

Out of Chaos, Hope

Cindy Droppers

Where do I begin??? Where do I begin to try to tell you what it is like to see the damage left in Katrina's wake? To talk to the people who survived her devastation. To see with your own eyes the havoc that she reaped upon New Orleans.

Do I begin by trying to explain what it was like to listen to the stories of the people who survived her reign of terror only to have their lives washed away because a barge was blown into a levee breaking through that barrier that was built to keep such an unthinkable thing from happening. And as if that wasn't enough a month later some where hit by a tornado.

Do I start by trying to explain what it is like to see house after house, strip malls and businesses standing in ruins and sitting vacant with very visible water marks still plain to see even after a year and a half?

Do I start by telling you the stories of the people that we met, some who became friends and some whom we met only in passing. Do I tell the stories that they related to us not only of themselves but stories of other people both known to them and unknown. Or maybe I should start by trying to explain that far-away look that comes into Miss Ethel's eyes when after telling her story she repeats softly over and over "I can't believe I am still here. I can't believe I am still here. I can't believe I am still here." By the vacant, distant look in her eyes you know that this petite dainty seventy-five-year-old woman who is cute as a bug has traveled back in time and is seeing sights and sounds and remembering realities that we will never know. She lost everything that day but her life and her faith in God.

Or do I start with Robert, an older gentleman who rode out the flood in his house and then somehow made his way to a hospital that is considered close by when things are normal but must have seemed miles away when he was trying to make his way there through toxic flood waters. His constant companion, a washrag, is always in his hands being twisted and twisted. What must he be feeling as he walks through his house that is filled with volunteers from Omaha, Raleigh and Pierre but void of any personal possessions. At least the washrag is his. He knows that it will be time soon to move back in and is fearing that day because being alone in his house brings back memories he isn't equipped to handle just yet. Various volunteers are trying to talk him into just coming and spending an hour or so a day at first and then as time goes by to work his way into spending longer periods of time there.

Do I start by telling you about the big "X" painted on the side of thousands of houses? On each of the four sides of this X are written the initials of the group that inspected it after the flood, the date it was inspected, the letters indicating whether they gained entry or not, and in the last space, the one that you are really not sure you want to see but the one that your eyes go to before any of the others, is the number of bodies found. And painted

next to this X are words such as.... no pet found, or one cat dead, one cat inside, or dog found.

Do I tell you of pictures that Joyce brings out of what their house looked like when they finally got a chance to come back from Texas to check on it. Deadly black mold from floor to ceiling. Or relate her story of going back to Texas and then getting a phone call from the New Orleans police telling them that looters had broken into the house further destroying what remained of their former life. Now, thanks to the help of the crew from here that went last spring and others that have come to help since then, they have just recently moved back into their house. The FEMA trailer still sits just outside the front door waiting to be picked up and taken elsewhere. The house like many others doesn't look at all like the same house on the inside, but that is OK with Joyce. She doesn't want the memories associated with the "old" house.

Maybe I should start by painting a word picture of what it looks like to see block after block of FEMA trailers setting in front of house after house, still being lived in by the home owners because they still haven't gotten any money to start over. "Why" you ask? Because they are still being given the run-around that the damage was caused by the hurricane and when they try to collect for that they are told that the damage was caused by the flood. Meanwhile they know that their time to live in these trailers is supposed to be limited to a certain amount of time and that time is running out. And questions like "What happens if there is a disaster somewhere else and they need these trailers?" haunt their minds.

As you see the destruction, as you listen to the stories, you try to imagine what it was like to be in their place. Then you see the pictures. Pictures of people on rooftops, coffins washed out of their above ground tombs and lying in the middle of the road, people dying in the street because they couldn't get the medicine that they needed. Or you hear the story of the man who went next door to get the 8-year-old, 2-year-old and 2-month-old that were left home alone by their parents and not being able to get back to his own house with them, ending up on their roof for three days in the heat and blistering sun. He would dive down into the toxic water in the house and bring back cans of vegetables in order to provide the juice for the little ones to drink and food for them to eat. And then when they were rescued they were dropped off on an overpass where they were left for another two days. It is then that you realize you will never ever come close to comprehending what these people have seen, what they have experienced, the memories that they live with. And deep down inside you really don't want to know. You prefer to remain in your own safe secure world and you feel guilty because of those feelings.

To say that things are back to normal in that city is a major understatement. Yes, things are starting to look better. There are street lights now; there weren't in May. Some birds and squirrels are back; there were none in May. Every overpass isn't harboring piles of wrecked cars beneath them like they were in May. The broken mangled trees are taken away, the piles and piles of garbage are few and far between now. The acres and acres of refrigerators and freezers, still filled with the contents that in August 2005 were meant to sustain those who lived in the houses where they sat, have been carted off to wherever it

is that they decided to go with them. And best of all, the people are starting to return. We saw several moving trucks and U-Hauls backed up to the doors of houses that have been restored but sit alone amongst empty house after empty house. They move into their “old” house that seems new because it has been stripped down to the bones with only the roof, floor, framework and outside walls left and then rebuilt by either themselves, volunteers or contractors that have taken them for everything they had. They move in with their few new possessions and look forward to things getting back to normal again.

But normal has changed and to have things the way they were before is a dream never to become a reality. Life is full of questions: Will the neighbor across the street come back? Did the couple that lived in the house behind us survive? How will I support my family since the building where I worked will be demolished and the business has moved to another city or state? The woman who ran the Gym Rompers program at the church told us, “The rest of the country thinks things are back to normal, that things are the same as they used to be. We have come back from Texas. We have gotten our business up and running again but it isn’t the same. It will never be the same. All of my friends are gone or have moved away. I have no support system any more. The people that I knew aren’t here. Only strangers. It’s not the same. It’s just not the same. It will never be the same.”

Helping them to get back to some semblance of normalcy seems to be an overwhelming undertaking. We spent our time there split up into two groups. One group worked on Cheryl’s house. Another volunteer group had been there before us and had gotten most of the dry wall up. The two men in our group (Larry and Ken) spent their time plumbing the entire house while the women taped and mudded, sanded and mudded again. The college girls in our group spent time on both projects and did a fine job at both with hardly any breaks, no complaints and with a workaholic attitude.

One day they worked with growling stomachs because there was only meat, cheese, chips and fruit for lunch; the bread had somehow gotten left back at the church and there were no stores open yet nearby! The same goes for the other group. We all found out that you can make it on just meat and cheese folded together. Still no complaints. Well, I shouldn’t say that. There were a few complaints but they ran along the lines of “Do we have to quit for the day? We could get some more done yet if we ate supper late.” Or “We don’t have enough time to do everything!!” And on the last day, “But we don’t want to leave without finishing the job,” which is what we had to do. Pastor Cliff will have some other work crew that comes to stay at the church pick up where we left off. It is hard to leave when you know that you won’t be coming back to finish what you started.

We never got to meet Cheryl. She is staying in Dallas and won’t be able to come home until she somehow figures out how to get enough money to accomplish that feat. And at this moment in time it sounds like she is going to need lots of prayers to be able to get the money needed. In the meantime her neighbor across the street, who is back in her house, impatiently waits for Cheryl’s return.

The second crew with Rolly in charge worked on Cade and Anika’s house. Some of the tasks they accomplished were to tear out a back wall and replace it; and install windows

and French doors and try to repair a floor that the termites had feasted on to their hearts content at some point in time. That crew also had college kids who were hard workers and worth their weight in gold. All of them are to be commended for spending their Christmas break helping those in need. The group was joined on our last day by five or six men from Wisconsin who had come to help. We also had to leave that project before it was completed. The men from Wisconsin were going to continue on after our departure. Unlike our group, this group got to meet the owners of the house who came over to meet the crew and spend a little time with them.

We spent our time when not at the job sights cleaning at the church.

Groups come to help rebuild, but they forget that the church where they stay while they are there that, by the way, was also flooded, needs caring for as well. It is a big church and while we were there housed work groups from Omaha, Nebraska and Raleigh, North Carolina, along with us.

The janitor was washed away in the flood and so there is no designated person or persons to clean a building that houses group after group of volunteers, is home to another church for the time being, has a preschool, has a Gym Rompers program, birthday parties in the Gym Rompers room all weekend, has people walking through the church at all times of the day or night from another church a block away to take showers out behind and use the washer and dryer inside. While we were there a group of fifty college kids from Boston were coming over from the other church for showers and to do laundry.

Also staying there is Joel, who also worked with the group at Cade and Anika's house. He is an older gentleman from Canada who is living there all winter and joining the work crews that stay at the church. He did the same last winter.

And staying there for the last few days of our stay was Rev. Ann Johnson who is Executive Director at the Good Samaritan Counseling Center in Chicago. She worked with us at Cheryl's house and at the church. She even went above and beyond and took it upon herself to clean the men's second floor bathroom at the church! She became one of our group later in our stay and we all wished that we would have had more time to get to know her better.

All together there were ten in our little group from South Dakota. Rolly, Zach and Katie Kemink from Onida., Rolly's niece Heather Burnham from Gettysburg, Katie Smith from Martin (yes she knows Ardeth), John Huisman from Rapid City and the DeJongs and Droppers from Pierre. So much to do and so very few people to do it.

In the light of what there is still to do it seems we left without doing nearly enough. But there is only so much a person or group can do. So you do what you can. It reminds me of the comic I saw one time where a father and his son are walking along a beach littered with star fish washed up on the shore by the tide. The father picks up one of the starfish and throws it back into the ocean. The son says, "What difference does it make?"

There are so many you can never help them all anyway.” And his father says, “It made a difference to that one.” So when I get to feeling that we didn’t accomplish enough or that we barely made a dent in all that needs to be done down there, I remember the starfish and tell myself that we can’t begin to do all that needs to be done there, but we can make a difference. We can make a difference for Cheryl. We can make a difference for Cade and Anika. and for the Miss Ethels and the Roberts. We can make a difference for the church that never dreamed that their mission at this point in time would be more along the lines of a motel. Providing water for endless showers, loads of laundry, restrooms and dishes that need to be washed is an ongoing mission of First Presbyterian.

By providing way more electricity than they ever dreamed of using before because it is a big church and at this moment in time every part of it is being utilized day and night. We can make a difference for Pastor Cliff who was contemplating becoming an interim pastor the week before Katrina and since she hit has been kept beyond busy coordinating volunteers, the groups staying at the church, the houses that are being worked on and so much more. All of this on top of leading a congregation that needs special care right now. A smaller congregation than before that is healing from losses and traumas that, God willing, we will never experience or could ever imagine. And we can make a difference for a city that is trying to do the same.

There are lots of good things that have and are happening since the flood. And again I don’t know where to start. I could start with the volunteers from all over that continue to come and do whatever small part they are able to do. Some that don’t have the talents needed to do electrical work or run plumbing, etc., but do have the talent to cook for the volunteers. Or have the talent to just listen. Just listen to people talk about what they went through. To let them tell their story and in so doing work through their fears and anxieties and continue the healing process.

We heard countless stories that were beyond a doubt miracles and had God’s fingerprints all over them. And the people are starting to come back. More all of the time.

Building centers have opened up and so people can buy the materials needed to restore their homes. The Walmart fairly close to the church is a Super Walmart once again and not just a grocery store. Not as well stocked as it could be but up and running just the same. Three of the nine hospitals are open and treating patients. You no longer need to stand in line for ages to purchase food and water. Things are getting better as time goes on. But it is going to take lots and lots of that time and lots and lots of help from those who can do so before one can say that all is well.

In telling my story I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the thanks that we heard from people no matter where we went—a thanks that they can’t seem to voice often enough or in the right words to relay what they want to express. Thanks from the people whose houses we have worked on, Thanks from the friends we have made. Thank you from the friends of the friends we have made. We heard “Thank you so much for coming to help us” from the persons behind the cash registers, from employees of Walmart and Lowes (the only shopping we did was for food and building materials). Thank you from the

people working at gas stations and quick shops and from the patrons of those places. And I can't forget the thank-yous from Cheryl's neighbor or from the people of First Presbyterian Church. They along with many others asked us to thank the people back home who made our trip possible.

And that is what those of us who went want to do also. We want to thank all of you who supported us with money so that we could go down there and provide some much needed help from our little corner of the world. To represent our congregation and community and let people know that not everyone has forgotten about them. We greatly appreciate your willingness to make the trip a possibility.

Also we want to thank those of you who held us up in prayer both before we left and while we were down there. We had good roads and good weather both going down and coming back. No ice or blizzards! It must have been because of you (and the prayers coming from Rolly's Suburban and the DeJongs Camry following it) that we made it all the way down there without being broken down on the side of the road even though the Suburban started acting up and continued to do so the rest of the way down.

Those of us who went are eternally thankful for your prayers, support, and whatever else it was that you did to make our trip possible. We are thankful for a safe and productive trip, for eyes opened, for friends made, for an experience we will never forget. And above all else for the chance to *make a difference*.

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