

Movie Review: Twisters - Taming Nature's Fury

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Tornados were a constant for me as a child in Indiana. Each summer, when a violent storm took place, we listened attentively to the radio for tornado alerts warning us about a possible tornado. Our family rehearsed what to do in case one actually touched down in our neighborhood. Fortunately, I never personally experienced a tornado or its destructive force. The closest I got to them was providing disaster relief and mitigation to the families and businesses who did experience one. Throughout my extensive career directing the work of IRFF, a sustainable development and disaster response agency, I have witnessed the devastation that even a relatively weak tornado can do to someone's home or business. Having witnessed first-hand the pain and devastation that results, I could relate to the disaster-based movie, *Twisters*, currently playing in theaters.

This film picks up where the 1996 movie *Twister*, ended. Whereas the storm chasers in that film were trying to get special sensors into the heart of a tornado to collect vital data on its inner workings to create a more effective early warning system, now the study of tornados has developed beyond data collection. In this latest film, the focus is on developing a chemical compound that will stop a formed tornado once it is launched into the tornadoes center. Kate Cooper (Daisy Edgar Jones), a young, bright-eyed doctoral student who has a sixth sense about storms and tornadoes, is committed to finding a way to stop tornadoes in their tracks to prevent the loss of more homes and towns. The chemical compound is the brainchild of Kate and her fellow researchers. However, when Kate and her research team encounter an EF-5 level tornado, the strongest level, she loses all but one of her teammates when they are trapped by the tornado and sucked up into the storm. Her grief and sense of guilt over the loss drives her to drop her studies and leave the Oklahoma tornado alley for the safe confines of a meteorological research center in New York.

Twister Movie Trailer

As with many disaster-themed movies, Cooper is drawn back into the fray when the other surviving team member from her past, Javi (Anthony Ramos), contacts her and invites her to return to Oklahoma to

provide much-needed wisdom and advice to his new team of tornado chasers. She reluctantly agrees to give the team one week, which becomes a week filled with old ghosts, nightmare images of that earlier storm, and new possibilities.

She quickly learns how much the field of tornado chasers has changed during her five-year absence. Not only did the technology become more sophisticated and powerful, but those engaged in the chase now represent a broad spectrum of individuals and groups who are not all concerned with the science of it all. One new face on the scene is Tyler Owens (Glen Powell), nicknamed the "Tornado Wrangler." A social media star, Owens is a daring cowboy-like personality who comes off as flirtatious and a media hound who craves the limelight. Cooper and Owens end up in a competitive relationship while they seek to show the other the extent of their wisdom, knowledge, and skills. Their competitive dynamic comes to a head when Tyler informs Kate that Javi's team is backed by an entrepreneurial business grouping seeking to profit from the victims' losses. While Kate staunchly defends Javi's motives and accuses Tyler of being a profiteer, she confronts Javi about his backers. He justifies his sponsors' motives while standing amid an Oklahoman town that has just been destroyed. That is when Kate looks around and sees Tyler's crew working on the frontline of the disaster response while Javi's team is not.



This ultimately leads Kate to walk away from Javi and his team for the safe confines of her mother's farm in another part of Oklahoma. While there, two things align to move her forward. First, walking through the barn that had served as her workshop, she rediscovers her notes on her early experiments and designs to stop tornadoes. Second, Tyler shows up and, after going through Kate's initial files, encourages and challenges her to pick up where she left off, offering his resources and his team's skills to take her plans to the next level.

Agreeing to get back into the chase for tornadoes, Kate and Tyler head for a storm line that is a good prospect for tornado formation, where they can launch her new and improved compound to stop the tornado. However, approaching a town in the tornado's direct path, they stop to get the townspeople to safety. As the tornado touches down in the town, Kate takes the van with the chemical compound to move it into position while Tyler and his team position the townspeople who have now taken refuge in the local cinema. Like all good action movies, the stars aligned to stop the tornado and save lives.

One can say that this was just another "disaster action" film. But I saw much more in the film, having personally engaged in disaster response for over two decades. Disaster response brings out the best and worst in people, but mainly the best. Strangers roll up their sleeves and work together to clear out the debris of what was once someone's home. They offer comfort, understanding, and compassion for those who lost so much. And they give - time, money, and goods. Some will spend a week or two doing such work or a month or two doing it. Twisters shows the inner struggle that many experience in disaster response. This dynamic is evident in the film, which features two teams of tornado chasers.

The struggle is most often between those pitching in and serving the victims with a heart that directs them to live for the greater good and those who see the financial possibilities of the disaster and/or those who have a more paternalistic perspective of service to the victims. In the film, Kate experiences the challenge of responding authentically to the "other" and from one's life compass. It is a question of learning to respond from, through, and with the genuine love of God that flows in our veins and out to the one in need. This represents a more familial concept that is more parental rather than paternal. Our response should not be and cannot be about "me" and what "I" want to give. Nor is it a question of pity or misguided altruism. When we respond to a disaster out of pity, it creates an unequal dynamic perceived or experienced as disingenuous and does not move others to work out of their life compass.

This is what I appreciated in the film. Whereas the 1996 film initially danced around this conversation, it was not focused on the people caught up in the disaster. Tyler and Javi portray, in essence, these two polar perspectives. Javi meant well. He hoped that the data and equipment his team's financial sponsors paid for would result in data that would ultimately save property and lives. He could also justify aligning with this set of sponsors by telling himself that the victims would now be able to move forward with their lives and the financial resources to purchase a new home. But, by getting caught up in the science of it all, he struggled to "see" those impacted by the tornado and so could not respond out of his life compass. Tyler, on the other hand, was looking at the disaster victims themselves, their families, and their needs. That is what prompted his crew to be with the victims, and so connect meaningfully with the community. Witnessing these two dynamics empowered Kate to engage and respond out of her life compass. This also led Kate to be more effective the second time around.

In the long run, this film began the conversation on what it means to live for the greater good and what the hallmarks are of what Martin Luther King called "beloved community." As demonstrated by Tyler and Kate, such service is not about "me" or about "what's in it for me", nor is it about what "I" can or cannot offer. It is about what my "family" needs. This infectious dynamic empowered Kate to follow her life compass and ultimately move Javi to do the same.

In disaster work, we all face these critical debates as we try to understand our motives for being there. As responders, we find ourselves searching to define what an authentic response looks like. That is why I have come to define an authentic response as one in which I can be present to the victims. This becomes conducive to the sharing of God's authentic love that flows freely in my veins with the disaster victims, which further guides me in being present to them. This is what creates an environment in which 'beloved community' can flourish. Twisters has begun that conversation and attitude.

Twisters certainly embodied what I look for in a movie these days . It is action-packed, has a creative and inspiring storyline, and challenges and encourages me to reflect on meaningful issues. As I left the theater, I concluded that the movie reminded me that the search to create the 'beloved community' is alive and well in our movies.

Director: Lee Isaac Chung

Produced by Universal Pictures, Warner Bros., and Amblin Entertainment

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