

Date: July 16, 1979

Occupation: College Professor

INTERVIEWER: When did you first hear about the TMI incident?

NARRATOR: I guess on Wednesday afternoon, I believe my wife called me and told me there was trouble in the news.

INT: And what did you think about then?

NAR: Well I was mildly concerned, but as will be clear from the interview, I've lived through a number of crises, the Bay of Pigs and World War Two, and such tremors as that, and this one didn't impress me as being that strong of an emergency.

INT: Was your wife very upset about it?

NAR: No, she was quite calm. We did, however, all through the period emergency, keep fuel in our automobile so that we could get to my father's farm, which is our haven for every emergency.

INT: Did you ever actually leave?

NAR: No, no we didn't come close to leaving.

INT: Did you pack at all?

NAR: We had things ready to pack. Yes, we had some things piled up, but we expected to travel very lightly if we did go.

INT: So it would be pretty much then just necessities?

NAR: Very much so.

INT: Did you know that the Three Mile Island was there before the incident?

NAR: Yes. We looked at it very interestedly every time we took somebody to the airport, and we were very interested in the process of it too. Besides I think it's quite beautiful.

INT: Yeah, the towers are sort of artistic.

NAR: And we were especially interested in it because it's one of the first such power plants, although not nuclear, is not too far from my native home on my father's farm in Indiana County. It uses coal, however, not nuclear power. We were interested in the workings of the generators long before the news media.

INT: Had you ever been to TMI, the observations centers?

NAR: No we did not. I guess I didn't know there was an observation center. Yeah, we were just there a couple of days ago. I think it's, they said before the incident, they would have 300 visitors a week, and now they have a couple of thousand. Everybody wants to see it.

INT: How far away is Three Mile Island from us?

NAR: Well, we assumed it was about 20 miles, we assumed that we were a little inside the danger zone until we were informed that in point in fact we were on the end of a 24 mile radius. So we were mildly concerned about that.

INT: Did you feel better because you were outside the 20 mile radius?

NAR: Yes, I guess we did to be honest. The fact that simple mathematical difference was given to us, we suddenly felt a new assurance. And also the fact, of course, that Carlisle was to be used as an evacuation center, it was one of the important reasons that we didn't get panicky. We figured that they wouldn't take an unsafe place as an evacuation center.

INT: Did you try to find out more information about TMI? Did you really keep on top of it?

NAR: Well, I'll tell you the secret of our self confidence was our colleagues. I knew very well the work Professor Laws, Pricilla Laws, had done in radiation. I knew that she was very sensitive to the dangers of radiation in the American Civilization through her work with X-rays. And when she and her colleagues, Professor Luetzilschuab, Professor Wolf, kept their eye on the Geiger counter, and they weren't nervous, I wasn't nervous either.

INT: But if they had been anxious about it, then would you have started to become more concerned?

NAR: I would have indeed. Yes.

INT: Did you talk about it with your friends or your family and your coworkers?

NAR: Yes, my family particularly. Of course we discussed it. We were in a somewhat unique position because instead of worrying about our youngsters, our youngsters worried about us. Our son is in Cornell and he called to check and make sure that we were alright. In most cases the students' parents were panicking for them, but I'm happy to say that even he was very rational about it, and it was very nice to have him call to be reassured by us, but it was also very nice to know that he could be reassured. So yes, of course we talked to family, but we didn't have (unintelligible) to discuss the emergency.

INT: What seemed to be the general attitude among your colleagues here at Dickinson?

NAR: It changed at different points. And of course it would vary among. There's one, at least, who panicked and ran, and has never come back. There were two or three who left in considerable anguish, but most of us stayed here and felt superior that the students fled and we did not. (Laughter)

INT: How did your attitude change as it went on, or did it change? Did you keep pretty well the same feeling as you did on Wednesday?

NAR: Yes, I certainly was more nervous on say Thursday and Friday than I was from Sunday on because by that time the bubbled had started to cool a little bit, was retracting a wee bit. Again according to the report, but I tried to listen to the engineers and not the government, still less to the political commentators of the press. But I put my faith in them and they were very calm and under control. I did not look on them as people who merely worried about the profits from the corporation. I know engineers to be humane people. I listened simply to their reports as far as I could.

INT: Which engineers were these?

NAR: The companies' engineers, the ones who reported on the size and nature of the bubble. The ones on whom the press started from, and they inflated everything as far as I could see. So I tried to listen to the reports that included the men who were really working on it.

INT: So you didn't trust the media then?

NAR: I certainly did not. But I don't trust them in general.

INT: What did you think about the government?

NAR: I felt differently about the state government than the federal government. I felt the state government covered itself with considerable more glory than one would expect it too. The federal government, which had so much more at its command, did very little for the community as far as I could see. They sent in the president on the helicopter visit, but they didn't use any of the facilities that were available to them. The company had to get its own corrective machinery here, as far as I could see no help from the federal government. The government didn't even do a great deal for the communities. But the state government on the other hand, partially because it was so immediately involved in this, it would have had to move itself too, it was very concerned, I felt, about the communities. Also, of course, the state government was a politically untried force, it was a new party with a new head just taking over and they were very anxious to make themselves known. I felt that it was a good sign for the state government, that the one thing the Lieutenant governor has done was used so generously, and the governor didn't use it simply as a chance for headlines, but shared with the Lieutenant governor the duties feel they should be.

INT: What did you feel about Metropolitan Edison in general?

NAR: I felt that they made a considerable flaw in letting the situation occur, but I didn't feel that they were less than conscious about trying to get it corrected against considerable odds, not only the odds of nature, but the odds of society as well.

INT: Did you feel that they were in control of the situation?

NAR: I don't think anybody was in control of the situation and that's of course why everybody was pressured. But they brought it under control often I think with the interference of government and media standing in the way, rather than their help and support.

INT: How would they interfere?

NAR: Well, by creating more panicked than was really necessary. It was the time to trust the corporation, to trust the owners of the outfit, but I felt at least, that the media took this as one more chance to hit at the American corporation in the abstract. It was not a very well timed attack I felt.

INT: Do you think they are in control of the situation right now?

NAR: Oh, I presume they are. I don't think they are very clear on the future of the plant let alone the future of nuclear energy. But again that's because an awful lot of other things have to be taken into consideration. I don't really have any strong feelings on whether they are in control now or not because I really haven't followed it very closely since the occasion.

INT: Yeah, I think most people have sort of dropped off now.

NAR: Right.

INT: It's getting so tired of it. Ok, what worried you about the situation, what bothered you about it?

NAR: I was more worried for people to the east of the Island than I was for us. I am very aware of the westerly nature of our winds. And I knew that shortly the big boom threat would wipe out the whole valley, they were in much more danger than we were. I would have been quite panicky if I had been in Elizabethtown or Lebanon Valley or Franklin and Marshall. I felt that it was very proper that they should close fast and clear out. But I was worried about, chiefly about, just overtones than actual harm to myself. I felt that short of a quick burst of radiation, our own little Hiroshima, that we were in no danger at all. I didn't think that we were in any danger of nuclear drift from the problem. But I did worry a good deal, still do to a certain extent, about the areas down east of the island

because you asked me whether I think they have things under control. Yes, but it doesn't mean that I don't think that similar things can happen in the future.

INT: Do you feel that your health was affected in any way?

NAR: No, I certainly don't.

INT: Now or in the future?

NAR: Now or in the future.

INT: Do you think people around the plant's health might have been affected?

NAR: Yes, I certainly do. More in the future than right now. I was rather stricken to read about the worker who had to be so completely decontaminated, this was in the Sunday paper, and to be sure he went back with no signs of radiation problems, but there's the place that it may show up later.

INT: What sort of things would show up?

NAR: The thing, of course, that we all sort of nightmare about is the genetic possibilities, but even there, it seems to me that cancer is a possibility some time in the future. But if it comes thirty years into the future, it seems to me it would be very hard to trace to this particular occasion. It's more likely to come from his working there constantly over a decade.

INT: You mentioned that a big bomb like Hiroshima, did that idea pass through your mind at the time?

NAR: Yes, well it seemed to be a possibility as they talked about the bubble. I didn't really believe that that was going to explode and shower me. But I didn't really know that much about the workings of the plant, thought maybe I was missing a stage somewhere.

INT: Did you have any other mental images?

NAR: I looked at the island often and I was interested enough in the processes, it was diagrammed by the engineers in the screen. I didn't really have apocryphal, apocryphalic, dreams from the whole thing. Because despite the fact that I was humanist in my college days I always used to work with the engineers too and had a great deal of respect for them and a great deal of interest in the problems that solved. So I suspect that I, in short, read it more in terms of an engineering text book than The Book of Revelations.

INT: Did any other biblical images come to mind, not necessarily revelations but...?

NAR: Not really, I think of all life in biblical terms but not this one particularity.

INT: Did you think that it could be God interfering at all?

NAR: Well, I think that God controls at all times, but not this more than any other incident in my life. I am not one to theologically wait for emergencies to think about God.

INT: So this just sort of fit in with the sort of flow of life?

NAR: Yes.

INT: Did you pray at all during the incident about the incident?

NAR: Yes, but again not more than usual. I'm a praying person. It would have made it a very unusual incident if I hadn't prayed.

INT: What sort of things did you pray about?

NAR: Well, my family and my students first of all, and then the community surrounding. I'm not one who prays I guess as we should, for calm in the government, and the more rational social gifts that God can provide, but there are lots of people who pray for that.

INT: Did you go to a church service at all during the incident?

NAR: Yes.

INT: Which service was that?

NAR: The regular Sunday morning service which I always take part in. There was nothing unusual about my going to church.

INT: Did the minister mention it at the service, TMI?

NAR: Yes he did.

INT: In what way?

NAR: We included it in our prayers, and I truly can't remember whether he included it in his sermon. I think he did, but only where it belonged.

INT: Was the attendance a regular attendance that Sunday or did there seem to be more or fewer people?

NAR: It wasn't remarkably different in either direction that I can remember. I probably should remember that Sunday service better than I did but...

INT: We're just trying to find out if all of a sudden people flooded in or they all ran away.

NAR: Of course, our church is pretty well filled every Sunday. I can't remember that there was standing room only or on the other hand...

INT: So it was nothing drastic?

NAR: No, it was not deeply affected on our church attendance.

INT: Did you feel any better after the service because it was mentioned there?

NAR: Well, I always feel better after a church service and I'm sure I did, yes. But again, it's not an unusual thing...

INT: Did you hear any comments by people around you about how they felt, was there anything in particular?

NAR: I think I can truthfully say that there was less talk about it at the church service than there was at the party that I attended the night before, sort of a community party, but I can't remember that either event was very excitable about the incident. The party was chiefly professional people and they didn't seem upset by it.

INT: In what way did they talk about it there?

NAR: Well, we all talked about our homes and our relative distance from the center of things, and who had left from our corner of the community and who hadn't. But we really were not terribly excited about the whole thing.

INT: So it was more just a general discussion that anything pointed about it?

NAR: That's right. Yes, a rational discussion about how the thing was going.

INT: Back to your religious feelings on it, does your faith say anything about the use of atomic power? Does that have any relation?

NAR: You mean my personal faith?

INT: Your personal faith...

NAR: Well it certainly finds nothing as offended by atomic power. Again it's something I discuss a great deal with those students that are knowledgeable on the subject. I have one very dear ex-student here who was a double major in chemistry and classics, and who is taking a masters degree in ecological studies at NYT, and I pretty much put my mind in his hands. He actually is quite opposed to atomic development because of the problem of

the wastes and in the wake of his thought I'm more cautious about it, but I'm still not convinced that it's a good thing.

INT: How do you feel about atomic power?

NAR: I think that it's going to be very necessary. Various sources of electric power are going to more and more important, and I think we have been very silly in making the ceiling so low in the use of water for electricity. I think we are by passing thousands of American streams that could be providing electricity. But at the same time, atomic power is still more practical than solar power. But I'm sort of alone on that, at least on the campus I am.

INT: How would you feel if they built an atomic power plant in Carlisle?

NAR: Well I wouldn't feel that a town is the right place for an atomic plant. It seems to me that's one of the advantages of atomic power that for one thing it doesn't take a big population to run one of those plants, and therefore I'd say put them out in the desert. Get rid of the waste in those same areas. So I wouldn't be happy for an atomic plant in Carlisle because I wouldn't think it was the right place for it. There's no end to the distance that you can send electricity. So I say make use of its fluidity.

INT: So just keep it away from the people in case something does happen?

NAR: Yes, exactly.

INT: Was there someone in life that you were watching in order to decide what to do? Whose concern you had in mind particularly? Your wife or your family or your students?

NAR: Well, I was deeply concerned for all of those. I suppose with my son away from home, the person I was most concerned about was my daughter. Particularly, of course, the question of parenthood for either one of them that was the prime thing that was to be considered. I was a little like the old man that somebody quoted who said that he wasn't concerned about himself; he had passed along all the DNA he was going to in the lifetime and he didn't have many worries about cancer thirty years in the future because he would probably be gone by that time anyway. So I wasn't terribly concerned about myself, but I did think very seriously about my daughter.

INT: Did she seem very worried about it?

NAR: Not in the faintest. She too, is of a scientific bend and was interested in the intellectual side of it, but not panicked about it all.

INT: Where did you hear about that old man you've included?

NAR: I think it may be from Professor Fits, I'm not sure. You might check with him.



INT: That's interesting. Some of them, most seemed to have reacted like that. A few of them, little of it came out in little ways. I remember an old man asked me if he should be worried about drinking milk. Were you worried about the food or milk in the area?

NAR: Yes, that's one nervousness that we did have. Because of course our milk does come from Harrisburg dairies. Most of it is from the farms east of the river, and we were rather concerned about the milk.

INT: Did you drink it?

NAR: I think milk consumption in our household went down about that time, 'til we got reassurance because I knew at the same time, from my students once again, that the farms were being tested for radiation. One of my seniors was a resident of a farm in Lancaster County and he told me about their coming around with Geiger counters to test the pastures. So yes, I was rather concerned about the milk.

INT: What about the food from the area?

NAR: Well, we don't get much of our food from that area, even though we do use the farmers market, but still I think most of food comes from this side. After all, it wasn't a period when much local produce was on the market anyway. But I would say that our single true nervousness was about the milk.

INT: Are you drinking it now?

NAR: Oh, yes. I have long since forgotten the whole thing. Again I come from a dairy farm and I know that very close track is kept on the milk. I don't worry about it either.

INT: One Professor I interviewed said he still isn't drinking milk. His wife's really mad at him because she really likes it.

NAR: Well, as I say not everybody has the advantage that I've had in coming from a dairy farm.

INT: If you envisioned the worst that could happen, what do you think that it could be?

NAR: You mean in the future or could have been?

INT: Could have been, put it that way.

NAR: The worst that could have happened would have been an explosion of that one tower. And that still raises the question of whether it would have been a nuclear explosion or simply a physical explosion. It does seem as if that was steam was highly loaded with radiation. I can picture something like the private outskirts of Hiroshima

occurring in some of the communities near to it. That is the steam blowing out the tower and the radiation then dropping all over the area.

INT: How did you change your daily routine, other than the canceling of classes? Did you do anything?

NAR: I didn't really change my daily routine. One thing I did do is give a seminar for the students who have stayed here. The president called us together on Monday morning and asked us for seminars. The scientists of course all volunteered seminars on various phases of atomic energy. The humanists on the other hand were all giving seminars on the escape matters. Chess, mathematics for the people who hate math, and subjects such as that. So I thought I would join the scientists and give the scientists a hand and gave a seminar on the last days of Pompeii. Which of course was just two thousand years ago next month. And also our one great source for the last days of Pompeii tells us the different reaction of the older generation and the younger generation. They are two letters from Pliny the younger who represents the younger generation, this great uncle was so curious about Vesuvius that he went out with his notebooks and defied the elements and actually died on the shore there taking notes. Young Pliny on the other hand panicked and at first wasn't going to leave at all, was going to die there, but then packed up his mother and they put pillows on their head and walked to the coast line and saved themselves. With the help of my colleague Dr. Staly and his pictures he had taken from his summer in Rome, we gave students, about 30 of them, a picture of a two thousand year old explosion.

INT: Have you seen that exhibit about Pompeii?

NAR: Well, I may go next week. But no I haven't seen it.

INT: My dad saw that, he said it was real interesting. What did you think about the college canceling classes?

NAR: Well, I thought it was the only thing we could do. Can't have classes without students. But we couldn't call the students back from (unintelligible) but once it was done, you live with it. But it really did castrate the semester.

INT: Did you find it difficult to work during the incident; to concentrate or anything like that?

NAR: No, I really didn't. Again anymore than I had with the Bay of Pigs or similar times. I'm used to working in emergency times.

INT: Could you tell me something about the other crises you've been in?

NAR: Well, the greatest crisis still is World War Two. I went to high school through that. With of course, the draft day getting closer with each passing year. I was 17 just a few days before the atomic bomb was dropped. So there was a certain amount of relief in

the Holocaust of it all for me and I guess I've never quite gotten over that. Sort of my life bought at the expense of someone else's I guess. But the Bay of Pig thing was very interesting. I was at the University of Pennsylvania then, and a great many students came to see me in my office at that time. And I remember reactions of various groups, some of them quite panicky. I was interested then in the fraternity reaction.

INT: What was that?

NAR: Well, I remember one fraternity that, in the light of your interviews here, decided that they should start saying grace at the table. But at the same time they didn't lose their sense of humor, somebody said, "Don't you think we should have grace at table?" and they said "Grace, who's she?" So, they were nervous, they were quite scared in fact, because again they were going to be the ones called in if war started. And they were in an area that would make a nice target close to the refineries. But at the same time, they maintained a sense of humor.

INT: There was joking going on then too?

NAR: There was joking going on then too, yes. And it was a much graver crisis than this one was. Because we had much less way of knowing what was going on in that one. But again, I've always had the insurance policy of my father's farm. We would have simply packed up and headed for the farm.

INT: During the Bay of Pigs, were the people's reactions pretty similar to this?

NAR: No, I would say people were really much more scared of the Bay of Pigs in my experience. Again, speaking of professional people and students. We were much more nervous at that time because it's easier to control atomic power than it is to control political forces. We had no sense of what the Russians might do and to have us right in their gun sights at that time. So I was considerably more nervous at that time than I was at TMI.

INT: Did you think of any other crisis or anything else in history?

NAR: Do you mean comparing it to TMI? Well, there should be one more, but it escapes my memory right now.

INT: Well, you've had quite a few. That's really interesting.

NAR: Well, I haven't had any that the rest of the country hasn't had. I've tried to keep all of them in perspective.

INT: Did you have ideas about how it would be best to behave during TMI?

NAR: Honestly, I wasn't terribly self-conscious about my behavior then. I guess I felt that for students' sake, again, I should be calm and maintain a sense of humor. But I really was not that nervous or self-conscious about it.

INT: So you really didn't feel conflict in responsibilities and between how you felt you should behave?

NAR: No, I really didn't. It just didn't have a deep affect on me, I suppose that's kind of disappointing to the world but it just wasn't a time of great crisis for me.

INT: Did you ever think about dying?

NAR: Constantly.

INT: In what way?

NAR: Well, I don't mean then, but I always think about dying. I often quote to the students the line (unintelligible) you are dying, I am dying, everybody is dying. Or now I suppose I would quote Garp that "analogous is man who deals only in terminal cases."

INT: I've heard a lot about that book. It sounds like one I should pick up.

NAR: Well, it's very quotable. I think it's very significant in the modern novel, it seems however, to be one more novel by a young man who knows brilliantly how to write but doesn't have much to write about. But still, that wonderful closing line is significant. But yet certainly, when you teach the humanities, to paraphrase Garp, when you teach the humanities, you teach about death all the time. There are only two things in the humanities, sex and death. One is comedy and one is tragedy. That's what we deal with. So of course I think of mine own too, all the time.

INT: Did you think about it particularly during TMI?

NAR: No, truly it would not.

INT: Did it cross your mind at all whether you would survive it?

NAR: I just assumed that I would survive it. I really was either impervious of it or very rational, whichever way you want to look at it. But it was not a great crisis moment in my life.

INT: Did you think this incident was more frightening than a natural disaster like a flood or a hurricane?

NAR: No, I didn't. I guess yes, you talk about other emergencies. I was much more worried when Agnes, not so much for my own safety although I lost... tape stops here. ...the community in Agnes than I was in TMI because a great deal of the Harrisburg area

not only could have been, but it was, wiped out in the flooding, and I felt that the containment of this one would be much easier than facing the Susquehanna river on a rampage.

INT: Did you think of any TV shows or movies?

NAR: No, I don't form my images from TV shows. Except against the very fine newscasts with the engineers at the center of it. I was very impressed by the way they were able to describe the situation with chalkboard. It was good professorial teaching and I was very impressed.

INT: Did you think of any books or stories?

NAR: Only, The Last Days of Pompeii.

INT: Yeah, that would sort of center in on you. Did you have any daydreams that you can remember?

NAR: No, I guess I daydreamed about where the students were.

INT: Where did you put them?

NAR: Well, I pictured them just where they were, many of them had been the week before, on the beaches. And some of them who I knew had gone off to be with companions, with college friends, and I pictured them in all sorts of distance places in little gangs. But I guess I sort of felt the hollowness of the buildings around here, because I always miss the students when they're gone.

INT: Did you have any night dreams at all?

NAR: No, I really did not.

INT: Was your sleep disturbed by it?

NAR: No, it's not my nature to dream about my current problems. So again that doesn't tell us anything one way or the other.

INT: What sort of jokes did you hear about radiation or TMI?

NAR: Some very good ones. One that you've heard quoted here but it can be immortally Tyrone, Mike Crebage who said, "Now I can fulfill the American dream of having 2.3 children," but I think that was the one I appreciated the most. There were some other very good quips. I don't know that I was overwhelmed at the t-shirts.

INT: Did you get one?

NAR: No I didn't get one.

INT: Did you repeat any jokes to other people?

NAR: I repeated that one several times. I don't suppose, I know better now that it was original Tyrone's but that's who I identify it with. Partially because we talked a great deal about this anxiousness to have a little Tyrone.

INT: Did you see any posters or graffiti anywhere?

NAR: Well, outside of the t-shirts, no I don't think I did. But I probably wasn't in the right place to see them.

INT: I sent my boyfriend down at the airport into the men's room to copy down the graffiti on the walls and he was mortified. He was hiding it behind a newspaper trying to get it all in, and people were sort of looking at him funny. It took, I think it took him about four trips. He kept having to leave. Then there was another guy copying things off the walls and he kept giving him funny looks too.

NAR: (Laughter) That's the best story of Three Mile Island yet. That one I will certainly repeat.

INT: I don't think I will ever be forgiven.

NAR: You have a very loyal boyfriend I would say. You better hold on to him.

INT: Why do you think people were joking about it?

NAR: Well, I suppose that all jokes come, from a certain extent, from nervousness. We all laugh more easily when we're nervous, but at the same time there is a sort of defiant laughter and I think there was some of that too. That sort of showing faith, and that it really couldn't frighten us. Anything that began to look as non-scenic as this. So there were two stages of it I think. One, where we laughed from a sense of inferiority and even despair, and one where we laughed from a sense of security.

INT: You mention you heard joking from the Bay of Pigs back then, do you remember any other joking from other crises?

NAR: Well, let's put it the other way around, we have brought in the other crisis that I think of, Hurricane Agnes. There wasn't much joking at that time. Although as we saw our basements fill up with water there was some quips about that too since you couldn't do anything about it. When a lake formed near our house miles from any body of water, and one family had to be brought out in a canoe from a place that's just as ordinarily as dry and arid as any place could be, we certainly had a sense of the incongruity of it all along with the fact that we knew that nobody in our area was going to be physically hurt, we were able to laugh to a certain extent at our property losses in our wealthy area. But

still, when you look at somebody's grand piano chopped up and laying in from on the house, you didn't think it was very funny.

INT: Do you think that was because that was more of... the crisis was much closer?

NAR: Yes, I think so. Well it was more... more actually happened. People were having to be evacuated; people had died in Johnstown. We knew that the little towns south of the sewer had been virtually wiped out. It was in a sense quite the opposite of Three Mile Island because there in Agnes, everything happened the first night and it was aftermath to tragedy. Three Mile Island was a gradual build up of tension and then a sense of anti-climax. We had all been worked up about nothing. It was a very different kind of disaster.

INT: To step back just a moment, when you were listening to the joking did you hear it from colleagues and students or primarily from students?

NAR: I think my colleagues were pretty sharp about it too. I can't remember any commenting in particular. But the ones who were not completely panicked were very clever about it. Colleagues are clever.

INT: Is there anything else that you'd like to add, anything I haven't covered? Something that I didn't ask, or that I cut you off?

NAR: No, as I say, I'm really a very dull person to interview about Three Mile Island because it was too routine of a period for me. I dwelt more on the small things. Questioned what was happening to student work more than I did on the situation itself. It just never impressed as being that great.