disaster of the proportions of the recent earthquake and subsequent tsunami causes all of us to do our own personal assessments. Most of us wonder how we would have responded. Many of us see the catastrophe as a profound reminder of our own mortality. As we read the news and watch the very graphic material on the Web or television, many questions come to mind.

For me, one of the compelling questions was: How is it that no early warning system was in place? How could that be? Why didn’t anyone listen to the scientist who was trying to sound an alarm? The Web site of the International Tsunami Information Center (http://www.prh.noaa.gov/itic/) provides links to the systems in place in the United States and other parts of the world, but no systems exist for South Asia or the Indian Ocean.

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

After 9/11 various sections of the public health community became very busy with preparedness projects, attempting to forecast and then “plan for” (read as “damage control”) any event involving terrorism, whether from chemical, biological, or other agents. I have not seen any national survey attempting to measure the degree of confidence the public feels about such efforts. Perhaps our officials don’t want to know whether their efforts inspire confidence.

In earlier times, when the U.S. government engaged in early warning activities, there appeared to be some confidence in those efforts. Or perhaps I was too young and naive to know any better. As a child living in New Jersey, I routinely participated in practice drills for air raids during World War II; the goal was to protect us from a possible enemy attack. At night, the sirens would sound, and we had to darken our homes. Our windows had black shades to prevent enemy aircraft from knowing the location of the cities, and the headlights of our cars were half black. In school, we had to practice diving under our desks for protection. Did these efforts work? So far as I know, these actions were never tested against actual aircraft. However, there were submarine sightings off shore.

PERSONAL WARNING SYSTEMS

What are our own personal, early warning systems? Do we have them in place? Do we listen to the messages coming to us from our families, friends, and coworkers? Or are we caught by surprise, traumatized by a seemingly unthinkable event or situation?

To what should we be paying attention? Each of us, of course, is in the best possible position to create our own personal list. We certainly have lots of help from
the various forms of media. Warning signals include weight gain, a checkbook out of balance, unexplained aches and pains, and notices in the mail of various forms of delinquency.

But perhaps the more dangerous signals may not seem to be signals at first. It may be difficult to discern, at first, that one is out of step professionally. When going to work is no longer pleasurable, it may be time to ask, “Why?” Has there been a subtle change of value systems in the larger work community? Do the administrators no longer value what you do, or how you do it? Among your peers, is there a similar tension or discontent, or are you alone? How much freedom do you have to change what you are doing or look for another place to do it?

Years ago, I realized I should be paying attention to the cues that graduate psychiatric nursing education at Rutgers University was on a demolition track. At first, I tried to prevent the demise of the four-semester clinical program, developed by Hildegard Peplau. Painfully, I came to realize that junior faculty would vote with the dean to court her favor, and that the highly regarded clinical program would be nothing more than a 30-credit disaster. So, I fled the academic tsunami and ran for higher ground—a life-saving move.

If you work in the for-profit corporate sector, how will you be affected by the company’s economic losses, mergers, or downsizing? Is there a substrate of bias against working mothers? Older adults? Minorities? If you work in academia, you already know that women earn less than men for doing the same work, and are less likely to be promoted, especially if “burdened” by children. If you are approaching age 60, you also have been made aware of the “benefits” of retiring. A good move would be to engage in coursework labeled Retirement 101 so you are equipped with the facts and can make the best choices.

When you sense an early warning that a disaster may be brewing, to whom can you turn, confidently and confidentially, for validation of your perception? One useful approach is to consult your right brain to determine what feels “right” about potential people with whom to share your worries. Our right brains are not cognitively judgmental, as our left brains are. They simply take in important material, globally and nonverbally. Do pay attention. In addition, dogs are important to people as early warning systems for impending seizures. Watch dogs take their positions seriously, sizing up intruders to assess their level of potential harm to the system.

CONCLUSION

The articles in this issue were selected long before the tsunami struck, but they contain messages about potential warning systems. In Thailand, efforts are being made to prevent drug abuse in communities. Social support is described as extremely important when homelessness occurs. And what had been considered in the past as positive prevention (seclusion and restraint) is now rethought, from the experiences of caregivers and care recipients.

By the time you read this editorial, a friendly early warning system, or forecasting event, has already occurred. The furry little groundhog has already seen his shadow (back to sleep for another 6 weeks) or not (early spring).

Are your own warning systems in place? Do you pay attention?

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