

Abstract:

The bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland on December 21, 1988 was a major terrorism and mass murder event on par with 9/11 in terms of social and cultural impact. All 259 people onboard and 11 people on the ground were killed. The families and other loved ones of those on board created a new paradigm for victim-led advocacy for better treatment from the United States government and other responding organizations. It was also a turning point in the development of disaster spiritual care as a distinct discipline with its own best practices. Terrorism and other aspects of the story overshadowed the story of the disaster spiritual care response. This paper tells the story of the spiritual care response to Lockerbie, both as a social history and as guidance for disaster spiritual care professionals. It offers four main lessons: Be prepared; be ready for death care; the impact zone is endless; and it will change you.

Keywords:

Pan Am 103; Pan Am Flight 103; Lockerbie; Lockerbie Air Disaster; Pan Am; Pan American World Airways; Terrorist incidents of the 1980s; Disaster Spiritual Care; Disaster Chaplaincy; Death Care; Aviation Disasters; Plane Crashes; Disaster Planning.

Coming Down in Pieces:

The Spiritual Care Response to Pan Am Flight 103

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A Senior Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Divinity
Harvard Divinity School
Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2021

Summary

Major aviation disasters are far less common today than they were in the 1980s.¹

When they do happen, the response is considerably more attentive to the emotional and spiritual needs of survivors than has historically been the case.

The bombing of Pan American World Airways Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in December of 1988 is a significant reason why. It led to unprecedented victim-led advocacy for more humane treatment and accountability by the United States government and the airline industry. Much scholarship exists on how the Lockerbie families fought for justice and comprehensive improvements to aviation security and safety, but very little has been written about the spiritual care lessons learned from the disaster. This paper tells that important, overlooked aspect of one of the most significant events in civil aviation history. It is intended to be both a social history and a scholarly contribution to the nascent field of disaster spiritual care best practice research. Knowing the story of Lockerbie's role as a seminal event in the creation of disaster spiritual care is essential for understanding the nature of the discipline and its most effective utilization. Telling the story honors the legacy of the victims of the Lockerbie Air Disaster while creating practical resources for spiritual care providers responding to other high profile, mass fatality events. Lockerbie ushered in a new paradigm for understanding the human response to trauma.

¹ US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), *Aviation Accident Reports*, <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Pages/aviation.aspx>.

I. Introduction

“There is little evidence to guide professionals working with bereaved relatives after a sudden traumatic death.”

— BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL (BMJ)²

Air traffic control conventions have changed little since the early days of commercial aviation. Brevity in radio communications is important, and aircraft are assigned call signs — standard short names — based on aircraft type or operator, followed by tail or flight number.³ Most major airlines use their company name (e.g., ‘Delta 123’). The most storied carriers often have something with a little more panache. British Airways, for example, is ‘Speedbird.’ Pan American was ‘Clipper,’ in homage to the historic sailing ships of the nineteenth century that crossed the oceans at a rapid clip. Having started business by operating seaplanes from Key West to Havana, Pan Am incorporated nautical motifs into its corporate identity. The tradition of airline pilots wearing uniforms styled after naval officers originated at Pan American.⁴ Pan Am also maintained a tradition of giving all of its aircraft a ‘Clipper’ moniker painted prominently near the cockpit.

On December 21, 1988, a Pan Am Boeing 747-121 aircraft (N739PA) operating as Flight 103 from London-Heathrow to New York-John F. Kennedy International Airport broke apart after an explosive device detonated in the

² Alison Chapple and Sue Ziebland, “Viewing the Body after Bereavement Due to a Traumatic Death,” *BMJ* 340, no. 7754 (2010): 1017.

³ US Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), *Assignment and Authorization of Call Sign Designators and Associated Telephonies*, FAA Order JO 7610.12A, March 2020.

⁴ Robert L. Gandt, *Skygods: The Fall of Pan Am* (New York: Morrow, 1995), 15-19.

forward section of the cargo hold. The explosion occurred about 45 minutes into the flight, just as dinner was about to be served. As millions of people would soon see from horrific images endlessly repeated in the media, the name of the ship was *Clipper Maid of the Seas*. She carried 243 passengers and 16 crew and came down over the village of Lockerbie, Scotland, just over the English border. Eleven people on the ground in Lockerbie were also killed.⁵ Investigators later determined the explosive device that destroyed Clipper 103 was most likely timed to detonate after the aircraft had turned over the Atlantic Ocean, which would have made the recovery of evidence and remains all but impossible. Instead, it detonated just before the turn west, making the epicenter of carnage this sleepy Scottish market village.⁶

Every airline disaster is a human tragedy, but Pan Am 103 led the list of superlatives. It was then: The largest terrorist attack on Americans and the largest criminal investigation in the United Kingdom (led by its smallest police force). It remains the deadliest terrorist attack and mass murder ever to occur in Great Britain. The flight was full of American college students — including a group of 35 from Syracuse University — and service-members returning home for the holidays. A quarter of the flight was under the age of 27.⁷ It was a national

⁵ Department for Transport, Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AAIB), *Report on the Accident to Boeing 747-121, N739PA at Lockerbie, Dumfriesshire, Scotland on 21 December 1988*, February 1990 (United Kingdom), 1-3.

⁶ Simon Houston, “Death of Flight 103: Delay meant a change to plane's route, 270 lives coming to a horrific end in Scotland and vital evidence falling on dry land,” *Daily Record* (Glasgow, Scotland), February 1, 2001.

⁷ Interview with Kathryn Turman (Former Assistant Director, FBI Victim Services Division), March 25, 2021.

tragedy on par with the Space Shuttle *Challenger* catastrophe two years earlier. And Lockerbie was the death knell for the storied and iconic Pan American World Airways, the *de facto* flag carrier of the United States. The criminal investigation continues to the present day.

As the head of the Church of Scotland would say at a multifaith memorial service a few days after the crash, “It is not only pain and grief that we feel at this catastrophe. It is also indignation. For this was not an unforeseeable natural disaster, such as an earthquake. Nor was it the result of human error or carelessness. This, we now know, was an act of human wickedness. That such carnage of the young and of the innocent should have been willed by men in cold and calculated evil is horror upon horror.”⁸ The passengers and crew of the *Clipper Maid of the Seas* did indeed die horrific deaths, as did the 11 victims on the ground. The aviation and law enforcement experts who responded to the disaster were universally credited for doing an exemplary job. They had ample best practices and a body of established professional knowledge to follow. Whatever paradigm existed for providing spiritual and emotional care for catastrophe of such magnitude, however, was deployed *ad hoc* and was often an afterthought. This paper explores four primary lessons learned from Lockerbie for today’s disaster spiritual care providers:

1. Be prepared;
2. Be ready for death care;
3. The impact zone is endless; and
4. It will change you.

⁸ Steven Emerson and Brian Duffy, *The Fall of Pan Am 103* (New York: Putnam, 1990), 153.

An overview of the disaster sequence follows for context.

II. Clipper 103

“This was a routine departure. It was an on-time departure. There was nothing out of the ordinary whatsoever.”

—JEFFREY KREINDLER, PAN AM SPOKESMAN⁹

Pan Am operated three daily nonstops from London-Heathrow to New York-Kennedy in late 1988, all with Boeing 747 ‘jumbo jet’ aircraft.¹⁰ Flight 103 was the last of the three, pushing back from the gate at 6:04 p.m. and taking off at 6:25 p.m. It was scheduled to arrive in New York at 8:40 p.m. and continue on to Detroit, landing there a few minutes after midnight. Flight 103 began as Flight 103A, a Boeing 727 feeder from Frankfurt, West Germany.¹¹

Investigators determined a brown Samsonite suitcase from an arriving Air Malta flight was routed to Pan Am via the computerized baggage system in Frankfurt early in the afternoon of December 21.¹² The suitcase was unaccompanied. It contained a Semtex plastic explosive device and a timed detonator concealed in a portable stereo cassette player. Flight 103A departed Frankfurt around 1:00 p.m., arriving in London about a half-hour before 103’s

⁹ *Since: The Bombing of Pan Am Flight 103*, directed by Phil Furey (2015), Amazon Prime Video.

¹⁰ Pan American World Airways, Inc., *System Timetable*, October 30, 1988.

¹¹ AAIB Report, 3.

¹² US Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Signed Statement of Facts,” Case 1:20-mj-00252 (December 17, 2020), 17.
<https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1347321/download>.

scheduled departure. The aircraft were parked at neighboring gates.¹³ Baggage — including the brown Samsonite with the explosive device — and 125 passengers from the feeder flight were quickly transferred to the 747 for the transatlantic leg.¹⁴

Muammar Gaddafi's Libyan government was eventually determined to be responsible for building the bomb and arranging for it to enter the baggage system at Frankfurt and be transferred to Pan Am 103.¹⁵ Pan Am was found liable for negligent security practices for not identifying and properly screening the unaccompanied bag before transferring it to the 747. Soon after Flight 103, the Federal Aviation Administration determined the company's security practices in Frankfurt were substantially out of compliance with federal regulations.¹⁶ Experts debate whether the bomb could have been detected even if security regulations had been scrupulously followed, but the perception of carelessness was a significant source of Lockerbie families' ire toward Pan American. Their loved ones had paid a ticket surcharge for an high-profile Pan Am security program that was marketed as providing enhanced security protection from terrorism. The program turned out to have been little more than a revenue-generating public relations gimmick.¹⁷

¹³ AAIB Report, 3.

¹⁴ Emerson and Duffy, 167.

¹⁵ Sergey Ushynsky, "Pan Am Flight 103 Investigation and Lessons Learned," *Aviation* (2009:13), 78-86. 10.3846/1648-7788.2009.13.78-86.

¹⁶ Arnold H. Lubasch, "Pan Am Is Held Liable by Jury In '88 Explosion." *New York Times* (New York, N.Y), July 11, 1992.

¹⁷ Laurie Goodstein, "Pan Am Was Lax in Security, Bomb Trial Witnesses Charge," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C), June 6, 1992.

At approximately 7:00 p.m., Captain Jim McQuarie contacted Prestwick Oceanic Control in Scotland: “Good evening, Scottish. Clipper one zero three. We are at level three one zero.” First Officer Ray Wagner then requested oceanic clearance. At 7:02 p.m., Thomas Fraser, the Prestwick controller, responded with the clearance and routing: “Clipper one zero three, route direct, five nine North one zero West to Kennedy. Maintain flight level three one zero.” The Prestwick controllers received no answer and soon saw multiple radar returns, showing that the aircraft was coming apart at 31,000 feet.¹⁸

The suitcase containing the explosive device had been loaded into a cargo container that was placed in the forward left section of the cargo hold, close to the skin of the airplane.¹⁹ Those onboard would have noticed the plane shaking when the bomb exploded at 7:02 p.m. The bomb caused a basketball-size rupture in the skin of the cargo hold, roughly beneath the forward left door. The outside air temperature would have been about -60° Fahrenheit.²⁰ Within fractions of a second of the explosion, the aircraft lost electricity and became completely dark. Beginning at the skin rupture near the bomb position, ever-larger pieces of the fuselage began to peel away from the aircraft, producing a slipstream effect of air moving violently through the cabin. The nose section of the plane, containing the flight deck, first class, and Clipper Class (business class) then broke away — in a

¹⁸ Ian Black and Gerard Seanan. "Court Told How Jet's Radar Blip Broke up at 7.02pm," *The Guardian* (London, UK), May 3, 2000; Frank Ryan, "Controller: Flight 103 Vanished from View" (UPI), October 1, 1990.

¹⁹ John Stuart Mowat, QC, *Determination in the Fatal Accident Inquiry Relating to the Lockerbie Air Disaster*, February 13, 1991 (United Kingdom), 16.

²⁰ Seth Hulbert (Boeing 747 pilot), in conversation with the author, April 10, 2021.

fissure beginning approximately at the “P” in the “Pan Am” titling on the left hand side of the plane — and headed right. Floors buckled as pressurized air escaped from the rest of the aircraft and crystallized on the windows. Passengers immediately lost consciousness in the thin air, though no one was killed instantly. With the four engines still at full power, the beheaded plane moved through the sky before dropping forward and catapulting the passengers in the first few rows out into the night. Several were sucked into the engines. The plane broke apart in five main sections as it fell to the ground (the nose and cockpit, an engine, the wings, the aft cabin, and the tail). Most passengers remained in two large sections that descended through warmer, breathable air a few seconds after the plane broke apart. Captain McQuarie and 147 passengers survived until they hit the ground. When they did, according to one forensic pathologist, “There’s a good possibility they were conscious.”²¹ Some were clutching crosses, and one woman was holding her baby in a way that indicated awareness of the situation. Investigators believe the captain was gripping the yoke tightly when the cockpit section landed on a farm outside of Lockerbie in an area called Tundergarth Hill. It took people on the plane anywhere from two-and-a-half to four minutes to hit the ground, depending on where they were in the aircraft and how they were ejected from it. A local police officer early on the scene of where the cockpit section fell reported a flight attendant had a faint pulse when he found her. Her autopsy later concluded that her injuries were not survivable. The autopsies of

²¹ Michael Bates, “Researcher: Many Lockerbie Victims May Have Lived Until Impact” (Associated Press), October 6., 1990. <https://apnews.com/article/acdaad08cbee147122a54b5592f26ec2>. See: William G. Eckert, “The Lockerbie Disaster and Other Aircraft Breakups in Midair.” *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology* 11, no. 2 (1990): 93-101.

two other victims — a child and a man in his late thirties — discovered they had survivable injuries but had died of shock and exposure. It was a very cold winter night in Lockerbie. December 21 was also the longest night of 1988.²²

III. Lesson One: Be Prepared

"In a highly charged and emotional event such as a mass fatality incident, responders and managers will default to completing tasks in the manner which they are most accustomed... It is best to train the way you operate and operate the way you train... 'Failing to plan is planning to fail.' When you plan ahead, you have the advantage of being able to think through actions and consider their consequences."

— ROBERT A. JENSEN, CHAIRMAN, KENYON INTERNATIONAL²³

While formal disaster spiritual care is generally the domain of trained professionals like disaster chaplains and congregational faith leaders, I argue that the need for basic familiarity with disaster spiritual care practices extends far beyond these traditional categories. Customer-facing airline employees, internal airline leaders (e.g., union officials and human resources managers), airport administration, law enforcement, and medical examiner and mortuary staff should all have at least a basic awareness of the spiritual dimension to their role as disaster responders and appropriate training well before those services are needed.

²² The aircraft deconstruction sequence is based on multiple sources: The AAIB Report; the Mowat *Determination*; Interview with Kathryn Turman; and Cay Rademacher & Christoph Reuter, "What Really Happened on Flight 103?" *The Observer* (London), Feb. 17, 2000.

²³ Robert Jensen, *Mass Fatality and Casualty Incidents: A Field Guide* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2000), vii-x.

No common paradigm for disaster spiritual care existed in 1988. For aviation incidents, the task of delivering such services generally fell to the airlines. Pan Am's people were themselves traumatized, and the company's expertise fell well outside the domain of psycho-spiritual caregiving.

Johanna O'Flaherty managed Pan Am's Employee Assistance Program in 1988. She was also a former Pan Am flight attendant who was close friends with Mary (Gerry) Murphy, the senior purser (lead flight attendant) on Flight 103.²⁴ She recalls that at the time of Lockerbie, Pan Am: "Had a sophisticated emergency program in place from a technical response perspective, but was sorely lacking in psychological preparedness (the other airlines were similarly ill-prepared). The airline pulled employees from their regular duties, and assigned them as Family Escorts to the bereaved family members as first responders."²⁵ These Pan Am Family Escorts had no training for the task, which involved a great deal of providing what we would now consider forms of spiritual care. While individual Pan Am employees typically responded with exemplary humanity, the organizational handling of matters such as death notifications and the return of remains would become the source of much anguish for the families.

At Pan Am's operations center at Kennedy Airport, "The Senior V.P. of Operations' secretary came through the door and announced that the airline's system control group had just been informed that Flight 103 had disappeared

²⁴ Johanna O'Flaherty, "Vicarious Traumatization in First Responders of an Airline Disaster" (Ph.D. diss., Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2004), 173.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

from the radar during departure from London and was presumed down.”²⁶

Television news special reports began to interrupt programming with news of the crash. Events rapidly began to outpace Pan Am’s ability to cope with its public responsibilities, including managing information.

Pan Am’s Director of Flight Safety recalls what happened after finding out the 103 was presumed down:

The company’s aircraft accident contingency plan was immediately activated. Every key department was involved and a 24-hour command center at Kennedy Airport was established to coordinate company post-accident efforts and assign duties. Concurrently, a go-team was assembled primarily from Flight Operations and Maintenance and Engineering with supporting members from other departments to assist in the investigation at the accident site with government investigators from the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), a Boeing representative and a large contingent of investigators from Britain’s Air Accident Investigation Branch (AIB). Representatives from the Airline Pilots Association (ALPA) and Flight Engineers International (FEIA) unions also flew to the scene and assisted in the effort.²⁷

No mention of psychological or other emotional care was on that list. The spiritual care response fell to well-meaning people doing their best in an impossible situation and to whatever clergy may have been available. Worried loved ones of those aboard began arriving at the Pan Am terminal at JFK (dubbed the Worldport), along with hordes of reporters and television cameras. “The Worldport was a somber and frenetic scene swarmed by media reporters with their cameras and lights intent on capturing the sorrow and anguish of relatives

²⁶ Arnie Reiner, Personal Reflection in *Pan Am – Personal Tributes to a Global Aviation Pioneer*, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://jpbtransconsulting.com/tag/aircraft/>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

and friends gathered there to meet those who would never arrive on Flight 103. Company representatives were on hand to lend what comfort, support, and assistance they could at a time of bottomless despair.”²⁸ Daniel Cohen, whose daughter Theodora was one of the Syracuse students aboard the flight, said of Pan Am’s immediate response, “They didn’t know what to do, and they were confused and frightened.”²⁹ Another parent said:

There were a lot of issues in the beginning that just didn’t feel right... even though you were grieving personally, you knew that... things were not happening... the way you thought they should. The State Department abrogated their responsibility for caring for us to Pan Am. And Pan Am hired their part-timers to become grief counselors... and they were always a day late and a dollar short... because they weren’t trained. They weren’t trained to deal with this kind of magnitude of grieving people and information gathering and trying to support... they had no idea... It was horrible. I felt sorry for them because they were not trained to do what they were asked to do.³⁰

What we now recognize as missed opportunities for providing competent psycho-spiritual care added significant additional trauma for the family members and other loved ones of those aboard Flight 103.

The situation that unfolded in those initial hours at the Worldport has been written about extensively in media ethics literature. This scholarship reveals an unexpected opportunity for clergy. As with all high-profile international disasters, the media interest was ferocious and often overwhelming.

Heart-wrenching footage was ubiquitous on nightly news, including an infamous

²⁸ Reiner, Personal Reflection.

²⁹ *Since* (2015).

³⁰ Aphrodite Tsairis interview in *Since* (2015).

scene of a passenger's mother falling to the ground and screaming for her child as the press pack got as much video as it could. The woman likened the experience to being raped.³¹ Many reporters later spoke of regret at their aggressive tactics and the hypercompetitive culture of their profession. It was not uncommon to read sentiments to the effect of 'we were just trying to do our jobs; we just needed something to file in our reports and satisfy our editors.' No one doubts that the media were invaluable conduits of information and accountability. Indeed, Lockerbie families would later utilize the media to great effect. During the impact phase of the disaster, however, the press was often intrusive and predatory. Clergy had a role to play in mitigating some of their excesses. One reporter at the Worldport noted that it took some time for Pan Am to 'crank up' their media response. After a few hours, Pan Am provided a priest and a rabbi, "So we had people to talk to, which you need in a situation like that. You need an authority figure who can talk to the press." This reporter emphasized that clergy can provide adequate soundbites on behalf of family members so that reporters leave the families alone, "Give us something to tell our readers and editors." The presence of clergy was critical and helped the public relations response go well once it was 'cranked up': "The TV people had a talking head with a Roman collar. A rabbi showed up later on. So we had a priest and a rabbi. The priest, I think, was an assistant chaplain with the (police department), so he just showed up. The regular airport chaplain was ill that night or had been ill for some time. I don't know what the situation was. So they didn't have an

³¹ Joan Deppa, *The Media and Disasters: Pan Am 103* (London: Fulton, 1993), 110.

immediate clergy response, which I think in a situation (is) very important. You get someone who's a clergyman. The press can't beat him up."³²

Arriving family members were whisked into the Pan Am Clipper Club lounge, where they would be eventually addressed by the company's CEO, Thomas Plaskett, as state troopers guarded the doors. Red Cross volunteers and a few clergy members facilitated by the Red Cross were also inside comforting the bereaved.³³ Theo Cohen's mother, Susan, recalled, "It... became the worst day of my life. Almost, as I really say and feel about it, the last day of my life."³⁴ There is no shortage of scholarship and documentary material about how much anguish occurred that day for the families. Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of this part of the story was what happened inside Pan Am, the airline often credited with creating the international air travel industry.

Pan American World Airways continues to hold a legendary status within the aviation community. It was a symbol of postwar American prosperity that had a brand cache hard to imagine today. At one point, the blue Pan Am 'meatball' logo was second only to Coca-Cola's in worldwide brand recognition.³⁵ But December 21, 1988 was, "The day that the heart of Pan American died."³⁶ The airline would limp on until 1991. Starting with Lockerbie, "Psychological stress

³² *Ibid.*, 116.

³³ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁴ *Since* (2015).

³⁵ Captain Don Cooper, "Pan Am Logos and Slogans," *The Pan Am Series*. Accessed May 15, 2021 <https://jpbtransconsulting.com/tag/pan-am-logos/>.

³⁶ Gant, 271.

overwhelmed the Pan Am organization at every level, and there were reports of several suicides.”³⁷ Around the time of its collapse, the Wall Street Journal reported, “Such upheaval would be painful for employees at any company. But for Pan Am people, the experience has been especially traumatic because the carrier fell from such heights... Many workers report that they began to suffer severe emotional distress... The sense of loss and heartbreak at Pan Am is only amplified by the memory of what it once was.”³⁸

Pan Am employees working at Kennedy that day simply ended their shifts and went home, without any stress debriefing or other forms of psycho-spiritual care.³⁹ Pan Am’s Johanna O’Flaherty would later write her Ph.D. thesis in clinical psychology on the high risk to airline personnel of vicarious traumatization after aviation disasters. Her research demonstrates that any adequate disaster spiritual care plan must consider the needs of everyone directly impacted by catastrophic incidents.

³⁷ Helen Davey, “Orphaned by Job Loss: The Death of Pan Am,” *HuffPost*, May 31, 2010, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/orphaned-by-job-loss-the_b_518076.

³⁸ Brett Pulley, “For Pan Am Employees, Fate Of the Airline They Love Brings Stress, Depression,” *Wall Street Journal*, Europe (Brussels), 1991.

³⁹ Interview with Johanna O’Flaherty, March 3, 2021.

IV. Lesson Two: Be Ready for Death Care

“The loss is going to be real, and there is no anesthesia... What I also learned, however, is that there is something in us that knows how to do that... That lesson gets repeated for me over and over when I do death notifications. What I find is people know how to do this. They know how to absorb that, the impact of that blow. It knocks them down... And after about 20 minutes... They will come up. They will come back to themselves, and they will ask a very sensible question, which is usually, “Where is he? When can I see him?”

— REV. KATE BRAESTRUP, CHAPLAIN, MAINE GAME WARDEN SERVICE⁴⁰

Lockerbie is a town of about 4,000 people. It was policed by the smallest constabulary in Britain. On the night of December 21, 1988, only one police officer was on duty. Most of the town was busy preparing for Christmas.⁴¹

Clipper Maid of the Seas departed Heathrow with 100 tons of jet fuel aboard, of which only about ten percent had been consumed when the plane went down. Its gross takeoff weight was 713,002 pounds.⁴² Eyewitnesses in the area reported seeing a “cigar-shaped flaming mass” coming from the sky south of Lockerbie. This was likely the plane’s midsection, which included the wings (and the fuel tanks inside them), and parts of the fuselage. It grazed the north side of the main highway between Scotland and England and slid into a cluster of houses on the south side of Lockerbie — a neighborhood called Sherwood Crescent —

⁴⁰ *On Being with Krista Tippett*, “Kate Braestrup: A Presence in the Wild,” (Minnesota Public Radio, 2012), <https://onbeing.org/programs/kate-braestrup-a-presence-in-the-wild/#transcript>.

⁴¹ Gregory H. Moody and Anthony Busuttill, “Identification in the Lockerbie Air Disaster” *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology* 15, no. 1 (1994): 63-69.

⁴² AAIB Report, 9

creating an enormous crater. This is where the 11 people on the ground were killed.⁴³ Seventeen bodies were never found.⁴⁴

A nearby Richter scale recorded a seismographic reading of 1.3 at impact. A fireball erupted 350 feet into the air, and the police station itself was struck by debris from the houses, cars, and buildings that were destroyed in the fireball. A second large portion of the fuselage landed between a few houses about a quarter mile away to the north. One of the jet's four engines buried itself fifteen feet into a street west of that section. The soon-to-be iconic nose section on its side with the words "Maid of the Seas" clearly visible landed about three-and-a-half miles away on Tundergarth Hill. The bodies of the flight crew were still inside. Many others were ejected outside. Everyone there that night speaks of the ghastly and widespread distribution of bodies all over town: On roofs, in trees, in yards. Some of them were intact and looked like sleeping people.⁴⁵

Father Patrick Keegans was the local Roman Catholic priest. He happened to live at number One Sherwood Crescent, placing him at the center of Lockerbie in every sense. His was the only house on the street not totally destroyed by the impact. "There was an almighty explosion, the whole house went into darkness and shook and I couldn't do anything but put my hand over my head and look at the ceiling and think, this is where we die," Fr. Keegans recalls. His mother was visiting for Christmas. When the house stopped shaking, he went downstairs and

⁴³ Eckhert, 96.

⁴⁴ Turman Interview.

⁴⁵ Moody and Busuttil, 63.

found her in the kitchen. The refrigerator had protected her from the blast. “When I looked out the front door the whole street was gone and everything round about it... The smoke was horrendous. I said to my mother, I'm taking you out here now but I don't want you to look at anything, just keep your head down.” After getting his mother to safety, Fr. Keegans spent the rest of the night out with the police identifying bodies.⁴⁶

Thousands of police, firefighters, and military personnel were quickly deployed to aid with the investigation and the awful task of searching for victims and recovering their remains. Because the response quickly became a criminal investigation, the police were more deeply involved than they would have been in typical civilian disasters.⁴⁷ The psychological impact mirrored the scope of the incident, which would soon extend to 845 square miles. “On the following days, the most salient feature was the scale of the disaster.” The vastness of the devastation was described as “incomprehensible” and “beyond belief.” One officer said, “My experiences over the years have seen me become accustomed to tragic situations, but I was ill-prepared for the situation I faced at Lockerbie. I have had wide dealing with sudden deaths and post mortems, but nothing could prepare me for what I had to do.⁴⁸” Fr. Keegans described an expression common to those on the scene, “I call it ‘Lockerbie eyes.’ After a while you get Lockerbie

⁴⁶ “Lockerbie 25 Years On... Priest Tells of His Memories” (*Glasgow Times*, 2013) <https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/13269969.lockerbie-25-years-on-priest-tells-of-his-memories/>.

⁴⁷ M. Mitchell, D. McLay, J. Boddy, and L. Cecci, “The Police Response to the Lockerbie Disaster” (*Disaster Management*, 1991), 198.

⁴⁸ M. Mitchell, et al., 199.

eyes.”⁴⁹ A police officer recalled, “I thought all the time about how the victims must have suffered and whether they were aware of what was happening to them and I couldn’t get rid of the image of bodies and young children falling from the sky.”⁵⁰

Perhaps surprisingly, those officers who consistently worked on longer-duration mortuary assignments had better mental health outcomes than those who had brief, episodic contact with human remains. Researchers speculate they were likely better able to assign meaning and closure after seeing their work through to some amount of resolution. Those performing search duties often developed anticipatory anxiety because they never knew what they would find.⁵¹ It was only years after the disaster that a formal awareness of the need for spiritual and formal psycho-social support systems for first responders were necessary. Lockerbie contributed significantly to the maturation of police and fire department chaplaincy as a vital service in the United Kingdom.⁵² At the time, police officers and other first responders were generally, “Expected to cope with distressing duties with a mixture of black humor and alcohol.”⁵³ The emotional impact was enormous on those performing the search and recovery

⁴⁹ “It Happened In... Lockerbie” (Al Jazeera), accessed February 7, 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tk67ASDsLJI>.

⁵⁰ Mitchell, et al., 202.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁵² Interview with Rev. Christopher Henley, March 3, 2021.

⁵³ Mitchell, et al., 199.

activities in Lockerbie, which is universally regarded to have been of the highest quality.

Responding organizations that were prepared ahead of time and knew their role generally performed well. Most airlines — including Pan Am — have an agreement with a company called Kenyon International, a disaster mortuary service. Kenyon has a well-deserved reputation for responding rapidly and with the utmost competence. In researching this paper, I spoke with Christopher Henley, a former funeral director and executive at Kenyon in the UK who responded to Lockerbie. His father was one of the embalmers. He spoke of the tremendous pride the mortuary professionals had in the quality of their work. Many of the bodies had suffered shattering injuries. The embalmers were proud to have made a significant number of them viewable. All aspects of the mortuary process — identification, medicolegal autopsy, tracking of personal effects, etc. — were conducted with an exacting level of attention to detail and care for the dead.⁵⁴ And yet many families felt tremendous frustration with some aspects of the death care they received. Pan Am was the default liaison between the professionals on the scene in Lockerbie and the families. From a modern spiritual care perspective, it is not hard to see how the involvement of trained professionals could have prevented some of the worst instances of traumatizing gaffes by Pan Am. The missteps between the airline and the families started early.

Today — in no small part thanks to Lockerbie — commonly accepted, evidence-based best practices exist for making death notifications. Notifications

⁵⁴ Henley Interview.

are singular, life changing events, and they can cause tremendous additional trauma when mishandled. The presence of clergy is commonly indicated. Notifications should be made in person whenever possible, and under no circumstances should the news be left as a voice message. Notifiers should contact families as soon as they know a death has occurred and are confident of the decedent's identity. Disaster responders must also do everything possible to avoid having people first learn of a loved one's death via the media.⁵⁵ Multiple reports emerged of Pan Am representatives leaving answering machine messages like this one: "This is Pan Am calling. Your daughter Diane was on Pan Am Flight 103. The plane went down over Scotland. There were no survivors. If you have any questions you may call us."⁵⁶ Such messages were often left days after the disaster. Perhaps even worse, many families spoke of hearing the news on television. In the chaotic information management climate of the first few hours after the crash, the media somehow obtained the passenger manifest from Pan Am. Multiple national newscasts aired the list of the Syracuse University students aboard before anyone from the government, Pan Am, or Syracuse had officially informed the families. Many families found out this way.⁵⁷ The news travelled quickly and roughly.

⁵⁵ In my interview with Kathryn Turman, she explained how her office at the FBI had developed an evidence-based best practice training for death notifications in conjunction with Penn State University, which is the source for these recommendations. Accessed April 6, 2021: <https://www.deathnotification.psu.edu/we-regret-to-inform-you>.

⁵⁶ "Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 Testimony" U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Transportation Infrastructure. 1996.

⁵⁷ Deppa, 37, 320

Suse Lowenstein, the mother of one of the Syracuse students, remembers how she found out:

The phone rang and it was one of his young friends who did not go abroad. And she said, “Is Alexander home yet?” And I said, “He is not. He’s coming home tonight.” And she said, “Well, what’s the airline?” I said “Pan Am.” She blurted out, “What’s the number?” I said, “It’s Pan Am 103.” And that’s when she blurted into the phone, “Haven’t you heard? Pan Am 103 was last seen in a fireball over Lockerbie, Scotland.” And I remember doubling over and going down on my knees because I really thought I was going to faint. And it felt like everything I had was just sucked out. It was just draining out of me, and I knew instantly, truly that Alexander was dead. My body told me so.⁵⁸

Controlled information and a properly delivered death notification — including the presence of a chaplain or other spiritual care provider — would not have mitigated the impact of the news, but it could have prevented the trauma of such a shocking, unexpected phone call. Many families spoke of their anger that information in the acute phase was so haphazardly managed. In the first hours, many had difficulty getting through on Pan Am’s toll-free number. The State Department was also less than forthcoming with information.⁵⁹

Death notifications and disaster information management can be capably done by persons in any number of fields. When looking to Lockerbie for insight into what functions might best be performed by spiritual care professionals, tending to the acute phase of death care stands out. This is perhaps the most misunderstood and delicate time for loved ones learning to cope with their new reality, which is characterized by the transformation of their loved one from a

⁵⁸ *Since* (2015).

⁵⁹ Congressional Testimony (1996).

living person to someone who is ‘socially dead.’⁶⁰ The logistical and investigatory demands of the recovery also frequently come into conflict with spiritual care needs during this phase. Disaster scholars Sue Blanshan and E.L. Quarantelli explored the sociological aspects of recovering remains. It is not done simply to process bodies and dispose of them. “A purely instrumental approach disposes of the dead as bodies whereas the living want to treat the dead as persons.”

Blanshan and Quarantelli emphasize that something critical is occurring during this transition phase: The dead can only become *socially dead* when the right steps are taken. “To the dead it may not matter, but it does to the living... The living will, if at all possible, not let go of the dead until the body involved is respectfully converted back into an individual person.”⁶¹ Multiple factors complicated this process in Lockerbie, not least that it was a mass murder investigation.

Terrorism was suspected immediately. It took about a week for evidence of a bomb to be confirmed. Suse Lowenstien recalls, “When the news came that a bomb exploded on Pan Am 103, there was a shift of how it felt. That he now was a murder victim.”⁶² Not only did remains have to be located and identified, each person found had to undergo a meticulous postmortem examination. This caused significant delays in the release and return of bodies. Law enforcement was also

⁶⁰ Anne Eyre, "Dealing With Disaster: Implications for Death Care Professionals." (Pharos International, Autumn 2016), 12-19.

⁶¹ Sue Blanshan and E.L. Quarantelli, "From Dead Body to Person: The Handling of Fatal Mass Casualties in Disasters." *Victimology* 6, no. 1 (1981): 275.

⁶² *Since* (2015).

being intentionally tight-lipped about anything related to what they were finding during this phase of the investigation.⁶³ Families found it difficult to get reliable information about when their loved ones would be coming home.⁶⁴ The extended delay in returning remains added an extra element of spiritual angst for the families of a large group of Hasidic Jews on Flight 103.⁶⁵ Jewish law forbids autopsies in most cases and requires prompt burial of the deceased. This is an area where spiritual care expertise could have negotiated a better experience for the families.

The condition of the remains varied considerably. Some were barely scathed, while the damage to others was described as “quite unimaginable.”⁶⁶ Law enforcement often concealed the extent of the horrors in an attempt to protect the families. Kathryn Turman, a senior US government official who led the FBI’s Victim Assistance division throughout the Lockerbie investigation said this was perhaps the one area where the Scots could have performed better.⁶⁷ The families had a right to know how their loved ones had died and the condition in which they were found. A British government committee later articulated standards for law enforcement to follow in other disasters. Its chair stressed: “The importance of honest, accurate information being given to the families as

⁶³ Emerson and Duffy, 146.

⁶⁴ Helen Engelhardt, *The Longest Night* (New York: Blue Thread Communications, 2013), 44.

⁶⁵ Deppa, 109.

⁶⁶ Mitchell, et al., 202.

⁶⁷ Turman Interview.

early and regularly as possible and at all times thereafter. If accurate information cannot be given, the families should be told why not. There are few things more frustrating than being told nothing and not being given any explanation for the fact that one is being kept in the dark.”⁶⁸ Disaster spiritual care providers can be reliable and compassionate deliverers of difficult news, relying on best practices established, in part, by the lessons of Lockerbie.

Pamela Dix’s brother Peter was a passenger on the flight. His body was identified 11 days after the crash via dental records and fingerprints. She recalls, “How my family was treated during those 11 days has remained with me and influenced my life ever since.”⁶⁹ Her overall conclusion about the involvement of families in the aftermath of a disaster is, “Above all, they must be allowed to feel that they are part of what is going on, if that is what they want. If people ask for information, they should be given it, although it should not be forced upon them. To give an informed choice about whether or not to see a body is essential.” As Kenyon International funeral director Chris Henley mentioned, embalmers and other mortuary personnel on site were proud of their work making many of the victims viewable. Despite this, Pamela recalls that the Scottish authorities made a decision that there would be no visible identification. “Relatives were not allowed to see the bodies, irrespective of their condition.” This went against the wishes of many loved ones who felt a duty to see their dead. They were not given the option of an informed decision. “This is one of many examples of how the bereaved

⁶⁸ “Report of Lord Justice Clark (2001),” Cited by Eyre.

⁶⁹ Pamela Dix, “Access to the Dead: The Role of Relatives in the Aftermath of Disaster.” *The Lancet (British Edition)* 352, no. 9133 (1998): 1061-1062.

were distressed and alienated by the supposed good intentions of those managing the disaster.” She observes that the desire to shield families from unpleasant truths can often preclude closure and lead to lifelong regret at not having had a last chance to say goodbye before it became impossible. After overcoming significant law enforcement resistance, families were allowed (in 1990) to view photographs under tightly controlled circumstances and without the presence of professional caregivers to provide support.⁷⁰

Pamela Dix contrasts this with her treatment by the Air Accident Investigation Branch (AAIB, the UK’s equivalent of the NTSB). The AAIB had reconstructed a significant portion of the 747 at a military facility in Farnborough. After the final accident report was published, the principal accident investigator invited family members to tour the reconstruction and briefed them on the report, making sure to answer questions in detail and explain technical terms. This was when family members first learned that the explosion at 31,000 feet had not immediately killed anyone. Pamela recalls the shock of hearing this: “But for myself and many others it was more important to learn the truth than to be palmed off with meaningless platitudes such as ‘he didn’t suffer.’ The humane treatment of relatives by the AAIB comes from their willingness to treat people as they would wish to be treated themselves in similar circumstances.” The lessons she learned from this experience are particularly relevant for spiritual care providers: “Catastrophic death or injury destroys our belief that we are in control of our lives. The best way for the caring professions

⁷⁰ Dix, 1062.

to respond to such trauma is to restore some sense of control to the survivors and the bereaved. Survivors and the bereaved must not be overprotected, and the caring professions should be guided by their wishes. Above all, caring professionals must not be so sure that they know best.”⁷¹ Like many survivors, Pamela Dix found meaning and purpose in her life after Lockerbie through advocacy work. She was a founder and executive director of Disaster Action, an influential international NGO that brought victims’ voices to the disaster planning conversation and removed much of the taboo around discussing the most delicate matters. Her work is a major reason why giving families an informed choice whether or not to view their deceased loved ones is now a standard practice in disaster death care.⁷²

Groups like Disaster Action did not exist in 1988, nor was there a legally mandated, comprehensive paradigm for aviation disaster response in the US or the UK. Pan American received the lion’s share of blame for failures of an entire system that came up short. Executive agencies, Congress, and other public entities were not prepared for the ‘human side’ of a disaster like Lockerbie. It was a hot potato that was dropped often, and it is difficult to imagine another major airline responding much better under similar circumstances. At the same time, Pan Am was not a neutral party. Frontline employees who were drafted into *ad hoc* grief counselling work can be forgiven for missteps attributable to a lack of training. It is also true that awareness of the need for disaster spiritual care and a

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Chapple and Ziebland (BMJ, 2010).

standard paradigm for delivering it have only emerged in the past twenty years. But a comprehensive aviation disaster response knowledgebase did exist in 1988, and it resided within airline management.⁷³ Pan Am knew lawsuits were inevitable and that payouts to families could be reduced by minimizing the likely earning potential of passengers killed on the flight.⁷⁴ For example, the worth of a high-income executive who was the sole breadwinner for his or her family would be substantially less if Pan Am could prove he or she had an undiagnosed heart condition. The Pan Am Family Liaisons functioned as facilitators between investigators in Lockerbie and the families. When the medical examiners needed records from the families, the requests were routed through Pan Am. In later litigation, it emerged that sensitive information was often copied before being provided to the families and retained by Pan Am. Feelings of betrayal were common. A conversation between Theo Cohen's parents demonstrates the nature of the dynamic that emerged:

[Daniel:] It turns out, they were sending people out who would then talk to you and be friendly and find out if there was anything they could get that would lower their cost when they were being sued. If, for example, a husband and wife and they weren't getting along, if they were going to have a divorce or something like that, that might lower whatever the compensation would ultimately be. They wanted to find out all this personal information.

[Susan:] Did somebody take drugs? Was there any homosexuality? Was your child a homosexual? Isn't that wonderful? It's just sickening, isn't it?

⁷³ Turman Interview.

⁷⁴ The carrier was well-versed in accident-related legal matters, having experienced multiple hijackings and fatal incidents in the decade before Lockerbie. Eleven years before Lockerbie, a Pan Am 747 was involved in the Tenerife airport disaster, resulting in 583 fatalities. Tenerife remains the deadliest (non-terrorist) aviation disaster in history.

Because then you don't have grandchildren, and then we don't have to give you so much money. That's exactly the rotten, disgusting level it was. I entered a parallel universe. You are the enemy of the airline. You are the enemy of the government. You are the enemy more than the people who created this horrible thing.⁷⁵

Later in this paper, I will discuss how post-Lockerbie legislation mandated a system where independent third parties would provide spiritual care to family members and other loved ones in the aftermath of major aviation disasters. Former NTSB Chairman Jim Hall — who was instrumental in passing that legislation — told me, “Now it's just accepted by the airlines. You're going to get sued. Deal with that later and worry about doing the right thing in the moment.”⁷⁶ Professional, independent spiritual care clarifies roles, reduces opportunities for violations of trust, and relieves the airlines of a major disaster response burden.

Pan Am may have been in a complicated legal and ethical situation regarding its relationship with the families, but some of its actions are simply impossible to defend. Suse Lowenstien describes an experience similar to what multiple other families reported. It is worth quoting at length:

We found out [in the] beginning of January that Alexander's body was found, and we received his body back January the fifth. And that in itself was truly a heartbreaking experience, one that still makes me angry to this day, and I think it will always make me angry. I still find it unforgivable. We were notified by Pan Am that Alexander's body would be shipped home on a particular day and that we were supposed to be at a certain place at Kennedy Airport.

⁷⁵ *Since* (2015).

⁷⁶ Former NTSB Chairman Jim Hall in conversation with the author, December 8, 2020.

Well, we went there, and it turns out that it was the livestock quarantine section. There were 18 other families who would also be receiving their loved one's body that day. And at some point, I see this white, filthy, spray-painted truck approaching. And the back is being ripped open, and, my God, I see 19 coffins in there stacked. Just stacked. And then the forklifts and the people in hardhats came taking out the coffins one by one, 'this is yours; this is yours.' It was awful. It was bizarre, and I just remember when we got Alexei's coffin, it just looked so small... There was no one there from Pan Am. There was no one there from the State Department. But meanwhile we had seen on television how the coffins had left Lockerbie. They left with the dignity they deserved and came to the United States and were received like garbage.⁷⁷

This extremely delicate moment would have been an ideal opportunity for a spiritual care professional to be present.

V. Lesson Three: The Impact Zone Is Endless

"If people are not able to mourn and grieve appropriately, they may never be able to rebuild their spiritual and emotional lives, even after they have rebuilt their physical lives. In the chaos after a disaster, helping people mourn is one of the hardest challenges we will face as leaders of faith communities."

— CHAPLAIN STEPHEN B. ROBERTS⁷⁸

Most of the story to this point thus far has been about the absence of formal spiritual care in the immediate aftermath of Pan Am Flight 103. The reasons for that absence vary from the overwhelming scale of the tragedy to willful negligence. Traditional aspects of spiritual care — public and private ritual, meaning-making, etc. — were typically handled well. A template existed

⁷⁷ *Since* (2015).

⁷⁸ Stephen Roberts, *Disaster Spiritual Care* (SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2008). Kindle Edition, Loc. 350.

for that. The fact that the disaster occurred at Christmastime made it all the more dreadful. It was also the ideal time of year for people to seek out and be receptive to large public worship services.

Father Keegans led the Christmas Eve Mass at Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church in Lockerbie. He was three days into his new identity as a disaster survivor who was also a disaster spiritual care provider. Today's best practices counsel against people serving as care providers in disasters in which they have been impacted themselves, but it is often unavoidable; local clergy are always the frontline, 'ready reserve' of disaster spiritual care first responders. Fr. Keegans would go on to assume a major public — sometimes controversial — role in advocating for justice for the victims of Lockerbie. He is commonly acknowledged to be the most important spiritual caregiver involved in the tragedy. On that Christmas Eve in 1988, he found it difficult to complete his sermon.⁷⁹ At a Requiem Mass two days later, he found his voice: "Confronted with the horror of such a loss, we feel empty, hurt, confused, and we say to ourselves, 'Things will never be the same again.' As Christ did on the Cross, we too scream at the Father, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' He does not seem to answer. There is only silence."⁸⁰ Sitting in the endless silence with the bottomless despair of those who grieve is perhaps the most holy duty of spiritual caregivers.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Syracuse University's Lutheran chaplain, Rev. Michael Shultz-Rothermel, led the university's response to the tragedy [SU

⁷⁹ Emerson and Duffy, 82.

⁸⁰ AP. "Man Arrested for Looting at Pan Am Crash Site Traces of Bomb Sought in Suitcase from Jet." *Toronto Star* (Toronto, Ont), 1988.

paper]. December 21 was the last day of final exams, and many students had already left for Christmas Break. The bomb exploded at about 2:00 p.m. Syracuse time. As the news unfolded, it took time to arrive and sink in on campus. Basketball was a big deal at Syracuse, and the game scheduled for that night was not called off. Twenty thousand people attended. Many found out about the disaster for the first time during a moment of silence that Rev. Shultz-Rothermel suggested be held before the game. Concurrent with the game was a multifaith prayer service in Syracuse's Hendricks Chapel, which was filled by several hundred people. A chaplain said nothing could prepare the community for a tragedy so deep. The rabbi read from the Wisdom Literature and reminded those in grief to neither restrain their mourning nor prolong their sorrow. As the Roman Catholic chaplain prayed for the Lord to lead the souls of the departed safely home, he reminded those gathered that, "Life has changed, not ended." This would be the first of many remembrance services and other official commemorations organized by Syracuse chaplains in the days, weeks, and years since Lockerbie. A faculty member who participated in the service said afterward, "Right now, what these kids need most is their parents... but this did them a lot of good."⁸¹ Many of the relationships forged between clergy and those impacted by Lockerbie would become lifelong. Spiritual care providers would go on to officiate weddings and be present for other important life events of Lockerbie families in the thirty-plus years since the disaster.⁸²

⁸¹ Dick Case, "Dick Case on Lockerbie Crash," *Herald-Journal* (Syracuse, NY), December 22, 1988.

⁸² Turman Interview. (Or her email?)

People frequently assume that spiritual care services are mostly provided for the benefit of people of faith who regularly attend worship services or engage in other spiritual practices. In reality, the ‘demand profile’ for spiritual care services is often dramatically increased in the wake of disasters. Professional spiritual care providers are not there to proselytize; they are there to provide a ‘ministry of presence.’⁸³ This presence can be a great comfort to those who are suffering, regardless of their religious beliefs. And just as secular people often seek out religious rituals for important life events like marriage, death is frequently an occasion to engage with otherwise dormant religious traditions.

Helen Engelhardt’s husband, Tony Hawkins, was killed on Pan Am 103. Her book and audiobook of the same title, *The Longest Night: A Personal History of Pan Am 103*, are tremendous primary source materials for those interested in a deeper, first-person exploration of how the disaster impacted one family. The audiobook contains sparsely excerpted recordings of Helen’s audio journal in the days after the disaster and recordings of significant events like Tony’s memorial service. These carefully curated documentary records are a magnificent record both of Helen’s story and an exemplar of the kind of meaning-making project survivors often undertook as they lived into life after Lockerbie. Tony was raised Roman Catholic, and she is a secular Jew. Neither were observant. They were married by the Society for Ethical Culture in New York but were not regular congregants. When Tony died, Helen sought out a clergyperson from the Society to perform the memorial service. She writes of

⁸³ Providing a ‘ministry of presence’ is a core concept of US Navy chaplaincy.

finding great comfort in following the Jewish rituals of grief and mourning. Sitting *shiva* and saying *kaddish* were especially meaningful for her. After the first public *kaddish* was said, Helen thanked the congregation and offered this reflection, “As you know, Tony was not interested at all in any formal practice of religion or to be associated with religious institutions. He didn’t discriminate; he stayed away from the church he was baptized into as well as mine. So it was particularly moving to me that so many of you came to our home to create a minyan each night, to enable me to say *kaddish* for him. Whatever else *kaddish* is, it is a ritual to comfort the newly bereaved and Tony would have wanted me to be comforted.”⁸⁴ In the immediate phase of being newly bereaved, Helen fully engaged the resources and practices of her faith heritage. Once the memorial service was complete, she remembers seeing the clergyman leave and knowing that she had the appropriate closure to resume her life and do her best to get on with things.⁸⁵

Some survivors got on with things better than others. Thirty years on, it is clear that the ability to create meaning from Lockerbie was (and is) the most reliable indicator of how well survivors fared afterward.

⁸⁴ Englehart, 45.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 37.

VI. Lesson Four: It Will Change You

“I pray and reflect on these words every day: “And I will lead the blind in a way they know not; on paths they have not known; I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light and rough places into level ground.”

— FR. PATRICK KEEGANS QUOTING ISAIAH 42:16⁸⁶

Father Patrick Keegans spoke of the telltale “Lockerbie eyes” of those who saw the worst of it. Perhaps this is akin to the ‘thousand-yard stare’ so often described in combat veterans. The iconic severed nose of the plane came down on Jimmie and June Wilson’s farm on Tundergarth Hill, an area extensively combed through by the British Army: “These were the soldiers who had arrived by bus from Edinburgh in such splendid physical condition that [they had been] assigned the roughest terrain to search. Day after day, June Wilson watched them as they started out, their heads high and their chests out. In the afternoons, the light dying, they would return, having spent the intervening hours picking up bits and pieces of bodies. They were, almost literally, deflated. And they would leave Lockerbie, Wilson recalled, ‘like old men.’”⁸⁷ What old men give up in vitality, they receive in wisdom.

I would encourage readers to find some interview clips of Fr. Keegans; he has the otherworldly composure of a modern-day Lazarus. When he arrived at his parish assignment in Lockerbie not long before the disaster, he was an alcoholic. “I was suicidal at that point in my life and recognized that I’d be better

⁸⁶ Patrick Keegans, Address to Scottish Parliament, “A Time For Reflection” (Dec. 17, 2008). Accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjUQX9VzgU>.

⁸⁷ Emerson and Duffy, 154.

off dead.”⁸⁸ The disaster instead made him a lifeline to grieving family members on both sides of the Atlantic. It gave purpose to his life, which he quickly put back in order. Near the twentieth anniversary of Pan Am Flight 103, he addressed the Scottish Parliament. After the endless darkness of the night of December 21, 1988, Fr. Keegans said, “Another kind of darkness took over: The thick, suffocating darkness that comes from extreme grief. The darkness that invades the human spirit, that threatens to crush and destroy... And into that darkness there came light. That light came from the people of Lockerbie. It was a light of genuine love, care, and concern for all those who were suffering. The people of Lockerbie, shocked to the core, looked not to themselves, but to others.” He then referred to the Gospel of John and the divine light shining in the darkness, “A light that darkness could not overpower.”⁸⁹ Under other circumstances, such words in a public address by a priest might sound like polite bromides. Fr. Keegans delivered them with a sense of the sacred few others could accomplish.

Laura van Dernoot-Lipsky speaks of the work spiritual caregivers provide as “trauma stewardship.” There is no way to steward the traumas of others without absorbing some — perhaps a great deal — of it. The detonation zone of the bomb that brought down the *Clipper Maid of The Seas* extended far beyond Lockerbie. Spiritual care providers have a unique vulnerability because, as van Dernoot-Lipsky puts it, “The most important technique in trauma stewardship is learning to stay fully present, no matter how difficult... when we arrive at a

⁸⁸ Reuters, “Old Wounds Reopen on Lockerbie’s Anniversary.” December 17, 1998. Accessed May 2, 2021:<http://plane-truth.com/Aoude/geocities/ramsdn98.html>.

⁸⁹ Keegans Address to Scottish Parliament.

frightening place, we want to slow down enough to be curious about what is happening within ourselves.”⁹⁰ Spiritual care providers responding to catastrophes like Lockerbie go willingly and with their eyes open to the inevitability of their own transformation by the experience. One difference between disaster spiritual caregivers and care-seekers is that caregivers will have had time to prepare themselves psychologically and spiritually to voluntarily enter places of terrible brokenness. Self-care is of the utmost importance for spiritual caregivers, as is an awareness of one’s own limits. A clerical collar does not provide immunity to the emotional and spiritual damage every person entering a disaster zone is susceptible to experiencing. As with everyone who encounters such brokenness, the only reliable way out is to find meaning through it. Spiritual care providers must find their own meaning as they steward survivors to do the same.

Suse Lowenstein channeled her work as an artist into a profoundly moving outdoor sculpture installation called ‘Dark Elegy.’ It depicts 75 oversized bronze representations of mothers and wives of those aboard Pan Am 103 at the moment they learned their loved ones had died. Suse initially began by sculpting representations of herself. After meeting Aphrodite Tsairis — the mother of Syracuse student Alexia Tsairis — and seeing how she carried her grief with “such dignity and such depth,” Suse asked her if she would be willing to be sculpted. Many other women from the families’ groups soon joined. All of the sculptures of the women are consistent with what Rev. Kate Brestrup said about death notifications knocking people to the ground. Suse recalls:

⁹⁰ Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk. *Trauma Stewardship: an Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*. (San Francisco: BK Life, 2009), 266.

I believe that the moment we learned our loved ones died probably was the most important moment in our lives. And it is something that is so embranded that we knew exactly where we were, what the sounds were, what we did, that it will never be forgotten. Some would scream and howl. Some would pull their hair, bang their fists on the ground, call their loved one's name. It was really a bearing of their soul that was almost holy." [Many of the women portrayed were protecting the middle sections of their bodies.] "That was the feeling that many of us described. It may well be that it was a birthing pain, except this time it was the dying pain of the child."⁹¹

After the attacks of 9/11, 'Dark Elogy' was rededicated to all victims of terrorism.

Johanna O'Flaherty was not the only former Pan Am employee affected by Lockerbie who would go on to become a clinical psychologist after leaving the airline industry. After Pan Am ceased operations in 1991, Johanna went to TWA and would lead that airline's crisis center after the explosion of Flight 800 off of Long Island in 1996. When asked if her Lockerbie experience made for a better 'human' response to TWA 800, she answered with an emphatic, thrice-repeated, "Absolutely!" Today, Johanna works in private practice in the Las Vegas area. She frequently consults with police and other EMS agencies on psycho-spiritual aspects of their disaster response plans. After a 2017 mass shooting killed 60 people at a Las Vegas music festival, she was instrumental in leading a team caring for the staff of the Clark County Coroner's Office. That work gained national attention and significantly contributed to the emerging field of best

⁹¹ *Since* (2015).

practices specifically tailored for mass casualty events resulting from gun violence.⁹²

Multiple people impacted by Lockerbie would go on to become clergy. Stephanie Bernstein, the wife of passenger Michael Bernstein, became a Reform rabbi. She recalls how her suffering in the wake of Pan Am 103 led her to the rabbinate: “When something like this happens to someone you love, you become more reflective. You want to know how something like this could happen.” For her, the Jewish tradition provided the tools for coming to grips with and making meaning from incomprehensible tragedy. “As Jews, we're part of something much bigger than ourselves,” she explained. “We're part of something that came before us and will continue after us. It's very comforting. There's a mechanism in place that helps guide us, even in our darkest days.”⁹³ Funeral director Chris Henely became a priest ordained in the Church of England. Today, he splits his time between leading a London parish and working as a senior chaplain for British Rail.⁹⁴

Relationships forged in disaster often have tremendous staying power. Lockerbie is no different. American families still make regular visits to see townspeople who became friends. Aphrodite Tsairis believes the degree of kindness and humanity the families received in Lockerbie would not have happened in the United States. The family who owns the farm where Alexander

⁹² O'Flaherty Interview.

⁹³ Richard Greenberg. "Lockerbie Aftermath." *Washington Jewish Week* (Gaithersburg), 2009.

⁹⁴ Henley Interview.

Lowenstien was found built a traditional Scottish cairn on the spot where his body came to rest. Suse Lowenstien observes, “We had such gratefulness for the Scots. My God, what they did for us was so precious.” Peter Lowenstein said that was what made all the difference: The Scots obviously cared, while the American government behaved as if it did not.⁹⁵ That perceived indifference galvanized the families to organize to make substantial and lasting improvements to aviation safety and the treatment of victims of terrorism.

VII. Legacy & Conclusion

“[Pan Am] 103 transformed ordinary Americans into tenacious advocates and charted new territory in international law and diplomacy. It brought about improvements in airline security, helped sensitize a callous US government and created the first institutions to deal with terrorism victims”

— USA TODAY⁹⁶

Many factors overshadowed the spiritual care story in Lockerbie, both in the media narrative and in the advocacy priorities of the family members. It was a terrorist attack surpassed only by 9/11, and the intense level of international intrigue complicated and delayed the most basic efforts to find out what had happened and to hold the guilty accountable. Pursuing justice has been a grinding, decades-long process — the alleged bomb maker was only indicted this past December. During those years, the families created a new advocacy template

⁹⁵ *Since* (2015).

⁹⁶ Barbara Salvin, “Money No Windfall for Families of Lockerbie Victims,” USA Today, September 11, 2003.

by organizing and implementing a sophisticated media campaign to place maximum pressure on the US government. Pan Am 103 families would later coordinate with 9/11 families, helping them to organize and become formidable advocates in their own right.⁹⁷ If the Pan Am 103 disaster had not been a terrorist act on foreign soil — had it been a straightforward, ‘normal’ plane crash — it likely would have been a decisive catalyst spurring legislation for better treatment of families. Such an event would happen eight years later, after another 747 setting out on another transatlantic flight exploded shortly after takeoff.

TWA Flight 800 crashed a few minutes after departing Kennedy Airport on July 17, 1996 after an electrical fault caused a fuel tank to explode.⁹⁸ The lessons of Lockerbie certainly contributed to a more capable response by the airline and government agencies, but the overall dysfunctional system had not changed. TWA was responsible for coordinating spiritual care, and TWA was in almost exactly the same position as Pan Am was in 1988: Struggling financially, not able to withstand a major disaster, and not incentivized to act altruistically. This time, the federal government heard the horror stories and took action, passing the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996. Pan Am 103 families testified before Congress as the legislation was being considered. Their stories —

⁹⁷ Bruce Hoffman and Anna Kasupski. *The Victims of Terrorism: An Assessment of Their Influence and Growing Role in Policy, Legislation, and the Private Sector*. (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2007), xiii.

⁹⁸ NTSB Aircraft Accident Report, "In-flight Breakup Over the Atlantic Ocean Trans World Airlines Flight 800 Boeing 747-131, N93119 Near East Moriches, New York July 17, 1996" <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Reports/AAR0003.pdf>

particularly the death notifications on answering machine messages — were a major factor in the Act’s successful passage.⁹⁹

The Family Assistance Act is generally credited with creating the field of disaster spiritual care. It required airlines to have comprehensive disaster care plans in place, and it shifted responsibility for providing psycho-spiritual care to representatives of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). The NTSB contracted the American Red Cross to provide these services, but neither agency had the experience or resources to provide spiritual support.

In 1998, the Association of Professional Chaplains was called in to help the Red Cross and NTSB develop what would become known as the Spiritual Aviation Incident Response (SAIR) Team. Their first order of business was a three-day planning retreat to hear from those with the most first hand expertise: Family members and other loved ones of those killed in airplane crashes, including more than a few from Pan Am Flight 103.¹⁰⁰ The SAIR Team has deployed to numerous disasters since its founding — including 9/11 — and has a reputation for providing the highest quality spiritual care with the utmost professionalism.¹⁰¹ It is a commendable legacy of Lockerbie that deserves to be more widely known.

⁹⁹ Hall Interview.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Chaplain Greg Bodin (SAIR co-founder), May 15, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Roberts, 122.

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