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The Human Condition of Coping

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Ryan Shumway and Robert Machoian, Design

Introduction

The intention and purpose of my project was to observe the condition of Puerto Rico as a whole and learn coping methods used by the people who survived Hurricanes Maria and Irma. The “Human Condition” is a phrase I picked up from the famous photographer Platon who is known for his iconic portrait style and sensitivity to others suffering. I defined the human condition for this research project as life's hardest moments that shape the way we behave, think, and who we are. With so much chaos in the world today I want to learn and highlight what those in Puerto Rico did to heal from the hurricanes.

Methodology

Through observation of circumstances, maximizing on opportunities for conversation with Puerto Ricans and travelling the island I began to learn about similar situations and conditions and overtime asked the same questions less and instead dig deeper into individual experiences. My overall results from this research are therefore more qualitative than quantitative.

I used audio recording devices and cameras to interview both members and non-members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: including members of a Stake Presidency south of the capital, San Juan, the local Branch President in the town of Luquillo on the north east of the island, and members and non-members in Humacao on the south-east side of the Island. I also contacted a non-profit group called Light Up Puerto Rico, interviewed members of this organization and helped them do some service cleaning up abandoned homes.

In each of these interviews I asked specific questions about their experience with the hurricanes, where they were and what they were doing during the storm, and in its aftermath.

Discussion

As I listened to each person share their coping methods I noticed similarities in each experience: all I met with told me that they were with their families or neighbors, and that they had been praying, calling on God to protect them.

After documenting these coping strategies I then did more in-depth interviews using open-ended questions about what the people learned about themselves during these crises. I learned two important things. First, every single person I interviewed said this same thing, “The worst part wasn’t the storms itself. It was the aftermath, the feeling of abandonment from the [Puerto Rican] government.” Each person insistently emphasized that the government tried to provide supplies and force curfews but there were too few supplies provided and no curfews enforced nor obeyed. In addition the hurricanes knocked down trees in the rainforest which knocked out the majority of cell towers and electricity, leaving millions without power to their refrigerators where their food was kept. In order to survive, they required generators; these generators required gasoline to power them; gas lines formed up to 3 hours before curfew was over and the lines would last through most of the day, with many not getting the gas they needed. No one, including the government, was prepared. Preparation for emergencies is the key to be able to more quickly recover from disasters/emergencies.
The second thing I learned was that the people who coped the best were those with a wider but more closely knit social group. Those who relied only on the government for help were the most likely to still be waiting for relief and had the most difficult time coping with the aftermath of the storms. People who had many different contacts that were more intimately tied to them did better. This includes people who belong to churches, and people with strong family ties with relatives outside of Puerto Rico. In addition to this, those people who believed in God seemed to be emotionally coping better than those who do not.

**Conclusion**

I strongly believe that the best coping method is the Atonement of Jesus Christ and His grace. Among all the information in the many interviews it was confirmed to me that many wouldn't have made it without their families watching out for them and without God protecting them. Also, that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints' recommendation to be prepared for emergencies is inspired counsel.

On a side note, I also learned that actually doing research is a lot more difficult than it sounds on paper. To actually do the type of research that I that proposed would require several weeks of dedicated interviewing. The compilation of material and organizing it in a way that makes sense is also much more difficult and time-consuming than I had planned. While I feel like I was able to accomplish a lot in under a week, this project taught me a lot about the difficulties of actually carrying out research. There are many things I would do differently now that I have had this experience. Without the ORCA grant it would not have been possible for me to learn these things. It was a very valuable experience.

I'll be doing a show in the Harris Fine Arts Center on September 14th 2018, a year from when these hurricanes hit Puerto Rico.

Left Image: Me helping cleaning up a destroyed house in Puerto Rico

Right Image: Two people cooking in a homemade outdoor kitchen.