The New York Times
nytimes.com

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August 7, 2005
A Hero in Every Aisle Seat
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Pittsburgh

ONE survivor of the Air France crash in Toronto on Tuesday described the "panic" of his fellow passengers. Yet these people had just evacuated a burning plane in about two minutes. While they had had critical help from the plane's crew members, those trained professionals were busy assisting people with limited mobility, not providing psychotherapy. Thus what the passenger observed was clearly not "panic" in the sense of an unthinking crowd acting irrationally and abandoning the norms of civilized behavior. Indeed, it was the exact opposite.

The Air France evacuation required an extraordinary degree of social coordination - which emerged among a group of strangers with virtually no time to prepare. Once out of the wreckage, they were aided by other strangers who, on the spur of the moment and with no expertise in emergency situations, had pulled off a nearby highway and calmly charged into the scene, despite the risks posed by an exploding plane.

While this sort of behavior is often described as remarkable, it is actually what researchers have come to expect. Studies of civilians' intense experiences in the London Blitz; the cities of Japan and Germany in World War II; the 1947 smallpox outbreak in New York; the earthquake in Kobe, Japan, in 1995; and even fires have found that people, however stressed, almost always keep their wits and elevate their humanity.

Indeed, the critical first responders in almost any crisis are ordinary citizens whom fate has brought together. As Kathleen Tierney, head of the University of Colorado's Natural Hazards Center, has noted, "The vast majority of live rescues are carried out by community residents who are at the scene of disasters, not by official response agencies or outside search and rescue teams."

In these ways, the Air France crash was fundamentally no different from the heroic evacuation of the World Trade Center on 9/11 or the London Underground on 7/7. People helped out one another, despite being in the (thankfully) rare circumstances that can occasionally produce panic: confined quarters, limited visibility, restricted exits and acute time pressure.

What the passenger called "panic" was a normal response to stress. Although unpleasant, that stress is typically productive. It focuses people on solving the problem at hand or identifying those among them who can do so. In a plane crash, those solutions might come from people who paid attention during the preflight announcements. In London last month, such problem-solving was evident among those who surmised that the darkness in the subway tunnel meant that the third rail posed no risk of electrocution.

Obviously, a passenger who has just made a harrowing escape is entitled to use whatever descriptive terms he wants. Professionals and policy makers, however, need to be careful with their language. In discussions of homeland security

emergencies, one hears "panic" a lot, despite the evidence that panic won't be likely, whatever our enemies throw at us.

Tom Ridge, the first secretary of Homeland Security, warned the public not to give in to the terrorists and the "panic they seek to create" and informed it that first responders "tell us that avoiding panic and confusion in a crisis helps them do their jobs better." One of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's bioterrorism plans states that "following a terrorism-related event, fear and panic can be expected from both patients and health care providers."

If our leaders are really planning for panic, in the technical sense, then they are at best wasting resources on a future that is unlikely to happen. At worst, they may be doing our enemies' work for them - while people are amazing under pressure, it cannot help to have predictions of panic drummed into them by supposed experts.

It can set up long-term foreboding, causing people to question whether they have the mettle to handle terrorists' challenges. Studies have found that when interpreting ambiguous situations, people look to one another for cues. Panicky warnings can color the cues that people draw from one another when interpreting ambiguous situations, like seeing a South Asian-looking man with a backpack get on a bus.

Nor can it help if policy makers talk about possible draconian measures (like martial law and rigidly policed quarantines) to control the public and deny its right to manage its own affairs. The very planning for such measures can alienate citizens and the authorities from each other.

Whatever its source, the myth of panic is a threat to our welfare. Given the difficulty of using the term precisely and the rarity of actual panic situations, the cleanest solution is for the politicians and the press to avoid the term altogether. It's time to end chatter about "panic" and focus on ways to support public resilience in an emergency.

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