

If You Can't Hold a Cup of Coffee; How Can You Handle a Disaster?

"You're going, aren't you," Bryan stated quietly and supportively, as he looked at the CNN news alert and then, at me.

My reply was equally simple: "Yes."

We both knew that our lives had changed in that moment. It was August 29, 2005 and we were aboard a cruise ship rounding Bermuda.

The emails to my local Red Cross chapter began then and culminated in my deployment less than two weeks later. From that moment on - subtly, and then not so subtly - the changes began as my preparation evolved. With every news story and headline, I began to create a personal connection with Katrina. This was no longer simply an awful hurricane with a particularly destructive aftermath; it had a personality, a name, and it became mine.

One of the aspects of disaster work not often discussed is that it makes you feel different. Consider that while everyone at home continues their lives; yet, for some bizarre reason, the disaster mental health worker willingly, even enthusiastically, rushes to the disaster.

What in the world would make a "regular" person do this? (That is a topic for a different article than this.) Suffice it to say that my family and friends, knowing I volunteered in other disasters from 9-11 to local fires and floods, took it in stride.

I reported to my chapter the next morning after a short detour to the US Open tennis tournament. Hey, I wasn't getting there any sooner by missing the Open. And, as any disaster mental health worker will tell you, having your personal life in order makes it all much more tenable; hence, the trip to the Open.

Back to the Chapter - hearing words and sensing the organized chaos that are indelibly associated with disaster work for me brought me up short. Did I really want to expose myself to the physical, psychological and environmental stressors that this disaster would present? I remember 9-11 well, and I remember the sense of violation I felt, having been a New Yorker my entire life.

Would that experience affect my response to this disaster and, if so, how? The reality is that you don't want to realize in the middle of your work, in an unknown area and without your normal supports around, that you, too, are vulnerable. I gave these concerns my full attention. I assessed my response patterns to subsequent disasters and drills, as well as my "recovery" from working 9-11. I realized I was OK to go.

There are a couple of concepts that are inherently a part of disaster work. One is that nothing, and I mean *nothing*, is definite. Period.

You know what you're going to do *as you do it* and, in retrospect, you know what you did. It is not the setting for those of us who prefer even a tad of predictability. And we all know the lack of predictability is a stressor in and of itself.

Then there's the concept of "hurry up and wait" that I'll discuss later. Another is conjuring up a way to remain flexible and creative while triaging under tough situations.

And we haven't even made it up to the concept of "hardship." This is a term used by the American Red Cross that refers to the existence of significant stressors that might be involved in the particular situation.

If my memory serves me correctly, Katrina left the area with potentially contaminated water, housing shortages, poor working conditions, limited health care access, potential power outages, limited food availability, extreme heat and humidity, poor air quality, and my personal favorite, extreme emotional stress. Quick, where do I sign up????

The major functions of disaster mental health include providing support for other disaster workers, as well as victims, conflict resolution among everyone involved and psychological triaging. All people have their breaking point, their brick wall. The disaster mental health provider needs to be able to assess his/her own, and virtually everyone else's, in real time. As people approach their limits, their abilities to cope diminish, their reactivity increases, and resources are strained. Conflict resolution often becomes a creative activity. The strain of the disaster exacerbates all pre-existing pathology, which brings with it additional concerns. There is minimal opportunity for "therapy" in disaster work; that's for when the situation stabilizes a bit. Triage of mental health needs is a constant.

Initially, I was told that I would be deployed to New Orleans to aid in persuading some recalcitrant folks to evacuate. I promised myself that if I was being stuck in a large rubber ducky with some National Guardsmen, or something of that ilk, someone had damn well better provide me with a drysuit. (I was momentarily thankful for my SCUBA training). I was also provided a list of supplies that I would need.

Having decided that I could tolerate the demands of this deployment, I did what any red-blooded American female would do...I went shopping. My personal belief is to be as self-sufficient as possible in the field, as well as to travel as lightly as is reasonable. So, off I went to purchase an inexpensive sleeping bag, long, yet cool pants (an oxymoron in my lexicon), a ton of bug spray with DEET, surgical masks, latex gloves, anti-bacterial everything, disposable cameras, notebooks (for the journal that inevitably is not finished), books and Vicks Vapo-rub. The significance of the last item was sobering; Vapo-rub is pushed up your

nostrils to block out noxious odors. Its inclusion on my packing list brought home the dire situation on the Gulf Coast.

I logged on to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) site, and then I tracked down the chairman of my hospital's Infectious Disease Department for his opinion on appropriate prophylactic steps. Armed with this information, I shamelessly begged for protective gear, a Hepatitis A vaccination, a tetanus booster and numerous prescriptions to combat potentially nasty bugs.

Fortified with these prescriptions, I generously enhanced the coffers of my local CVS, went home, and packed all my purchases and other necessities (read: M&M's – peanut, regular and almond), in a rolling duffel bag.

Remember the self-sufficient part? I also decided that I would take nothing at all that I couldn't leave there. And then came the most difficult part – the waiting. I can deal with disease, chaos, threats, heat – just don't make me wait.

The ensuing days were spent trying to walk that one centimeter line between doing "regular" stuff, staying very much in the here and now, and making no plans. That meant arranging coverage for my practice, preparing my patients, getting subs for my various tennis games, and making sure someone would fly my little plane. (Most people don't know this, and I guess most don't really care, but planes get very cranky when they're just left sitting. Believe me, you don't want a cranky airplane; thus, the need for surrogate pilots.)

Finally, the call.

"Get there ASAP. Here's one phone number for the deployment instructions and another for the travel agent we use. Call them. They (always "they"; who are they????) will give you the information you need and get you there." "There," I found out, was Montgomery, Alabama, where I would arrive about 18 hours later.

Made my travel arrangements, threw the remaining items in my bag and said my farewells, and tried to get some sleep.

Morning found me winging my way South; surreptitiously sneaking peeks at the people around me, wondering if any of them would become my comrades-in-arms. A stop to change planes. As I boarded the plane for the second half of the flight and found my seat, I realized that I couldn't hoist my carry-on into the baggage compartment. I looked around to find an appropriate individual from whom I could request some help and noticed a gentleman in the aisle seat right next to me.

"Excuse me," I said, "but could you hold my coffee while I put away my bag?"

Unbeknownst to me, I had just requested assistance from Syracuse's favorite psychologist son, Dr. Joseph Himmelsbach. Little did I know that he was suspicious that I, too, was going down to the Gulf Coast, and wondering how in the world I would be able to handle a disaster when I appeared so ill-equipped as to need assistance to negotiate carry-on luggage. And with that, a friendship, and an immediate support system, was airborne.

Between that fateful introduction, and our touchdown two hours later, Joe and I reached a mutual understanding of our expectations, requirements and concerns about our deployment. We compared notes and preparations, created a structure and identified patterns. By then, I had assuaged most of his concerns about my ability to function in a disaster. Probably as a function of the frenetic aspect of the situation, relationships tend to blossom quickly and become very important. We're social creatures, us humans, and we seek out others for a sense of community and for support.

Our dyad increased, initially, to a group of six and then settled into a functional group of four within a 24-hour period. We all shared very dry senses of humor, an ability to tolerate lots of inconvenience, and a proclivity not to take ourselves terribly seriously. The group was (and is) comprised of Joe, Martha, Kathryn and me. Martha and Kathryn, our social work contingent, were new to disaster work, but not to clinical challenges. Among the four of us we had in excess of 80 years of clinical experience.

This fearless foursome set out to encounter some of the most disturbing and horrific conditions that could be imagined. We became a spontaneous peer support group, complete with the ability to morph into different dyads and triads as the situation demanded. Yet, the resiliency of the group, and the integrity of the foursome, withstood all the demands of the deployment, and continues to exist to this day.

As veterans of prior disasters, Joe and I became the *ad hoc* leaders of the group, each coming to the fore when our particular talents were needed. Joe found the restaurant that (I swear!) moved since we drove past it 45 minutes before. I got us through orientation and assignment in record time. This is true – the Guinness Book of World Records should be contacted.

We arrived at Montgomery Headquarters at 3:15 PM, and crashed the orientation that had just begun. Quickly, we scouted out the room for supplies we might need, pertinent phone numbers (those of us "in the know" put the phone numbers directly into our cell phones), and fluids – lots of fluids. Most important was the number for the road conditions in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, often tenuous at best.

We were dispatched to a local hotel to enjoy our last night in "civilization." Enjoy we did, further shoring up the bonds that would sustain us through the

challenging experience, and beginning to develop an appreciation for each other's personalities. It's important to know who eats (and drinks) what, who their family networks are comprised of, prior exposures (or lack of) to disaster, and what they sleep in. My roommate and I delighted in her pink frilly pajamas, especially as she asked me if I thought if other people would laugh at her. Little did we know what our housing situation would become and how her frillies would work in.

I was shocked that we were actually picked up on time to leave the hotel for Headquarters. Once there, we (actually, I) jumped on the opportunity to go to the Gulfport, Mississippi, site and were on our way before noon. To be honest, I think that my comrades seriously questioned my sanity when I volunteered to go to Gulfport. This was not an assignment forced upon us; rather, we were discouraged from going if we were faint of heart, squeamish, inadequately prepared for hardship conditions, or not in good physical health. Within nanoseconds, all of us had chosen this assignment, sort of a one for all and all for one mentality.

And with that decision, I found myself centered, focused, and ready to go. No, there were no jitters, no appreciable anticipatory anxiety. It was past that point; it was time to begin our group assault on Katrina.

The trip from Montgomery to Gulfport was sort of a re-visiting of the Civil Rights Movement as we traversed Selma, Hattiesburg and Meridian. The mood was somber and respectful. The trees became less numerous and the mounds of disturbed earth more prevalent. Swaths of trees were missing as if a giant hand had brushed them away. We passed a church whose cross was at about 45 degrees to the steeple.

The trees that had grown in the center median of the road were uprooted and thrown helter-skelter like so many pick up sticks. There were caravans of military vehicles, of FEMA trailers, of other Red Cross vehicles. There was a paucity of civilian cars and trucks.

The sense of things simply not being normal was insistent and pervasive. It was disquieting, not right. It was not yet apparent *how* abnormal things were. I felt that familiar sensation of settling into myself, a type of hypnotic state that cropped up after the September 11 terror attacks. I would characterize it as a very deep-rooted assessment and recognition of my personal capabilities and vulnerabilities, a last effort at setting myself up in as strong a position as possible.

We pulled into Gulfport, smack into organized chaos, frenetic activity and disembodied voices. Welcome to Headquarters. Welcome to "hurry up and wait." As I said earlier, that doesn't work well for me, so I quickly insinuated my partners and me into the work was going on at that moment.

First, we had a quick meeting of mental health providers that stressed that many of the assignments would bring us into contact with people who had not had any access to support personnel since Katrina hit, days earlier. We also were getting numerous calls daily from other agencies and the military about individuals and families exhibiting erratic behavior, or some other indication of impending psychological dysfunction.

We identified the important folks to know, wrote down and stored pertinent phone numbers, and found more fluids. Armed with these necessities, Joe began what would become a nightly routine of negotiating a van from the transportation people so that we could travel back and forth to our housing site as a group. This was no small feat, and I suspect required great use of his exceptional people skills.

You see, in a disaster people seem to fall into one of two groups. Either you are flexible and make do with what you have and avoid becoming attached to “things,” or you become invested in the material aspects of the situation and identify your experience in terms of manipulating supplies. Mental health workers had best be able to think on their feet, to be very creative in using what provisions are available, and, dare I say it, be able to be pleasant. On the other hand, the folks responsible for assigning vehicles tended to be quite parsimonious in their behavior. Sort of the ying and the yang of disasters. Equipped with our van and our belongings, we set out for the naval base that was to be our home for the immediate future.

Picture this, a group of mental health providers, all between 45 and 60, all products of the Vietnam War Era, and most of us northerners, entering a military base in the deep, deep South. Little did any of us realize the warmth with which we would view this base in the coming days.

When we arrived, it was about 95 degrees out with about 95 percent humidity – pretty oppressive. We were brought into a steel-covered warehouse with somewhere around 600 cots amassed inside. This was the real thing – no a/c, no indoor plumbing. Home sweet home.

It wasn't all bad; we did have Porta-Potties, mobile shower units and an outdoor mess set-up that looked straight out of the movies. Nesting began; we all grabbed cots, tried to set ourselves up without drenching our belongings in sweat and then stood on line for a shower.

Know how we assess patients for drug of choice? How's Ambien for a change of pace? After dinner and an orientation talk about the dos and don'ts of living on a military installation, we hunkered down to try to sleep, especially since it was “light's out” at 10PM.

No, in answer to your question, no one laughed at the frilly pink pajamas – no one really cared. We were all pretty intent on trying to get some sleep in advance of whatever the next day was to bring. If nothing else, by the end of that first day in the field, we would no longer be the “newbies” – the lowest of the low on the disaster relief hierarchy.

Officially, the day began at 6AM when the lights came back on. But, the first wave of workers began their day at 4AM, and thus, the rest of us began our day, as well. By that point, the temperature inside the warehouse was probably down in the low 80’s – a virtual cold front. We all struggled to dress, wash and eat without exerting much effort, because with effort comes sweating.

Off to the van, picking up stray workers who were not blessed with a Joe to commandeer transportation, and off to the Gulfport Headquarters. At this point, Joe and I were quite pleased that we both had grey Red Cross vests. See, these further emphasized our experience level because the gray vests were from 9-11. The “newbies” got bright red vests. We quietly cackled to ourselves about the respect due us as disaster tested and proven. Little did we realize that the red vests were significantly more functional than ours. And, since the newer workers helped perpetuate the pecking order by asking our opinions about the deployment, we were loath to switch at this point.

The day’s meeting began and I found myself deployed to Hancock County – the Mississippi county that abutted Louisiana. This was one of the areas that we had been told had not simply been vastly underserved, it was actually not served at all since the storm. I was partnered with a psychologist from Burlington, Vermont, Dr. Mark Banks, who was approaching the end of his deployment. Mark had been involved in initially setting up the shelters in this badly hit area. In addition, he had taken it upon himself to foster communication with the National Guard and the local firemen who had been this community’s mainstay for days. Mark also had been involved in outreach in the community to people who were unable or unwilling to leave their homes.

We drove through unending devastation, about 25 miles west of Gulfport, and about 25 miles north. I was unusually quiet, just looking at the boats 40 feet up in the trees, the cars scattered throughout the ditches along the road, the seaweed waving from the top-most windows of homes, and all over, clothes and belongings waving from the uppermost aspects of the trees that remained.

The fact that this was Brett Favre’s hometown, or that the shelter had been set up in what had been his high school, simply didn’t impress me. Mile after mile of stores and businesses that hadn’t reopened, the buildings with gaping holes where there had been roofs, the carcasses strewn about, and the military presence wherever we turned, they got my attention. It dawned on me that I was having trouble remembering that this was my country, that these people were

also Americans – this was not the relief effort for a tsunami on distant shores or for a catastrophe in South America – this was us.

I felt small, insubstantial, clueless. How do you reach out to people who overnight went from being regular citizens to being evacuees in their own country? This was brought home to me pretty quickly as an older couple declined my offer of help by saying that they had never taken charity before, and they were not about to start at that point. The fact that they had nothing left - no home, no clothes, no medications, no eyeglasses, *nothing* – did not alter their stance.

I told them that I was a native New Yorker, and had been through 9-11. I wondered out loud how my city would have fared if other Americans had not supported us. I suggested to this couple that, perhaps, this wasn't charity; rather, it was one American reaching out to help another American. That we in New York had experienced it a few years earlier, and that enabled us to now offer help to others. I ended by saying that if the shoe was on the other foot; I knew that they, in whatever way they could, would assist me at a time when I needed it.

The couple agreed with me, and was able to accept whatever they needed. We talked for a little while longer, exchanging small bits of personal information. My asking them what the storm had been like for them and how they were getting on seemed to ease their way into talking. And, I did what I found myself doing day in and day out – actively listening, compassionately listening, and sharing.

My functions throughout my deployment fell into three major categories: listening, defusing potentially explosive situations, and debriefing people after exposure to stressors.

Mark took me to meet two elderly women who had been severely impacted by the storm. More driving through devastated areas, followed by more evidence of pain and loss. The first woman had been identified by the National Guard as having significant medical issues, as did her husband. I felt so small in the face of her suffering. Mark already had made the contacts that would help them access the services they needed. All I could offer were my wishes and prayers for their recovery.

We moved on. The second woman was an education in the resiliency and humor that can be found in the South. She was involved in a running battle with the chief of the fire department about living in her home. He wanted her out, not an unreasonable request given that parts of the ceiling were about to collapse, there was significant water damage, and some floors were unsafe. The woman finally acquiesced to sleeping at her relative's home, but still spent the days in her own home. With a twinkle in her eye, she reminded us that she knew the chief when he was in diapers, and all his posturing wasn't going to really affect her! She did offer that she was bribable by some watermelon, a request that the chief also made.

Off we went to procure, by hook or by crook, said fruit. We were successful in our hunt, and delivered a large piece each to the woman and the Chief, and then we gave the remainder to the National Guard unit up the road. That was some major defusing! While distributing the watermelon, we were able to strike an agreement between the woman and the chief, and also to keep our eyes on the community (the National Guard) happy.

I gathered myself and sought out ways in which I could make myself available and approachable. We went to the local elementary school. The school's walls were a mélange of contrasting messages. Amidst the usual announcements were sign after sign with soul-wrenching requests for information about the whereabouts of loved ones. Messages and telephone numbers for friends and families, prayers for strength and support, notices from FEMA about emergency housing and "Operation Blue Roof" (the program that supplied and covered roofs with bright blue tarpaulins) taped up next to bus schedules, special events and the usual "stuff" of schools. There were tables with every type of emergency aid numbers, the daily report on deaths and illnesses, the status report on relief operations and all the precautions the government was instituting.

"Miss Jill, Miss Jill."

This was the Southern way, and by the end of that first day, it was as natural as could be. A middle-aged woman came up to me and asked me to say a prayer of thanksgiving with her – so, I prayed. She told me that she was so thankful because she knew where all her family was. She had just returned from the morgue, where she had identified the final missing members of her family. At least she knew, she told me. She was one of the lucky ones.

'Miss Jill, Miss Jill.' This time I was hailed by two children - a 10 year-old boy and a 6 year-old girl, " We found a dead dog in our school bus." They calmly took me over to the carcass of a large dog – no affect, no response whatsoever. What happened to the typical squeals and "oooh, icky" that one would expect from a child? Katrina took that away, as well. It's one thing to debrief people who are expressing stress responses; it's a much more difficult task to debrief those who are responding with almost a functional dissociation.

An erudite-looking man approached me and quietly asked to speak with me. He was uncomfortable asking for assistance, he said, but more uncomfortable being unable to read a newspaper. He explained that most of the shelter residents had lost their glasses in the chaos, and he truly didn't want to be a bother, but could I help.

Help? I leapt at the opportunity to do something that might impact in a meaningful way, and jumped in my trusty, yet ugly, car to drive to the Wal-Mart in Picayune. I purchased a dozen pairs of glasses. I gave them all to the man who had initially asked for them, and sat back and watched. He moved about the room, assessed

who needed what strength correction and dispensed them accordingly. No one took what they did not need, no one hoarded additional pairs; on the contrary, people had to be convinced to take them and only would after clarifying “sharing” agreements with others.

This was consistent with my experience throughout the hurricane-devastated area. A family came in asking for dog food. When they were offered 3 bags, they declined all but one, saying that someone else might need the dog food. Contrary to reports that I heard in the press, I neither witnessed nor heard first-hand any incidents where people took what they didn't need. My experience was that the survivors of this catastrophe were exceptionally aware that the need was extraordinary and that physical resources might be limited. The connections that developed between people seemed to amplify the benefits of any tangible product.

Simultaneously, the toll of feeling out of control, of not having predictable outcomes, and often not having anything personal to attach to, became more and more apparent. Rumors run rampant in disaster areas, and the ruins from Katrina were no exception. At times, it was difficult to recognize the insidious effect of constant rumors and emotional reactivity. Often my role was to separate fact from conjecture, to contact authorities to clarify specifics, and to disseminate accurate information. Sometimes that meant being the bearer of bad news; more often, there was no news. The disappointment etched on the victims' faces reflected the anguish in their hearts. It was a brutally harsh reality for each one of these individuals.

When Mark and I left at the end of the day, he drove me around the devastated areas of Waveland, Bay St. Louis, and Pass Christian. We drove by the enormous K-Mart parking lot that looked like a movie set, except it was real. Huge M.A.S.H. units, thousands of boxes containing everything from clothes to books to stuffed animals, booths manned by every insurance company one could recognize, federal, state and local authorities, disaster and relief organizations, military units. I had to keep reminding myself that this was not TV – it was truly surreal.

As we continued to drive, all I could say was, “Oh, my God. Oh, my God.” A red house blown off its foundation that came to rest against a telephone pole, a motor boat that was planted in the drive-through lane of a Burger King, wood stripped off houses as if it were ribbon, roofs on the ground with the associated house no where to be seen.

At times, we would pass homes that had had the front walls missing so we could look right inside. One's home is so private, such an intimate thing; to have it virtually ripped open for anyone to see was very disquieting for me. But I did look – beds on top of bureaus, staircases on their sides, floors and ceilings gone. How did anyone survive this?

In the midst of all this destruction and horror, we'd catch a glimpse of some people's amazing resilience. A man drove by us in an old red Camry, the passenger door cut out to fit a room air conditioner that he had rigged to work off the car battery. There he was, calmly driving around as if this was the most reasonable of solutions.

Over the next few days I noticed that tempers were flaring more easily, people were feeling misunderstood. The shelter head was injured and had become ineffectual and there was infighting among rescue workers. Mark and I were busy setting up mechanisms by which the shelter staff could communicate effectively and feel that they were being heard. In addition, we were establishing protocols by which workers could access one of us to vent, or to tell us of a situation that had potential for needing defusing.

One day I arrived at the shelter to find that lunch had not been served, and was not going to be. Two days prior, the shelter had arranged with another agency to provide food – 3 meals a day. This had been accomplished without any disruption in service up to then. Without any explanation, on day 3, the schedule was changed by the food providers. I arrived at the shelter to find everyone extremely upset. A large contingent of people had interpreted this change as meaning the shelter was imminently closing (rumor). They were frantic at the notion of, yet again, needing to settle themselves in an unknown place.

Emotions were running high and the fear and anger was palpable. I assessed the situation as best I could, noticing that some of the staff members were as upset as the residents, while others seemed quite emotionally withdrawn. I was astounded to find that the staff, as a whole, was responding as if the rumors were true; they just responded differently. Reactions among the staff mirrored that of the residents. After identifying the facts in the situation, I first worked with the shelter residents to assuage their fear; after that, I approached the staff. Although this situation was ultimately resolved, it illuminated the tenuous line between functional capacity and chaos.

This was one of those nights that our peer group debriefing was particularly helpful. Since we were all working in different roles, we brought with us diverse approaches to our experiences. Common among us, though, was a sense of mutual respect and genuine liking that made it all work. Knowing that we would somehow manage to drive back to the base as our own little group rendered a sense of closure to our workday. We piled into our commandeered van, each taking our "assigned" seat. Joe drove, I rode shotgun, and Kathryn and Martha were in the back. We slipped right into our shorthand way of speaking, and quickly updated each other on our day's events.

When we arrived "home," we did our usual after-work routine – organized our stuff, showered and decided which of our "dining facilities" we would choose for

that evening's repast - indoors, the terrace, or al fresco. It was this ability to create some minor routine and some sense of predictability that was so stabilizing. After dinner, we wandered back indoors, griped for the requisite minute or two about the oppressive heat, gathered important news about the world, i.e., what the relative standings between the Yankees and Red Sox were, and then went to bed. A handful or two of M&Ms made things cozier for all. We then dutifully wished each one of the others good night, knowing that the next morning, inevitably, would start with a report on who snored the loudest.

When I initially arrived at the area, the people in the shelters were as diverse as the larger population, with many people going out to find work during the day, and returning for dinner and sleep. This was not the case by the end of my deployment, as the shelter population shifted to a far needier group comprised predominantly of homeless people and a significant psychiatric population. At this juncture, my function was reminiscent of the periods through my training where I worked within the psychiatric system: Identifying who needed medication but didn't have, who was working the system, whose pathology was most exacerbated by the situation, therefore needing immediate attention, and trying to find the people who often don't seem to be heard. I was relieved when I was assigned two new workers to replace me, as it was time for me to move on.

With my replacements in tow, I visited the elderly clients to whom Mark had introduced me days earlier. The couple was not home, appearing to have closed up their home and left. The elderly woman was home, and we spent a lovely hour listening to her recollections about teaching in the deep South through the Civil Rights Era. We also were treated to some mildly risqué commentary, with a strong dose of dry humor. She graciously accepted my replacements as the connection *du jour*, and bid me a very warm and sincere goodbye. I truly felt a pang upon leaving her home and think of her often to this day. It was with great pleasure that I received a note from her about 6 weeks after returning home – replete with humor, warmth and intelligence. This, to me, is one of the great rewards of this work – the opportunity to meet and connect with people on a level that transcends so many commonplace attributes.

One of the components of our immediate peer support group that was particularly important was the ability to call one another during our days. Just a moment of hearing a friend's voice, someone who was sharing the experience, brought tremendous relief. When I am in the field, working a disaster, it is difficult to speak to most of my social network at home. I simply do not have the energy or the inclination then to try to orient them to what I am experiencing.

I find that I cannot split myself between the disaster and my regular life. As a result, I keep my calls to friends to a minimum and ask them to call others to let them know I am fine. I do look forward to the calls to my family for a short respite from my current life. Otherwise, I find that it is the interactions with my peers in the field that mean the most to me.

The day I left the shelter for the last time, I was truly grateful to have been directed by the rest of our Fabulous Foursome to report in. I knew that I was not alone with the sense of desperation that surrounded me that day, and that gave me the strength to function.

It was also the first occurrence for the disaster of me hitting my personal brick wall. My brick wall and I tend to collide three times during a two-week deployment. The first time is about five days into the deployment. It is an uncomfortable sensation that is generally resolved by some after-hours peer support in a non-official setting. In and of itself, this one is not problematic, and probably results from the first wave of accommodating to the environment.

First time rescue workers don't know their particular cadence yet, and this often takes them by surprise. So, in addition to dealing with own personal brick wall, I was well aware that those around me were at risk to meeting theirs as well. This is why availing myself of time with people with whom I am not "on duty" is a necessity.

Not being "on duty" in a disaster is difficult. Pretty much all the time you are awake, you're wearing some kind of official ID. And anyone at the disaster knows very well that the mental health folks are the ones to approach for support. I have found absolutely no stigma associated for disaster workers who do reach out to mental health personnel. On the contrary, my experience is that this is the most normalized approach to emotional needs. As a result, mental health services are always being accessed, whether at a site, in a store or restaurant, or in their shelter. The flip side of this is that the psychologist has very little down time, and that can be problematic.

At this juncture we had graduated to have vehicles routinely assigned to us without the in-depth negotiations of the first few days. That night, we headed for our first foray off-base for a break. We went to the local Appleby's, which had just reopened. Who needs carpet on the floors? Real cutlery? Or a full menu? Not us. Since we were now officially "off-duty," off came any identifying clothing, shirts were turned inside out, and we tried to hide our northern accents. The latter was much easier than I would expect. I knew I had made the transition to the South when I noticed frequent uses of "Y'all." And, when asked a question, I responded with, "I sho' don't know!" Armed with these bits of subterfuge, we made ourselves comfortable, and resorted to sort of normal Appleby's behavior.

By the time we rolled back into the base, we all felt significantly more human, less hassled, and had much improved perspectives. The icing on this was that when we signed back into our area of the warehouse, we received a warm and resounding, "Welcome home." Things were OK again.

That night was very helpful, as I found myself deployed down to Long Beach, along Route 90, the next day. The National Guard and other military units formed checkpoints at all entries into the area. We sought out, and found the proper authorities, swapped water and stories and received our permits to enter. So much informal support occurs in these quick interactions. The soldiers were hot and tired, their noses had been assaulted by noxious smells for extended periods, and they, too, were trying to understand the extent of the destruction. I was continually impressed by the kindness and gentleness exhibited by the military personnel, many of whom were personally affected by Katrina, in addition to being professionally involved.

The area had not yet been bulldozed. Residents were milling around, desperately trying to find some evidence of their prior lives. Elsewhere, there were people wandering with a dazed, questioning look. All around there was destruction. I stood there, frozen to the spot, looking at a dormitory where a number of college students lost their lives, at school buses tossed about like dice, at beautiful tiled foyers without any building left standing around them, and piles and piles of debris. My nose quickly began to differentiate between the odor of raw sewage and the odor of decaying corpses. No amount of Vicks Vapo-rub could block the smells out. I walked down 90, the Gulf to my right, destruction to my left. How could I possibly help anyone who had witnessed this, who had survived this? I walked for hours, stopping to speak with people, then everyone faded back into their own private spaces. I saw a casino simply washed onto the beach, its huge concrete base apparently picked up and tossed ashore. It was, and still is, just impossible to imagine the forces involved.

I came across a young woman who was searching through the remains of her family's home. She was desperately trying to reach an antique crib, and refused to leave without getting it. I went back with her, past a beautiful in-ground pool with trees descending all the way into the water. The odor around the pool was sickening, yet we walked past. The woman effortlessly leapt from one piece of wood to another to reach the crib. I walked slowly and laboriously, frightened with every step that I would fall into some bacteria ridden puddle of liquid, or cut myself on the many sharp objects around.

We were able to pry the crib loose and carry it to a safe spot. We separated a little as we made our way toward the street, with her in front; I walked closer to the pool. As she passed the pool, a large branch fell from the tree into the pool. It caught my eye, and created just enough disruption in the water for me to be able to clearly identify a swollen body submerged and held down by other tree branches. I remember this as one of the most difficult moments of my deployment.

The young woman was on the verge of hysteria, made obvious by her frenetic attempts to reach the crib. She had been speaking quickly and in short bursts of words and her behavior was hypervigilant. Her breathing was shallow and rapid

and her skin diaphoretic. Disaster induced hypomania? I knew I couldn't respond to what I saw if I was to keep this woman from decompensating, but it was very, very difficult not to. I was quite thankful that we met some friends of hers as we reached the road. We each went our own way.

As I walked down route 90, I stumbled upon a large pile of debris, with a dead fish caught in the middle. My nerves were definitely beginning to fray. Farther down the road was what must have been a beautiful Catholic church. The priest was walking around it, perhaps assessing the damage, or perhaps contemplating some meaning behind the destruction. The pews were gone, everything inside was gone, except for the extraordinary stained glass windows. We stood there, mesmerized. In the midst of all of this horror, I couldn't decide if the existence of these windows were portents of good that would return, or the cruelest of taunts.

On and on I walked, the juxtaposition of the glorious Gulf of Mexico behind me, and what I imagined a nuclear disaster must look like in front of me. I walked away from the water, up and down streets that I suspected had comprised a lovely neighborhood. I was becoming inured to "routine" damage like missing roofs and windows. But, no matter how many times I came across the orange diagrams drawn on the fronts of homes that had been searched for bodies, with symbols delineating who had done the searching, when it had occurred and what had been found, I couldn't help but stop and wonder.

What had happened to the inhabitants of those homes? What horror had they faced? What did it sound like? Why were some homes on one side of the road empty testimonies to peoples' lives and identified to be bulldozed, while homes on the other side were salvageable? And how would the people who lived in the salvageable homes ever be able to look out their front window, knowing what had happened a mere 50 feet from their house?

Hours passed, one horrific scene after the next. The Crowley railroad cars strewn all over the area, clothes without owners whipping in the afternoon breeze, a yellow highlighter innocently laying on the ground. Bits of normalcy interspersed with chaos.

Someone was talking, but I was so immersed in my surroundings that I didn't hear at first. Gradually, the words pierced my defenses. It was four members of a family who had owned an estate right on the water. The patriarch had been a surgeon, and the family was looking. Again, always looking.

There was an elderly woman standing there, plaintively looking out to sea as if the answer was there. She wasn't making eye contact with anyone and the younger people with her, her son and daughter-in-law, told me she had been like that since the storm hit. I stood next to her, and matched the cadence of her breathing with my own. I looked out where she looked, and I waited. We stood

like that for about 15 minutes, each consumed by her own thoughts. The younger couple moved off for a bit, and the elderly woman and I continued our vigil.

“I want to be out there with him. I know it’s a sin, but aren’t we cursed anyway?” she said, staring straight ahead. She looked at me and simply stated, “I miss him so desperately.”

I held her as she sobbed and mourned and raged. She told me that they had gone inland to a friend’s home where the ground was 20 feet above sea level; they felt they were safe there. After all, the same spot had been a safe refuge from (hurricane) Camille, she said. The wind was the worst part, she told me; the sound was “unnatural and terrifying, and it just never stopped.” For hours, they huddled together, holding each other, protecting each other as they had since they were children together. Suddenly, it became ghastly silent and then a sound that she could not describe occurred. The house came apart, and her husband, her soul mate, her “everything,” was gone.

There was nothing to say, nothing that could have meant anything at that moment. She took a few deep breaths as if to collect herself, and then thanked me for listening, for communicating without words that I wanted to hear her story, She felt that she couldn’t tell her children as their pain was also great. She was worried that if she told anyone, she wouldn’t be able to stand it; she was just as worried that if she didn’t tell somebody, the memories would kill her.

We walked back together to the where the family home had stood, and she collected a few small statuettes. The younger couple rejoined us. They all hugged, and then they drew me in to their hug. It felt very natural to be so close to them after what had just transpired.

The family left, and I wandered back to Route 90. A military vehicle was rolling down the road, announcing that curfew was about to begin. I hitched a ride back with them to my car and drove away from Long Beach.

On the way home, I spoke by phone at length with Bryan. That conversation reminded me that there were parts of me that I could, and wanted to, keep apart from my disaster experience. As I drove on, I was very grateful for the calming and grounding influence he had on me.

I managed to leave voicemails for my comrades-in-arms, telling them that I would meet them a little later at the base; I chose not to stop by headquarters. That night I just needed some time alone - granted in the midst of about a thousand people - but alone with my thoughts, my feelings.

I felt as if I had been assaulted by too many smells, too much pain, too much emotion, too much death. I must have stayed in the shower for a half hour (an unheard of luxury), trying to wash the miasma of misery off of me. But I didn’t cry;

I still hadn't cried. I had raged at Katrina, my private crusade against her continued, but I hadn't cried.

When I returned to the barracks, my friends were all there. Providence being what it is, they had had less emotional days, so this was my turn for being fried. They understood when I said I just needed to go to sleep and end this day. They understood when I said I was thankful that the day did have a predictable ending. I was all too aware that I had had a glimpse of days that never ended for some of the people I had met. I had just had my second interaction with my brick wall and the cost was higher.

One of the attributes of disaster work is that the closer to the disaster any bit of help comes, it is clearly identified and appreciated. As time passes, usually the most basic needs have been addressed, which allows for the recognition of other losses to occur. Often, at this juncture, people affected by the trauma first begin to comprehend the extent of the situation. Concomitant with this recognition is increased emotional reactivity, decreased coping responses, complaints of malaise, fatigue and various other psychophysiological symptoms, a generalized sense of negativity. People are tired, worn, and fearful.

In short, the first blush of thankfulness that they were spared has passed and reality has begun to set in. Relief efforts need to recognize this characteristic and are best geared toward enabling people to regain some sense of efficacy, control and predictability. Relief workers also are tired and run the risk of being reactive. It is a difficult period for all.

The next morning brought a sense that I was in my home stretch, literally and figuratively. My new assignment was to the financial distribution center set up in Bay St. Louis. This was truly an amalgam of interagency interaction. I am pleased to say that this particular center didn't have any significant bureaucratic problems. The function of the site was to disseminate money to the victims, based solely on their reports of the extent of the damage and the number of people in their homes, up to a finite amount of assistance.

It was a simple construct, mainly initiated due to the total failure of the Red Cross 800 number for financial assistance. That number had been overwhelmed within a very short time of its inception. Three days later, the sites came into being. As with everything else with this disaster, the scope of need was so huge that it impeded the operationalization of virtually any intervention.

In case waiting in line wasn't sufficient irritant for everyone, Mississippi was in the midst of a heat wave. The heat index was in excess of 110 degrees for a few days. Yet, by 9 AM, there were more than 1,500 people waiting for services, most having gotten there as soon as they could once the curfew was lifted. We could not possibly process that many applications in one day, so people were given a

number. Those with lower numbers were guaranteed service that day; those with a number higher than our cut-off were asked to come back another day.

Of course, this created additional stress for those who were unable to get their money, especially since distance determined who could make it to the site early enough once the curfew was over for the night. People who could manage for a few days were encouraged to wait before returning, in the hopes that the lines would lessen by then. Alternate sites were also posted.

We were situated on a ball field near an elementary school amidst the usual Katrina detritus. We were a mélange of disaster workers from all over the country, from all different agencies. This guaranteed a busy time for mental health, as not everyone has quite the same interpretation or expectation of disaster work.

I identified the other health personnel, introduced myself, and quickly established an excellent relationship with the physician. He took the medical cases, I took the psych, and we both responded to all emergencies – no problems. Situations ranged from individuals without their diabetic medications to those without their psych medications.

Within minutes of arriving, I intervened on behalf of no less than six people who were quite confused. Upon questioning, I learned that they all had diabetes, had lost their medication, had not been eating correctly, were under extraordinary stress, were too damn hot, and, imagine, felt cruddy! These folks got what they needed and pushed through the line and out of the heat. The elderly, people with young children, pregnant women, and those appearing more fragile, also got special treatment. Not once did I hear anyone who did not receive this treatment utter a complaint. I truly don't understand how they tolerated all the waiting with such grace.

We came up with the idea of having me circulate among the evacuees with Tylenol, Motrin and Excedrin to allow me an easier way to assess potential problems. This worked exceedingly well, and in addition to successfully combating some evil headaches, this made my presence very apparent to both the victims and the workers.

My attention was piqued by a couple sitting and waiting. I went up to the woman and asked if she felt OK; the man who was with her was motioning to me that she was having a hard time. I brought them over to a quiet, more private area, got them cold drinks and sat, prepared to listen. By then I should have known, no matter how prepared I thought I was, Katrina was a step ahead of me. The woman told me that she and the man had married the Friday before Katrina, but since the storm hit before the papers were filed, she felt they were not "legally married" and was concerned about the legal implications for the losses they had incurred. That wasn't the main problem, though.

She broke down, saying she was terribly worried about her son, desperately in need of a kidney transplant. She was terrified that the storm would lessen his chances of getting a kidney in time. She blamed herself for his predicament as he suffered from an autoimmune disorder that she carried. She said she and her new husband were having a rough time. He added that he felt she was becoming increasingly withdrawn.

She looked me in the eye and said, "If I could find the gun, I would kill myself right now." We talked a while longer, and she finally agreed that she would go into the hospital, although she was sure she couldn't ever feel better. As the nurse kept an eye on her and expedited their assistance, I went in search for the ambulance personnel. The two women who were assigned to the ambulance showed remarkable compassion and patience, and were pivotal in helping this distraught woman maintain her dignity amid a very difficult situation. On follow-up I was able to find that she progressed very well in the hospital, was stabilized on medication and out-patient therapy, and was doing much better.

On another occasion, a State Trooper had taken over for one of the mental health providers who had been interacting with a group, as they sat just before going in to get processed for their assistance. The Trooper presented a formidable appearance to the evacuees. His personal style was not particularly relaxed or welcoming, although he was very direct and open with everyone. Tensions were higher this day, as the checks were no longer being distributed at the time of application; instead people had to return two days later to get them. This was an understandable development as there had been occurrences of individuals coming back multiple times for financial aid on the first couple of days of this program.

Going into the first day of the new rule, staff was concerned about the additional delay that people would now incur. The mental health provider walked up to the Trooper to offer help. His rather informal manner might have been interpreted as being less than respectful. He was curtly dismissed by the officer, and stomped away. The officer also seemed upset by the interaction. This was just another example of the pervasive fatigue and stress. I spoke with the Trooper and the mental health worker separately, encouraged each to vent, validated their perceptions and defused the situation.

One evening we had the opportunity to change our accommodations to a different staff shelter. We thought that this was a step up, as the new one had both air-conditioning and indoor plumbing. Granted it didn't have showers, and the food situation was tenuous at times, but we decided to give it a try. As Joe and I were both stuck late in the field, Kathryn packed all of our gear so that we could get situated prior to curfew. We made it just in time, found our cots and were about to make our beds when the lights went out – nice welcome! We did finally get situated but sleep was to escape us most of the night. It's funny that

we all could sleep in the barracks among 600+ people, but in this small room with maybe 40 people we were totally disturbed by the sub-Arctic temperature and noise - suffice it to say that two men behind us offered a snoring rendition of "Dualing Banjos." By 6 AM, we were re-packed, and on the road back to "our" base.

My last day at the financial assistance site was dedicated to maintaining some sense of stability among the increasingly alarming reports about Hurricane Rita. At the meeting that began the day, we discussed not talking about this new hurricane with evacuees, given the losses already incurred and the fear it engendered. Many staff members approached me about their concerns. My job was not to gauge the accuracy of their concerns, but rather to try to maintain a functional work force.

I suggested to a number of people that they try to leave if they were finding the situation too frightening. I saw some Katrina victims become quite upset when told not to worry about Rita. In those instances, I counseled the staff workers about the effect of those comments, and taught them more useful ways to communicate what they were trying to say. Impromptu groups formed and I used these to defuse the situation and to help begin contingency planning. As I had over the past number of days, I found that the people directly affected by Katrina were willing to listen to suggestions, asked reasonable questions, and approached the situation in a responsible fashion. It was a very disconcerting development for everyone, and I was glad when the meteorological reports showed a good chance that the same area of the Gulf Coast would not sustain a direct hit.

Joe and I were scheduled to work together the next day. We were sent to Biloxi to assess the current conditions and the needs of the inhabitants of the area. So, we loaded up a Penske truck with all sorts of supplies, and headed out. I think we were both a little bit in a funk.

This was our next to last day of deployment, we were beginning the separation process, and we were very, very tired. So, although we were thrilled to have the opportunity to finally work together, neither of us was at full strength. But, as psychologists, we used our ample clinical skills to give ourselves a proverbial kick in the butt. We debriefed each other, gained some insight as to what we had each accomplished and what we each still wanted to do. We agreed that we would drive around a bit and park in an appropriate spot and open shop.

We pulled into a small community near Keesler Air Force Base, and within minutes were surrounded by a bunch of kids. These kids, instead of asking for toys or stuffed animals, asked for diapers and formula and cleaning supplies and food. We gave them all they asked for and also some toys and stuffed animals. Our reward was seeing their faces light up in age-appropriate delight. Shortly

thereafter, the adults began arriving, and we were happy to supply them with much of what they needed.

The one thing we didn't have to give them was financial assistance. This was brought home to me when one woman told me that she had used her last money to go to a relief site two days prior, just to be told to come back the next morning. I loaned her \$10 to pay someone to drive her the next morning, again to be turned away. For all the good that was done, and a ton of good was accomplished, these stories were still far too numerous. And, I noticed that I wasn't shaking off my feelings of desperation too well, any longer.

We finished our day and returned to headquarters to begin our out-processing. Both Joe and I were to have the afternoon off the following day, so we decided to spend the morning in the field and then do some exploring. We planned our next day's activity over the requisite meal out, this time at Outback Steakhouse. By then, we were pretty comfortable driving all over, a development that didn't cease to amuse me. In any case, we met up with a bunch of Milwaukee firemen, and rendered mental health care. We dragged ourselves back after lights out; that complicated finding our cots, but we were successful.

The next morning was our last scheduled morning of work, and we addressed it with a renewed sense of purpose. We both knew, though, that it had become increasingly difficult to recharge as we ran out of energy during the day. Still, we were anxious to get out into the field.

We packed my ugly car and headed east, toward D'Iberville. We drove down to the Bay, directly across from where one of I-10's destroyed bridges had been. Carrying extra water and comfort packs, we introduced ourselves to people working at what we suspected had been their home. Again, we heard heartbreaking stories of loss, of how he was a master boat builder and had lost all of his tools as well as his home. His wife told of how she left the night of the storm, and had allowed the family pets, three cats and a Rottweiler to stay, on the advice of authorities. She was in such pain as she told me she would always remember the look on her sweet dog's face, as she told her that she would be back in the morning. Her pain was palpable, and all I could do was share it. My heart felt heavy. I could see that brick wall coming.

We got into the car after spending about 45 minutes with these good folk. As I started to drive, Joe collided with his wall. I listened, I comforted – I knew he had to get it out in order to move on.

After a few minutes, we were on our way again. He directed me to the side of the road where a mother and her 5 year-old daughter were feeding a cat. We pulled over, got out and greeted them. The mother told us that their home had been about 40 feet from where we were standing, and that it had been totally

destroyed. They knew this cat was ill, but since they had lost all of their own, they were bringing food to this one in the hopes that they could save him.

She then invited us over to see where their house had been, Her little girl came with us, not saying anything and not making eye contact. She explained what the area had looked like, and while she continued to speak with Joe, I went over to where the little girl was standing, just looking out. I brought with me a stuffed animal and gave it to the little girl. She quietly took it, and just held it. I asked her if she knew its name and she just shook her head. All I could come up with was "Cocoa," which she liked.

I told her that Cocoa needed two things from her: lots and lots of hugs and kisses, and to have his tummy rubbed. She followed my suggestion and, as she connected with her doll, she was able to spontaneously move away from the spot where she had been looking at what had been her home. She turned and took my hand and we walked back to her mother and Joe. We stayed for a little while longer and then had to leave. As I said good-bye, this little girl threw her arms around my leg and tried to keep me from leaving. Inadvertently, I had become yet another loss for her.

After separating, we resumed our rounds. This time, Joe noticed an older couple standing in front of an RV. We stopped there, and carrying water and other provisions, we approached the couple. They were initially somewhat reserved, although very polite. We found out that he had a negative experience with a Red Cross worker a couple days prior. We encouraged him to tell us what happened.

The gentleman was torn between telling us and clarifying that - except for that one individual - everyone they met from the Red Cross had been great. We thanked him for the gracious comments and prompted him to continue, He told us the story, we took down all the pertinent information, and told him we would do our best to correct the situation.

As he told us about the episode, the couple warmed to us, and they brought chairs out for us to sit with them. Somehow, we got talking about regular stuff we all do in our lives, and enjoyed seeing how similar we were. The man took us over to the remains of their house and described what had happened. The RV was their son's; they had opted to have him bring it to their land so they could stay there. He had been trying to re-collect some of his wife's jewelry for sentimental reasons when we arrived.

Joe complimented them on their pioneering way, and they both connected strongly to that. The woman asked her husband to get something they wanted to show us, and he returned with a Bible. She told us a story of how they had lost all their belongings and had gone to get some free clothes. They were drawn to a particular box and dug deep into it. They felt something hard and pulled out the Bible. They had lost their Bible in the storm, along with their eyeglasses.

Amazingly, this was a large print Bible. It contained a note from the woman who donated it, explaining that it was her mother's Bible, but because her mother had Alzheimer's, she didn't use it anymore. Her note asked that whomever found the Bible and her note realize that God is not angry with them, and to feel safe and secure in their faith. The woman signed her note with her name.

Her name was the same as the woman who had found the Bible!

This coincidence did it to me: I hit my brick wall about as hard as I could. Right there, in front of these two elderly people whom I had been comforting 15 minutes before, I burst into tears. And the beauty and strength of human nature was so exemplified as they gathered me in their arms and hugged me, and told me it would all be all right.

We took pictures together, and they invited Joe and me back down next year for a "home cooked meal"; she promised us a fish dinner. It was time to go.

We left the next day, and I got my pictures of this wonderful couple developed as soon as I got home. I framed them and sent a set to the couple and a set to Joe.

It's been almost two months since I've been home, and not a day has passed that I don't think of my time down South. There are many more stories to tell; most are terribly sad, and a couple are humorous. But, no matter how many I tell, somehow I still feel that the essence of this opportunity is hard to communicate.

The allure of disaster work is borne from the combination of willingness to deal with the unknown, reaching out to people in times of need, and maybe some bit of risk-taking. The relationships that develop, whether brief or longstanding, are unique due to the conditions under which they evolve. I am honored to be in contact with a number of people from Katrina; both those who lived through the storm, and those that went to help. Certainly, being involved in any capacity in this kind of undertaking can have a profound effect on an individual. I found this to be the case, and treasure the changes that have occurred.

I hope that this article, in some way, presents my experience as a disaster mental health provider. It is in no way meant to be representative of the experience as a whole, nor is it meant to impart factual information pertaining to this disaster.