

Remembering the Forgotten Flood

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Abstract: Louisiana, a southern coastal state in the United States, flanked by Texas and Mississippi, has seen its share of disasters in the past several decades: from epic Hurricane Camille in 1969 to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, with pervasive aftermath and local, national and global media coverage. This article describes the August 2016 *thousand-year flood*, meaning the extent of this magnitude only happens once in a thousand years. Experiences seem to be fading from the collective memory, despite massive loss of property, businesses, life and landscape. This article shares two flood stories: a single male who is a painter and who lost everything in a remote and rural place in French Settlement, and is still homeless, and a female doctoral student who was in a more populated suburb of Baton Rouge and has since rebuilt her home with her partner. Both people continue to be productive against the devastating loss of being physically displaced from their homes for months. The authors' intent is not to establish hypotheses or theory, but to share narratives nested in a time when humanity in coverage and science seems left to the political flavor of the day. The people persist, even when others don't pay much mind. Throughout the article, the authors use the "Great Flood," "Great Forgotten Flood," and the "Forgotten Flood" interchangeably to refer to the flood of August 2016.

Keywords: Louisiana disaster, flood reflections, thousand-year flood, environmental, personal resilience

Introduction

Few could have imagined the devastation the Great Flood, also termed the *1,000-year flood*, had on Louisiana during August 2016. The American Red Cross categorized the flood as the worst natural disaster in the United States since Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Emergency responders and, in many cases, neighbors and ordinary citizens, rescued over 30,000 individuals and 1,400 pets (Yan, 2016). A total of 13 deaths were reported across five parishes as a direct result of the flooding. Tens of thousands of people became homeless for months; many of them are still awaiting improvements or for new living opportunities as this piece is completed nearly a year later. The area is well acquainted with catastrophe, given Katrina



occurred in August 2005, Gustav following in August 2008, and Ike in the following month of September in 2008—all resulting in unprecedented devastation and loss of lives and property. The flood of August 2016 was enormously smaller, even still, and received less financial assistance and media coverage than many disaster events that impacted far fewer nationwide. There is no question that Hurricane Katrina was expansively and expensively more devastating than the Great Forgotten Flood. One cannot compare the financial heft of the Forgotten Flood with Katrina (e.g., \$50M spent for the flood vs. \$13B spent for Katrina, respectively). The 1,000-year flood was 1,000 times less expensive than Katrina, and the death toll was exponentially higher for Katrina compared to the flood (e.g., 1,833 deaths from Katrina vs. 13 deaths from the flood). Moreover, the overall number of damaged homes was much higher as a result of Katrina (e.g., 800,000 damaged homes after Katrina vs. 60,000 damaged homes after the flooding) (Yan, 2016). However, the number of people who suffer from a costly illness (e.g., mold-related illnesses) after being stranded in their homes following the flood could ultimately rise in the near future.

The flood for Louisiana residents will not be forgotten in the unique city of Baton Rouge, translated from French to mean *Red Stick*, which is home to some 700,000 people. We could have used that proverbial red stick to wade through the waters in August 2016 when 6.9 trillion gallons of rainwater, enough to fill 10.4 million Olympic-sized swimming pools, fell in the southernmost part of Louisiana within six days (Yan, 2016). Many rivers reached record levels, particularly the Amite and Comite rivers. Rainfall exceeded 30 inches within just 15 hours in Livingston Parish compared to 19 inches of rainwater that fell within the same duration in Baton Rouge. New Orleans, the state's largest metropolitan area downriver, was devastated 11 years earlier by Katrina, yet remained unharmed and dry during the Great Flood. In and surrounding the Baton Rouge area, more than 60,000 homes were damaged as a direct result of the historic flooding, with the vast majority of damaged homes located within Livingston Parish (Pallotta, 2016). An estimated \$30 million in relief efforts are needed, with the possibility of the total cost rising, given the overall magnitude of the flood (Yan, 2016).

While these facts and features may be essential in starting up an article and outlining the problem, the content of the flooding is far more personal. Two examples of devastation and aftermath are briefly provided, and others are mentioned for a backdrop.

One of the authors was directly impacted by the flood with approximately one foot of water occupying and destroying her home. Part of her story is contained in this writing to elaborate the psychological spirit and the necessity of moving forward as a doctoral student navigating her own course of tide, and perhaps writing in and of itself aids the psychological recovery of individuals who've experienced loss and tragedy. The other writer has had a full-time flood evacuee living with her since August 2016 (nine months and counting), with no building occurring on his home anytime soon, given the landlord had 60 other properties to repair and rebuild. The modest, rural, rental cottage on the end of a winding road in an area that often floods was not a priority. Everyone in Baton Rouge was somehow touched by this flood, but the stories are starting to fade much like the removal of the watermark inside of the houses—torn

out and rebuilt. The memory of the impact and the enduring reality is harder to erase.

Cajun Navy

As is often the case, it is not the well-orchestrated and high-paid federal cavalry first on the recovery scene after floods and fires, but the regular people who show up to help. Cliché as it may sound, the small town heroes and heroines are the ones that get things done. Such was the case with the “Cajun Navy.” The Cajun Navy was literally everyday people going out in their private boats to pick up people and pets and deliver them to safer, dryer places. Without the goodwill of citizens working under their own steam and values, many of the flooded would’ve perished. People in this area have a bit of the native warrior image; as a result, they quickly started up boats and generators to assist people. The outcome of the flood was quite different than a hurricane due to the standing water and need to escape the area by boat or foot. An example of a kind neighbor who didn’t turn his back on a man yelling to save him from his house surrounded by water is highlighted in Alan’s story, which appears later in this article.



Shelter After the Storm

Due to large tax breaks, Louisiana houses a couple of sprawling movie studios that sit dormant for long spells at a time. Such a place is the Celtic Studio located at the city’s periphery and near the Costco store (Gallo, 2016). Celtic Studio took in more than 2,000 storm evacuees, but as long as two days after, there were people sleeping on the floors and restricted from going into the staging unit where supplies were heaped. Well-meaning team-spirited moms and dads dropped off loads of water, blankets, Doritos, and diapers. Volunteers walked around unsure of who to help and what to ask. The social workers, however, were skilled, yet tired. One Louisiana social worker single-handedly coordinated the cots and the transportation after assessing that it hadn’t been done (Gina Rossi, personal communication, August 15, 2016).

After the flood, multiple shelters were quickly set up: one on Louisiana State University’s (LSU) campus, where a special needs shelter was established in the Maddox Fieldhouse; a large shelter at Lamar; and a new shelter at Celtic Studios. As is usual with disasters, planning and response was uneven due to the unprecedented number of evacuees.

To represent both the trauma of the event as well as the resilience, two reflective accounts

follow: Amy, a full-time social worker and full-time doctoral student at LSU, and Alan, a full-time house painter and dog breeder, who lost everything in the flood. Despite their losses, both were willing to share their stories.

Storm Story: Amy

I woke up to warning sirens from my cell phone around 9 o'clock in the morning on Saturday, August 13, 2016, after receiving little sleep. About three hours preceding the warning sirens, I had submitted 45 written pages of my PhD comprehensive examination to my dissertation committee. After restless tossing and turning that night following the submission of my comprehensive exam, I finally fell asleep with expectations of waking up the following morning in order to pack for a highly anticipated conference in Olten, Switzerland. My mentor and I were planning to fly out of Baton Rouge the following day in order to represent Louisiana State University's (LSU) School of Social Work program and present at the third annual International Sexuality and Social Work Conference of 2016.

Instead, my partner and I awoke to witness people in our neighborhood lining their garages with sandbags and hastily loading their cars with their belongings. Our neighbors, with distraught expressions on their faces, told us that the floodwaters were starting to flow down O'Neal Lane, less than three miles from our home, and were headed directly toward us. Instead of packing one suitcase for what I thought was going to be a week of international traveling, my partner and I followed suit of our neighbors. We quickly packed as much as we could of clothes, toiletries, and valuable belongings. We put anything of financial or sentimental value on high ground, unplugged all electrical outlets (or at least the ones we could remember), gathered our anxious pets and evacuated with both cars to my parents' house in New Roads, LA, about an hour northwest of Baton Rouge.

Needless to say, I opted against attending the conference in Switzerland in order to be on standby. Sunday and Monday came and went while my partner and I were glued to the local news at my parents' house with nothing to do but cross our fingers, wait, and hope that our friends, family, and neighborhood were all safe. On Tuesday the 16th, three days after evacuating, the majority of road closures were still enforced and we had not yet heard any news specifically related to the status of our neighborhood. Our nearby friends had also evacuated and were waiting to receive updates regarding their homes. Not knowing any of our neighbors' phone numbers, as we were fairly new to the subdivision, my partner and I became desperate to learn of the status of our house. After spending three hours fighting traffic and trying five different routes to access our neighborhood on Tuesday (i.e., the majority of streets were closed off or inaccessible due to the high water), the closest area to our house that we could access was over six miles away, and the sun was about to set. We were unsuccessful, and we were still in the dark as to the status of our home. Feeling defeated, we drove back to New Roads with hopes of trying again the next day.

The following day, Wednesday the 17th, four days after evacuating, we drove back to Baton

Rouge. This time, we were able to access a closer area to our house, as the floodwaters were beginning to recede. My partner and I parked in a neighborhood located over two miles away from our house, and we began walking. With backpacks in tow and a large stick to help navigate flooded areas, we walked in waist-deep floodwaters for over two miles in order to reach our home, while National Guard helicopters with surveillance cameras flew loudly over our heads. We were not alone. Several others were doing the same. While trudging through the floodwater, I met one gentleman who said that he was trying to check on the status of his pets as he was forced to leave them behind while he evacuated his home. One woman I met said she just learned of the status of her home and expected it to be a total loss, as she received about 10 feet of water.

After reaching the halfway point of our journey, we saw an eerily vacated 18-wheeler stranded at an intersection. We had to somehow find a way around the large truck. We crossed over a flooded gas station parking lot, and as I was attempting to cross over to the other side in order to gain access to the neighboring parking lot, I fell into a six-foot floodwater pit. My cell phone was in my pocket; it was obviously destroyed. After hoisting myself up and over the ledge, and after briefly laughing in disbelief as if I were in denial as to what exactly was happening, my partner and I continued to walk the remaining mile to our house.



The Cajun Navy

After about two hours, we finally made it. Our house, as I had expected, had taken in a substantial amount of water, along with almost every other house in the neighborhood. After inspecting the house, taking several pictures in order to document the losses, and throwing out some of our household items such as the broken refrigerator with its spoiled contents, drenched area rugs, my partner's artwork that she saved from her high school years, and Christmas ornaments that my mother had purchased for me as a baby, my partner and I set our sights back to the car. One young man with a kayak occupied by his black Labrador retriever offered us a

lift. After pushing the kayak for about a mile before the water started to recede again and the young man could not proceed any further, we got back on our feet and were then stopped by a local reporter asking us to be interviewed on camera for the local news regarding the flood. Once completing the impromptu interview, we continued to our car and were then offered a ride by a polite, middle-aged couple in a large pick-up truck who disclosed to us that they also received several feet of water in their home.

The three months that followed were beyond difficult in an emotional, mental, physical, and financial sense that neither my partner nor I could anticipate. We had no flood insurance, as our house was not located in a floodplain, as was the case for thousands of other homeowners. After completing the majority of the house-gutting ourselves, we decided to hire contractors for the majority of the work that needed to be done. Some contractors I worked with were reliable, timely, and trustworthy; others demonstrated poor craftsmanship and professionalism, as they were out to seemingly only make a profit, and had damaged some of our property further. I was forced to put my doctoral dissertation research on hold for almost a semester as there was virtually no free time between working full-time at a local hospital as an emergency room social worker, where the census kept rising following the flood, and working around the clock to repair our own house. My partner and I both experienced a significant increase in our anxiety and depression. I spent over two hours in the car virtually every day of the week in order to drive back and forth from New Roads to Baton Rouge for three months for work and flood-related house repairs.



Typical property damage in flooded area.

Three months later, we finally moved back into our home. There is still a laundry list of items that need to be repaired, both on the interior and the exterior of the house. The vast majority of contractors are overbooked and are unable to accept new clients or projects until further notice. Huge piles of debris and trash that seem to increase in size on a daily basis still sit at the front of each house's property in our neighborhood, given that the amount of debris landfills in the area

are significantly lacking. Certain materials needed for the remainder of our repairs are on backorder until further notice simply due to the overwhelming need in the community.

My partner and I were among the luckier ones. We were fortunate enough to have family members that were able to fly in from out of state to assist in the repair process, and we had local friends and family who dropped everything to help us dig trenches to install a drainage system and clean the interior of the house, and some even donated money for the home repairs. Several other people in the surrounding areas were not so lucky. People are still displaced from their homes and are not even past the gutting phase of the repair process. Some people I know personally were forced to declare bankruptcy and walk away from their mortgage and are currently homeless. Some lost their vehicles in addition to their homes and are without transportation. Some lost their family members or pets to the flood. Such a person is Alan.

Storm Story: Alan

When I woke up Sunday morning my house was completely surrounded by water. I was trapped. I knew I had to get out of there, somehow, by boat. I was yelling to people who had their boats out in the streets, yelling for them to get me. My neighbor yelled back and said he could try to



Alan's beloved Jeep Grand Wagoneer under water at the Moonlight Inn.

get me after he took his kids home. I left about 9:00 a.m. We could only go so far until there was dry land. Then I had to walk. I had to walk 100 yards or so, then I had to sit for hours and hours and wait 'til another boat came to get me out of there. There was no place to go. I didn't know that. It was me and my three dogs. It was difficult. I had food for my dogs, but not for myself. The second boat got me out, and I thought I was going to my vehicle, but it was parked at the Moonlight Inn, and we learned that the restaurant/bar was completely under water, so they took me to the Baptist Church, which was dry.

After that, the guy took me and my three dogs to Brignac's, my friend's, house about three miles away. I stayed with them for three days and then Dennis and Suzanne (my friends) picked me up Tuesday night and we found a way to get out of there. I stayed with them for a couple of weeks. I got back to check my house about a week later. It was a mess. Everything was upside down and turned over. We had to throw everything to the street. I'm still waiting. The house was gutted on Labor Day.

There's nothing else to do now. It's frustrating. I stayed with some other friends outside of

Covington, LA who offered to put me up. I stayed there with my dogs, and I helped them paint their outside kitchen. Out of the blue, after the work was done, they asked me to leave. I've been staying with Lilly ever since. Two of my dogs have been staying with other people, and I don't think I'll get them back. My house is still gutted and I am still homeless.

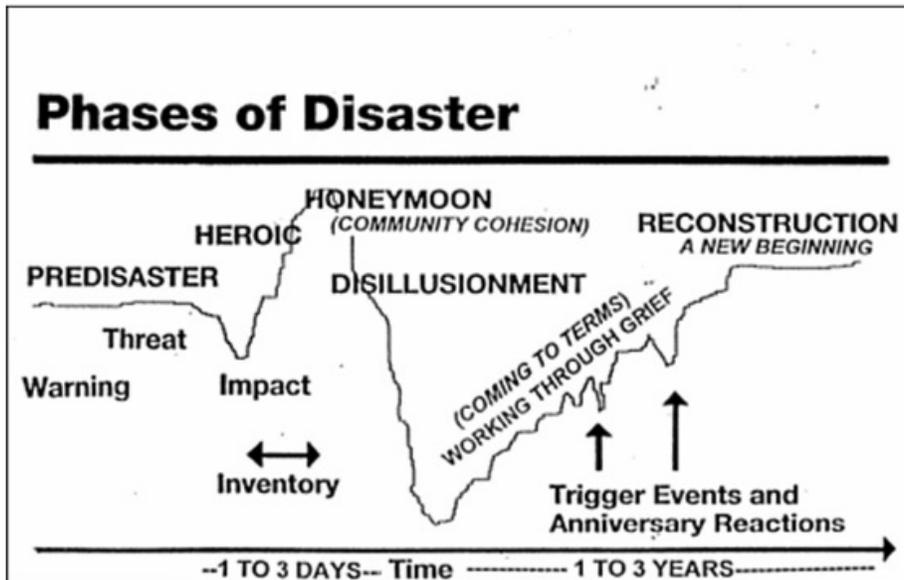
Minimal Media

Pallotta (2016) likened the magnitude of the Louisiana flood to an entire city burning down; he noted that if this was an act of human terrorism, it would be an international catastrophe (Pallotta, 2016). Obviously, the comparison may seem less relevant since it wasn't an act of terrorism as we know it, yet even so, the media coverage of devastation was curiously spotty and short. It was noted that the timing may have been part of the low-coverage issue. The 2016 presidential election was underway and the Summer Olympics were in their final lap. The waters flowed into subdivisions and rural tracts, making their way to filling homes to 10 feet. Other things may have interfered with the coverage. Is it possible that the demographics of the victims were less compelling to the environment of news? Some say yes, that Hurricane Katrina was more compelling due to the racial component and that media focuses on the victimization of people of color—the graver the outcome, the more coverage is made. Given the majority of the media have been focusing on political issues surrounding the 2016 presidential election outcome, the rest of the country is virtually oblivious to the current state of Louisiana following one of the most historic natural disasters in modern-day history. Undeniably, political coverage following the election is important and vital to our democracy. Notwithstanding, horrific post-flood conditions and trauma for a large proportion of Louisianans is very much alive.

Loaded Dice

Hayhoe states that “Louisiana is always at risk of floods, naturally, but climate change is exacerbating that risk, weighting the dice against us” (as cited in Mooney, 2016). Urban sprawl is often to blame for devastation after natural disasters. An example in Pennsylvania strikes similarities with the Louisiana problem: With miles and miles of concrete and asphalt roads and parking lots, rainwater has nowhere to drain. Instead of seeping naturally into the ground, the water runs quickly into streams, causing overflow, and taking with it pollutants like fertilizer and oil picked up along the way. “‘The term sprawl is used a lot, and that’s one of the impacts of sprawl,’ said Baldassare.” (Ward, 2004, para. 13). He continued, “We keep adding more impervious surfaces with roadways and driveways” (Ward, 2004, para. 13).

Overall, it seems that it was easier to place the blame on the national response following Katrina on racial disparities since lower socioeconomic status neighborhoods were most affected in New Orleans during Katrina. With the Great Forgotten Flood, however, there is no racial component to blame, given that the majority of people who were affected were middle-class, white people. This, coupled with the other points I've mentioned above, would be why I would think there was a lack of flood coverage within the media.



Psychological Preparedness for Disaster (Guterman, 2005)

There are theoretical and real phases of disaster, from warnings to threats to activation of heroism, and there is even a honeymoon phase when people may lighten the experience without feeling the responsibility and trauma of what actually happened and what lies ahead (Guterman, 2005). Many have noted how their lives have significantly changed, some even say for the better. We can only hypothesize at this juncture the buffering effects, but anecdotally most attribute well-being and adjustment and a sunnier outlook to social support, faith, and resiliency. So, if and when people come to terms with the reality, the waiting, the rebuilding, the scheduling to rebuild, and the financial and emotional toll, and as the anniversary is soon to roll around, a new beginning is possible. These stages, however, are not linear, nor are they the same for any one person, community, or group. Social work and other health professionals can anticipate the stories, the solidarity, the isolation, and the hope that tomorrow brings with disaster. We have sought to share the stories of the Great Flood of 2016, given its environmental and psychological impact, and given this journal's readers' awareness of the key intersection between the two. The more stories are shared, the more healing and reconstruction can occur to reshape lives, plans, and the contextual-symbolic as well as physical and tangible necessity of home.

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