

Volcanic memory of the fear of the unknown

ROBYN T. BRALEY

The headline in Friday's Herald about the havoc wreaked by the volcanic eruption in Iceland brought back vivid memories of 1980.

I was reminded that natural or man-made disasters carry two levels of terror — the real and the imagined. We experienced this with 9/11 and more recently with the H1N1 epidemic.

Sometimes the imagined is even more disturbing than the reality of the event.

In 1980 my wife Meg and I were professional gospel singers. Some may remember us as the music producers and regular artists on the television ministry To You ... With Love, which was broadcast on CTV for about 20 years.

That summer we were booked for a series of concerts scheduled through Montana, Washington and Oregon. On Sunday, May 18, 1980, we were in Libby, Mont.

In the morning we had a concert south of Kalispell. That afternoon we enjoyed a blue-sky, three-hour mountain drive to Libby. As we listened to music, we were oblivious to the natural disaster that was unfolding at Mount St. Helens just seven hours to the west.

The volcano had erupted early that morning.

The concert began at 6 p.m. and lasted about

90 minutes. After, the kids, who were the first to go outside the church, started running back in shouting that it was snowing. That seemed odd in May, but Montana is close to Alberta so anything weather-wise is possible.

Panic started to set in as adults realized what was happening. They quickly gathered their families and headed for home and shelter from the unknown. Still not realizing the impact of what had happened, we quickly packed up our sound system and headed out on the 1½-hour drive to Kalispell, where we were headquartered.

The air was thick with particles of ash floating from the sky. Soon the ash blotted out the sun. It seemed like we were inside a wood stove that day after a hot raging fire had burned itself out. The ash settled on our windshield and was turned to a grey paste by the windshield washer fluid.

We listened to the emergency broadcasting on the radio as they reported on the unknown. The eruption was the first in North America for many years. The unknown brought an element of terror and panic.

The first instruction was to fill bathtubs, pots and pans with water. It was not

clear whether the settling ash would contaminate fresh water supplies.



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The second recommended not breathing in the ash. We were told to fashion a cloth mask to filter the air. Not doing so could mean an agonizing death. Finally, people were cautioned not to drive. Engines would seize

up from sucking in ash.

But Meg and I were already committed. We finally made it by driving 40 km/h. The entire city was shut down — much like Calgary during a spring snow storm.

The next day the few people who ventured outside wore surgical masks, much like those worn during the H1N1 pandemic.

We headed back to Calgary and learned that the ash cloud had followed a set path toward the East Coast and on to Europe. There was little evidence of what had happened by the time we reached the Canadian border.

Through that summer we had concerts scheduled back in the region.

We learned that Seattle, only a short distance away, received a lighter dusting than New York because the wind carried the cloud east.

Moses Lake, on the east side, was blacked out by 10 a.m. that fateful Sunday.

It took months and many trucks loads of ash to clear the roads and parking lots.

I remember mountains of ash left along highway interchanges that looked like the piles of dirty snow we see in shopping centre parking lots near the end of February.

Fear of crop damage dissipated over the next few years as farmers learned of the fertilizer properties of the ash. I can still remember watching combines in the fields in August causing great clouds of ash to billow into the sky. Years of rainfall, which is light in central Washington during the best of times, failed to completely wash away the gritty paste.

But the most sobering image remains burned into my memory. That summer I remember driving south on Interstate 5 and seeing the ragged top of Mount St. Helens on the left, the destruction of the mudslides from the top of the mountain into the valley, and then the twin stacks of an atomic energy plant to the right. Mudslides, volcanic eruptions and an atomic energy plant.

The memory certainly brings pause for thought of how much worse the catastrophe could have been.

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