



PROJECT MUSE®

Flutter Point

Alyssa C. Greene

Pleiades: Literature in Context, Volume 40, Issue 2, Summer 2020, pp.
153-156 (Article)

Published by University of Central Missouri, Department of English
and Philosophy

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/plc.2020.0114>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/759353>

Flutter Point

When the call comes, leave immediately.

Bring your team and set up a base camp near the site. Access must be controlled. Establish a perimeter, hire security. Factor in the speed and direction of the wind when calculating the largest possible radius of fallout, debris, remains.

Most often, the scenarios you handle will not involve survivors.

When he asks what you do for a living, tell him the version from the company website. You offer assistance in the event of unforeseen structural events, or something equally bland. Do not volunteer details. Elaborate only if prompted. Use words like “management” and “recovery.”

Do not describe the way jet fuel overwhelms the natural scents of grass and trees, or the number of mornings you wake up to find soot in your hair, your clothes, the contours of your ears.

Describe a description, not what you have seen, smelled, or touched.

There are many reasons a structure might fail, and your client—an airline, a real estate developer, a municipal government—will be anxious to receive your assessment.

The structure may not have been strong enough, not tough enough. There may have been fatigue or corrosion, defective materials or a manufacturing error. The client may have failed to account for some variable, like the increased frequency of weather catastrophes or the human capacity to take anger out on others.

You have seen all of these varieties of failure, and what has been left in their wake.

One of your first priorities must be establishing the identities of casualties. Clients should provide you with as much information as they can – employee records, passenger manifests. This will prove more difficult in the case of a public or commercial space, a mall or government building, places that bring unknown visitors on unknown whims.

Families should be put up near your base of operations. It is important for you to be able to communicate with them all at once, before speculation can spread. Accommodations should not be convenient enough, however, that a bereaved parent or spouse might wander out in the middle of the night in search of lost loved ones.

When he asks what you have seen, on your third or maybe fourth date, teasing, smiling, do not give in to the temptation to share. Trust the experience of so many deflated romances: he does not know that he does not really want to know.



When next of kin have arrived at the site, gather them into a neutral meeting space. Choose a hotel ballroom, a large tent—someplace appropriate to wedding receptions and bar mitzvahs.

Stand in front of them and explain what will happen.

Be kind but impersonal. Wear a suit and tie. You should be reliable but generic, a man they can entrust to deliver some kind of closure.

Do not get attached to any one story.

Have counselors on hand but do not offer your own time.

Force yourself not to offer your own time.

Say that a thorough investigation is underway. Reassure them that when there are answers to be had, they'll be the first to know.

Do not say that the world around us fragile.

Do not say that you look for the emergency exit of every building you enter, that you cannot stop yourself from ballparking your odds of escape.

When he takes you home for the first time, do not let him see you making note of stairwells, the locations of fire alarms, the age and architectural construction of his apartment building. In the morning, refrain from asking, even casually, if the building has been seismically retrofitted, or if he keeps a fully-stocked first aid kit.

Establish reasonable expectations.

Never promise a body. Only explain why when pressed. Not asked—pressed.

For those who will not let go of your arm, who block doorframes and elevators until you'll respond, find an explanation of high-speed impact or total collapse that uses the fewest possible colloquial and anatomical terms.

Do not wonder how many years your words will haunt them.

Never disclose how many unreconstructable pieces a loved one can become.

When dealing with families and with press, remember to use appropriate terminology:

Compromised structural integrity, not structural failure

Ongoing investigation, not causes unknown

Bring in the investigators. The dogs. The storage units. The portable morgue.

Divide the site into a workable grid. Move efficiently. Cover as much ground as you can without sacrificing thoroughness.

Leave nothing behind: not the burnt pages of a paperback, nor the cracked glass of a phone, nor the smallest piece of flesh. Collect everything. The bereaved will hunger for anything you can give them, any material trace of what they have lost, for those nights when photographs are not enough, for when sense memory begins to fade.

Remember: for them, this is a once-in-a-lifetime event. A singular tragedy.

At the site, feelings must be private. If emotion takes you by surprise, your tie serves as an adequate tissue. Be quick. Wear dark-colored ties.

Do not startle at the sound of thunder or a large vehicle rumbling down the street. Do not allow yourself to imagine the sounds of collapse and crash.

Do not take offense when he laughs at your skittishness, your ultra-cautiousness, when he tells you he finds your tics endearing.

A system that operates optimally until it doesn't is brittle. Once a brittle system reaches its limit, it will degrade rapidly, irreversibly, until it fails.

A system, structure, or relationship can fail due to fatigue, or due to miscommunication.

Perhaps it's not that he can't handle it, it's that you don't want to taint him with it.

To say that a material has fractured means that it has broken. A fracture is irreversible.

Given the appropriate amount of force or change, all materials will eventually fracture.

A flashlight is not a gift. A fire extinguisher is not a gift.

For his birthday, buy him something decadent, something frivolous. Savor the joy on his face. Later, buy him everything his home needs in case of emergency. Put the supplies around his apartment when he's not looking. Not all acts of care are recognized for what they are.

Although it's in your job description, although your otherwise-stellar performance reviews repeatedly urge you to do so, never give in to the temptation to completely delegate site cleanup. Go out into the field with your employees at least once a day. Work shoulder to shoulder with them. Never let them think you're out of touch with what you're asking them to do. What you're asking them to live with.

Set aside your sense of identity. Do not judge what you find among the wreckage. Do not allow yourself to consider if you would have been friends with a someone, laughed over coffee, or whether they would have told you you're going to hell and given money to politicians who want to see your kind stamped out.

All bereaved must receive equal care and consideration.

In the event of a cascading failure, the main support gives, placing too much pressure on supporting structures, causing them, too, to fail.

Make sure your staff has access to counseling. Listen when their voices crack. Listen every time it becomes too much. Never suggest that with time they may grow used to it, in a way. Always let them go back to their darkened rooms for a few hours, or sometimes days.

Take up the slack without complaint.

Expect a high rate of turnover.



Remember: unidentified, not unidentifiable.

Inevitably he will shake his head and ask how you can be so tough.

Toughness describes a material's the ability to withstand shock, to absorb energy without rupture or fracture. Elasticity, the ability to resist distortion, resist stress, and return to the shape held before those trials.

Do not explain that you try to be elastic, not tough. Do not confess you fear you're brittle.

When the cause has been determined, notify the client immediately. The client will hand your report over to a PR firm, who will in turn instruct you on how to discuss your findings with the public. Whenever possible, inanimate materials should bear the burden of agency. Pipes were corroded. Safety mechanisms were defective. When describing human action, the passive voice should be employed.

No matter how much you love him, do not tell him all of the things that can go wrong. Tell him only to leave his shoes on during takeoff and landing, to have an office by a fire escape.

Do not clean personal effects unless directed to by the bereaved. Ask family members if they should be mailed or hand delivered. If mailed, send first class. If hand delivered, delegate to a subordinate.

Do not follow up. Do not call and ask how they are coping. If they cope. Do not listen to their stories night after night, letting their grief osmote into yours.

Do not think of the fragility of the system that holds your softest parts in place.

Smile when you're awarded plaques in recognition of your service to industry. Smile when clients recognize your hard work and compliment your professionalism. Nod in agreement whenever you hear the words, I could never do the kind of work you do.

Refrain using from inappropriately descriptive terms: cinder, crush, smoking, smolder, smithereens.

Do not say, I know how you feel.

Do not say, I have seen it so many times before.

A catastrophic failure is sudden and total. There is no possibility of recovery.

Remember: incomprehensible, not senseless.

When the client calls to thank you for a job well done, say, Yes, of course. Say, No problem. Humor chitchat about weekend plans and weather. Never seem too eager to hang up. Never begrudge their relief that the unpleasantness is finally over. Resist the urge to throw the phone out the window. Bite your tongue until goodbyes have been said and the call disconnects. Set a timer. For five minutes, allow yourself to entertain the fantasy that the phone will never ring again.