

REFLECTIONS OF THE STORM: EMERGING HOPE

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As the nation marked the one-year anniversary of hurricane Katrina, the clean-up work continues. This narrative recounts personal experiences of members of the Sacred Heart University faculty who accompanied a student delegation as they joined the many volunteers in Gulfport, Mississippi. The interdisciplinary group included faculty from Nursing, Psychology, Education, Media Studies, Campus Ministry, and university administration. The goal of the group was to participate in manual labor while providing emotional support for those hardest hit by the storm. The results had a profound effect on each member of the team, as each developed a sense of gratitude, a true understanding of the importance of neighbors helping neighbors, and experienced hope.

When the Katrina disaster struck the gulf region, it was evident that immediate response efforts would be needed for emergency food, water, clothing, housing, and health care. A combination of governmental, faith-based, and other private organizations would provide for these immediate needs. However, the devastation to the infrastructure of the Gulf Coast communities was so extensive that assistance needed to come from other sources, including many academic communities; the priority that we accepted was to assist in the removal of debris to make way for reconstruction. Additional contributions in the future were unclear, but the potential for additional assistance was kept open.

In December 2005, when our university family joined others in the relief efforts, an advance delegation composed of two university administrators and two faculty members traveled to Mississippi. The initial team represented the disciplines of sociology, education, and nursing. In an intensive period of several days, they formulated a tentative understanding of the immediate needs of the survivors of this disaster. It was clear that initial perceptions of debris removal were correct and other needs potentially included disaster mental health and access to health services. A second trip was planned for the March 2006 winter break. This team would be larger and include students as well as university administrators and faculty. Education, Media Studies, and Campus Ministry participants joined the first group to meet our commitment to the region.

The following account of this journey includes excerpts from diaries kept while engaging in the activities of a week spent in

the company of remarkable people, survivors, students, recovery teams, hospital administrators. It is important to note here that our own Vice-President of Mission and Planning and Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs joined us on the trip. This is a reflection of our own mission where we attempt to "walk the talk" at every level of university life.

The trip south began with anxiety provoked by late transportation to the airport, snow in the northeast, and the assembly of 26 students and eight faculty, staff, and administrators. Despite these initial challenges we started our trek south with great enthusiasm. While we were sure that we would learn from sharing this venture with our students, their tolerance of these challenges, their enthusiasm, and their ability to roll with the punches and take minor difficulties in stride energized the whole delegation. Their teaching began at the start of the venture and in the end we learned so much from them. The following accounts of this second journey are from faculty in Psychology and Nursing.

"I was concerned with a number of issues. How could I meet the mental health needs of people who have suffered such tremendous loss? What good could come from my participation in this effort? How could I join the community in order to ease their suffering? These among other questions were on my mind as our journey began.

“As a public health nurse, I was a member of the initial delegation. The experiences of the first trip led to many unanswered questions, insights into pre-Katrina community health services, and concerns for the general health and well being of residents and volunteers. As I am the co-director on an inner city health and wellness center that is a collaborative partnership with the university, a community parish, and a community based primary care center, I questioned if this or similar models of faith-based community services could help fill the void created by the devastation of the community hospital and emergent care centers. Additionally, I shared the same concerns of my colleague in Psychology; what good could come from my participation in this effort? How could I join the community in order to ease their suffering?”

“Prior to the trip, my colleagues who assisted the survivors of the World Trade Center Attack helped me to prepare for this disaster. They encouraged me to trust my inner voice; however, I was still uneasy about what good I could do in Mississippi. My colleagues suggested that our presence would be more important than any supportive or encouraging words. Our willingness to share our time and labor would make the most impact. Though the tragedies had obviously different causes, the profound loss was as palatable and the pain was just as real. My concern was well-founded. There was nothing that could prepare me

for what I saw, what I heard and how I felt.

“As a nurse, I have been involved with preparing students enrolled in community/public health nursing courses for community mobilization following disasters for many years, and following the September 11, 2001 attacks had worked with public health and nursing faculty in preparing these groups for emergency preparedness. On my first trip to Mississippi I contacted former students who as practicing public health representatives had joined the initial response in New Orleans. They had reassured me that what I had taught them prepared them well, and bolstered my confidence that I knew what I was doing. I contacted friends and former colleagues who live in Mississippi and they were able to provide people and contact resources, advise me as to the status of transportation and health care, and provide insight into health concerns for volunteers. Despite this background nothing could have prepared me for what I saw, heard or felt in either the first or second trip to the region.”

The Journey

As we drove from New Orleans International Airport, we saw isolated pockets of storm damage. While these sights conveyed the damage to buildings, roadways, and other structures, it heightened our concern for the people themselves as we could only imagine what they had survived and the challenges they faced on a daily basis. Our students joined us in noting this damage and devastation. They voiced concern over the emptiness of the New Orleans' neighborhoods and communities that we passed through on our way to Mississippi. The closer we got to the Mississippi border,

the more evident and more shocking the damage, and the enormity of the work ahead of us began to sink in.

Our students were staying at a retreat center where the operators functioned on a daily basis to provide food and housing. They received frank answers to some of their questions as both of the supervisors had lost everything in the storm. They were able only to serve us as we attempted to provide some relief. In fact, one of the staff at this retreat house had died since our initial visit in December.

“Because we arrived later than anticipated several meetings with town and church representatives were postponed and rescheduled. As the nursing representative, I made contact with nursing faculty from one of the universities located on the gulf coast and devastated by the forces of Katrina. On a Saturday afternoon, a small group of students and I met one of these faculty members, Paula, who was a survivor of this disaster, in the parking lot of a large strip mall. It was evident that this parking lot would have been filled with weekend shoppers and locating a specific automobile would have been challenging. But on the afternoon we met this soon to be new friend, the number of cars and trucks using the area for staging was so minimal that it was not difficult to find her car. Paula graciously invited us into her car and took us on a “sight-seeing” tour of the immediate gulf coast. As she drove us around and recounted some of her survival experience, I was struck by the sadness in her voice, the determination to rebuild a life that had been so suddenly and ruthlessly taken from her, her family and

friends, and a resilient love for the ravaged beauty of the Gulf Coast.”

Prior to our departure from our home university, two staff members conducted a discussion with a group of psychology and nursing students. The purpose of this meeting was to identify open-ended questions that would elicit discussion and reveal emotions and residual fears and problems. We were concerned that we would be prepared to work with the residents of the region as we did not want to further traumatize or worsen the lives of women, men, and children who had already endured so much. We soon learned that we need not have worried; the people with whom we came into contact wanted, yearned, to share their experiences with others who would willingly, patiently, and lovingly listen.

We learned from a hospital administrator that mental health services were scarce prior to the storm. In the aftermath, the need was greater and the availability of trained personnel was even less. Of course, we knew that we would be gone in a short time. Any work that could be done would not have appropriate follow-up unless connections with local clergy and helping professionals could bridge the gap. Our plan was modified to include research on local referral sources for mental health counseling.

“We went to church as a large group on Sunday at Saint Ann’s Parish. A second smaller group went to St. Rosa de Lima’s Parish. Much of the church at St. Ann’s was badly damaged but repairs were going on and we met in an auditorium. I observed a distinctive look about the folks in church that reflected what they had been through. It was numbness, a blocked emotional reservoir of confusing feelings and pain. More importantly, however, I observed a sense of resilience. One woman stated, ‘We welcome your help, we

want you to work with us but don't pity us. We will survive. I am not sure what feelings I experienced at that moment, but I think I was just overwhelmed. There was so much to be done and so little time to do it. As the afternoon wore on, I began to see that if I listened, they would share what they were thinking and feeling."

In contrast to the extensive damage to the church at St. Ann's Parish, the church, auditorium, and grounds of St. Rosa's church and parish were minimally damaged despite being only two to three blocks from the Gulf and the destroyed Bay Bridge. However, while this parish sustained such limited outward damage, the look on the faces of the parishioners mirrored the look of numbness and feeling of pain of their neighbors at St. Anne's. Likewise, as we first listened to the voices of the parishioners and later the pastor, their courage and fierce determination for survival rang clear and loudly.

"I am not sure what I was feeling, perhaps a sense of urgency, a need to learn and listen and an inkling that the ideas for a faith-based health and wellness center might be too far a reach just right now for a community trying to survive, recover and rehabilitate."

Most people weren't talking to each other about the events of August 29, 2005, and yet they shared the experience with us. That was as much as they could do at the time. While exploring potential sites for health and wellness clinics, we encountered stories of great tragedy and fear, profound sadness, and grave disappointment. One family had debris up to the doorstep of their custom built home. They were the lucky ones; the damage to their home was minimal compared to most folks. As we worked together to remove the enormous loads of debris, we listened to the experience of this couple who wisely evacuated prior to the onset

of the storm. This couple had strength of faith, love and partnership. It was clear as they recounted stories of trying to get back home after the storm that they were reliving the trauma as they spoke.

"The conversation unfolded and my feelings were mixed. My mental health training forced me to consider if this discussion was helpful or was it kindling more fear, anger and desperation. As I prayed for answers, again I controlled my instinct to 'take care of Mr. & Mrs. J' and instead I listened. As the day wore on, we worked to remove debris and walked the grounds of this property talking about how the home was built by its owners: the meaning of each room, each pathway and the wonderful trees that protected the home from complete devastation. The trees suffered significant damage but were alive and remained standing as an entry to sacred ground. Following the example of the owners, we cared for the trees tenderly as we removed dead branches and broken limbs."

Mr. J is a geological engineer; he told us that for years the officials of government knew that levees would not hold in New Orleans and that the infrastructure could not withstand category 3 hurricanes. Katrina reached category 5 status. His frustration was evident and his anger was clear. He knew that this devastation could have been avoided if wiser minds had prevailed. During that afternoon at his worksite, a brush fire flared. We were in the midst of fighting a fire with only a few tools and water carried by wheel barrow from a single pump to the flames. We did all we could to contain the fire. The fire department facilities were also damaged and had not been fully restored; therefore, fire fighters would

have to come from towns north nearly 60 miles away. The debris strewn area was especially vulnerable to such fires, because in March of 2006 there was little rainfall. Fortunately, one of our students was a firefighter and directed our efforts. The fire was under control in a short time, and before we left, it was all but extinguished. We departed the grounds and the family expressed such gratitude for our help that we were humbled by their response. We did little more than remove debris and save some brush from burning out of control, but we listened to their experience. They hugged us, loved us, and were grateful that we were sent to their home. More hope emerged.

Later we met people who did not evacuate because the storm surge was not expected to reach them. Some large families in Mississippi tend to buy wide tracks of land where generations could build homes in close proximity. One particular family had experienced damage to every one of their homes. However, they all pulled together to set up barbecues to cook food before it spoiled; they shared with their neighbors, and they survived. One grandmother described her surprise at seeing snakes swimming in her kitchen as the waters continued to rise. This was another aspect to the storm that we hadn't imagined. We were there to repair the walls in her kitchen and to remove appliances that were irreparably damaged. By the end of that week, her kitchen was done and hope emerged for this multigenerational family.

"While there, we saw a man who was very sad. He approached us and asked if we could help his mother. She hadn't been out of her trailer in over a week and wouldn't talk to anyone. One of my students and I followed him 'just around the corner' which turned out to be about six miles or so away. As we approached her trailer, there was movement and Miss Betty emerged from the trailer in a sweat suit. Initially, she was angry that her son brought intruders to her home. She

was very depressed and hadn't wanted to continue on.

"As we began to walk around her house, she told us stories about the storm, her home, her children, her horses, and her dismay. She had not attempted to ask for help recently, because every time she did since Katrina hit, she was pushed aside for those in more need. Her depression was easily understood. We asked what she needed as our hour long visit was coming to a close. She gave us a list. We told her we didn't know how much we could help but we would put her in touch with other helpers, primarily the Knights of Columbus chapter in her area. She smiled and thanked us. As we left, her big, burly son cried because he finally saw a glimpse of his mom's old self. She was a strong woman, a brave one too. This set back was not going to permanently take her joy. There emerged hope once again."

The Monday evening of our trip, a group of students joined nursing and psychology faculty members in a meeting with the parishioners of St. Rose de Lima. One of the parishioners was a nursing faculty member from Ole' Miss, devastated by the forces of Katrina, and she informed us that one of the possibilities that they were considering for the parish and community was a faith-based nurse managed center.

"Prior to returning to Mississippi I had shared with Mary and Paula the mission, goals, partnership structure and several model programs of the inner city health and wellness center run by our university. One of these programs is focused on the health promotion of older Hispanic women and men. Upon hearing

about the massive destruction, the women of this group had begun sewing rag dolls for the children of the region. I had hand carried about 30 dolls to St. Anne's parish in December and had brought more on this trip. Father Sebastian of St. Rose's introduced us and we were warmly welcomed to the meeting.

"We offered our help in creating a nurse managed health and wellness center; and while non-committal, the parishioners expressed interest. I felt a growing awareness that a health and wellness center was probably unrealistic as the immediate needs were for access to and restoration of the basic infrastructure of the community. While disappointing, the grit and determination of these parishioners came through as in the middle of the meeting, my cell phone rang, and on the other end was a student experiencing dental pain. At 9 o'clock p.m., access to a dentist in the region was out of the question. Perhaps there might be an emergency dentist in Hattiesburg or Mobile, but there was none local, nor was there an open pharmacy. What would have been a minor challenge here on the Gulf Coast prior to the hurricane or now at our home university was an impossibility given the paucity of primary care. Through the creative efforts of various parishioners we were able to provide adequate pain control until the next morning when we were able to locate a dentist.

"As I managed this situation, my colleague from psychology and students were involved with two

families that adopted a stuffed rag doll."

This story is particularly poignant because hands reached across miles to bring comfort. One of the parishioners of St. Rose Church began to cry as she received her little rag doll made by the ladies and men of Aging with Grace Program. Her friend relayed the following story. Not long before the storm, Mrs. J. lost her 24-year-old daughter following a long, painful illness. As the story goes, her daughter died holding onto a little rag doll that she had had since childhood. Mrs. J. cherished that beloved toy. When Katrina hit the gulf, the storm snatched the doll away too. Mr. and Mrs. J. barely survived with their grandson. As Mrs. J. told us her tragic story, she also recounted how they emerged from their home. With a sweet smile and an unexpected sense of humor she shared her solemn oath. She stated that she would never again complain about all the gadgets her husband bought from cable network shopping shows. It was with one of those bizarre objects that he was able to cut an opening in the roof of their house for them to escape. With this statement she broke into laughter and gratitude. She said, "We have hope, because we survived. You bring me hope because this doll can help us carry on." Through tears and laughter we shared hope once again.

"Later in the week several students and I re-connected with Paula, and as we had another appointment following this meeting, one of the students traveled with Paula in her car, and the other student stayed with me. Paula said to follow her closely and she would take us to her university. We drove through neighborhoods and communities, some seemingly untouched and others bearing the visible scars of demolished homes. We drove past the beach where I and several of the faculty had walked on a beautiful sunny day and had found skeletal remains. As

we drove east towards Paula's university, we struggled with the juxtaposition of utter devastation and places of death visible through the windows on one side of the car, while on the other side, the source of much misery and death ebbed and flowed. Here were the tranquil blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico, the glint of the sun creating a diamond like reflection that reminded us of precious jewels positioned on the sateen of a jeweler's case. The scene had been replayed numerous times during the week, but we continued to struggle with the savageness of these calm waters.

"Then, we turned and drove to what I thought was Paula's university. For blocks in from the Gulf highway, and for blocks and blocks to the left and right of where we stopped was nothing but concrete slabs where buildings once stood. In the few mangled trees scraps of clothing, fabric, and other material swayed in the breeze; and in the plowed earth were pottery fragments, keys and countless other items.

"Thinking that this was the site of the university I felt the color drain from my face; tears welled up in my eyes. The tightness in my throat made me gasp, then sigh, as I thought of how I would feel if the material evidence of my professional life were suddenly torn from me. Flashing through my mind was how I would feel if the papers, the awards, doctoral paraphernalia, and mementos from students and from trips were suddenly all gone, most irretrievably, and only accessible in my memory. I fought back the

tears. Then I heard Paula's voice asking if I was alright—here we were to provide support, comfort, and solutions, and yet she was concerned over me, my students and how we were coping with this experience. I forced myself to smile, nod yes we are alright and then in a weak voice heard myself ask, 'Where are we?' While we had seen homes and neighborhoods totally leveled, and we had prepared ourselves for one answer, Paula gave us an even more emotionally packed response; and it was given in a voice that we had encountered time and time again on this trip, "Welcome to my home." The struggle to not break down into tears of anguish and empathy was almost lost, only my years as a nurse caring for families saying goodbye to dying relatives helped me to shed only a few tears and not unleash the torrent that was ready to breach the reservoir of stored emotions. After she invited us into her home and handed us some china fragments and said, 'Here, keep these,' we took the short drive to her once beautiful and now devastated university.

"It was here that she introduced us to the Friendship Texas Live Oak, a tree that had been alive when Columbus sailed to the 'new world.' As we read the history of this living tree we came to a shared realization that miracles do happen. Here, not more than several hundred yards from the Gulf Coast, was a tree more than 500 years old. It had withstood the savage onslaught of hurricane force winds and tidal surge, and when the man-made

buildings that surrounded it were destroyed as if they were constructed from matchsticks, this tree survived. And the fragile bronze plaque that recounted its history withstood the forces of nature as well.

"I struggled with feelings of awe and of incredulity. I could feel my mind searching for answers as to how a tree of this age could survive when people died, when buildings of brick, mortar, steel and concrete were strewn over the countryside like children's building blocks discarded after an afternoon's play. Then, from the depths of my soul came the realization that hope arises from the depths of despair and that this tree represented the lives of those lost and those that survived. It exists as a symbol of the continuity of life and the potential for the future. As this realization crystallized, Paula said quietly that we should take a picture as part of this tree's history is that those who come together under its limbs will remain friends, and in the future will return to this very spot. While the emotions I and my students had struggled to contain overflowed, I realized that the tears we were shedding were not solely those of sorrow but were also those of faith and hope and of courage.

"There were many such stories that testified to the strength of the human spirit. What struck me most was that people just like me could get up each day and move toward the future despite their losses. Their strength made me believe that we could survive similar circumstances. I realized that I had many selfish reasons for

participating in this venture. Perhaps, I wanted to know if I could survive. I was there to provide support and comfort and I found hope for myself as well. It is so interesting that my intended gift returned to me ten-fold."

While discussing the needs of a small hospital, the Chief Executive Officer recounted the day of the storm. He shared pictures of the waters rising on the streets while he and his staff cared for the patients too sick to be moved. The hospital staff remained on duty, not knowing the condition of their own homes. Some could not locate their loved ones. And yet they stayed on; some were living in trailers in the hospital parking lot when we visited. It was worth it. There were 34 patients that could not be evacuated and the CEO smiled gratefully as he shared that every one of them survived the storm. Hope emerged again.

Though there were elements of hope and resilience, anger was ever present. It was directed toward government officials, insurance companies, and relief organizations. FEMA was a major target of the rage of the residents. There were rows of brand new empty trailers for temporary housing sitting in parking lots that were no more than 100 yards away from people who were still living in tents. No one seemed to have the answers as to why these housing units were not being utilized. The people of lower Hancock County had to make do on their own. Politically speaking they were outraged at every level of government, at every party representative regardless of affiliation and the perceived lack of interest in their well-being.

In one particularly interesting and frustrating story, a special education teacher had just adopted her fourth child. There was a champagne breakfast in celebration of this wonderful event on August 22, and on August 29, everything was washed away. When the insurance assessor came to evaluate the damage, the family was told that the damage was caused by a tornado that emerged from the storm. As a result the next day, according to the assessor, they would receive a check

for over \$200,000. This was a source of great relief. On the next day, however, there was a reassessment of the damage and the new determination was that the damage was caused by the flood waters and they were not covered by flood insurance. So, insult was added to the pain of the loss. While this teacher relayed her story to us, her anger found some release. Following her account of the insurance fiasco, she said that the way she and her family are coping now is to blame everything on Katrina. If she stubbed her toe, she blamed it on Katrina. If she got a flat tire, Katrina was to blame. It was part of the coping strategies developed from experiencing despair and total loss. It seems that once you lose everything, there is nothing left to lose and the only thing to do is stand up, start again. This type of humor and resilience gives rise to more hope in their own community.

As we recounted the stories that touched our hearts, we could not forget the plight of Miss Dottie. Miss Dottie was about 85-years-old. She and her companion Jim were living in a camper trailer on the property where her home was pushed several inches off its foundation. Most of the professionals believed it could not be restored. There was a very small guest house that needed considerable work but was solid enough to be repaired sufficiently so that Miss Dottie and Jim could live on her property. Our students and Sister Donna, our V.P. of Mission and Planning, worked at a fever pitch to ready the building for electricians, plumbers, and other contractors to do this finishing work. By the time we left, it was ready.

Miss Dottie is a lady in every sense of the word. A slight woman, she appeared frail and fragile at best, but she proved otherwise to all of us. There was mud, standing water, and the possibility of disease-bearing insects close to her house. There was so much debris that we were once again overwhelmed. We decided to save what we could of her memories and treasures. Eileen, our V.P. of Academic Affairs, sat at a makeshift washing stand for eight hours carefully washing each figurine that had meaning to Miss Dottie. Our students took two tiny porcelain figurines to her trailer and she nearly cried because it gave

her hope to carry on. We couldn't save much, but what we did save was clean and organized. After a celebratory luncheon, we took some pictures. Fr. Antony put his arm around the tiny smiling lady. Miss Dottie responded to this protective gesture by saying, "Oh Father, I don't think it is proper for you to put your arm around a naughty girl like me." We loved her spontaneity, her hope, and her joyful acceptance of what we wanted to do for her. Mr. Jim just smiled.

In many conversations with our colleagues and travel companions, we wondered how the people could maintain their faith and belief systems. It seems again that they focused their energy on surviving just one more day. Their spiritual needs seemed to be met by gathering together at churches to pray and seek peace. There didn't seem to be anger expressed toward "God" by any name. In fact, there was a powerful sense that their faith was stronger than ever.

Forged from these experiences are lessons and relationships that have had and will have life and career-transforming effects. Students sought out the faculty members who worked with them on this trip when we returned to our usual lives. Why? Just to say, "Hi! We were thinking about you the other day and missed you." Curriculum is far greater than the words, laws, principles and theories that are imparted in texts, in lectures and discussions. What we learned about the human spirit for determination, courage, love, caring, and hope will pervade our lives personally and professionally from now on.

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