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Memories of Hurricane Rita and Mental Health

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Your Life Your Health

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It seems like yesterday and it seems like a life-time, but it was only a year ago. The scars which remain of Rita are more than lost trees and houses. There are deep emotional scars which will heal but will never be forgotten. Most people associate “post –traumatic-stress syndrome” with military service, but in Rita Southeast Texas suffered a collective post-traumatic-stress and many individuals still struggle with a foreboding and a sadness which they do not understand, but which is just that, post-traumatic stress.

The stress began before the event. As the inevitability of Southeast Texas being struck by Rita unfolded and as those without critical, life-support responsibilities evacuated, a sadness began to settle over the city. On September 22, 2005, at mid-morning, I stopped preparations and thought about what I was feeling. More and more people were inching their way out of harms way and I wrote:

“There is an eerie quietness in Beaumont right now. Many have already evacuated and/or are on their way to evacuation. My immediate family is safely at a distance. It is hard to believe that a killer storm is inextricably headed our way and there is absolutely nothing that we can do about it.

...In less than 48 hours, we will know what our lives will look like physically. It is then that we will discover what is really important to us...As we await Rita, having done what we can, praying for all who must, or who do stay, we may feel helpless, as I do, but we never, ever be hopeless.”

As my family and thousands of others fled the storm, we communicated constantly by cellular phone. I remembered the words of Tevia in *Fiddler on the Roof*, when his daughter who was leaving for Siberia to marry, said, “Papa, God only knows when we will see each other again.” To which Tevia, his heart breaking, knowing that he would probably never see his daughter again, wisely said, “Then we shall leave it in his hands.” Those words struck a cord with me when I first heard them, now they echoed in my mind, as I thanked God for the ability to know that my wife, children and grandchildren were safe. I smiled as I remembered my wife’s protestations of leaving early Thursday morning. She only relented when I threatened to manacle and gag her in order to get her into the car with my son. I don’t know if I would have had the courage to release my family if I could never have heard how they were.

This all happened on Thursday but Friday was worse. If on Thursday Beaumont was quiet; on Friday there was silence. For the first time in my life – to my memory – I experienced a sense of forlornness, if not outright fear. As I prepared this column, I

looked up the definition of “forlorn,” it is precisely what I was feeling: “Sad and lonely because of isolation or desertion.” The city was deserted and I felt isolate, alone and sad

Furtively, we prepared personally and professionally. The emergency rooms were filled with those already experiencing the trauma of evacuation. Elderly people on hot buses had temperatures shooting up to 105 and above. For every patient discharged from the hospital, or transferred out of the city, it seems that there were two more to take their place. Physicians who stayed – all with children were encouraged to evacuate – picked up charts and saw patients in the hospital to make sure all were cared for. In the crisis, there was no chaos. There were pressures and frustrations, but there was also a quiet confidence that this job could and would get done.

Late Friday afternoon, having done everything which could be done, I shut down SETMA’s bank of servers and went to the Entergy building where I would spend the night with the Beaumont firefighters and with the city and county emergency management team. My son-in-law, who is a Beaumont firefighter and I spent the night together. His presence was a great comfort to me. I gained a deeper appreciation for the value of family that night and the next several days.

Until the last possible minute, transport planes continued to land at Municipal airport where patients, nurses and doctors were flown to safety in far-flung places. All that could be done had been.

Friday night, as the fury of the storm rose and fell, I watched local leaders perform their responsibilities admirably. Windows rated for high winds blew out; reporters from cable news services bounced down the road in the face of powerful winds. The howling of the winds was like the banshees from hell. In it all, I particularly marveled at the administrative and leadership skills of Carl Griffith. I was very proud of everyone. I knew that all over our city and others, brave people cared for strangers as if they were family. It went on forever it seemed, yet it was soon over.

On Saturday morning, I left the Edison building at 9:30 AM with two firefighters. The hurricane was over, but gale-force gusts of wind battered the truck as we wound our way to Memorial Hermann Baptist. The destruction was overwhelming. Few streets and no under passes were passable. The entire power transmission infrastructure was down. Power lines were down every where; trees block every road; no one had electricity, even the hospitals. Both hospital staffs worked in sweltering heat with a few auxiliary lights but mostly with battery-powered lightening and no air conditioning.

In the chaos, everyone pulled together. One thought consumed all thoughts, getting everyone to safety and caring for the neediest. On Saturday afternoon, I stood at the Ford Center where we anticipated setting up an emergency treatment center and watched a convoy of dozens of ambulance led by numerous law-enforcement officers speed by as they rushed to the aid of those in hospitals without water or power. The wail of the sirens on those emergency vehicles was thrilling as I thought, “Only in America!”

On Saturday night, the city was dark, but a ray of light broke through as neighbors who did not know each other began to congregate in the twilight and began the bonding of those who shared crisis and tragedy. Out of the tragedy, life was finding a way to reassert itself. A year later, many of those bonds remain as firm as on that lonely, dark night a year ago.

Sunday morning dawned and the silence was thick and heavy. A few people were trickling back but the town was deserted. One man rode his bicycle by and said he was looking for a cup of coffee and his morning newspaper. Both would be weeks before returning. News services from all over the world roamed the city looking for someone to interview, but no one in Beaumont saw the interviews; there was no power and there was no television.

Chaos seemed to reign over the city; yet the rebuilding began immediately. Everyone did what they could. Some had jobs which could be done. Firefighters were told that they were on extended duty until further notified; no days off and no going home. They worked tirelessly, going from house to house to make sure no one was trapped inside. They worked for everyone, except themselves.

As I looked at the debris around my neighborhood on that Sunday, I knew that the only way to survive mentally and emotionally was to “do something.” I began to clean. After an hour, I thought, “This is impossible,” but I kept going. With nothing else to do, I kept cleaning. After piling debris from my yard 12 feet high, 7 feet wide and 30 feet long, I began on my neighbors’ yards. Chaos began to give way to order, but it was not easy.

On Monday, September 26, when my wife and son returned to Beaumont, the reality of what our community faced was before me. When I saw them drive up, there was hope. As we embraced, we all wept. We wept for joy that we were all safe and together. Nothing can overcome that.

After several weeks, my son-in-law got a day off and drove to Madisonville where by daughter and four grandchildren were. He talked to them on his cell phone as he turned into the long drive. My daughter exhausted, heard the truck and thought that the last thing she needed was visitors. Suddenly one of the children exclaimed, “It’s daddy.” Tears well up in my eyes as I recall this story; for all six fell into each other’s arms sobbing for joy. Such reunions were common.

After three weeks of sweltering heat, we had power again. How, Entergy did that, I do not know, but they did it. I remembered that as a child my father would leave for weeks at a time after a natural disaster – he worked for Louisiana Power and Light, now a part of Entergy – and would not come home until power had been restored. As I watched the crews of young men and old do their magic in the midst of mayhem, I smiled to myself as I experienced the work of my father.

The physical scars of Rita are healing rapidly. Some will never recover, however, as the stress of Rita and its aftermath pushed them beyond their physical limits and they are no

longer with us. Others still suffer the physical damage which their bodies experienced from the stress of Rita; they may never recover. The anxiety and fear of another disaster plague others, but when seen through the memories of service, sacrifice, strength and spiritual nurture, Rita lets us know that hope and life find a way and that our community has more to be thankful for than to regret.

As we remember, a year ago, we know that the coming year will be a triumphal one; no matter what we have to face. Family, friends, faith and community will sustain us and our scars will heal, even the ones which cannot be seen.

The first step to healing is the willingness to admit that we were afraid, that we were sad, that we are anxious, or whatever other negative emotion it is that we experienced. Once acknowledged, the power of the past begins to lose its grip on us, and we begin to be made whole again. Sharing that pain with others continues the process of healing. Renewing of faith in God, in one another and in the inevitability of the triumph of good, completes the healing.