



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Emergency preparedness drill: A “premature evacuation”

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Happily, we all survived the dirty water emergency, with credit, kudos and high fives to our government officials for bringing the episode to a quick resolution. Aside from some panic on Saturday night as supplies of bottled water flew off the convenience store shelves, everyone in Eastern Massachusetts seemed to handle the situation as little more than a temporary inconvenience.

Of course, this was a problem of contaminated water, resolved by means of alternative beverage sources. What if this had been a case of contaminated air? The folks at Poland Springs wouldn't be shipping in bottled air from Maine. Actually, everyone would be shipping out, flying out or driving out of town. Are we prepared for that? Just take a look at the official Boston evacuation map and see for yourself. Get your GPS system ready!

Actually, I'm not the kind of person who worries about catastrophe, be it natural or man-made. If anything, the thought of evacuation is strangely exhilarating. I know I'm not alone: Consider how giddy TV meteorologists become when a fierce storm is approaching; consider too the popularity of disaster films.

I'm also not the type of person who prepares for the worst. I figure I'll cross that bridge - be it the Zakim or the Longfellow--when I come to it.

Sure, I have batteries in virtually every drawer of the house-- a perk to my "executive membership" to Costco, but I haven't a clue where the flashlights are. I don't keep supplies of bottled water, but again thanks to Costco, I've got 27 bottles of Diet Coke. Although I'm well stocked up on 12-packs of tuna, it would take me time to locate the can opener.

Despite my *que sera sera* approach to emergency preparedness, the new evacuation route signs that have appeared throughout my South End neighborhood and elsewhere around the city have got me thinking. These round blue signs are both larger and more plentiful than the green airplane symbols --those Logan logos-- that are so easy to miss when lost en route to the airport.

As a gesture to crisis readiness, I decided to conduct a "get outta town" drill--a "premature evacuation," if you will. I thought I'd see how helpful the blue signs are in guiding me to safety in New Hampshire, Rhode Island or the Boston Harbor.

Starting out at the Boston Center for the Arts, I traveled west along Tremont, tracking the evacuation directional signs that appeared at nearly every corner. But soon came Massachusetts Avenue, where a blue evacuation sign points left, right and straight ahead. What now?



Because the traffic light was red, I decided on the quickest response --right on red. Obediently following the evacuation route indicators posted along Mass. Ave. through Back Bay, I suddenly got befuddled by signage overload. My view partially obscured by a double-parked truck, I mistook a blue public parking symbol pointing right for an identically-colored evacuation sign.

I soon realized my goof after having turned eastward onto Commonwealth Avenue: There were no more evacuation signs to be found. At the end of Commonwealth, there was only one way to turn-- right onto Arlington St.

Thank goodness! I had rediscovered the trail of evacuation signs. Crossing over the Mass Pike, the next sign directed me to the right onto Tremont, back to where I had started.

Traveling the boomerang route was actually a good thing. In my rush to leave, I had forgotten my precious little kitty CATastrophe. That isn't really her name, but for the occasion it seemed fitting.

The second time around, I'd be smarter. At Mass. Ave., I steered left to avoid the downtown confusion and head toward the Expressway. This, however, maneuvered me toward Albany Street, site of the BU biocontainment lab, which, in my make-believe disaster, had experienced a toxic leak due to sabotage. Simulation game over. I'm make-believe dead.

I performed my drill mid-morning when traffic was light. Had this been an actual emergency, I would have been directed to tune my radio to the Emergency Broadcast Network, where I would receive more impossible-to-obey instructions while helplessly stuck in traffic gridlock waiting to die.

Good thing this was only a test.