

Date: August 23, 1979

Occupation: Psychologist

INTERVIEWER: When did you first hear about it, that there had been an accident?

NARRATOR: I was coming back from a trip and I was in a restaurant and I saw it in a small-town paper and it was in read headlines. It was Pine Grove, PA which is some paper that I can't even identify.

INT: So that was pretty far from here or what?

NAR: A few miles on the other side of Harrisburg.

INT: What did you think about when you first heard about it?

NAR: Well, I wasn't alarmed. I thought that sounds pretty bad but it didn't stay with me for more than about 5 minutes and then I went on thinking about other things so I must not have been alarmed about it.

INT: This was Wednesday or the first day of the incident?

NAR: Yeah, it seems like it was Wednesday.

INT: Did you start to think maybe it was more serious; did you hear more things about it?

NAR: Not until I began to hear about it on the radio and read other newspapers. I came home and went to sleep that night and forgot about it. In fact, I passed right at the airport, I was right at the cooling towers and it really didn't dawn on me that I had been right there and I didn't even think about that stuff. It was the following morning that I began to hear about it that I got more seriously thinking about it.

INT: Did you start to seek further information out about the whole thing?

NAR: Yeah at that point, I wanted all the information I could get.

INT: Because you had been so close to it or didn't that bother you?

NAR: No, I wasn't thinking so much as far as my being there. For some reason I didn't see myself as having been exposed to any great danger because it was brief. Because I was there, I got out of the plane and left. I was concerned more about what was going to happen.

INT: So you started to believe it was serious?

NAR: Yeah.

INT: You said that you were listening to the newspapers, or listen to the radio and reading the newspapers, were you following them more than you usually would?

NAR: Yes. I'm not sure by when. Let's say it was Thursday night I was probably reading and listening far more closely than I ever would have.

INT: Do you remember any particular sources you were looking at?

NAR: Well, I would read the PATRIOT and the EVENING NEWS and the PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER and THE NY TIMES and would listen to anything that was on the radio. I didn't pick a particular station.

INT: What did you think of the media's handling of the incident?

NAR: Well, I wasn't at the level where I was rating the media. I was trying to see what information they had that would help me and even now it's hard to reflect. I think they certainly succeeded in scaring me and a lot of other people. Whether that was justified or not is another question.

INT: So you think that they were being accurate or were they sensationalizing or anything like that?

NAR: I don't know. I don't know how to rate that, because I don't know enough about that truth of the matter to know how that compares with what the newspapers were telling us.

INT: How about Met Ed, how do you think they were handling it?

NAR: Well, we get things fourth people removed so who knows what who was doing, but from what I read and that's the only was I can judge, Met Ed was doing. . . making a great effort to withhold information from people and that, of course, made me quite angry.

INT: Did you think the government officials were doing any different of their job than they were before?

NAR: Well my since of it at the time I felt that the NRC was being somewhat more honest at least less dishonest than Met Ed about trying to keep us well informed. But now, as I have more information and I'm back off from it I think they were probably doing a real good job of telling us what they wanted to tell us. I'm very cynical and suspicious about all of that now.

INT: Was there anyone who you particularly trusted?

NAR: On a relative scale, I trusted our own Physics faculty in particular and our leadership meaning the President in general, more than anyone else.

INT: So you did trust anybody? Really distrust anybody?

NAR: Well, I fairly quickly got to the point where I didn't believe a whole lot of what Met Ed of the NRC or any officials were saying.

INT: So it was basically those people like Met Ed that you did not trust?

NAR: All of the people who were in official positions of having to tell the public. I can't even sort them out now, but all of them lied; I didn't believe them. They were probably telling us some truths, but there was a whole lot that they weren't telling us.

INT: Why do you think they weren't telling us?

NAR: In order to protect their own interests, whatever those might have been. For political or other sorts of interests.

INT: Do you think that they have control of the situation over there?

NAR: You mean physically? That they knew? I believe that they were not able to predict what was going to happen.

INT: Did you feel that way at the time, too?

NAR: Yes. I remember very specifically on a given couple of days of feeling and believing in my own heart they were not nearly sure what was going to happen in that plant. Not anywhere near being able to predict, and maybe completely unsure.

INT: How about now, do you think they know what they are doing now?

NAR: No. I have grave doubts of whether they could predict what will happen at the plants such as that continue to operate.

INT: Do you think now that it's not really operating and they know...that they have it including control?

NAR: Well, my answer is a general no because I think that there is a certain amount of radiation that still must be dealt with as far as I know and I'm not convinced that they know exactly what to do with it.

INT: Were you worried about the situation?

NAR: Yes.

INT: What worried you the most?

NAR: Unpredictability. The difficulties of being able to see the effects of radiation upon people, water, food chain, animals. Even now, whatever it is that's happening, I can't see it.

INT: Were you imagining things that would happen?

NAR: Well, I imagined then and I still imagine now that radiation may get into our food chain.

INT: What do you think the results would be?

NAR: I lose out on my lack of scientific knowledge there but if somebody asked me to guess I would guess that there is some probability that 20 years from now the people will have more cancer incidents, significantly more than we otherwise would have.

INT: This is through the food chain or just people themselves who have been exposed?

NAR: Well, from what little I know the more serious difficulties come from the water and food and the less serious ones come from what comes through the air. I think I've heard enough that we need not be too worried about what comes through the air because even it doesn't add up to a couple dental x-rays, but its getting things into the food, and that sort of thing, and other things I'm not even aware of that were in it. I've read just enough about nuclear energy to alarm me even further. Couple of books, I can mention them if you want. John McFeese, The Curb of Finding Energy, um... I can't remember all the books and articles. That's the book that sticks in my mind. That thought crossed my mind.

INT: So have you read them since the incident?

NAR: Yeah, oh yeah.

INT: Did you make plans that you normally wouldn't make at the time?

NAR: There was an evening when...I went to the college meetings to get the information and there were one or two evenings when I was saying to myself if the information we get is negative, we will consider leaving and when we would leave.

INT: So you were kind of watching the school to determine when you should leave?

NAR: Watching the people whose information I trusted the best, who happened to be from our college, yeah. And also considering my obligation at the college, I think that if I were not a representation of the institution my thoughts about leaving would have been even quicker.

INT: Did you change your ordinary routines?

NAR: Not much.

INT: Did it affect your students or anything like that coming in?

NAR: There weren't many around.

INT: Did you find students coming in to talk to you because they were scared?

NAR: Well the timing was such that most of them were gone, so there was not many of them to come in. But then when they returned, no.

INT: I would have thought that some would have had maybe not emotional problems, but I know I did, I was just curious.

NAR: I would say the norm seemed to be it was a radiation vacation and just like anything else, if there was a fire in town and you had to leave, and then they came back, and well that's over; that was the prevailing attitude that I heard anyway.

INT: Did you think about leaving the area, in that you made plans?

NAR: Our plans only went so far as saying, "If the information tonight gets really bad, then we will go to our relative in Long Island."

INT: Did you do anything to pack, or think about what you would take at the time?

NAR: Yeah, I would think about what I would take, but not so detailed that said it would be this and this. I just thought, well I'll have to make decisions about what's most important to me because I might not be coming back. That thought crossed my mind.

INT: Did you think that was a serious possibility?

NAR: I didn't know how serious, but even if it were two percent, it was something I had to think about.

INT: Did you determine the types of things you would take with you?

NAR: No, I didn't get that far. Then I went to the Sunday night meeting and my fears were relieved.

INT: It was Sunday when you started to feel better?

NAR: It was that meeting that was pivotal for me.

INT: Why?

NAR: The information that Priscilla and others gave relieved most of my immediate fears.

INT: Did you have any mental pictures of what was going on at TMI or what might happen?

NAR: Yeah, that's a good question. We asked that question in career planning a lot. Yeah, I saw a lot of people in some moderate state of panic from whom it was difficult to get leadership so external leadership had to come in. People who were perceived as knowing more and the other people were either saying, "Boy, I'm glad it's them that's taking the responsibility or repressing it". I think a lot of people over there just repressed it. It was too emotional to think that they might be standing there dying and saying, "These people know what they are doing so I'll just let them do it." But I think there were moderate to severe levels of panic among a lot of people.

INT: So you could just picture these people sort of panicking over there?

NAR: Probably most of it internally.

INT: There wasn't any outside proof that they were panicking so this is all mental stuff?

NAR: Well, I didn't have any proof, but knowing people as they do, I think there was a lot of conflict.

INT: You were saying about your job not really being affected, but that if you hadn't been tied to the college you would have left or you would have thought more seriously about it, did you find you had job conflicts or that you felt that there were responsibilities that conflicted with leaving?

NAR: Yeah, I felt that I wanted to be as helpful as possible to everyone in the college, the students in particular.

INT: What kind of responsibilities?

NAR: I'm not sure what kind of responsibilities these would be. Whatever the leadership would say we might do or if we were to evacuate I felt that I should help with that.

INT: Then of course responsibility toward your family?

NAR: Well, that's where a lot of the conflict came in. Do I just ship my family out of here and forget the College? That was too extreme so my feeling was well, I'll wait a bit longer and see if the college needs me but when it gets down to being severely dangerous, then we'll just have to go.

INT: Do you think that anything that has happened over there has affected your health?

NAR: I doubt it, but I'm not certain. I do worry from time to time about the food I'm eating and the water I'm drinking and what that will mean for me when I'm 60.

INT: The future potential harm. Do you think other aspects of your life or the life of your community has been affected by the whole incident?

NAR: Well, my life, I'm more anti-nuclear. Severely more so now.

INT: Had you been before the incident?

NAR: Mildly, now I'm intensely. If and when I ever choose another place to live, I will keep in mind where it is with regards to a nuclear plant, and do my best not to be near one. You asked me about my life and the community, I don't see any real signs that it has been affected the Carlisle or Cumberland County community.

INT: You were saying that you are now anti-nuclear have you demonstrated or anything like that against it?

NAR: No, that would put in kind of an awkward position to be a professional person and be demonstrating and perhaps be perceived much differently by people who would see me, but privately in terms of voting and in any way I can be anti-nuclear, I will be.

INT: If the worst thing had occurred, what do you think it may have been?

NAR: Well, my understanding of the worst possible is that large amounts of radiation would have been released; hundreds of times larger than what was released. Both into the air and into the earth. The earth would be worse because then that would without any doubt would be in our food chain. I guess that's about what I imagined the worst being.

INT: So then it would have been potential health hazards in the future and that type of thing?

NAR: Well, almost without a doubt.

INT: How about the community, how do you think they would have been affected?

NAR: It's hard to say. We have no precedent. You've got on the one hand I'm saying that there would be social chaos, I'm guessing. But on the other hand, I know how strong the bonds are between the people who live here and the community. Such that people who live two miles away were not even leaving so I don't know how that would play itself out. I suspect the bonds are so strong that you'd have to have some people dying immediately to even touch other people's consciousness and you have to know that it was attributable to radiation. And then we'd probably be in a near panic situation.

INT: What do you think you would have done if you lived two miles away from the plant? Do you think you would have left?

NAR: I would have left.

INT: No matter what other responsibilities you had? If, say, you were in Dickinson College two miles away from the plant?

NAR: I'm pretty sure that I and my family would have left long enough to be sure that if we came back we would not be in any significant danger.

INT: Do you think the people who live there were in danger?

NAR: Then or now?

INT: Did you believe it then?

NAR: Then, I believed so, yes.

INT: And now you don't?

NAR: Now, I'm not as sure.

INT: You were saying that the food chain may have been affected by this, at the time did you stop eating food from the area or stop drinking the milk?

NAR: I stopped drinking milk for a couple days and that was it.

INT: So it really didn't worry you all that much?

NAR: No, I guess it didn't.

INT: Did you have any kind of ideas of how radiation would actually affect the environment? The type of things it might be able to do to maybe plant life, or animal life?

NAR: I did know enough to know that my thought was pretty much on cancer because well, I even knew before TMI that cancer deaths were cropping up in particular places and particular industrial plants, industrial towns cancer deaths were very high and the evidence was beginning to come out that people who had been exposed to atomic tests twenty years ago had dramatically high cancer rates so I knew something about that then and I know more about it now. That's a pretty compelling argument to me about what can happen. So my focus is pretty much on cancer producing.

INT: Did you think of your own death?

NAR: Yeah, in a vague sort of way.



INT: How about that of others?

NAR: Yeah, I did think about that.

INT: What kind of images did you have of that? What did you start thinking of?

NAR: I don't remember real well. I remember fleeting images of people dropping over. No, you don't drop over with cancer, you deteriorate. I did have and still do have images of people deteriorating from cancer because I have known a couple of people who died with it. And the horror of knowing that humankind made this happen. So I thought and felt about that a lot.

INT: Did you think that you would survive this particular incident?

NAR: Yeah. I still believe that I will not be affected by it. It could be a very irrational belief. I'm as irrational as the next person. I believe in my own fitness and my own attitudes toward my body. I can somehow ward off some external influence. But some external influences can't be that easily warded off. We are getting examples of that. The people who stood and watched the first atomic test out there in Utah and Nevada, it was reported on the NY Times are now dropping off like flies.

INT: From cancer?

NAR: Yeah. So, what am I supposed to think?

INT: So visions of this run through your mind?

NAR: Yeah.

INT: Did you think of God during the incident?

NAR: A little bit. I don't really remember exactly what I thought, but I hoped God would help if he could.

INT: Did you pray?

NAR: A little bit. My family prayed a lot.

INT: What kinds of things did you pray for? Or about?

NAR: For help for humanity. Help us find our way out of this.

INT: Did any kind of biblical images cross your mind?

NAR: No. I would just be making one up if I gave you one now.

INT: Not anything like the judgment or anything like that?

NAR: No.

INT: Was your job affected at all by TMI, like the week we were off you didn't do things the way you normally would?

NAR: No, I was not affected. It was just the same way I would spend a week in January when the students are away.

INT: So it wasn't any kind of pile up that you found at the end of the week?

NAR: No, it was fine. There is always planning that I do and this gave me another week of planning.

INT: So actually, it was like an added bonus?

NAR: Yeah, in that sense it was helpful.

INT: Did you have any ideas of how a person should behave in a situation like this?

NAR: Well, I had some vague sense of people being concerned about each other and not just about themselves, but I really didn't play out my image of that further than that.

INT: Did you feel that you yourself acted the way one should act? Or did you find there were outside influences that didn't permit that?

NAR: Well, I guess I felt I was a little more selfish than I should have been and I was a little bit quicker to think about leaving than I should have been. I wasn't real happy with myself about that. But that's about all.

INT: Did the whole incident bring to mind any past experiences that you may have had?

NAR: Sitting out a couple of hurricanes in Florida.

INT: Have you experienced hurricanes then?

NAR: Yeah, but nothing is really comparable because you know when the hurricane is coming and you see it and you can react to it and this is entirely different.

INT: Did you find this more frightening or less frightening?

NAR: More frightening, more.

INT: Why?

NAR: Because you didn't know what was happening to you. You had no way of calculating it. Creeping death. That sort of stuff. All these things you can't see but you know they are there.

INT: Do you think that anything like this has ever happened before? In history?

NAR: Well, I now believe that there have been some nuclear plant accidents that the public never found about. I'm almost sure of that.

INT: They did a job of covering it up then?

NAR: Yes.

INT: Did you picture these images of hurricanes at the time?

NAR: It was just the same sense of excitement that any stimulus will give you. Something really out of the ordinary happening, but that's about all. The comparison ends there.

INT: Did you start to think of any TV shows or movies or anything like that, books or stories?

NAR: No, I don't recall any vivid images of that kind other than the obvious one since we had seen the movie two weeks before.

INT: Had you seen that?

NAR: Yes.

INT: What kinds of things did you start thinking about?

NAR: Well, I felt that I had a lot of images of the movie and that it was very much parallel to what we were experiencing.

INT: Where had you seen it?

NAR: In the Capital City Mall which is outside of Camp Hill.

INT: Do you remember how people reacted when they saw the movie? I know there is one line that says the signs of Pennsylvania. What did people say?

NAR: There was a slight gasp for some people.

INT: Really? And that was it?

NAR: Yeah. We had talked to people as we went out so that's all I can say.

INT: When you first saw the movie, did you think it was possible? Or was it definitely fiction?

NAR: No, I thought it was possible, and a couple months later I read in, I think it was Esquire, I'm not sure, that the people who made the movie knew that an accident at TMI was almost inevitable because they had researched it well enough to know that. And they were really wanting to get the movie out before the accident happened. It was as they said a race between fact and fiction.

INT: So they had heard of it?

NAR: They knew about it. There had been similar accidents of that kind two to three times in the 18 months prior to when it happened. We just didn't know about it.

INT: Where was this article that you read?

NAR: I'm not sure if it was in Enquire or Fort Nightly. It's been about...well, when did it happen, in March. I think it was the June issue or May somewhere in there.

INT: Did you find yourself singing any songs or making comparisons?

NAR: Well, you know what I thought of, Nevel Shoots on the Beach.

INT: The movie?

NAR: Yeah. I never read the book. That one I thought of a lot.

INT: What kind of images did that bring?

NAR: The whole beach image of nobody being there and a few remaining people walking around. That one I thought of a lot, because, you know about that movie?

INT: I've heard of it.

NAR: It's about ten to fifteen years old. It's about an atomic holocaust. And that one came to my mind, many, many times.

INT: What really happened in the movie?

NAR: Well, I think everybody dies off except one or two people who fall in love at the end or something like that.

INT: So you were picturing Three Mile Island as turning into this type of thing, or the general vicinity?

NAR: Yeah, I was imagining that that might possibly happen. Sure it was irrational, but I thought about it many, many times. It was pretty vivid image if you have ever read the book or seen the movie.

INT: No, I've never seen it. Maybe I should. Ok, did you have any daydreams that you remember?

NAR: No, I didn't...well, about all I got into was imagining what my life might be like if in fact there was an accident. I couldn't imagine that very easily.

INT: Feeling like it can't happen to you?

NAR: Well, it could happen to me but I just couldn't play it out in terms of day to day; what would I be doing. It got to be too much to imagine and I just sort of well...that's too difficult.

INT: Did you have any sleeping dreams?

NAR: Not that I remember.

INT: How about disturbed sleep?

NAR: No. Not as a result of that.

INT: Did you notice any changes happening to people around you during the incident?

NAR: No, I didn't actually.

INT: Did you hear any jokes about radiation or Three Mile Island?

NAR: Yeah, I heard a thousand of them, but the only ones I remember now are what's chocolate and melts into the ground? Hershey, Pennsylvania.

INT: I hadn't heard that one. Where did you hear that?

NAR: I don't know.

INT: Did people think these things were funny when they were saying them?

NAR: Yeah.

INT: Did you think they were funny?

NAR: Yes.

INT: Can you remember any others?

NAR: No, that's the one that sticks in my mind.

INT: Have you heard them since or have they died out?

NAR: I haven't heard any more other than to watch Saturday Night live and that routine they did.

INT: Did you happen to see that the first weekend right after the Wednesday when the incident occurred?

NAR: No, I didn't see it then, but I saw a rerun later.

INT: That was the one when they were offering a big reward for the capital of Pennsylvania or something, the new capital of Pennsylvania.

NAR: I don't think I ever saw that one. The one I saw was when President Carter got to be 90 feet tall.

INT: The Pepsi syndrome.

NAR: Yeah.

INT: What did you think about it? Did you enjoy that looking back on it?

NAR: The rerun?

INT: Yeah.

NAR: Yeah, I just more or less treated it as funny. I was able to distance myself enough from it just to laugh at it.

INT: Why do you think people were laughing?

NAR: I don't know. Why was it funny?

INT: Why were they joking?

NAR: Well, what makes humor, that gets very complicated, but you've got the gross difference between people were telling us and what they were exactly doing which was, in a black way, very humorous and then you've got humans foibles being concerned about the sandwich he is eating rather than what is taking place. People's small-mindedness and all these things are great subjects of humor.

INT: Do you remember any other kind of joking from anything else in a crisis like Kennedy's assassination or Guiana or anything like that?

NAR: Well, that's funny, I don't remember, I remember specifically the after joking of Kennedy's assassination and about the Rev. Jones thing. I remember one of two semi-joking things here on the campus that were considered extremely bad taste by most everyone.

INT: And what were they?

NAR: Some fraternity had a "Come to the Slaughter Party" or some stupid, really offensive thing like that. And outside of that, I didn't hear any humor at all attached to those other things. But I did hear a lot with Three Mile Island.

INT: You have no explanation for that?

NAR: That would be interesting to try to figure out why? Well, I guess because nothing really happened. Nothing that you couldn't point to so and so and say that so and so died.

INT: So you think death is kind of the killer humor or something?

NAR: Well, think of Charlie Manson associated with death. I guess there were Manson jokes, but my sense of it is that people don't joke easily about death.

INT: You said that you had developed a stronger opinion on nuclear energy, is there anything else you'd like to say about that?

NAR: Well, I wish I could find a way to have impact on that because I believe strongly that dangers of nuclear energy are real. Not just what goes on at those plants, but the storage of plutonium and other nuclear related things which as far as I know enormously dangerous, and it is a source of some befuddlement to me that those things don't alarm our own physicists more. Maybe they do, but people get to the point where they have to simply go on living and not...but I am alarmed about those things for myself and for thousands of people. Because I believe that the dangers are enormous.

INT: That's pretty much all I have to ask, is there anything else you'd like to say or anything you think that I may have forgotten?

NAR: Well, I hope that what you all learn from this will get a lot of publicity. I hope you will put some effort into conveying it to communities such as our own but wider. My instinct is to see it published. Of course I know how people get inundated by things they read, but if a good sensible article in a popular magazine could be produced from this or a book of some kind I think it would be worth the effort. If you have something to say that is significantly different from other people say, which you may very well do it so I hope you attach a couple of good writers to your project because I think there are things to be learned from this that may help people.

INT: Anything else?

NAR: No, that's about it.