that magnitude.”¹³

Humanity Humbled

The Flood myth also emphasizes that humans are helpless in the face of the Flood. In society after society, humans come to think that they have advanced beyond nature, that their knowledge, ingenuity, and technology have placed them beyond nature’s power to hurt. The Flood sweeps away such hubris. Humanity is humbled. Similarly, even as early *Times* reports emphasized the destruction, they also suggested the capitulation of humankind to nature’s forces. One of the first *Times* stories, on October 27, said:

People fled coastal homes and the Honduran Government sent air force planes to pluck residents off remote Caribbean islands today in the face of the most powerful hurricane in a decade to threaten Central America. Thousands of people abandoned or were evacuated from coastal regions of Belize, Mexico and Cuba.¹⁴

The *Times* offered numbers to attest to the immense power of the storm. It noted that wind speeds reached 180 miles per hour, that 20 inches of rain could fall in the mountains, and that the storm was listed as Category 5, making it one of the biggest storms of the century. The *Times* also offered more descriptions of panicked humans fleeing towns and resorts:

The rain and winds snapped trees and sent thousands of people fleeing for higher ground. . . . Most of the population of Belize City fled inland in cars and Government buses. In neighboring Mexico tourists rushed to leave the resorts of Cancun and Cozumel, where the hurricane, Mitch, is expected to hit by the end of the week.¹⁵

The report was accompanied by a two-column photograph of a crying Guatemalan child, in a bright, frilly dress, being lifted by firefighters from floodwaters. Two days later, a similar image was printed: This photograph showed rescuers pulling a woman from rising waters in LaCeiba, Honduras.¹⁶

Even the highest officials, stories said, were humbled by the flood’s power. One *Times* report stated:

flood. Four of the six columns above the fold were blanketed by a dramatic, 6 x 8-inch color photograph. Taken from an aircraft, with the photographer looking down as if from the heavens, the photograph showed trapped residents on a tiny island of high land surrounded by muddy waters that had risen to the top of the trees. Rohter's report ran on the top right column of the page. The second paragraph stated:

“There are corpses everywhere—victims of landslides or of the waters,” Carlos Flores Facusse, the President of Honduras, said in a grim television address this afternoon that followed a thorough inspection tour of his stunned and beleaguered nation of four million people. “We have before us a panorama of death, desolation and ruin throughout the entire country.”⁸

The report directly drew upon mythic references of destruction. It said, “Relief workers and evacuees, who were visibly disturbed over what they had seen, used phrases like a ‘vision out of Dante’ or ‘a deluge of Biblical proportions’ to describe the destruction.” It concluded with the words of the Honduran president: “The floods and landslides have erased many villages and households from the map, as well as whole neighborhoods of cities,” he said. “I ask the international community for human solidarity.”⁹

Another front-page report by Rohter emphasized the decimation. “In one way or another, every part of Nicaragua has been devastated by the relentless floods and landslides that followed Hurricane Mitch,” the story began. It went on to describe “a realm dominated by destruction and suffering.”¹⁰ Two days later, another front-page report continued the theme. The lead paragraph reported:

Where just a week ago there were fertile fields of corn, beans and peanuts almost ready for harvest, there are now only discolored corpses, swelling grotesquely in the tropical sun. Where the simple thatched houses of peasants have always stood, all that remain are clusters of ripped and shredded clothing and a few scattered kitchen utensils.¹¹

Times reports also quoted U.S. officials who attested to the destruction of Honduras and Nicaragua in particular. ““Those two nations have been wiped out,’ said J. Brian Atwood, head of the United States Agency for International Development, which is overseeing the Administration’s

disaster relief effort in Central America.”¹² Another source said, “It’s total, pure devastation. I’ve never seen a human drama of that magnitude.”¹³

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“Not just this country, but all of Central America is cut off,” President Arnoldo Aleman of Nicaragua said in a televised address to his nation in which he urged vulnerable citizens to seek shelter on higher ground. His Honduran counterpart, Carlos Flores, found himself trapped in San Pedro Sula, an industrial city of 500,000 people that was cut off from the capital by flooding.¹⁷

Two weeks after the storm first hit, Rohter interviewed Flores, who said, “In 72 hours we lost what we had built, little by little, in 50 years.” Flores added, “In Honduras everything will be measured before and after” the floods.¹⁸

Witnesses testified to their helplessness. A *Times* story quoted a cleric: “I have seen earthquakes, droughts, two wars, cyclones and tidal waves,” said Miguel Cardinal Obando y Bravo, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Managua and the nation’s senior religious figure. “But this is undoubtedly the worst thing that I have ever seen.”¹⁹

A rescue worker emphasized the humbling powers of the flood. “‘We could hear people buried in the debris imploring us to help them,’ said one shaken resident-turned-rescue worker, who would give his name only as Nicolas. ‘But there was nothing we could do for them. It was the most impotent I have ever felt in my life.’”²⁰

The *Times* often portrayed relief efforts as futile. “Honduran authorities struggled today with meager resources to deal with catastrophic damage from torrential rains and floods,” one report began. “Many families have been waiting for days on top of their houses or perching in trees without food or water, the officials said. ‘The demand is so great and the equipment we have is so little that we feel impotent,’ said the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Mario Hung Pacheco.”²¹

Humanity was left with little more than prayer and beseechment. Rohter ended a “Week in Review” essay with the words of a survivor: “‘We’ve lived through earthquakes, a pair of civil wars, volcanic eruptions, tidal waves and now this, all in the last 25 years,’ said Maria Lourdes Rodriguez, a peasant who lives north of here. ‘When is God going to take pity on us?’”²²

Rebuilding in the Wake of Disaster

Though the devastation is complete, though humanity is humbled, the Flood myth ends on notes of rebuilding and regeneration. The Flood wa-

ters will be waters of birth as well as waters of death. Survivors emerge, grieving and chastened. In some myths, these survivors were selected prior to the Flood. They were the only good people in the community and the gods have warned them. In other myths, the survivors simply have been granted dispensation by fate or the gods.

The theme can be seen in numerous *Times* reports. One article, "1 House Left in Sea of Mud," began: "Of 164 houses in this northwestern Nicaraguan farming village, only one was standing today in a sea of mud that stretched as far as the eye could see."²³ Another item told the story of Laura Isabel Arriola de Guity, a teacher, who "reportedly drifted on a makeshift raft in the Caribbean for six days before her rescue. Her husband and three children died."²⁴ Another story began with the myth-like memories of one survivor who saw the earth open before him:

Selvin Joynarid Perez was standing under the awning of his small house on a bluff overlooking the Choluteca River early Saturday morning, keeping an uneasy watch on the torrential rain and the rising waters below.

Suddenly the earth trembled, he said. He turned to run into the house to wake his wife and 3-year-old daughter. He never made it.

"When I tried to go into the room where my wife and child were sleeping, the earth opened up," he said.²⁵

Other reports, too, focused on stunned survivors. Vicente Hernandez, his wife, and brother were away visiting relatives when the flood and mudslides engulfed his village. "'We have been left with nothing but this,' he said, gesturing toward a small plastic bag containing a few items of donated clothing that was attached to the handlebars of the bicycle he was riding. 'Our family has been dispersed, and a great misfortune has fallen upon us.'" The same story ended with the words of another survivor, shocked but ready to move forward. Milton Juarez's farm and livestock were all swept away. "'Everything I had is gone, and all we have been left with is rocks and stone,' he said as he sat on his bedraggled horse and surveyed the destruction here. 'I'm ready to plant, but somebody has to give me seeds. But so far, nobody has come here to help us, nobody.'"²⁶

A story of a burial service offered the thoughts of a grandmother, stricken but resigned to go on. "'There were six in that family, and now only one remains, Isaac, the youngest son of my only daughter,' the boy's

grandmother, Candida Morales Delgado, said tearfully as the coffin was lowered into the ground. ‘We will care for him as best we can because he is all that we have left.’”²⁷

More than a month after the storm, the *Times* suggested that survivors had begun the process of rebuilding. In a photo essay for the *New York Times Magazine*, Larry Towell captured the devastation—and the regeneration.

And yet, the flood waters seem to have washed away something else—a lethargy induced by decades of foreign economic control, along with the humiliation of being used by the Nicaraguan contras in their war against the Sandinistas. Honduras has been energized by the sheer effort to survive as a nation. No matter where I look, I think I’ve seen the worst. But I am constantly surprised, not just by the destruction, but also by the will of the people to overcome it.²⁸

Striking Those Who Have Strayed

A primary characteristic of the Flood myth is that devastation comes to a people who have done wrong. Detailing the wrong—defining the sin—is a crucial and socially specific aspect of the Flood myth. Were people punished for hubris and pride? Did they worship the wrong gods? Did men take wives for themselves, “whomever they chose,” as in Genesis? As I noted earlier, myths often begin here. In *Times* coverage, this theme did not emerge until the aftermath of the disaster. Then, stories sought reasons or meanings behind the disaster.

In *Times* reports, the Central American people seemed to be punished for the sins of their nations and governments. Corrupt leaders, petty politics, and backward economies explained the devastation, according to the *Times*. And in a complementary theme, the *Times* suggested, implicitly and explicitly, that such errors would not bedevil U.S. society.

The theme first appeared more than a week into the coverage, on November 5, at the end of a report on survivors returning to destroyed towns. Though the survivors blamed the river, the report raised the idea that devastation had come because officials allowed houses to be built in illegal and unsafe areas.

Several acknowledged that the houses that had tumbled down the bluff had been illegally built in a zone where construction is prohibited.

“The reality of the thing is that it is not the Government’s fault,” said

Florentino Sanchez, who had spent the day digging with his bare hands for the bodies of four children of his cousin. The mother's body was found on Tuesday.

"We never believed the river would do this," he said.²⁹

Soon after, in a "Week in Review" essay, the *Times* again suggested the governments were at fault. Rohter used the governments' responses to the flood to draw comparisons among nations. His premise was that a disaster "teaches a lot about the way a society does or does not work" and "the nations of the region always seem to respond in ways that illuminate their history and character."

Nicaragua, for instance, is still grappling with many of the same problems it could not resolve in the 1980's, when the Sandinista National Liberation Front was trying to fend off American-backed contra rebels in a bloody civil war. In that polarized political climate, the relief effort here last week was hampered by petty partisan squabbling; the conservative Government and the Sandinistas, who are now in opposition, even disagreed over whether it would be more appropriate to declare a "national disaster" or a "state of emergency."

Rohter compared that response with actions taken by a U.S. territory, Puerto Rico, during a previous hurricane, Georges. "In Puerto Rico, an American possession," Rohter said, with an important choice of words, "the government leaped into action as soon as the first hurricane watch was issued."³⁰ Rohter was making a contrast between Nicaraguan and U.S. society.

The *Times* returned to the theme on November 9 in a 2,800-word, front-page story that looked back on how the hurricane caused so much grief. The report acknowledged that much of the destruction resulted because the storm moved very slowly, allowing huge amounts of rain to fall. But the nations and people also bore responsibility, the *Times* said.

The freakish behavior of the storm is the major reason it caught governments and people off guard. But the high death toll also owes something to poverty and politics. Most working-class houses are poorly built, and many impoverished people erect their homes, often illegally but with a wink from local politicians, on marginal lands close to rivers or clinging to unstable mountain slopes that have been stripped of trees.³¹

Even two weeks later, the *Times* continued the theme. In a bylined editorial, a *Times* editor, Tina Rosenberg, focused specifically on government policies of deforestation. “Five days of torrential rain would have caused damage anywhere, but there would have been fewer lethal mud slides if the land in Honduras and Nicaragua had been covered with trees,” she wrote. “Trees hold the soil together and help it absorb rain. When the land is stripped of trees, heavy rains sweep mud and minerals into the rivers, swelling and clotting the water and increasing its power to destroy.”³²

A letter to the editor saw government capitulation to corporations as part of the problem, a theme not emphasized in *Times* coverage. It said:

The infrastructure that was destroyed was often created to meet the needs of the military and the multinational organizations. In Honduras, which is an oligarchy, the poor, who took the brunt of the storm, had been forced to live on the edges of banana plantations in flood-plain shantytowns or on hillsides that were of no economic value to the landowners. While aid efforts should continue, this disaster provides an opportunity for issues of basic justice and land reform to be addressed.³³

Finally, some stories raised the idea that the flood could be interpreted as a punishment from the heavens. For example, a report on survivors explicitly offered the theme of punishment. It quoted Jose Antonio Amaya Garcia of Honduras.

“It’s a punishment from God,” Mr. Amaya, an elderly carpenter, said late last week as he searched under an avalanche for what was left of his house. He is tiny and frail in his soiled shirt and pants, the last clothing he owns. “I am 73, and I’ve never seen a disaster like this.”³⁴

An essay on the *Times* op-ed page entitled “The Wrath of God?” offered a similar theme. Arturo J. Cruz Jr., a Nicaraguan professor, said that in the seventeenth century the people of Leon, Nicaragua, left the original site of the city, “believing that they were being punished by God for the sins of their ancestors, conquerors from Spain whose treatment of the native population was barbarous. Since then, doom has remained an indelible component of the Nicaraguan world view. To this day, many wonder if they have a pending ‘bill’ with God.”³⁵

MYTH, NEWS VALUES, AND DISASTER STORIES

On one level, the retelling of the Flood myth in the *Times* lends support to my thesis that myth has taken modern form in the news. *Times* reporting shows how *naturally* myth takes shape in news stories. *Times* coverage seemed so . . . normal. It is only on close examination that we can see the comparison to myth. As the writer and philosopher Roland Barthes wrote at the beginning of his book *Mythologies*, “The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the *naturalness* with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history.”³⁶

Other insights can be gained into this mythic examination of *Times* coverage. For decades, gatekeeping studies have shown that U.S. news coverage of international affairs is dominated by stories of coups, crises, and catastrophes.³⁷ In tending the gates, in deciding what is “international news” and how it should be covered, U.S. news media often give priority to calamity. Nations and peoples around the globe merit U.S. news coverage in times of earthquakes, train wrecks, tidal waves, airline crashes, famines, and floods.

Research has also suggested why this is so. As we have seen in the previous chapter, scholars have argued persuasively that U.S. news media reaffirm U.S. political authority and superiority on the global stage. International news coverage, they suggest, is dictated by U.S. foreign policy. Coverage legitimizes global inadequacies, defends U.S. action or inaction, explains U.S. positions, and degrades the positions of other nations. Areas of U.S. interest become areas of U.S. news coverage. When do other areas of the world merit coverage? They become newsworthy only when they meet dramatic, attention-grabbing requisites: calamities. And even then, the portrayals of crises and catastrophes often can be understood to lay claim to U.S. superiority as they symbolically lay waste to a people or nation.³⁸

Myth thus can provide an additional perspective to the distinguished literature on gatekeeping. International communication researchers have identified a mythic dimension to U.S. news coverage. As we have seen, myth has always affirmed the authority and superiority of the current social order. Myth legitimizes and justifies positions. Myth celebrates dominant beliefs and values. Myth degrades and demeans other beliefs that do

not align with those of the storyteller. And myth has often fulfilled these roles through portrayals of disasters and calamities, such as the Flood. The Flood, again, can be seen as the ultimate morality tale. People who have done wrong or taken the wrong path or otherwise strayed are punished and swept away. Only the righteous are left alive and thereby confirmed in their position and place. Societies around the world have told themselves stories of the Flood to affirm their own status, to sanction their actions, to explain the fall of others, and to warn doubters and slackers.

In reporting global events, in tending the gates, U.S. news is doing what myth has always done. News is drawing upon the eternal story of calamity and crisis to uphold the social order and to affirm the superiority of a way of life. *Times* coverage of the 1998 Central American floods can be understood as fulfilling this mythic role. Months can go by without a single *Times* story from Guatemala, Honduras, or Nicaragua. With the onslaught of the hurricane and the resulting floods, the *Times* published daily, front-page stories chronicling the calamity and symbolically degrading the victims by suggesting that they and their nations were at fault.

The four themes of the Flood myth were quite clear. As the myth suggested, *Times* coverage averred that Central Americans had made social and political mistakes; the devastation of the flood was in part the result of those mistakes. The flood was complete in its devastation; entire communities were ravaged. Humans were helpless against its power. And survivors were left to rebuild society. These things seem natural and logical in *Times* coverage. But the *naturalness*—the structure and pattern and themes—derives from myth.

Again, the process must be mostly unconscious. Though journalists sometimes refer to “biblical proportions” and “mythic stories,” they don’t often see themselves as telling and retelling ancient tales of humankind. Yet like myth tellers of every age, journalists draw from archetypal stories to make sense of events. They draw from sacred, societal stories that celebrate shared values, counsel with lessons and themes, instruct and inform with exemplary models.

DAILY MYTHS OF DISASTER

Once more we should raise the question: Were the Central American floods too convenient as a case study of myth? The analysis suggests precisely otherwise. The mythic structure and themes identified in these sto-

ries actually appear often, almost daily, in the news. International news coverage is replete with stories of disasters, calamities, and catastrophes that are caused by the inadequacies of other nations, that are complete in their devastation, that humble humanity, and that leave chastened survivors to reflect on their fate and renew their society. News reports of floods, famines, tidal waves, plagues, volcanic eruptions, and countless other disasters regularly tell us the same story again and again, a story told since stories were first told. The litany of disaster brought to us in international news is a litany drawn from the fundamental stories of humankind. The gatekeepers of U.S. news open the gates for myth.