

THROUGH US THEY SPEAK: LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF THOSE WHO WEATHERED THE STORM

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The following is a narrative about the author's visits to the Gulf Coasts after the two storms; both in private capacity and as part of a mental health disaster response team. The author heard stories of survival, resistance, and ultimately resilience from those she met who were deeply affected by the devastation.

First Stop on the Road to Recovery

"Through us they speak." This is the unofficial motto of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. It was initially uttered as part of a farewell speech by the Honorable K. Leroy Irvis as he concluded his elected responsibilities as Speaker of the House of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. In those four words, the Honorable Irvis declared the special role elected officials should embrace when given the charge to be a public servant. It would come to stand for the legacy and/or legitimacy of their work as public servants. It was not until I was asked to give a presentation of my experience as a social work mental health provider in the Gulf Coast region after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita that I gave serious deliberation regarding what "through us they speak" means in the life of those of us charged with the public responsibility to help individuals, families, and communities recover, rebuild, and reconnect.

The first time I went home to the Mississippi Gulf Coast area, a week and a half after the storm, I asked a 96-year-old resident what she thought about the disaster; about the storm that devastated so many lives in her community. I will never forget the words she uttered as I listened anxiously for her response: "This is not a disaster, this is my life." When I hear people say disaster, worst disaster, unbelievable disaster, I wonder, how anyone can look at all the destruction, loss, and death around them and think "life." Everything around you is dead. There seems to be no end to the miles and miles of destruction and loss. Life as you once knew it will never be the same. The life you embraced for ninety-six

years along the Mississippi coastline will never be the same. It is gone forever. Now in my mind, when I think about what surrounds this woman's home, I see a disaster, not life. She takes me by the hand, looks me square in the eyes, and says to me, "Can you feel my hand? Is it warm to you? Do I appear to be alive to you? Does my voice still crack at every fifth word? Can you see the bend in my back as I stand before you? Is every inch of my gray hair standing straight on my head except on the top that always seems to lay flat?" I look at her for a moment, and as I begin to prepare my response she says to me, "When you look at me, what do you see? I'll bet you if you had to write down one hundred words to describe what you see, not one of those words would be 'disaster'." "What do you tell people about what has happened here?" she asks. Do you tell them about the so called "disaster" or do you tell them about life that has survived it?" She reminds me that after the storm, she and others like her are still the same people who get up every day and bathe, clothe themselves with pieces of garments mercifully left by the storm or by others who come to help, eat ready-to-go meals from their kitchens or backyards if they are so lucky, and step out into the world charged with the task to reach back into the past to gather the pieces of their lives that still remain, while seeking an unknown future that they tell themselves to be grateful for because they are still among the living.

It's hard to look into the eyes of a thin, frail, ninety-six-year-old widow and not see wisdom. As I acknowledge her words of wisdom, I turn to leave for my car. She has one final word of remembrance that will bring

me back for future trips to “help.” She tells me that it is good to help and it is good to receive help. She says that when help comes, she takes it by the hand one hand at a time. She then admonishes me to remember this when I am helping others. She says I should take each person as one life charged with the responsibility of living, and not just the responsibility of recovering. I was puzzled as to why she was telling me this, but indicated that I understood with a southern sign of respect, “Yes Ma’am.”

As I leave this woman’s presence, I turn around and look at the few homes left standing in her neighborhood which is just below the railroad tracks where the greatest devastation can be seen. There are four homes left standing intact: her home; two homes at each corner of the street; and one home just at the point of the tracks that separates the beach homes that exist no more from the homes on the other side of the tracks. Now I’ve driven throughout the community well into the city limits and out into the county. Every neighborhood looks the same, much like this ninety-six year old woman’s. There are few homes left standing or undamaged. Trees are pulled up by the roots and left standing at attention in the middle of almost everyone’s home. Debris is seen as far as the eyes can see, and broken glass is piled so high it creates mini rainbows from the sunlight that hits subsequent piles of broken glass in people’s yards and on the side of the roadway. Nothing is like I knew it to be. The city as I remember is gone. At that moment I had to ask myself what it means to help. Am I missing something in my self-appointed desire to serve as a social worker, as a volunteer, as a public servant who just wants to help? I would ponder this question as I exited the Mississippi gulf coast for the first time. I would come closer to an answer on my second visit.

Second Stop on the Road to Recovery

It has been three months since my first visit to the hurricane zone. The landscape still looks much like it did during my first trip. This time I have been elected by SAMHSA (Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration) to serve as part of its mental

health disaster response team. Groups of mental health and substance abuse professionals are sent to the “hurricane zone” to provide mental health, substance abuse, social service, and community recovery support. As a representative of SAMHSA, I was contracted to identify and work with people who may be in need of mental health support and/or social service and community referrals. I met a number of people for whom I provided brief intervention counseling during my three week stay.

One of these individuals was a distraught young father. He was so distraught, not about the losses suffered during the hurricane, but the fact that his three year old son saw him cry for the first time and now tells his father, “No more teary eyes, Dad.” This young father expressed feelings of shame and guilt because he had taught his son that crying was not for men. He would often tell his son, “No more teary eyes” when he would cry. He said he could see the disappointment and fear in his son’s eyes when he saw him cry. How could he let his son down like this? What would his son think about him? For him, his greatest loss was his son no longer seeing him as the strong man, he had tried to teach his son to be. Being strong for his son, and teaching his son to be a strong man meant no teary eyes. It meant everything to this young father.

This man who had lost his home, his job, his car, two members of his family, his close friend, and most of his community was not concerned with these losses. His greatest concern was that his son saw him cry, and his son believed he was no longer a man. I began to talk to him about how the hurricane had taken so much and that it was okay to cry. I tried to explain to him that crying did not make him any less of a man, and that the hurricane and all of its destruction would bring the strongest man to tears. It’s a perfectly normal response I said to him. As I begin to continue my effort in counseling with him about the hurricane and him giving himself permission to cry and experience his emotions, he stopped me in mid sentence. The following is a summation of what he said to me:

"I'm listening to you and others talk to me about the hurricane, and I can tell that you just don't quite get it. Everything you talk about is in relation to the hurricane. It's all you people seem to see. I'm standing here telling you about how I feel about my son no longer seeing me as a man, and all you want to talk about is it being okay to cry because of the hurricane. It makes me wonder sometimes what you people really believe helping is all about. Ask yourself if you were me, and your son saw you cry for the first time and was afraid, what would you want me to say to you?"

He then challenges me to think about my idea of helping, to think about whether the people I'm helping would agree with how I have chosen to help. As he walks away from my table, he asks me how helpful I thought I was to him. Well, of course I'm thinking, "Is he challenging my commitment to helping in times of need, to taking action and responding with resolve and diligence? Is he challenging my own election and that of others as public servants who have come to help when the need for help is so great? What could he possibly be trying to tell me?" As I begin to start an apology for not responding the way this father needed me to, he turns quietly towards me and says, "You will be back. I can see that you really want to help. You just have to get beyond the hurricane and see the people. The hurricane is one thing, and I am more than someone who was affected by it. Remember that the next time you come to help."

With those parting words, I board my plane a few days later to return to my "normal" life. How many times will I have to be challenged before I finally get it? I believe that I am a competent and compassionate professional. There is no question to me I know that what I am doing is good and helpful. I've been doing

this as a social worker for more than thirteen years. Surely I would have been challenged before now if my idea of "helping" was so wrong. I couldn't help but wonder how my next trip to the "hurricane zone" would unfold. I was certain that I would return to help once again, and the next time they would see that I really do get it. I understand what it means to help.

Third Stop on the Road to Recovery

It has now been six months since I returned to the hurricane zone. This time my election finds me in St. Charles Parish, located about 35 miles outside of New Orleans. Although this area suffered wind and rain damage, most of its residents were able to return home and resume their lives a couple of weeks after the hurricane hit. The children are back in school, and life is getting back to normal for some. Not true for the residents of New Orleans who wanted to return to their homes but could not do so because the damage was so extensive, and there was still no housing, affordable or otherwise, for the most. As part of my continued efforts as a mental health disaster responder for SAMHSA, I worked at a high school with students grades 7 through 12. There I spent most of my time counseling children from the 7th, 8th, and 9th Wards of New Orleans, as well as children who lived in uptown New Orleans. After visiting these communities the day after I arrived, I was convinced there was no life left in these places. Everything looked so morbid. How could anyone return to these communities that looked like relics of a ghost town? Why would anyone want to return to essentially "nothing"? These were my honest thoughts as I surveyed what was left of the communities these children called home.

Each day I walked the halls of the high school pulling children identified as possibly in need of one-on-one counseling out of their classrooms. Sometimes, I came across teachers who lost everything they owned in the hurricane and needed to talk, but were more concerned about the children. They wanted to make sure that at least the children had some kind of outlet. I tried to convince the teachers that they needed to be able to

talk as well. I was convinced that they too needed help. They, however, insisted that I and my team take care of the children. Seeing the children laugh and try to resume some kind of normalcy seemed to help the teachers I talked with to get through the day. They wanted the children to be taken care of. Should I expect anything less from teachers? While they often are not given the credit they deserve, I was determined to do what I could to honor the commitment these teachers had to their students. So, along with members of my team, I spent my two weeks taking care of the children through counseling and organizing a coping and recovery group.

Three days before I was to conclude my service at the school, I met a seventeen year-old Hispanic girl who was anticipating graduation. Her teacher explained that she was a shell of a girl. She would not talk to anyone and seemed to be very angry. He asked if I would try talking with her to see if I could get her to open up. After about half an hour of trying to get her to talk and acknowledge that I was even in the room, I decided to tell a joke. It wasn't particularly funny, and my delivery I'm sure was not the best, but she cracked a smile at me. She then proceeded to tell me to keep my day job. Telling jokes was not my forte. Then she asked me, "Why are you really here?" I asked her to explain her question to me. She instructed me to ask this question of myself. "Why are you here?" I answered her by saying that I was there to help. I wanted to help her and her peers talk about what had happened and how they were feeling about it. I asked her why she thought I had come to talk to her, to "help" so to speak. We began to talk about her experience. The following expresses her feelings about those who came to help.

"People have been coming since the hurricane to help, and they all do the same thing. They want to talk about the hurricane and how it has affected my life. They act as if my life is gone. They act as if the hurricane has taken everything, including me. Don't

you people get it? I'm still here! All you want to talk about is the hurricane and how it has affected my life. Well, what about my life? Do you even see that a life is still here? You people treat the hurricane with greater attention than you do the people left to live with it. The hurricane did not just happen, you know; it happened to people just like me. We mattered before the storm, and I just wish you people would see that our lives matter not because of the hurricane, but because we matter. Do you see a hurricane, or do you see me? Do you see destruction and suffering or do you see a life worth getting to know outside of the destruction and suffering that the hurricane brought? I wish someone would tell the people coming to help to talk to me about life, my life. Ask me about me, and not just as it relates to the storm. I don't want to talk just about the hurricane and what it has done. I want you people, when you come to help, to talk to me about life, about hope, about community, about living because I still have today, and want to look forward to tomorrow. A hurricane did not just happen here, life happened here. Community happened here. Hope happened here. And oh yeah, people happened and are still happening here. We are not just victims of the hurricane, and I wish everyone would stop treating us like we are. We are people with the same hopes and dreams before the storm. These hopes and dreams are here with me in the present. I just want you to see me in my present. I still need community. I still need

hope. I still need today, and I still need the sun to come up tomorrow. Once you people realize that helping is not just about me and the hurricane, but about your willingness to see me as a life before the hurricane, maybe you can begin to see me in the present and work with me to help you help me hold onto my dreams. After all, my dreams were built on hope, family, community, and the desire to live life. People who really want to help should remember this and work to help me get this part of my life back again. People who come to help should tell the rest of the world about me, about my life. When you share my story, you help us all, including the people who come here to help."

I listened carefully to the words out of the mouth of a babe, and thought once again I had failed to get it. Why am I not hearing what has been said to me each time I have come to help? When would it finally click? I left this trip feeling that I had failed this child, failed her community, and failed myself as someone who believes I am truly committed to helping others as best I can. Perhaps one more trip to help would give me the insight I needed to finally get it.

The Not-So-Final Stop on the Road to Recovery

It has been one year since my first trip back to the hurricane zone. It was to be my final trip, but the value of lessons learned in previous trips motivates future efforts to continue the journey of what "helping" has come to mean to me. This time, the trip ends with one final act. That act comes in the form of this article. Because those I went to help helped me to fully understand and embrace a truth that says that the person standing before me is just as important, if not more so, than the things that happened to them.

I started this journey of helping by being admonished to take my self-appointed election of helping one hand at a time, one life at a time. I then was challenged to look beyond the circumstance and see the person, to see the person in relationship to the circumstance and not just the circumstance in relationship to the person. I was challenged to see myself and what helping meant to me. Would I want the help I was giving? Would I want to be seen only as a result of my circumstance? And if that were the case, what would that say to me about the value of who I am and my life before the circumstance that brought the "helper"? Would my life mean more than what had happened to me?

Children and adults alike questioned me about what I would tell others about what had happened and what I would say about them. I think about the stories I told the two trips after the storm and the story I tell in my not-so-final act one year after the storm. Today when people ask me about what happened, I tell them in the words of one young teenager, life happened, people happened, community happened, and hope happened. When they ask me about the people that survived the storm, I tell them that people are more than their circumstance. Their lives are not just what happened to them. Their lives are a reminder of what could happen to the rest of us. And how would we want others to respond? What would we want others to see when they came to help? Not just the circumstance, not just the people caught up in the circumstance, but the person separate and apart from the circumstance who was important before the tragic event happened, important during the need for help as a result of the tragic event, and most important long after the help has come and gone and the stories being told no longer make headlines or are a part of social deliberation. I was reminded by each of the people I encountered during my trips to the gulf coast that helping others helps me, and sharing and honoring one life's story helps us all.

Finally, through my not-so-final act of personal deliberation I finally do get it. I suspect I knew it all along. It was only after I was challenged to really consider not only how I

see others and their circumstance, but how I see others separate and apart from their circumstance, and how I respond to the lives before me that I am charged to give my best. I learned in a matter of months, after thirteen years of practice, that the work I do is the legacy of the social work profession. It is a legacy with the legitimacy of helping others and the nobility of the human spirit that speaks to us through the voice of innocence, wisdom,

and most of all humility. We are more than our circumstance. When we can embrace this, then we have taken our first step towards helping.

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An empty public school in New Orleans, Summer 2006.



Alternative options are needed during the slow rebuilding process.

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