

# The After Effect: Lived Experiences of Typhoon Yolanda Survivors

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Natural calamities cause massive affliction among affected communities. As a result, most survivors have to rely on their coping mechanisms and deal with their losses and consequent emotional grief. Taking November 8, 2013, super typhoon Haiyan, which was known as “Yolanda” locally, as an example, this study aims to report findings from within a phenomenological study designed to investigate the lived experiences of Yolanda survivors in Tacloban City. This study is based on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, which recognises the role of self in interpretation and utilises hermeneutic phenomenology, which is concerned with understanding texts. In-depth interviews with survivors were conducted, and their responses were audio-recorded and transcribed. Five emergent themes were identified: (1) unperturbed and used, (2) emotion-focused outcomes, (3) divine faith, (4) ways of coping, and (5) resilience. In the process, the participants did not only survive but established a new sense of purpose and their renewed awareness in life was awakened. Future studies may investigate different types of coping assistance at various points in the recovery process, and additional research is needed to elucidate how different types of religious involvement may intercede the effects of a natural disaster.

**Key words:** *Coping, divine faith, emotion-focused outcomes, Heidegger, hermeneutic, phenomenological, qualitative study, resilience, super typhoon Yolanda, and unperturbed and used.*

## Introduction

A calamity that strikes rapidly is unpredictable and out of our control, and its effects are extensive and long-lasting (Dyregrov, 2002). On November 8, 2013, Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan), a super typhoon of extraordinary power, made landfall among the islands of the Philippines, causing massive devastation across multiple islands. Particularly affected were



Leyte and Samar, further compromising many of the poorest communities who are already in stressed circumstances.

Typhoon Yolanda decimated entire regions as it made landfall five times while crossing over the central Philippine islands. The storm affected four provinces and 10,436 barangays in 575 municipalities when it hit land with sustained winds of 196mph and even stronger gusts which ripped off roofs, collapsed buildings, uprooted big trees, shattered windows and inundated coastal regions with an incredible storm surge (NDRRMC, November 11, 2013).

This storm surge swallowed houses and people's lives, destroyed boats and fishing inputs, and left the majority of homes either destroyed or uninhabitable. Tacloban City is one of the areas of Leyte that was hit hardest by the storm surge brought by the super typhoon Yolanda

NDRRMC reported a death toll of 5,632. The number has not changed since Saturday night, but even almost one month after the typhoon, authorities still expect the number to climb. The disaster council said the total damage to infrastructure and agriculture amounts to around P30.8 billion. Damage to infrastructure reached P15.7 billion, while damaging to agriculture was at P15.1 billion. The affected families in Leyte and Samar provinces rose from 2,335,031 to 2,376,217 or around 11.2 million individuals. Around 3,887,997 persons or 851,655 families were staying at 1,070 evacuation centres. The number of damaged houses also went up to 1,168,958 from 1,168,909. According to Danschutter (2005), natural disasters will increase in number in the future, so suffering caused by these disasters will be a frequent experience for some people in the world.

Hence, it is the aim of this phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of Yolanda survivors in Tacloban City. The researcher attempts to create a rich and deep account of a phenomenon through intuition, focusing on uncovering rather than accuracy, and amplification with avoidance of prior knowledge. In using this approach, the researcher accepts the difficulty of bracketing. To overcome this difficulty, the researcher acknowledges implicit assumptions and attempts to make them explicit.

### ***Methodology***

#### ***Research Design***

This phenomenological study is based on individual in-depth interviews with Yolanda survivors in Tacloban City, with secondary official sources providing additional data. Langdrige (2007) defines phenomenology as a discipline that aims to focus on people's perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them: it is a focus on people's lived experience. She further clarifies that phenomenology as a qualitative method focuses on

the human experience as a topic in its right. It concerns itself with meaning and how meaning arises in experience.

This study is based on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, now a popular methodology in human sciences research. It is about ‘revealing’ human experience, an interpretive approach, a means to understand the why of human experience, concerned with our ‘Being-in-the-world,’ and is a methodology which recognises the role of self in interpretation. On the other hand, this study also utilises the hermeneutic phenomenology, which is concerned with understanding texts. In this study, the researcher included the diary and blogs posted by the informants on the internet about their experiences during the super typhoon.

### *Conversational Partners*

Four participants were purposively selected with a variety of experiences of the super typhoon Yolanda. The researcher chose them because they have actual experiences of the said typhoon and have strong emotional constancy to share their stories. Also, they can express themselves and can share their experiences meaningfully and conscientiously.

### *Gathering of Data*

In-depth interviews were conducted with two participants, while two stories were taken from their blog and diary. Due to the sensitive nature of the information requested, all participants were made aware that engagement in the research was voluntary, and that withdrawal from the process was acceptable at any time. In this study, critical consideration of ethical issues was considered to ensure the credibility of the finding. Accordingly, the researcher kept them informed about the purpose of required activities in the study and they signed a Consent Agreement to avoid deception. The researcher kept their real names undisclosed by using anonymous ones, and thus the researcher ensured confidentiality and thereby established mutual trust.

As to data storing methods, the author audio-recorded all interviews with their permission; they were, most of the time, very reflective and informative. Most of the interviews were in dialogic form, and this has enabled me to reach deeper into their lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to their experiences.

Follow-up was also made from the participants by accessing their blogs on the internet. For the two participants, interviews were performed in school as a place of their choice; their interviews were recorded with permission. Meanwhile, the other two participants allowed the researcher to access their stories on the internet blog, and the other submitted her diary. Soon

after completion, the interviews were transcribed verbatim into Waray-Waray and then translated into English.

### ***Data Analysis***

The analysis was conducted in the following steps: a detailed reading of transcripts, after a thorough reading of transcripts, the researcher extracted and listed significant statements from the vast data. Then, in light of their common elements to the experiences of the typhoon Yolanda and their compelling representativeness to the shared and expressed experiences, repetitive and irrelevant statements were eliminated. The researcher reconstituted these significant statements to form central themes followed by appropriate descriptions. Respective data for each central theme was again summarised to check if the essence of the given phenomenon by each participant was correctly captured.

After a careful search for commonalities and particularities across the emergent themes drawn out from the data of each participant, a set of interpretive themes, as findings of the study, were formed. Although the researcher focused on themes common to most or all of the participants, the researcher also gave due attention to minority voices to retain personal meanings and subjective constructs of the participants. After this, the analysis led to the emergence of five themes: (1) unperturbed and used, (2) emotion-focused outcomes, (3) divine faith, (4) ways of coping, and (5) resilience.

### ***Results and Discussion***

From the data analyses, five major themes emerged: (1) unperturbed and used, (2) emotion-focused outcomes, (3) divine faith, (4) ways of coping, and (5) resilience. The five themes—and subthemes—suggested that informants suffered greatly from the super typhoon Yolanda. The negative aftereffects were evident in Theme 2. Theme 1 illustrates how informants were unperturbed and used to different typhoons. Theme 3 illustrates their divine faith, while theme 4 and 5 illustrate resiliency and coping efforts on the part of the informants. The following sections present the major themes and subthemes:

#### **Theme 1. Unperturbed and Used**

Theme 1 can be best explained by three distinct subthemes, including Lenient, Calm, and feeling secured and Used to many typhoons. From the analysis, the researcher believes that the informants had taken for granted the news and warnings of the coming super typhoon, for the reason that they are already used to the different typhoons that passed-by their place. Thus, they became lenient, calm, and felt secured.

### ***Subtheme A. Lenient***

The informants described themselves as lenient before the onset of super typhoon Yolanda. They did not worry, and no action was taken after they heard the news and warnings. Comments related to lenient were heard.

Transcript # 388, line 9-10, informant JS02-15

*We were not a bit disturbed by PAGASA's forecast of storm surge*

Transcript # 213, line 11-14, informant JS04-15

*We first heard the news of the super typhoon on Monday morning, but we did not worry about it.*

### ***Subtheme B. Calm and Feeling Secured***

The informants described themselves as calm and felt secured before the onset of the super typhoon Yolanda. They feel calmed and secured because of the many typhoons that passed-by their place, and which their houses always survived, so they thought Yolanda was the same typhoon as the previous ones.

Transcript # 388, line 10-11, informant JS02-15

*With the many typhoons that hit our place, we remained calm and composed.*

Transcript # 725, line 57-62, informant JS03-15

*Personally, I am never the type to get scared of calamities. I remember when an extraordinarily strong earthquake hit our city and my officemates, and I had to hurry out of our company building, everybody had been in fright, but I was just laughing.*

### ***Subtheme C. Used to Typhoons***

Tacloban City is part of the Eastern Visayas where storms usually passed-by. The people in the city were used to these calamities. Thus, they have no worries about it because they are used to these different calamities that go by their place.

Transcript # 725, line 57-62, informant JS03

*In my stay here in Tacloban, I've been used to different calamities.*

Transcript # 359, line 62-70, informant JS01



*We did not worry because we always experience typhoons. We are near the Pacific Ocean, anyways.*

Transcript # 388, line 10-11, JS02-15

*With the many typhoons that hit our place, we remained calm and composed.*

## **Theme 2. Emotion-Focused Outcomes**

Theme 2 can be best explained by four distinct subthemes, including Shock and Denial, Depression, Struggle, and Traumatic Grief. From the analysis, the researcher believes that the informants precisely described Kübler-Ross & Kessler's (2014) stages of grief (denial, anger, struggle, depression, bargaining) in Theme 2. Thus, three of the five stages described by Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2014) were evident in this second theme.

### ***Subtheme A. Shocked and Denial***

The informants described initial shock and denial after the onset of the super typhoon Yolanda damage. The informants experienced shock caused by the surge and losses, and comments were wrought with initial intense feelings of disbelief. Comments related to shock and denial were heard.

Transcript # 388, line 43-47, Informant JS02-15

*We saw water inside our house, and instantly Raul shouted, "Let us go out!" I grabbed my handbag, ordered our helper to follow us. The water is rising. Raul, in an instant, was able to open the big sliding window in our dining area. "We will go up," he yelled.*

Transcript # 359, line 130-137, informant JS01-15

*We were shocked to see that the water is already at the knee level, and in a matter of minutes, it went up to waist level already. We can't believe that the water is lifting fast, and the wind is so strong.*

Transcript # 213, line 72-80, informant JS04-15

*The hardest part and I can't believe that will happen to our place are seeing dead people on the streets and anywhere.*

### ***Subtheme B. Depression***

The Depression subtheme involved sadness, despair, helplessness, and hopelessness, as illustrated in the following statements:



Transcript # 359, line 210-224, informant JS01-15

*I now see in the eyes of my parents that they are worried and hopeless because we don't know what to do. The strong water current is rushing us. My mother keeps on shouting, "Lord Save Us!" while we are holding on the floating log, It so hard for me seeing my family trying hard to survive, but I can't do anything to help them.*

Transcript # 725, line 197- 204, informant JS03-15

*I was surprised to see people from different walks of life. I started asking myself, "What is happening to MY city?" Sadness threatened to emerge, but I fought it.*

### ***Subtheme C. Struggle***

The Struggle subtheme involved fighting to survive, resistance, and finding ways to survive, as illustrated in the following statements:

Transcript # 359, line 189-194, informant JS01-15

*The water current is getting stronger, and it's like we are inside the washing machine. The last time I see my father was when he was struggling to breathe, he was drowning because the water continues to rise and that was the last time I saw my father, he was dragged by the current away from Nanay and me.*

Transcript 388, line 308-313, Informant JS02-15

*On the other hand, I knew Raul, too, was hungry, just like me. But at the stage we are in, we have learned to keep silent in a situation such as this; when one is hungry, and there is no sign of food.*

Transcript 725, line 262-268, Informant JS03-15

*I went around the hotel to check how things were going. I found out that one of the hotel guests was about to give birth. We needed to take her to the hospital. Another guest was having high blood pressure, while another had an injured eye. We needed to get them to the hospital.*

### ***Subtheme D. Traumatic Grief***

The Traumatic Grief subtheme involved sorrow, mourning, and loss of family members, relatives, and friends, as illustrated in the following statements:



Transcript # 359, line 2214-224, informant JS01-15

*It was so hard for me that I'm helping my mother to hold on to the log, but she doesn't respond, then I realised that she is already dead. I was crying so hard while the waves rush us. It's so hard for me to see my mother lifeless, and it's like I did not do anything to help her.*

Transcript # 213, line 103-107, informant JS04-15

*It was so heart-breaking seeing a mother carrying the body of her lifeless child and keeps on crying, also seeing the dead bodies of our neighbors' family members lying outside their house. I can't do anything but cry.*

Transcript # 725, line 131-143, informant JS03-15

*When the baby was finally pulled up, I got so emotional that I cried (the only time I cried during the whole Yolanda ordeal) seeing a dead body of a helpless and lifeless child.*

### **Theme 3. Divine Faith**

Theme 3 can be best explained by two distinct subthemes, including Faith and Miracles. What is particularly noteworthy here are the shared elements of the informant's ultimate trust in a higher authority that provided and protected them against unpredictable and uncontrollable situations.

#### ***Subtheme A. Faith***

The subtheme Faith involved praying and seeking Divine guidance and thanking God for the positive experiences as illustrated in the following statements:

Transcript # 388, line 83-87, Informant JS02-15

*While I closed my eyes, I silently saying, "Lord, help us, Mama Mary come to our aid." Water was reaching our shoulders, I could feel it, but my eyes were closed uttering Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd. . .*

Transcript #213, line 90-93, informant JS04- 15

*In God's grace, I thank him that he saved my parents and brothers from the calamity. I trusted Him everything.*



### ***Subtheme B. Miracles***

The subtheme Miracles involved profound beliefs in miracles and beliefs that God performed miracles throughout the experience, as illustrated in the following statements:

Transcript # 388, line 160-178, Informant JS04-15

*As I looked down the floor, right in front of my feet was the picture frame of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. It was in the room facing the subdivision road and was carried by the current. I could not contain my joy seeing the picture frame intact, not covered with mud. I picked it up, kissed it many times, and held it close to my breast. We started to wonder how it came to the terrace when it could have been easily pushed by the current away from the house, just like most of our things since the walls and big glass windows crumbled, together with the new façade of our house. (Our house of 41 ½ years was undergoing renovation, with the walls, windows, and façade having worked on in July and August, thus, was completely finished by the time “Yolanda” came.) Mama Mary’s picture frame, having taken the direction towards the terrace instead of going with the other things that were washed out of the house, was for us a miracle.*

Transcript # 248, line 170-174, JS011-15

*The belief that no matter how uncertain or blurry the future is for me, everything will be alright because I know that I have guardian angels watching over me.*

### **Theme 4. Ways of Coping**

The fourth major theme is Ways of Coping towards improvement. This theme involved two subthemes for the informants: Helping others and outside aid.

#### ***Subtheme A. Helping Others***

To further assist them in coping with Yolanda, the respondents devoted much time to helping others. They assisted other people less fortunate than themselves.

Transcript # 725, line 313-318, Informant JS03-15

*There were two strangers outside, in the dark. One of them said he was wounded. We invited them back to the hotel so we could tend to their wounds. What I thought was cotton was not cotton after all, but it turned out useful anyway. So did the wet tape. There were a couple of*



*wounded people that we somehow managed to attend to. I gave antibiotics to those badly wounded.*

Transcript #388, line 350-359, Informant JS02-15

*He looked at me, and without saying a word, he jumped over our fence, and climbed the debris in front of our house, got the ladder, and went across to help our neighbours' family.*

### ***Subtheme B. outside Aid***

In talking about how they managed and recovered following the super typhoon, they talked primarily about drawing from their own resources or the support of their relatives and friends. Some informants also cited the supportive environment provided by Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) as a major factor in the return to normalcy.

Transcript #248, line 91-95, Informant JS011-15

*Being in Cebu made things a bit easier for me. My cousins were always ready to help deal with the hospital paperwork, bills, etc. My brothers' friends were there too, so they were able to help and stay at the hospital with him.*

Transcript 213, line 169-187, informant JS04-15

*I remember it took almost weeks for the government to help us. However, international Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) arrived first to extend their help, an example of this is the Tsu Tshi Foundation who has cash for work program, wherein the people of Tacloban are gathered together and tasked to clean their own areas, and after that by 4:00 pm they will assemble back in the Leyte Progressive School then they are given 500 pesos as payment of their labour. So you clean your own area without the monitoring, so you do it in all honesty and after that you are paid. With the help of these NGOs we were able to recover.*

Transcript #248, line 165-170, Informant JS011-5

*And we will be eternally grateful for them. The words "thank you" won't suffice for the overwhelming support that they have shown us. They were one of the reasons why I was able to cope with everything that happened. They made us feel that we will never be alone in this.*

### **Theme 5. Resilience**

The informants felt that the drive to overcome distress should come from them and highlighted the importance of self-motivation and adopting a positive outlook.



Transcript #248, line 225-236, Informant JS011-15

*There is always a silver lining to everything, and the life that I am living and will be living in the silver lining. When I thought that Haiyan crushed my dreams, in reality, Haiyan has opened so many doors for me; it has been a learning experience. I would like to share with you a quote that has made a big impact in my life after Haiyan, and I believe we should all live by this saying: "I am still determined to be cheerful and happy, in whatever situation I may be; for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances."*

Transcript #248, line 170-174, Informant JS011-15

*Haiyan forgot to take away my resilience and optimism, and rather it has strengthened my faith in God and myself. The belief that no matter how uncertain or blurry the future is for me, everything will be alright because I know that I have guardian angels watching over me.*

Transcript #248, line 208-203, Informant JS011-15

*When I talk about what transpired on November 8, 2013, at the end of every conversation, I can't help but hold back tears of overwhelming joy. Yes, overwhelming joy. I can't help but feel very grateful for everything. I am thankful that there is no inkling of bitterness in my heart despite the great loss. I may have lost my Nanay, Tatay, Kuya, Ate, and my nephew, but in the end, I have gained so much more. I am happy to say that it changed me for the better. I have gained maturity, wisdom, strength beyond my years, and love for myself. I am happy that before they passed away, they were able to realise their Personal Legends, and our family bond grew stronger. Our days spent with each other were filled with joy and contentment, and I will hold on to those memories forever. Indeed, nothing in life can call upon us to be more courageous than facing the fact that it ends. But on the other side of heartbreak is wisdom.*

Transcript #388, line 383-387, Informant JS02-15

*Blessed be the Name of the Lord who embraced us all at the time when being saved was far from being possible! True to what I believe in, God is ever faithful to His promises!*

## **Discussion**

There were important findings from this study after one of the most devastating disasters of our time. Beyond the emergence of five major themes: (1) unperturbed and used, (2) emotion-



focused outcomes, (3) divine faith, (4) ways of coping, and (5) resilience. This study offered insight into what the informants experienced and how they coped from such adversity.

In the first major theme, which is unperturbed and used, the informants honestly talked about how lenient and calm they were upon hearing the news and warnings. The reason for this was that they were already used to different typhoons in their place.

According to NDRRC (2013), this is one of the reasons why the city acquired large human casualties despite the government's warning.

The second major theme focused on how the informants experienced the full loss and discomfort during and after the desolation. They described themselves as being initially troubled and grief-stricken, while others described themselves as being in a state of shock and depression.

On the other hand, in the third major theme, the informants viewed their relationship with God as personal, essential, and unique, providing comfort, inspiration, and guidance. Some of the informants reported that miracles had occurred in their lives during the typhoon and its aftermath. The researcher believed that the continual talk with a Higher Power could be viewed as one of the coping strategies of the survivors.

Moreover, the fourth theme discusses ways of coping. It is about the informants' desire to give and receive mutual aid that helped them cope with the aftermath of the typhoon.

Lastly, the fifth theme, which is resilience, the informants in this study described independence of thought and behaviour as a resilient trait. Despite being full of loss and discomfort, they found that the disaster provided an opportunity to become engaged with life in new and meaningful ways.

## **Conclusion**

The present study shows that for the survivors of the super typhoon Yolanda in Tacloban City, their experiences can be viewed from the five emergent themes that were identified in this study. These are (1) unperturbed and used, (2) emotion-focused outcomes, (3) divine faith, (4) ways of coping, and (5) resilience. In conclusion, the result shows that the informants learned, grew, and developed as a result of this large-scale disaster. In the process, they not only survived but found a new sense of purpose. Their sense of competence and renewed interest in life was awakened.



## **Recommendation**

Future studies may be recommended in light of the findings of this study. Additional research is needed to clarify how different types of religious involvement may mediate the effects of a natural disaster. The resiliencies identified in this study should be validated and affirmed in the lives of older and younger survivors and more investigation should be conducted of the various types of coping assistance at different points in the recovery process.



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