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[Earthquakes: The Big One Is Coming To At Least Los Angeles](#)

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By [Timothy D. Naegele\[1\]](#)

While the damage from the recent Christchurch earthquake in New Zealand has been enormous, and the costs of rebuilding will be staggering, and the emotional trauma is unfathomable, Kiwis have much to be thankful for after the quake.

Having grown up in Los Angeles, I know that earthquakes are scary, because I lived through probably more than a hundred of them when I was a kid. They would happen so often that I got used to them and even began to enjoy them. As long as one has reason to believe in his or her own survival, one can find them interesting. Our family home was near the UCLA campus in the Westwood suburb of the city; and it was constructed out of wood, so no serious damage ever occurred.

Years later, after working full time in Washington, D.C. for 21 years, I moved back to Southern California and experienced them again. The first one hit when I was living in a house on the beach at Malibu, which had been built on wood pilings above the sand. The rocking sensation was accentuated because of the pilings, and it scared me for the very first time. Later, other quakes have unsettled me—as well as their aftershocks—perhaps because I had lost my fearlessness as a child.

California has experienced major earthquakes all of my life, including the 1989 Loma Prieta quake in the San Francisco Bay Area, which collapsed major roadways and buildings alike.[\[2\]](#) Earlier this year,

the devastating earthquake in Haiti killed an estimated 230,000 people.^[3] Also, I will never forget the “Spitak Earthquake” that was a tremor with a magnitude of 6.9—less than that of the 7.1 Christchurch quake—which took place on December 7, 1988, in the Spitak region of Armenia, then part of the former Soviet Union. The earthquake killed at least 25,000 people.^[4]

Geologists and earthquake engineering experts laid the blame on poorly-built apartments and other buildings. However, most of all I remember the quote: “Earthquakes don’t kill people. Buildings do.”^[5] Viewing photos of the damage in and around the Christchurch area on the south island of New Zealand, it seems that so many of the buildings were made out of bricks and other building materials, which could easily fall on people and injure or kill them.^[6] Indeed, it is a blessing that there were so few injuries.^[7] Buildings can be rebuilt, and roads and other infrastructure elements can be repaired or replaced—which will produce much-needed jobs for Kiwis—but lives cannot be replaced as the Armenians and Haitians learned so tragically.

Another lesson from the quakes is the need for stronger building codes. Los Angeles has adopted them; however, the steel joints in many high-rise office buildings were apparently weakened by the 1994 Northridge earthquake^[8], and nothing has been done to repair them. To remove tenants from the buildings, while the potentially-critical work is underway, was deemed to be politically and economically unpalatable. Thus, the problems were swept under the rug and never addressed by building owners and the city’s politicians. Los Angeles may rue the day that this happened.

Residents of Southern California are waiting for the “Big One” to occur sometime in the future, which geologists have been saying is long overdue. Predictions are that it will measure more than 8.0 on the Richter Scale, and that approximately 2 million people in Southern California might lose their lives.^[9] Thus, Kiwis must be thankful that the Christchurch quake relieved the pressures on the fault; and that while the damage is being measured in the billions of U.S. dollars, so few injuries occurred.

This is truly a blessing, unlike what happened in Armenia and Haiti, or what is being predicted for Southern California and along America’s New Madrid Fault Line—which could result in “the highest economic losses due to a natural disaster in the United States”^[10]—and in Pakistan where lives hang in the balance as these words are written, because of massive flooding in that country.^[11]

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^[2] See, e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1989_Loma_Prieta_earthquake

[3] See, e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Haiti_earthquake

[4] See, e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1988_Spitak_earthquake

[5] Similarly, on the last two boats that I owned, I had a plaque placed next to the wheel by which the boats were steered that read: “The sea is not inherently dangerous but it is mercifully unforgiving of human carelessness.” No accidents occurred, thank God.

[6] See, e.g., http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/image.cfm?c_id=1&gal_cid=1&gallery_id=113693#7075994

[7] See, e.g., http://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c_id=466&objectid=10671356

[8] See, e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1994_Northridge_earthquake

[9] See, e.g., <http://www.naegele.com/documents/LAEarthquake-80nRichter.pdf>
and <http://www.naegele.com/documents/Sciencemagazinearticle.pdf>

[10] See, e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Madrid_Seismic_Zone

[11] See, e.g., http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Analysis/2010/09/03/Commentary-Cry-for-me-Pakistan/UPI-97951283512773/ (“Pakistan is reeling under the most devastating national catastrophe since independence 63 years ago”)

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