September 11 and Risk

safety AT WORK's full interview with Peter Sandman will appear in Issue 3 (Volume 3 Issue 3) but we took the opportunity to discuss the events of September 11 with Peter. Below is a transcript of that interview.

SAW: As a resident of New Jersey and a risk communicator, what effect has the September 11 attacks had?

PS: I was very lucky. I live a sufficient distance away, that neither I nor anyone really close to me was lost. But lots of people close to people close to me were lost. Everybody in this part of the country is one or two steps removed from someone who died that day. But, professionally, I'm trying to think through, as I assume anybody in risk communication would be trying to think through what we can say to our countrymen and countrywomen about living in a dangerous world.

This is obviously a situation where the outrage is entirely justified. The last thing I want to be doing is telling people they ought not to be outraged. But it's also a situation where the hazard is serious. Most of my work is in either a high-outrage low-hazard situation, where the risk communication job is to reduce the outrage, calm people down; or a high-hazard low-outrage situation, where the job is to increase the outrage, get people to protect themselves. September 11 and its aftermath have to be described as high-hazard high-outrage. Neither paradigm works.

And yet clearly the message to people has got to be you need to live your life. You need to take what precautions you can take and recognise that you're not going to be completely safe and live your life anyway. You need to get on aeroplanes, and go to ball games. You need to go into big cities. I think in the months ahead people like me are going to be trying to figure out how to say that and say it honestly and honourably and credibly to a population that desperately needs to hear it and understand it.

I spoke in December 2000 at a conference on risk communication as it applies to weapons of mass destruction. The conference was sponsored by the Defence Department, the CIA and FBI and the Federal Emergency Management Administration and all the relevant organisations. This is obviously well before the attacks and the question then, not the only question we were talking about, but certainly the question I was focussing on, is how do we get people in this country and elsewhere to take the risk of terrorism

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seriously. The underlying assumption of the conference was that events like what happened on September 11 are going to happen. I think nobody knew what, but some of the scenarios that were looked at were as horrific as this one, and somewhat moreso.

SAW: One of the things that I've noticed that with some of the responses that are coming from Europe and Africa, is that although there's been no terrorist act that's of the same magnitude as this, the general populace has always had an uncertainty about their personal security. Is it a situation where New York and America is being brought into the real world?

PS: Well, objectively, that's exactly right. But the question that any good communicator would want to ask about America's attitude prior to September 11 is why were we so inclined to underestimate this risk. And the assumption of the conference I was at, I think, was an erroneous assumption. Most people at the conference framed the problem as how do we cut through American apathy. My hypothesis then, and I'm absolutely convinced of this now, is that what looked like apathy was actually denial. The difference between apathy and denial is terribly important. Apathy is enormously more common than denial. Certainly when you look at most of the risks that your magazine is interested in - most workplace risks - and you ask yourself why are employees hurting themselves you're more likely to get an apathy problem than a denial problem. But denial is real and it's very different from apathy.

Picture a dimension with panic on one edge, and concern in the middle and apathy on the other edge from panic. Denial is not apathy, denial is repressed panic. Denial has much more in common with panic than it does with apathy. I remember 20 years ago, working as part of the movement that Helen Caldecott and others were involved in trying to persuade Americans and others to take the risk of nuclear weapons seriously. She used to walk into meeting rooms all over the world and say if a nuclear weapon were to hit right here, right now, here's what would happen. Her hypothesis was that by talking to people about melting eyeballs, she would mobilise them into action. And that did indeed happen for some people, but what happened for most people when they listened to a Helen Caldecott is they were terrified ever more deeply into psychic numbness, into denial. And that's in keeping with what we know.

When people are apathetic you shock them and you get them more concerned. But when people are in denial you shock them and you get them further into denial. Well, we were in denial and we got shocked and it would be very surprising if the outcome of that were calm concern. The outcome is going to be an oscillation between panic and even deeper denial.

So as I start thinking through what Americans need to help them cope with the world that they're in I quite agree with you, it's not that the world's changed. It's that our awareness of it changed. But it didn't change the way we think it did in nearly the way that I think that much of the world imagined. It's easy for someone who lives in Jerusalem or in London to say, "well, New York, welcome to the world. We've lived with this for decades. You can live with it too." And if we had been apathetic this shock might be expected to yield a public that was rationally responsive to the actual risk. But if we were in denial, and I think we were, then this is going to yield some kind of mix of panic and deeper denial. I see signs that that may be happening. And it calls for different kinds of strategy.

SAW: It's been difficult for the last month or so to focus on occupational health and safety issues when suddenly the whole perception has changed to big picture issues. Has that been your experience as well?

PS: Well I think, for the most part, yes. A lot of companies, understandably, have focussed exclusively on the immediate results of September 11. Clients are beginning to come to me now and say, well, all right, help us to start preparing to talk to our public about the risks of sabotage and terrorism at our facility. I talked to a refinery with a chemical plant attached today, that is interested in doing some work with me on how do we address both our internal and our external public about the risks of sabotage. I think inevitably that will be the focus for a while, and rightly should be.

But I don't for a minute think that more traditional issues of employee safety have disappeared. Here's an interesting question, one I don't know the answer to. When things get a little bit more settled as, one way or another, they will, will they be settled with greater tolerance of traditional risks because this new risk has preoccupied our attention? Or will there be less tolerance of traditional risks because this new risk is all we can manage to live with? I don't know the answer to that question, but if I were guessing, I would guess the latter. Once we get used to living in a world with terrorists, after 3 or 4 or 6 months of giving companies a free ride on all other risks because we're worried about terrorism, we will eventually turn to these companies and say, well all right, we understand that we have to live in a world that has terrorism. But we sure as hell don't have to live with you. All the traditional risks that people worry about from industrial facilities will be back. And outrage will be back and companies will have to carry on.

SAW: Many risk perception studies identified plane crashes as a rare likelihood. Now that risk perception has moved closer into the lawn mower accidents and the grinding accidents.

PS: Aeroplane crashes will certainly disappear as the reductio ad absurdum used to inveigh against environmental protection. People who thought there was excessive caution in environmental and safety rules would refer to aeroplane crashes to mock the EPA standard of one in a million as the rule of thumb for acceptable risk. The lifetime likelihood of dying as a result of being hit by a plane coming at you out of the sky, they would say, is approximately one in a million. So if we take the EPA's standard literally, we should build all schools underground in order to protect children from this one-in-a-million risk of being hit by a plane. And that was a laugh line until September 11. Of course statistically the risk of dying as a result of being hit by a plane will have gone up fairly considerably now and it's no longer funny.