



Angela Blanchard

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7 Stages of Disaster Recovery: How the Light Gets In

“There is a crack in everything. It’s how the light gets in.” -Leonard Cohen



A ray of hope appears in Texas after Hurricane Harvey. (courtesy of TXDoT)

About twelve years ago I began collecting stories—stories that emerged from working with people who had survived disasters. There were so many lessons in these stories. After a time, I began to notice that the wisdom I heard and the deep learning that occurred after these cataclysmic events had such relevance—not just for the obvious storms such as category four hurricanes and their aftermath—but for all the storms that make landfall in our lives. Storms of financial losses, illness, divorce, death. Storms that shake us to our foundations and threaten our view of the future.

What is most precious to us is often what we can least control and when the real winds of destruction start to blow through our lives we begin by being frightened, angry and lost. As I watched and learned from those who had survived the very worst that nature has to offer, it became evident that there are discernible stages, identifiable milestones on this journey from disaster to a new beginning.

This is a shared journey. Many, many people have made this trip—one step, one day at a time. And their wisdom can remind us that the emotions we experience, the questions that come up, and the work we must do—well—tens of millions of people have had these feelings, confronted these questions, done this work and found meaning and purpose along the way. They have made a way out of no way at all.

STAGE ONE: SURVIVAL

When we crash, when our world is turned upside down, our view of the world shrinks. Our gaze is constricted and our questions are intensely focused. Am I okay? Am I still here? Who else survived? Sometimes our life threatening situation unfolds in slow motion—a medical diagnosis delivered in bits and pieces, one sad test result after another. Sometimes it happens all at once. A car crash. And sometimes we get to watch it roll in off the Gulf of Mexico, a huge storm headed right for us. Dread filled moments or hours once we realize the catastrophe cannot be avoided. We brace ourselves, suck in our breath, and wait for impact. Once we take our first real after-impact breath we have only two questions: Am I okay? How are the people I love?

STAGE TWO: SANCTUARY

When the immediate danger has passed, the terrible news has sunk in, we look around for a place to pause. Shaken and relieved, we seek the warmth of human connection or we go inward and try to connect with our life sustaining energy. Tears of relief and grief come and go as we relive terrible moments—when we first saw, when we first knew. Retreating to a place of temporary safety we are like children overwhelmed and helpless, and this helplessness is profoundly uncomfortable. As grateful as we may be just to be alive, we are raw with vulnerability and need.

Many times we find sanctuary in a dear friend—someone we can say anything to and know we will still be loved. Other times we find

ourselves depending upon the kindness of strangers, professionals or fellow survivors. Wherever we go when we are threatened—for immediate comfort, for sustenance—that shelter is a temporary home. We know we cannot stay there, that what has happened must be faced. But we must take refuge before we can face this cataclysmic event. We need comfort, the power of a healing touch. Often we are plagued by a sense of unreality as we try to grasp the enormity of our situation.

It does not help to be told “everything will be okay.” We cannot be reassured at this stage. The best help is patient kindness. Listening. The questions that plague us are: Is it really over? Is this the worst?

STAGE THREE: UPHEAVAL

We awaken from the numbness that comes from shock. Feeling returns like a leg that has fallen asleep. First a sharp tingling and then it hurts. Everywhere. No matter where we look we see the evidence of what was lost. Raw and ragged, scarred edges of what was, surround us.

Fragments of our old life intrude. A sudden smell, a glimpse of someone almost like the person we loved. A city similar but not quite like the one we lost. In a moment we can experience searing pain of loss. We can easily get lost in this stage—we want not to feel but if we don't allow this pain, if we turn our backs on mourning, the ground will be barren and there will be no way to plant a new life, imagine a new future, grow a new community.

But first we have to clear the debris. Pick up and put away the remains of what was.

When my friend lost her husband she made a decision to see a counselor—not just to grieve—but to clean out the emotional closet of guilt or resentment, to clear away any residual hard feelings from the tough journey they made together through his dementia and ALS. After disasters, we tear out walls and sweep out the house, scraping the ground clean for what happens next. Some people do this quickly—cleaning out closets and giving away clothes, tearing down the old school, pulling up soggy floors. Some people do this slowly—as if each piece, brick and board represented what was lost and must be mourned individually. The journey will not go faster if we hurry. Movement—one step at a time—is all that's needed. At the same time, hanging on to ruins will not bring back what was lost.

This stage is physically exhausting. Everything that should be easy is very hard and things that are usually difficult become impossible. Our sense of isolation grows—other people outside of the disaster zone go on living, even calling and expecting us to care about all the old concerns.

Our isolation is acutely painful. It is one thing to be with people in the same boat. It is a different matter to come face to face with people who really have no idea.

STAGE FOUR: LIMBO

In this stage, we have run through our reserves of energy and the full magnitude of what has happened in our lives gets clearer. The work of recovery seems more than we can possibly do. There is a new current in our lives and it threatens to drown us. There are two beliefs that keep us struggling at this stage.

One is the desperate search for normal. Trying to remember and trying to return to what was. Each day presents us with new information that we are in a new world but we cannot figure what our goal should be.

The other belief is that this work would be easier “if only.” If only the hospital, doctors, officials, FEMA, someone else would do something different, better, faster, we could move on. In some part of our consciousness we are waiting for someone stronger, smarter, and more powerful to arrive to deal with this disaster. In literal terms, we are often waiting on information we need, from insurance companies, experts, our financial advisors, “officials” of one kind or another.

Ultimately we must face the fact that the work is ours to do, that no matter what help comes, the real recovery work begins with us.

The danger in this stage is that we can get caught in desperate busyness which further saps our spiritual energy. Or we can practice patience with ourselves and understand that there is a need to refill and gather facts for what is coming. From the outside we appear to be making little progress. It may seem as though we are simply going through the motions, or doing the minimum to get through each day. But in fact, limbo really is a preparation for what’s next. We are going inward and adjusting our expectations. Our friends may be saying things like “you need to move on” or “it’s time to do this or that,” but

this quiet period is not laziness, we are not wallowing in our losses, we are refilling our reserves and preparing to move forward.

We need community at this stage, the company of people who understand, but not more demands. What is most helpful is not external prodding but useful information. We need data more than we need coaching. Simple facts. This is the disease trajectory, the length of time it will take to put on a new roof, the amount of insurance money you can expect.

We are storing these facts for the next stage and moving toward important choices we must make. Deeper questions are surfacing: Do I want to go on? Am I willing to do this work? Do I have the strength to face this?

STAGE FIVE: RESIGNATION / ACCEPTANCE

We come to a fork in the road where we must decide. In one direction is acceptance. Fully recognizing the extent of our loss and with our eyes wide open, we recommit to our beliefs and find meaning in our new journey. In the other direction, resignation. We experience only the loss and see no opportunity. Anticipating a life of diminished rewards, we feel shortchanged and cheated.

Acceptance comes out of the work we have done to reassess our lives. We believe our radically changed lives have a purpose and that the path forward—a spiritual quest—will be rewarding. We decide it's worth it and we embrace the work of rebuilding our lives. At times we experience a sense of adventure as we move into close connection with those around us who are moving forward in faith and commitment. A sense of adequacy replaces helplessness and frustration. If we have defined a larger purpose, to recreate community, to preserve traditions, to unite our family, to grow stronger so we can serve others, then all that we have endured and will endure begins to come under the umbrella of our faith and purpose.

But we can go another direction. We can get mired in resentment and blame. Healthy anger becomes bitterness if we settle on the idea that others are at fault; that this terrible situation could have been avoided and we could have been spared “if only.” “If only” may be the most dangerous two words. Even if it is true that the actions of others have caused deeper pain and loss, we must find a way to reconcile ourselves

to the fact that no matter who contributed, the work of recovery is still ours to do.

Acceptance begins not with “if only” it starts with “now that”. Now that my mother is gone, now that our community must be rebuilt, now that we have to start over saving for our child’s education. Acceptance that the work is mine for whatever reasons, however it occurred... the driver was drunk, the levee was not maintained, the doctor missed the diagnosis, there will always be an imagined scenario, a world of perfection in which mistakes do not occur and the scales of fairness are perfectly balanced.

This is a profoundly important stage because we come face to face with our one sided bargains with God, our Higher Power or the universe. We have eaten right and exercised—how can we be sick? We have sacrificed so much to care for our aging parent, how can it not matter? We have worked so hard to rebuild, how can others write us off, criticize our efforts? If we do this, then we can expect that. We may not be aware we have bargained this way until we look into our resentments and frustrations. They tell us what we were expecting, what we felt entitled to. A huge opportunity opens up in front of us—we must now decide how we are to live if there are no guarantees of comfort, stability, wellness, security. We must delve deep to discover what beliefs matter so much to us that we will not let them go even if our current reality diverges. Put simply, it’s about examining our beliefs about the world and our capacity to live in it—as it is.

One powerful source of faith and reassurance—if we will lift our heads and look around, if we have friends that love us enough to confront us—is when we recognize that we are on the same journey with tens of millions of others. Over 65 million people worldwide are not living in their own homes because of a natural disaster, war or poverty and so many other disruptions that are simply a part of the human journey. It is at this stage we rejoin the human race and recognize, though what has happened is profound and significant, we are not alone.

STAGE SIX: TAKING STOCK

I have stood in streets piled high with debris on both sides, piles so high I could barely see the houses behind them. These are the scenes that we see on TV. The camera pans, reporters intone “they’ve lost everything.” Of course what fills the screen is not everything—it is the

evidence, the remnants of what was really lost. Loss of security, loss of community, loss of our imagined future. It is painful to face it—difficult to look at the evidence of our fragile state. But we must take stock for many reasons. In this stage we have to understand what we have to work with. We must inventory what can be saved from our old life.

Help may come and we have to decide how much we need and how much is available. Sometimes it is basic realities. How much insurance money? How much savings? What is the cost to rebuild our home? How long for the physical rehabilitation for our bodies? We take stock of our tangible resources—at the same time we have to examine our own inner resources. What are our strengths and skills? What aspects of our character have allowed us to overcome difficulties in the past?

Even as we work through the practical side of recovery—the day to day arrangement of resources that allow us to move forward, we must also take note of gifts that arrive just when we need them. Support and help, knowledge and guidance come from those ahead on the path. If we reach out to our friends to remind us of where we are strong, of what is solid at our core, it allows us to move forward with more confidence. It may be tempting to tally only the losses, to bog down in permanent grief, but here is the important lesson from so many people: take time to be grateful for every blessing. The daily practice of gratitude and noting every moment of grace will sustain us as we build a new future out of our own imagination.

STAGE SEVEN: NEW BEGINNING

At some point we recognize that we have restarted our lives. We have come to trust there is meaning and purpose and we feel the strength of our hard won wisdom. We invest ourselves again in a new life, relationship, community, or endeavor.

Knowing now that nothing will ever be the same, having let go of what was, we are able to embrace a new way forward. Possibilities we could never have imagined before emerge. What could my life be like now? What might I do with what I have learned from this experience? How can I be better for my family, friends, and community as a result of my new view of the world?

We now have the freedom to leave behind old ways, old habits. Having faced a loss so significant, we have permission to let go, to change our

behavior, how we spend our time, what we care about, who we choose to love. Where we felt only grief and loss we now feel hopeful about the future and more confident as we notice strengths found inside, tools that brought us to this new place.

We no longer feel isolated because we are divorced, bereaved, jobless, displaced, or ill. Our vulnerability has made us more connected, one of many brave people who have chosen to go on, to love again, to care again, and to accept life on life's terms.

This does not come in a flash or in a blinding moment. It comes as we notice the steps we have taken—it can almost seem a surprise to us that we find ourselves caring about this new landscape of our lives. What was once unthinkable, unimaginable, now is absorbed, a part of our daily landscape. And we now possess new wisdom and strength for having allowed deeper questions into our lives and having done the work to answer them meaningfully. New reservoirs of joy, friendships that have deepened, new interests, a new respect for our own resiliency and a new relationship with God are all gifts borne of our hard work.

A NEW JOURNEY: AWAKENING

There is a crack in everything, a levee in every community, every heart slightly broken. Every person has a gene gone rogue. What is the levee in my community, family, and organization? What is my personal levee? Out of every broken place comes an opportunity to turn struggle into transformation.

Much of the time we strive for security, wondering if we can earn enough, save enough, build fences tall enough, to save us. One way or another, a crack appears and we are stunned at our powerlessness. In a culture driven by the idea of progress—the expectation that everything will get bigger, better, improve year over year, many of us have faced a new reality and how we move forward now is not “progress” in the old sense of the word. We have lived through a real disaster and what we lost was truly irreplaceable. But we are awake to ourselves and others, alive to possibilities that are enriching beyond what we might have imagined.

We know now that life is really a series of new beginnings—not one long progression upwards, but a series of challenges that reveal new dimensions of wisdom borne out of our constantly changing

environments. The good news is there are remarkable moments of grace in every journey from brokenness to transformation. The light gets in. Illuminating what matters most to us and lighting the way forward.

There is wisdom to be gained, friendships strengthened, faith deepened. It may be too much to ask that we welcome these experiences, but not too much to ask that we share them and appreciate them for the gifts they bring into our lives.

Angela Blanchard is President and CEO of [BakerRipley](#) in Houston, Texas. She is a globally recognized expert practitioner in community development, disaster recovery, and effective long-term integration for immigrants and refugees. She has provided a way forward for hundreds of thousands beginning the difficult journey of rebuilding their lives after disaster—from Hurricane Katrina, to wild fires in Australia to Hurricane Harvey.

Her achievements in community revitalization have received numerous accolades: elite awards from top institutions, three invitations to the White House, and extensive press coverage. She has been profiled in [The New York Times](#), [The Wall Street Journal](#), [The Atlantic](#), [Fast Company](#) magazine, and on [CNN](#) and [NPR](#). She is a Senior Nonresident Fellow in the [Centennial Scholar Initiative](#) at the [Brookings Institution](#) in Washington, D.C. To learn more about her work, visit [AngelaBlanchard.com](#).

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