My personal and academic interest in geography and disasters can be traced through a series of events that indelibly altered my life. I was born in the small town of Dyersville, Iowa, a dot on a map that easily eludes the eye. However, it was the experiences in this modest town and subsequent higher education that etched my current and future paths.

As a child, I vividly remember seeking shelter in the basement as an F4 tornado devastated the area. The tornado missed our home, but I can recall the golf-ball-sized hail and being awestruck witnessing the destruction in Worthington, a town three miles south of Dyersville. A few years later, the Midwestern floods of 1993 and 1999 affected the region—farm fields were swamped, creeks escaped their banks, and the nearby Mississippi River roared throughout the summers. It was at this time that I began my undergraduate education, which is when I developed a passion for Geography. My first course in Geography exposed me to new languages, cultures, and ways of life. The impacts were so great that I decided to attain a minor in the subject and to join the Geographic Alliance of Iowa (GAI). Through the GAI, I was offered the opportunity to travel to India as a participant in a Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad Grant. The objective was to develop K-16 curriculum on the geographic diversity of India. I was the youngest Grant participant and the only one who was not a current teacher or professor. The Grant represented my first experience outside of the United States and instilled in me a desire to conduct international geographic research as a career goal.

I fulfilled my B.A. student teaching requirements in Rome, Italy, and thereafter was employed as a Social Studies teacher in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. While teaching, I maintained an interest in disasters: I flew to Sri Lanka to volunteer as a relief worker after the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, and I incorporated a unit on Hurricane Katrina into my 7th grade Geography class. After teaching, I enrolled in a M.A. program that required me to learn a foreign language and carry out international research. Thus, I completed an intense year-long course in Hindi and conducted research on microcredit as a tool for alleviating poverty. Fortuitously, after obtaining my M.A., I was able to participate in another Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad Grant through the GAI, this time to study how people cope with serial floods and cyclones in Bangladesh.

The Grant to Bangladesh sparked an academic interest in disasters. Therefore, I decided to attain a Ph.D. in Geography examining the effects of disasters upon local communities. Based on experiences during volunteer work, I chose to examine reconstruction after the 2004 tsunami. I was subsequently awarded a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship to fund a year of coursework at an overseas institution. Interestingly enough, as I flew to India to attend a university, I left one disaster and was welcomed by another: I departed America as the University of Iowa was inundated with floods, and my flat in India was submerged by the torrential rains of Cyclone Nisha shortly after arriving.

I am currently nestled in Iowa, but my heart and mind reside elsewhere. I am enrolled in methods courses in preparation for my research abroad, and I am busy studying Tamil—with additional tutoring from my wife, an Indian national whom I wedded in 2009. My Research Assistantship is to help design a disaster preparation and response plan for the city of Des Moines, and I often draw upon the disaster-related experiences I have accrued across the globe. In the future, I look forward to completing my dissertation and becoming a geographer of disaster studies. My career goal is to work in academia or for the United States Government.