

# The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes - and Why

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It lurks in the corner of our imagination, almost beyond our ability to see it: the possibility that a tear in the fabric of life could open up without warning, upending a house, a skyscraper, or a civilization.

Today, nine out of ten Americans live in places at significant risk of earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, terrorism, or other disasters. Tomorrow, some of us will have to make split-second choices to save ourselves and our families. How will we react? What will it feel like? Will we be heroes or victims? Will our upbringing, our gender, our personality—anything we've ever learned, thought, or dreamed of—ultimately matter?

Amanda Ripley, an award-winning journalist for Time magazine who has covered some of the most devastating disasters of our age, set out to discover what lies beyond fear and speculation. In this magnificent work of investigative journalism, Ripley retraces the human response to some of history's epic disasters, from the explosion of the Mont Blanc munitions ship in 1917—one of the biggest explosions before the invention of the atomic bomb—to a plane crash in England in 1985 that mystified investigators for years, to the journeys of the 15,000 people who found their way out of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Then, to understand the science behind the stories, Ripley turns to leading brain scientists, trauma psychologists, and other disaster experts, formal and informal, from a Holocaust survivor who studies heroism to a master gunfighter who learned to overcome the effects of extreme fear.

Finally, Ripley steps into the dark corners of her own imagination, having her brain examined by military researchers and experiencing through realistic simulations what it might be like to survive a plane crash into the ocean or to escape a raging fire.

Ripley comes back with precious wisdom about the surprising humanity of crowds, the elegance of the brain's fear circuits, and the stunning inadequacy of many of our evolutionary responses. Most unexpectedly, she discovers the brain's ability to do much, much better, with just a little help.

The Unthinkable escorts us into the bleakest regions of our nightmares, flicks on a flashlight, and takes a steady look around. Then it leads us home, smarter and stronger than we were before.

Have you ever wondered how you would react to a disaster? Do you think you would be paralysed with fear, like the diplomat who froze, drink still in hand, as terrorists invaded the Dominican Republic's embassy in Colombia in 1980? Or might you find yourself pretending it hadn't happened, like the 9/11 survivor whose first instinct on feeling the shockwaves of the plane crashing into her building was to stay put? Or then again might you suddenly find hidden strengths in yourself, like Joe Stiley, who not only escaped from a dreadful plane wreck, but also managed to survive thirty minutes in the freezing Potomac river waiting for rescue vehicles to arrive?

In The Unthinkable award-winning journalist Amanda Ripley talks to risk analysts, psychologists and survivors of some of the most harrowing catastrophes in history in order to piece together how people react in a crisis and why they behave the way they do. She demonstrates that responses ranging from paralysed shock through to frenzied action can

be clearly categorised and explained, as can the stages through which most people go when suddenly faced with a disaster – initial denial, cautious deliberation, final decision. She compellingly shows how the rational and irrational parts of our brains interact when put under pressure, and she also reveals the physical effects of sudden stress. And finally she demonstrates that while our reactions are often instinctive and inbuilt, we can also be taught how to master or control them.

We all have a – disaster personality – that reveals itself at moments of crisis. In *The Unthinkable* you can become acquainted with yours. Who knows? One day, understanding how it works may save your life.

When the first plane hit the World Trade Center on 9/11, many office workers stayed at their desks. Some made phone calls, some stopped to gather their possessions together, about 1,000 took the time to shut down their computers. Even those who survived waited, on average, an astonishing six minutes before trying to save themselves. Why did they move so slowly when their lives were at risk?

In 1977 a Pan Am 747 awaiting takeoff at Tenerife airport was sliced open without warning by a KLM jet that came out of nowhere. After impact, most passengers remained in their seats, dazed and disbelieving. But sixty-five year old Paul Heck leapt into action and immediately led his wife to safety. How was he able to act so decisively when everyone else in the wrecked fuselage was overcome by shock or confusion?

When Seung-Hui Cho stormed into a French class at Virginia Tech and started shooting students indiscriminately, many people were caught in the gunfire while trying to escape. Clay Violand, however, instinctively crumpled to the floor and lay there completely motionless. In that split second, how was he able to make the decision that may have saved his life?

When faced with extreme circumstances, people behave in surprising ways. How would you react if you had to survive *THE UNTHINKABLE*?

– A must read. We need books like this to help us understand the world in which we live. –  
Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author *The Black Swan* and *Fooled By Randomness*

#### Other Books

*LIFE Titanic*, The tragedy that shook the world. Well over 100 years after the sinking of the Titanic, it remains one of the tragedies that loom large in our collective memories and imaginations, not just for the enormous loss of life, but also for the fact that it shouldn't have happened. From the construction of the ship and its maiden voyage, to its collision with an iceberg in the North Atlantic, the entire, fateful journey is chronicled in *LIFE Titanic*. This classic Special Edition is filled with stunning photography, authoritative text and archival documents that take you to the time period, and place you below the deck to see the ship's inner workings, imagine the lavish meals served in the dining room, and meet many of the illustrious guests on the RMS Titanic. Amazing photos of the survivors and the aftermath, plus a look at the Titanic's place in our shared history, make this a compelling guide to an unforgettable tragedy.

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told in this commemorative LIFE book, in words and pictures. This oversized, deluxe book is visually splendid and exciting on every page."