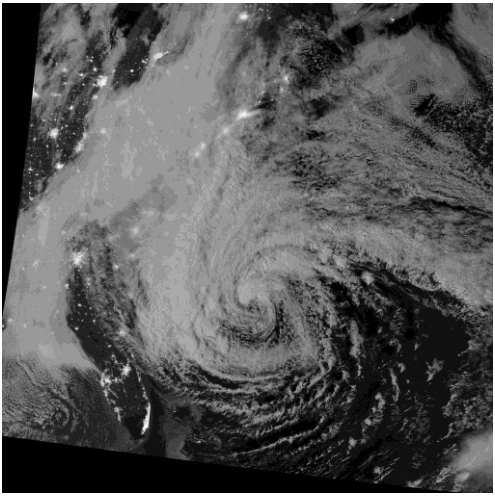
In the Wake of Disaster

Stories from the Center of Planetary Chaos

By

Derek Joe Tennant



Have you experienced a natural or man-made disaster? What was it like, in those first few hours, as you met neighbors you may not have spoken with in ages, as you clustered around the scene of tragedy or destruction and tried to figure out what you would do for food or water or shelter. Or maybe you evacuated, heeding the warnings of officials, and had to return home, with your heart in your throat as you approached your home, not knowing if it still stood or had become part of that debris field you just drove through...

There are many *official* responses to disaster, FEMA in particular, but other governmental and volunteer agencies as well. Yet the real healing following any event, large or small, happens when neighbors reach out to help one another. The stories in *In the Wake of Disaster* illustrate this and range from *the big ones*; Ivan, Katrina, and Sandy, through two tornados in Arkansas and Alabama, and even overseas, to Haiti after Hannah and Burma after Cyclone Nargis, both in 2008.

For my granddaughters, especially

Panjarat (Thailand)

and Dana (America)

As you may deduce from the above, my joy derives from the act of creation. I write to inspire you, to move your heart, and hopefully to amuse you all the while. We live in a sea of energy and consciousness. This energy is like water: its best work is when it is moving, vibrant and cleansing, alive with possibility. When it is trapped, captured, unable to flow it becomes stagnant and even toxic, a breeding site for dis-ease. I best serve when I allow energy to flow through me, when I am but a channel for consciousness to evolve. Moving my energy into the Universe allows room for energy to flow into me, nourishing and supporting me.

I hope you are grateful for what I have created, that it has moved you in some way. You can thank me for my work in several ways:

- bringing it into the awareness of others spreads the energy
- using any inspiration to take your own action or to embellish this work before passing it along feeds the flow
- or if you are so moved, showing your appreciation by passing some of your energy in the form of money back to me via my website also continues the flow that nourishes everyone.

I welcome your comments and/or questions. Contact me at derek@derekjoetennant.net

First Peek: Biloxi, September 2005, One Month After Hurricane Katrina

*I've already gotten used to driving around debris large enough to hold nails that can puncture my tires. And it's no big deal now to drive along the freeway and see couches, clothes, and file cabinets on the shoulder. Thankfully, it only took the road crews three weeks to get the soda machine out of the middle lane of I-10; clearing the debris from the interstate highway was that far down the *to-do* list, and we were so used to driving around it that it really didn't matter much. I fear that I will hurt myself when I return home, because now I don't think twice before driving over power lines draped across the roadway. But what still gets to me…the clothes in the tops of trees….the house in the creek, up against the bridge…the three 'Dorothy' houses[1] on Oak Street, blocking the southbound lane on three different blocks… the flagpole, bent only four feet from the top as if run over by a car. I can't imagine what it was that struck the pole hard enough to bend it like that so far from the ground. Or the twelve square block area completely pulverized, only piles of wood and metal, with some shiny parts that might be glass, capped by*

[1] Houses that floated off their foundation and landed somewhere else, annoying when they ended up in a roadway.

what seems like parts of a roof here and there....and now, five weeks later, a little cleared spot in the center, with a 10 X 10 pop-up canopy sheltering a table with some trinkets salvaged, nothing larger than a 2-liter bottle. Or driving back to the hotel each night, a two mile drive through a neighborhood where the only lights are an occasional flicker of a flashlight in the distance....and the lights of my hotel, but only above the first three floors, which are still dark and wet and without power.

A *Dorothy House* on Oak Street, Biloxi

Katrina: a name that will live in the hearts of millions of Americans, tainted with the smell of *disaster*. A hurricane that exceeded any that came before, Katrina brought 25 feet of storm surge and

winds topping 145 mph onshore in Hancock County, Mississippi on 29 August 2005. I work for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) following big storms. Hurricane Ivan was my first, in late-2004. Since then I've been deployed for varying lengths of time and various positions within the Agency for Dennis, Katrina, Gustav, Ike, and Sandy, as well as the tornado cluster that famously destroyed 20% of Tuscaloosa in 2011. I have responded with a small group of volunteers from all over the world to assist survivors in Biloxi after Katrina, Haiti after Hannah in 2008, and Mena Arkansas after a tornado ripped through half the town in 2009. I also volunteered with the City of Santa Clara Fire Department from 1992-2001, and volunteer with a local group as Incident Commander and Emergency Services Unit Dispatcher for public events such as air shows or art festivals. I like what a friend wrote to me when I was volunteering on the Thai-Burma border in 2008, just after Cyclone Nargis left tens of thousands of Burmese dead or missing… "You still alive? You seem to have an uncanny knack for finding the dead center of planetary chaos…" Now that's appropriate for a tombstone! But it is Katrina that everyone asks about first, and I helped there both as a paid FEMA employee, and as a volunteer helping people prepare to rebuild. There are many misconceptions about FEMA that can be clarified as I detail some of the stories from my service. *In The Wake Of Disaster* will primarily focus on these stories, written at the time and with the raw, fresh

emotion of the experience, and with occasional explanations about how FEMA operates.

> *Biloxi, October, 2005: I have yet to meet anyone who is hostile. That might change soon, as patience wears out. It's hard to be patient with the ponderous wheels of government when local officials go on TV and say "*everyone is getting $2358 for housing*" when everyone* isn't *and you live in your car wearing clothes you picked out of the Dollar General parking lot, thrown there so DG could try to clean the mud off the floor so it could begin to ~~mold~~ dry out. It's hard to be patient when the neighbors next door have a new, free travel trailer from the US Government and you are still waiting on anything at all because you didn't understand online registration and registered twice by mistake.*

First let's get to know something about FEMA and how it operates. From Wikipedia:

> *The **Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act)** is a United States federal law designed to bring an orderly and systemic means of federal natural disaster assistance for state and local governments in carrying out their responsibilities to aid citizens. Congress' intention was to encourage states and localities to develop*

> *comprehensive disaster preparedness plans, prepare for better intergovernmental coordination in the face of a disaster, encourage the use of insurance coverage, and provide Federal assistance programs for losses due to a disaster.*
>
> *The Stafford Act is a 1988 amended version of the Disaster Relief Act of 1974. It created the system in place today by which a presidential disaster declaration of an emergency triggers financial and physical assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The Act gives FEMA the responsibility for* ***coordinating government-wide relief efforts****. The Federal Response Plan [it mandates] includes the contributions of 28 federal agencies and non-governmental organizations, such as the American Red Cross. It is named for Sen. Robert Stafford (years in Senate 1971 – 1989), who helped pass the law.* [In March 2003 it was merged into the newly-created Department of Homeland Security.]

Note that FEMA is a **coordinating agency**: there is no mandate to traffic goods or services in the Stafford Act. Congress may appropriate[2] money to assist survivors; FEMA may facilitate the distribution of those funds, but the money is given to states and it is up to the state to decide how to

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[2] or not, as following Hurricane Sandy for a political reason I will mention later

spend the money. In fact, there are still billions of dollars remaining in state coffers, especially in Mississippi and Louisiana, from the appropriations made in December 2005 by Congress following Katrina. FEMA's mandate is to bring order to the chaos, not to serve water or meals. Each event is managed by a Federal Coordinating Officer who is assisted by the State Coordinating Officer. FEMA's work is consistently seen as a partnership between federal money and state decision-making. States get to decide what funds survivors can request, and what the limits are. Every event is different, so this book will often talk about generic rules and concerns. Your disaster may work out differently.

The bridge that linked Biloxi with Ocean Springs pre-Katrina. Mississippi would decide how federal funds would be spent to build its replacement.

Believe it or not, getting money from the government is neither easy nor quick. FEMA is working hard to improve the process; but as it stands, until we get better about tethering laptops to Blackberries and finding a table somewhere, once an area has become a Presidentially-declared Disaster Area you need to either go online to www.fema.gov or make a phone call (1-800-621-FEMA) in order to register a claim for assistance. Both of these methods are extremely problematic in areas that have lost power, cell towers, and phone lines. Keep in mind also that in these times of austerity and government cutbacks, FEMA is unable to keep a fully-trained and staffed phone center operating at levels that can endure the flood of phone calls when Hurricane Sandy affects tens of millions of people across a 12 state area. Standing up a phone center takes time, just as bringing in thousands of pallets of water takes time, especially when roads are blocked by trees and power lines. And as much of the process is computerized, if two people register from the same address, or if two applications have the same social security number involved, then all the affected applications must be notified by mail and then hand-processed, causing further delays. These issues are obviously very frustrating to someone who desperately wants to stop sleeping in their waterlogged car, but doesn't have the funds for the first- and last-month's rent on a new rental, the price of which just doubled and for which there is a waiting list. But remember the outcry whenever someone tells a story of FEMA fraud? People are outraged whenever a government

agency gets taken for a ride by a citizen who sees an opportunity to game the system. But the appropriate response by government is too tighten the process, making it harder for people to get money, and then FEMA is criticized for not responding quickly enough.

You know Katrina when you understand that the sign is ***not funny***.

This is not meant to say that there is no room for improvement. Following Katrina, many roads were

blocked within a triangle basically 200 miles per side. Imagine for a moment the physical challenges presented by this lack of accessibility if you think that the assistance arrived slowly. FEMA actually waited four weeks before expanding operations beyond a skeleton crew in the Biloxi area precisely because of the inability to provide shelter, food and water for us.

In Biloxi, centered on the coastal side of that triangle, we found that many people in the affected area were living in homes that had been in their family for generations. They had no mortgage, and thus there was no need for flood insurance. If this were your situation, would $31,900 enable you to rebuild your home when you only have a minimum wage job sufficient to pay the bills and buy beer every weekend, but nothing else? Where can these people turn for help? In reality, they have often been unable to rebuild, and the population along the Gulf Coast has yet to return to pre-Katrina levels.

> *Biloxi: She's not even 5 feet tall. The wide brimmed hat is immediately recognized, recalling the green of the rice paddies in Southeast Asia. She looks older than her years, but that may just be weathering, a result of exposure to tropical sun and wind. The broom in her hands furiously attacks the dirt and scraps of wood that litter the sidewalk, pushing it onto other debris already covering the asphalt of the street. The house, that used to be set 20 feet back*

from the curb, tilts at a small angle just three feet from the street. The violence that wrenched it from its foundation broke out every window, and twisted the doorway so the front door is jammed open. My quick glimpse inside shows mold, black mold, climbing the walls in the humid September heat. I shake my head, wondering at the normalcy she yearns for, but that she will never know again in this hulk of wood and drywall. And I drive on, trying not to stare.

Let's look at this flood insurance issue. No corporation insures property against flooding. Only the U.S. government sells flood insurance. The rates are high, and higher if you are in a designated flood plain (i.e., likely to flood in the future), and higher still if there has been flooding on your land in the past. And yet, when claims began to *flood in* following Hurricane Sandy in late-2012, the program was insolvent. It took a special bill passed by Congress 4 January 2013 that allowed the National Flood Insurance Program to borrow up to $9 billion to reimburse homeowners to keep the insurance in operation. And for anyone that relies upon private insurance to pay claims for wind damage, in most cases the companies point to *wind-blown-water damage* as an excuse to call it flooding, and thus reject the claim as ineligible.

Portions of this book are not about FEMA; I have also assisted survivors in other capacities, primarily as a volunteer. In 2004 I began my FEMA career

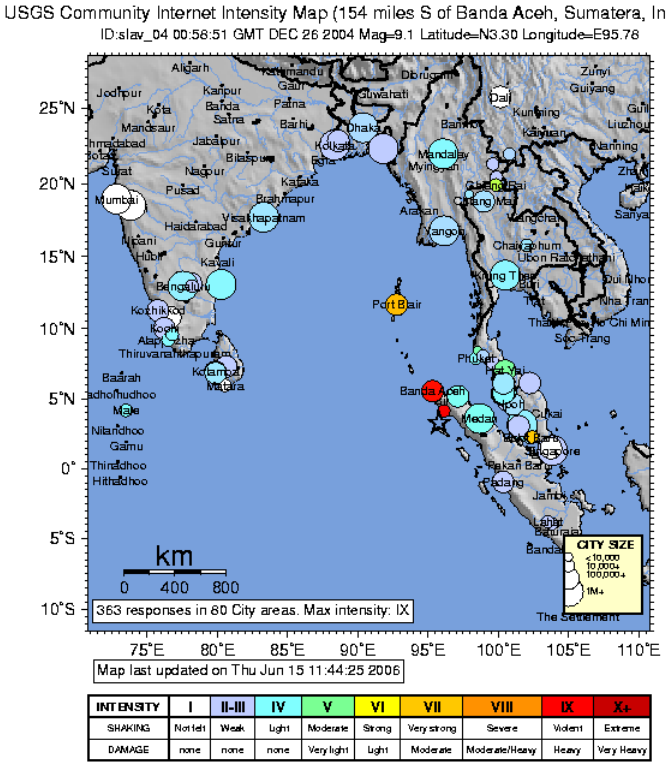
with Ivan, but that year saw another disaster that exceeds anything the U.S. has ever imagined; the Indonesian quake and tsunami on 26 December.

Musing About 9.1
29 December 2004

You've probably heard these things already. This is Thailand's September 11, except that there's no Bin Laden *to blame. Thai TV is running non-stop commercial-free coverage on every channel of the recovery efforts in Patong Beach and other nearby islands and beachfront towns in Phuket. The Thai death toll isn't higher than the Twin Towers and all the rest, but the King's grandson is among the victims, so* ***every*** *Thai has lost a member of the family in this disaster.*

We didn't feel the quake here in Tak, but others in our neighborhood did. We first heard about the tsunami over the loudspeakers that the nearby Buddhist temple normally uses to broadcast its morning service to our neighborhood. I don't understand that much Thai, but I instantly knew that whatever was being announced was very, very bad news, judging only by the looks on the faces of my neighbors as the words poured out. There is damage from the quake (minor) in Chiang Mai. If Chiang Mai is Seattle, the tsunami in Phuket is Los Angeles, and the epicenter of

the quake is in CABO SAN LUCAS. That's the difference between a measly 7.4 (Loma Prieta, 1989) and 9.1 (Indonesia, 2004).



Tak, Thailand, where I was at the time, is just to the right of Yangon, Burma on the map above.

BBC reports the quake lasted over four minutes and ruptured a fault line over 600 miles long. That's about the length of California. The island of Sumatra was

moved 100 feet west. There was one teaser for an upcoming report that said the Earth's rotation was affected by this quake. I missed the details….anyone else hear about that?

BBC's coverage has been outstanding. They've reporters in many locales. Two provinces in Indonesia have only seen one reporter, BBC of course. There's one province in Indonesia that even days after the event, still has not been heard from. The roads and bridges are so gone, no one can get in. Many of the deaths in Indonesia (at this point, just over one half of the total) are from the quake, not the tsunami. One photo op on BBC showed the reporter and a 360 degree pan from the town square….no people, only rubble. Two recognizable buildings in the middle of town. Oh, over there, that group of four folks are scavenging. Looking for water. It's more valuable than gold now, in Indonesia.

But life goes on. The bar in Patong Beach where I met Konkanok (my Thai wife) will re-open tonight. The building was under water at some point, and anything not nailed down was gone, but they've managed to clean things up and get a fresh supply of beer (no ice) and part of getting back to normal is beginning to do normal things again. Like drink warm beer. No chairs or tables yet, but lights will be on and they will have water if you prefer that to beer. And the foreign tourists, they came to Patong to

celebrate New Year's and forget about the bad year of 2004. It's the Thai job to help them forget.

Happy New Year!

And speaking of volunteer work and the 2004 tsunami, one organization was born out of that disaster that still provides international disaster response today. Originally named *Hands On USA*, then *Hands On Disaster Response*, it is in its third iteration as *All Hands*, a name change prompted no doubt by the fact that the majority of its volunteers for international projects come from outside the U.S. I met, and volunteered with, this group as they worked their second project following Katrina:

Hands On - Biloxi

I heard them before I could see them, they were laughing and yelling back and forth. The seven boys came into view, filling the lanes in the roadway and slowly riding their bikes. They seemed to be having the time of their lives....and all seven bikes were identical blue and white Huffy bikes. Hands On USA had raised money on their website, and found a donor who would match their own $5000 with his own, and now 100 new Huffy bikes cruise through East Biloxi. What struck me, as I watched this afternoon, was that this was the first time I have heard children laugh since arriving here 7 weeks ago. I am sad that it took so long, yet glad

that it has finally happened; so many thanks to Hands On USA!

I've another Hands On story this weekend [the one before Thanksgiving]. Saturday night was the Homecoming Prom for a local high school in D'lberville, the town on the mainland end of the only remaining bridge here in Biloxi. Most of the students only have a few pieces of recycled clothing, and many parents are still out of work. A Hands On volunteer contacted a friend in her hometown of Pittsburgh, and 2 weeks ago, 400 prom dresses showed up. A parents' committee has been busy hemming the dresses so that every girl would have a "new" dress to wear to the Prom. At the last minute, the Principal's daughter had no date...and one of the Hands On volunteers escorted her.

Hands On USA is less than a year old. It was formed by a few Americans who went to Thailand following the tsunami to volunteer their help for 3 weeks. After returning they began to raise money to take on other projects, expecting to spend some time each year giving back to the world community. Along came Katrina at a time they had planned to do a housing project in Sudan. They turned up in Biloxi instead. Since a week after the storm, they have been helping residents here. I first ran across them because they have opened the East

Biloxi Recovery Coordination Committee. *Literally thousands of volunteers are showing up to help Biloxi and the surrounding areas recover; and Hands On USA has taken on the task of organizing this flood of assistance. They have gone door-to-door to identify who needs assistance, and then distribute *work orders* to groups of volunteers who complete the tasks. Additionally, they have enough volunteers of their own to run other projects; for the last month they have been gutting houses. This entails removing everything in the home, furniture, dry wall, appliances, photos, carpets....right down to the studs. The many groups have done this for more than a thousand homeowners so far. Interestingly, they have managed to keep a steady supply of volunteers flowing through their organization by using Craig's List. Check now, and see if you can find their request. I found this a fascinating use of what most consider to be *just* a flea market-type site*[3].

It should now be no surprise when I tell you, that today on my first day off since coming here, I joined with Hands On and helped to gut two homes and clear the debris in the yard of another. There were 25 volunteers, divided into two teams. I don't

[3] Remember, in November 2005 Craig's List was still in its infancy

*know what the second team managed to do, but I know of two homeowners who can now move to the sanitation step and get their homes back to livable conditions much sooner than if they had to do this work themselves. Having a dozen young folks (folks my age were rare, but I wasn't the only *old* person) blitz your drywall saves weeks of work for most homeowners and gets the trash out on the curb for the third pass of the debris removal trucks. Both are valuable services.*

Glad today's note isn't as dark as the rest of my writings from Biloxi. We are beginning to see light again here, thankfully!

Besides the outstanding work Hands On was doing coordinating volunteers, one aspect of the group really captured my heart: they use the physical labor as a way to enter the community, and then they look around and ask, “How can we really make a difference here?” In Biloxi, that small act that had huge impact was a project to place small, laminated, cardboard street signs on trees and buildings. Most of the signs were gone, taken by the objects that were borne by the storm surge. Imagine having a few thousand volunteers, new to the city, that you need to direct to a particular location. You can hand them a map, but it is useless without the corresponding signage on every corner. I spoke with a FEMA co-worker, a Mississippi resident, in 2010 about the recovery efforts in Biloxi. He

mentioned that some of those signs were still posted, five years later!

My job title, until mid-2012, was *Disaster Assistance Employee*. We were referred to as *DAEs*, and were basically on 24-hour call at any time that we had made ourselves available in the DAE database. We had to be available at least two months during the government's fiscal year to remain in the program. We work 7am – 7pm, 7 days a week, when we first get deployed. At some point, the hours recede; we may only work 10 hours each day, and we eventually get a day off each week. This is all driven by the needs of the situation. Katrina was the worst: I left home 5 September and my first day off was the Sunday before Thanksgiving. The DAE workforce is heavily skewed towards older people; it is difficult for most younger folks to have this kind of drop-what-you-had-planned availability and keep a regular job. FEMA covers all expenses, including a per diem to cover meals and incidental expenses and money for laundry. The program has changed now, more on this later.

To work with any group: FEMA, All Hands, Red Cross, you hear the stories as people come to terms with what they have experienced. Science teaches us now about *mirror neurons*: it seems that we have only to view or hear about the experiences of another, and the same areas of our brain activate as if the experience had been our own. One of the changes that we instituted in Biloxi, within the FEMA framework, that I am most proud of was an effort to get crisis counseling in place for FEMA

staff: counseling for the counselors, so to speak. Often survivors don't need to be handed food or even money, as much as they need a sympathetic ear, a compassionate listener to hear their story.

> *Biloxi: Yesterday the owner of the second house we were gutting told us her story. She, her son, her nephew and his wife were in her home the day of the storm. Their front door is 26 feet above sea level, on a hill with a dock out into the Back Bay. She was sandbagging the kitchen-to-garage door at 9:30 am (water was coming under the door) when a 3 foot wave crashed through her front windows into the living room. By the time she and her soon got out into the backyard, the water was above their ankles. The fence had already blown down, so getting onto the street behind their house was easy, but fighting uphill through the winds and dodging falling trees was not. [Note: wind speed at this point in Biloxi was *only* about 120 mph.] They went two streets up, and tried to get into a house. The occupants* **wouldn't let them in**, *so they sheltered in a shed behind that house. At least until a tree fell on it. Then they went one more street further back, and found someone peeking out of a window who took them in. Besides the highlighted part above, I was struck by two parts of her tale. First she was describing how her nephew and his wife had gone back into the house looking*

for their second cat. This while the water was rising (it got to four feet deep before it was done). She said as she was sitting in the shed, she kept dialing her nephew's cell phone (on her own phone) to be sure he was safe. Wow; the cell phones were still working at that point. Second, she finished by saying that her perspective is so different now. In her words, "I used to get so angry when my hamburger wasn't made just right, now I'm grateful for any food. I used to take so much for granted: my son lives just a few minutes away driving, but 45 minutes when I have to walk to get there. And lastly, you're here today removing every bit of stuff I've accumulated over a lifetime of buying things. And I don't care a whit about that, because I'm alive, my family is all OK, and that's what's truly important."

Before we volunteers went off to serve the free dinner on Thanksgiving Day, the coordinator gathered everyone for a briefing. She ended it saying "Nothing that can go wrong today can rival 29 August. Don't get upset, keep smiling, it can't be as bad as what we went through 3 months ago." Don't lose sight of what's important, when you think of how to deal with your 'stuff'. Having lost a house in a fire (and more) I can also vouch for what's important. But I also recognize the stress surrounding losing your stuff. It even

generates guilt, for folks who miss it and then feel it shouldn't be important, so why am I missing it? Ah, the complicated lives we lead, huh?

Of course others have stories to tell about what it is like to experience Mother Nature venting fury upon what Man has built. Apologies, author unknown:

TWAS THE NIGHT BEFORE THE HURRICANE

'Twas the night before the hurricane
When all through the state
Not a gas pump was pumping
Not a store open late

All the plywood was hung
On the windows with care
Knowing that a hurricane
Soon would be there

The children were ready
With flashlights in hand
While bands from the hurricane
Covered over the land

And mama with her Mag-Lite
And I in my cap
Had just filled the bath tub
For flushing our crap

When out on the lawn
There arose such a clatter
I sprang from the closet
To see what was the matter

The trees on the fence
And the neighbor's roof torn
Gave the fear of us dying
In this terrible storm

With a little wind gust
So lively and quick
I remembered quite clearly
Our walls weren't brick

More rapid than eagles
Her courses they came
And she whistled, and wafted
And surged all the same

Off shingles! Off sidings!
Off rooftops! Off power!
Down trees! Down fences!
Down trailers! Down towers!

In the south of Mississippi
She continued to maul
Screaming Blow Away!
Blow Away! Blow Away All!

As wind ripped and tossed
The debris through the sky
I peeked out the shutters

At cars floating by

So go to the safe-room
My family did do
With a portable radio
And batteries too

And then, in a twinkling
I heard on the set
The end was not coming
For a few hours yet!

As I calmed down the kids
And was turning around
Through the window it came
With a huge crashing sound

A tree branch it was
All covered in soot
The wind blew it smack-dab
On top of my foot

A bundle of twigs
Now lay in a stack
And my living room looks
Like it was under attack

The wind - how it howled!
The storm - very scary!
Myself and the family
Were all too unwary

The dangers of hurricanes

Are serious, you know
They are taken for granted
As Katrina did show

With the winds dying down
And the danger beneath
I noticed my tool shed
Was missing its sheath

So I grabbed my last tarp
And nailed it on down
Then I got in my car
And I headed to town

The traffic was awful
And stores had no ice
My five gallon cooler
Would have to suffice

Generators were scarce
Not one left in town
There were trees on the roads
And power lines down

FEMA was ready (not!)
With people to work
Electrical companies
Came in from New York

And in the midst of
This peculiar routine

Another storm emerged
Just out in the Ocean[4]

I sprang to the car
And gave my family a whistle
Then away we all went
Like a Tomahawk missile

You could hear us exclaim
As we drove out of sight
"The hell with this place,
Vermont seems just right!"

FEMA has three basic sections: Public Assistance, Individual Assistance, and Community Relations. In Public Assistance (PA), FEMA provides money and engineering to repair, rebuild, and mitigate future impacts of storms on public infrastructure: bridges and roads, libraries and schools, and City Halls, for example. This section also provides money to assist local jurisdictions with the increased cost of providing life safety: the extra hours and overtime for police, fire, and medical personnel.

I was deployed as part of the PA section for Hurricane Gustav in 2008. We were sent to Baton Rouge, because the forecast track of Gustav had it making a direct hit on New Orleans. The plan was to stage nearby, and thus be on scene in NOLA within hours of the eye passing overhead. However, as is often the case, the storm made a left turn at

[4] Hurricane Wilma

the last moment and the eye went over Baton Rouge instead:

> *Baton Rouge, 2008: Why did I think that lessons would be learned from Katrina?*
> *I walked in to a Command Center being set up, 31 August, exactly what I expected. Got something for me to do I ask?*
> *"Yeah, the FEMA liaison inside the Emergency Operations Center in New Orleans (the one where Mayor Nagan and FEMA's Federal Coordinating Officer are doing their work) has a family illness and needs to leave within the next 3 hours, can you go replace her?"*
> *Sure, I say, where do I go?*
> *"Oh go get your badge first, you can't get a laptop or through the military checkpoints to get into New Orleans without it." Then, "Oh, darn, we don't make badges on Sundays....come back on Monday at 8 am."*
> *And during that evening's *daily* 6 pm conference call: "So.....where do we put the people who are on the busses evacuating from New Orleans? Can we send them on to the shelter that was just opened in Arkansas?"*
> *"No, they're on school buses, and those buses can't leave Louisiana. Well, they've been sitting in Shreveport (near the Arkansas border) for the last 2 1/2 hours waiting to find out where they can get off.*

We'll get back to you once we figure that out."

[Then Monday, the day Gustav makes landfall]

In typical FEMA fashion, I continued to wait for my badge the entire morning. My assignment, once I had my badge, was to be the liaison between the State and local officials in Region 8, a half dozen counties (Louisiana calls them parishes) in the Northeastern corner of the state. This is the section of LA least affected by the storm. As luck would have it, 20 minutes before I had my badge in hand, the doors on the building were locked by Safety to prevent anyone from leaving during the peak of the storm. We were left to huddle around the TVs and peer out of the glass front doors, the only view outside left after everything else had been covered in plywood. The power went out at about 1 pm, the generator was functioning within half an hour, and we were left to listen to the wind banging on the roll-up doors that protect the receiving dock.

The eye of the storm passed Baton Rouge about 15 miles to the south, so we were very close to peak wind as it passed. By the time it got to us, peak wind was 98 mph. At 5 pm, the doors were opened and I was able to leave for my 4-hour drive north.

Wind was still gusting to 70 as I began my drive, and I drove cautiously. Rain was still

an issue and the roads were littered, in some places lanes were blocked, by downed trees and tree limbs. My rental is a 2007 Prius. Good thing, since I was able to average 47 mpg with my cautious driving and only used half a tank going 210 miles through countryside completely without power. It was after 7:30 before I saw lights on, and that was only one little pocket in a town of maybe a dozen buildings.

About 45 minutes north of Baton Rouge, in the dark, I was driving on a two-lane state road and came upon a police car, lights flashing, parked diagonally facing my direction across the median stripe. Assuming the road was blocked, I pulled off onto the shoulder just in front of the car, put my FEMA badge around my neck, and stepped out into the driving rain. I came to within 10 feet of the driver-side window when it rolled down. I held out my FEMA badge and started to ask if I could get through the roadblock when the officer stuck his arm outside the car, index finger pointing above my head. "Just making sure no one runs into that," he said, and then he withdrew his arm and rolled the window back up. I looked up, and ***just four inches*** *above my head, was a power line. Thanks a lot, officer!*

But other than trees down and power out, not much else was evident. Few roofs off in Baton Rouge, almost no other visible

damage the entire trip. We'll see what happens in the aftermath with flooding, but all in all, I feel we got out of this one lucky.

Baton Rouge LA, 5:10pm 1 September 2008… two minutes before I drove over someone's front yard to get past other trees in the road…

Tuesday morning, Monroe, Louisiana: Last night I thought I was outrunning the storm. Gustav was traveling NW at about 8 mph, I was driving N at 50. While I was driving, and not getting minute-by-minute updates, it turned North too. So this morning, it caught me, the eye again passing just a bit west of me, leaving me to enjoy the feeder bands a second time, the parts of the storm containing the most rain. I still say,

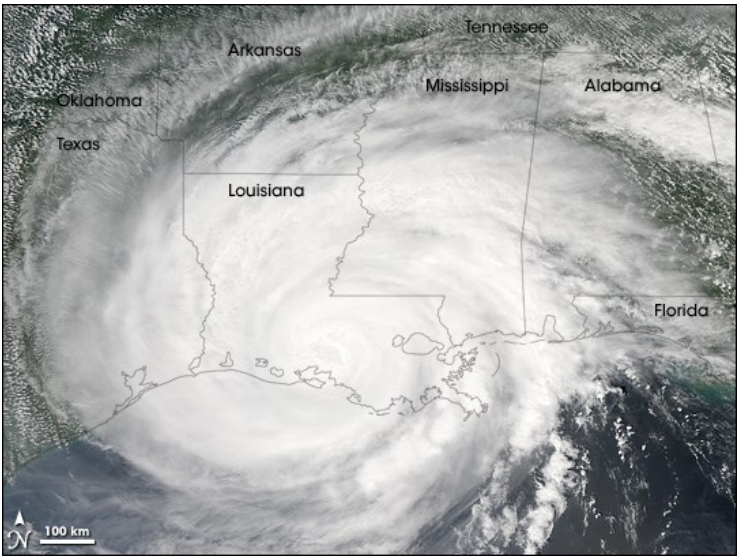
however, that the rain in Thailand comes down harder during the monsoons than what I've seen here.

I'm in Monroe, LA, interfacing with the various Emergency Services (police, fire, etc.) in the county Emergency Operations Center (EOC). There's just not much going on, is all. Most of the 12 northern counties have power, or never lost it. A few trees are down, but nothing that won't be cleared quickly once the rain stops. I doubt the EOC will stay active more than another few days.

Indeed, the worst of all of this in Monroe has been the evacuation from the coastline. Monroe Parish shelters today house 7000 people from the coast. These folks have been told it's not yet clear to return home, too much debris on the roads, too much power out. After even a few days, they are anxious to return, now that it is clear that most evacuated for "no good reason" (as one man said to me today). This was the first hurricane along the Gulf Coast since the Katrina/Rita punch of 2005. When the authorities said "Beware Gustav" late last week, many remembered Katrina in 2005 and left. What worries us is the notoriously short memory of folks, who may consider this when the next storm comes (Ike in 10 days?) and stay put when they should once again leave.

But why should I worry? The folks at the

biggest shelter here in Monroe were quick to ask where the FEMA and Red Cross money is, to pay for their hotels and gas since the government 'told us we had to evacuate". They remember these payments following Katrina, not realizing (or forgetting) that the extraordinary situation then created unusual solutions. Now they are just angry that they will have to pay for their own gasoline, in order to stay safe. If they will choose to continue to remember Katrina and its aftermath, maybe I don't need to be concerned. But wait, then I see the front page of the USA Today. The top story is a photo of the US Army, delivering Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) to folks who chose to stay behind in New Orleans. Excuse me? You are under a ***mandatory*** *evacuation order, you choose to remain, and less than 12 hours after the hurricane makes landfall, you are having food delivered to your home? Someone is risking their own life going into a still-raging hurricane to bring you food that you should have already arranged to have before you decided to ignore the prudent course of action? Sorry, friends, I'm full of compassion, but even I get concerned when I see situations like this.*



Gustav's eye is almost to Baton Rouge, moving north at 8 mph. This photo was captured by the Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) on NASA's Aqua satellite on September 1 at 2:00 p.m. I began my drive from Baton Rouge to the top left corner of Louisiana at 5 pm…

Flooding was the real issue in the area around Monroe following Gustav, and although there were dozens of homes flooded, most of the water was on farmland.

> *Monroe: I hadn't thought about it at all, my tendency to get sea- or air-sick, until the Sgt. mentioned what we should do if we got sick in the back of the Blackhawk.*
>
> "We can put her down just about anywhere, and let you walk it off. But if you

blow chunks in the back, everyone will join you, and I ain't cleanin' it up*" he said.*

I was joining 6 County Office of Emergency Preparedness Directors and their State Liaison in a tour of the northeast corner of LA to view flooding from the air. It was my first time in a Blackhawk helicopter. It rode rather smooth, as long as the pilot behaved himself. Three times he didn't, wanting to show off the capabilities of his machine, no doubt. Even sitting here the next day, when I remember how he was banking and dancing in that thing, I get queasy.

*We were up for 6 hours, with a break after each 2 hour segment to refuel. There are a lot of tilled fields that are underwater, and we saw up towards 50 houses still standing in pools of water. But thankfully, there's not as much damage around here as there is down south, around Baton Rouge. Today is as much of a *rest day* as we are likely to see for at least another week, tomorrow we start planning how best to re-open the shelters and find supplies to replenish the warehouses in preparation for Ike. The expectation here is that there will be fewer evacuees next week. Most folks only remember the last storm. When it was 30 August and the last storm was Katrina, we had 1.9 million people leave the Gulf Coast from Louisiana alone before Gustav hit. Now that the last storm is Gustav, and with*

*plenty of folks saying "I didn't need to leave for that!" we figure they will stay put, no matter the forecast. And Mayor Nagin calling Gustav the *Mother of All Storms* will hurt us now, considering how Gustav turned out. Thanks Mayor. You put your mouth in it again.*

Northeast Louisiana, post-Gustav, from the Blackhawk. Water is only supposed to be on the right-hand side of the levee…

One last story from Gustav; the Monroe EOC was still operating 10 days later when Ike came onshore in Texas:

Learning a whole new technology and language…..

The tornado warnings, and storm cells, are passing almost as fast as the winds. We are on the side of Ike that generates the most tornados, so everyone is tense. Currently the winds are around 40 mph, and the rain has only started here. But there have been four wall clouds (storm cells that generate tornados) go by in the last hour, all four showing some rotation and 2 showing funnel clouds. There are local amateur radio operators cruising the roads looking to spot tornados, and one has a webcam hooked to his cell phone and broadcasting live video onto a website: http://ladeltaweather.com/webcast/

Even the National Weather Service (NWS) is monitoring the feed. In our EOC we are monitoring the live feed as well as the real-time radar posted by NWS, so we can direct the spotters to potential problem areas. The Communications division of the county emergency services unit has a command post here where I am, and as the 4th wall cloud passed over the EOC, we all went outside to try to spot the funnel. As we stood there on the deck (the EOC is in a ~~tornado magnet~~ manufactured home), rain pouring down and black cloud overhead, we heard the sound of an approaching freight train. We all looked at one another; it was coming from behind the building as we stood under the awning of the front door. You have that

*moment of indecision…..run inside, and find a desk to hide under? Dash 30 yards to the Fire Department's *burn room* (a large steel cargo container) and hide in something that may not move in a tornado? Then the train thunders by on the tracks just across the fence from us, beyond the burn room. Huge sigh of relief…….*

In the end, none of the parishes in the northeast corner of the state were declared. That means that all they qualified for was the emergency, 72-hour funding to support life services. The costs of opening shelters, the repairs to some homes from the minor flooding, and what debris removal there was to take care of had to be borne by the state and the towns.

The second sector of FEMA, Individual Assistance (IA), provides money to households to assist their recovery process. One big misconception about FEMA centers around the idea that, "the government will give you money to rebuild if you suffer damages from some disaster". For fiscal year October 2012 – September 2013, FEMA assistance to individual households is capped at $31,900. You may need assistance paying for a rental while your home, with its mortgage payment still due, is repaired. You may find that the rent charged for the few remaining vacant homes has tripled, literally, and you need help finding a new place to rent. You may have lost Grandma's antique dresser, among other personal belongings; FEMA money is not intended to make you whole *like insurance* might.

Rather, it is meant to help get you back on the road to recovery. You may need, if you are a homeowner and not a renter, money to rebuild since your insurance likely has a clause claiming that all hurricane damage was caused by water, making it *flood* damage, and therefore ineligible for insurance coverage. In late 2005, Representative Stevens, from the Biloxi-Gulfport area, went to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency and got detailed, time-lapse data from satellites showing wind speed and water height during the height of Katrina, The data proved that Katrina's winds were 145 mph when the eye came onshore, and the storm surge followed two hours later. Consult any chart and you find that winds of 145 mph will *destroy most buildings*; consequently, in Mississippi at least, the ocean water did little more than mix the debris left after the winds had passed. Yet very few insurance claims were paid for Katrina's damage, despite premiums paid by homeowners who expected, because of clauses in their policies, that insurance would cover wind damage.

Much of my work with FEMA has been in IA. FEMA finds large empty buildings that it can lease for a short period of time, and then it opens a Disaster Recovery Center (DRC). The DRC is meant to be a one-stop shop for survivors; any agency or group that is offering a service can set up a table. Of course, FEMA representatives with access to the claim system are there to answer questions and explain letters for survivors, and SBA is there to process loan applications. There may be representatives from local groups collecting and

distributing food, crisis counselors, someone from the State Insurance Commissioner's Office, legal aid, and a person coordinating and matching volunteer workers with needs in the community. FEMA also offers advice on how to rebuild in ways that will lessen damage in future events, a section called Mitigation. There are plans for storm shelters freely available, and information for dealing with the black mold that plagues homes that have been soaked and left without power following hurricanes on the Gulf and East coasts. After a few months in each instance, we began to hear about *Katrina cough* and *Sandy cough*; these are symptoms of people who are living in a home where mold has taken over. It gets inside the walls, on the studs and everything, and is nearly impossible to remove once that happens. Hint: if the mold has taken over, burn everything and start over…

I was a manager of a DRC in Atmore my first time out, after Ivan, and went to Texas to manage one there due to Ike less than 24 hours after returning home from Gustav in 2008. Being a government agency, logic is not permitted: you can't just go from Louisiana to Texas to work a different disaster; you have to go home first and get redeployed from there. My other stint with IA was my time in Biloxi. I had spent the first three weeks, 5 – 25 September, working in the Community Relations section in Arkansas:

> *We are staying in Memphis TN now. It gets us more per diem than Arkansas, and only adds a few minutes to our commute.*

We are assigned 5 counties here in Eastern Arkansas, and we are to ensure everyone who might qualify for assistance gets registered. Near as we can tell, about 2000 folks have gone through this area since before the storm, and about 800 are still here. They are mostly in private residences or motels, as all the state run shelters have been closed. We have two shelters in our area, both run by churches. We have been amazed on the one hand, at the outpouring of help for the evacuees (that's a politically correct term for refugee). Everywhere you look, you see signs for free something… phone calls, food, clothes, furniture, or time at the skating rink… the locals have been outstanding. On the other hand, the communications between different agencies have been horrendous. Within FEMA (not new) or between state and local officials, things are chaos or not communicated at all. I know of at least 6 instances where state run shelters were activated due to expected evacuee arrivals, only to be closed a few days later because no one showed up. In 2 cases, hot meals for 300 were prepared, and no one came. Over 250 trucks carrying ice spent 6 days driving around through Alabama and Mississippi (at $600 each per day, FEMA expense) getting turned away at every stop. Finally last Saturday, they arrived in Memphis and off-loaded the ice into a large freezer warehouse until

requested. All while CNN asks where is the ice? It's out on the roads being given a tour of the South…flag down a semi if you're thirsty….

We attended a Rotary Club meeting Monday, the guest speaker was the County Emergency Manager and he wanted to show us off now that we were here. During his talk, he actually said: "I don't know many blacks, but during this, most of them that I met were very nice folks. Even most of the whites were nice. We had about 50/50 white and black, working together. It's nice to finally see that around here." Finally?? WOW. That's Arkansas for ya.

Haven't seen any snakes. We keep getting warned by locals to watch for cottonmouths. I ***have*** *seen lots of cotton. Next week is cotton pickin' week.*

I'm not sure what's happening with me. We're done with our assignment, but the local management doesn't want to re-assign us, they keep hearing rumors that more folks will be evacuated here from Texas. I can't get through to anyone who can get me transferred to a long term position in a Recovery Center, so I may be home soon.

Ultimately, we were given the option to redeploy from the staging area in Atlanta, or go home. I went to Atlanta. By now, the storm over what had happened in New Orleans was huge. I had written from Arkansas:

As the reports pour in from the South, it's easy to get caught up in the blame game, whose fault is this? Is it the media, for "crying wolf" and hyping every single storm into a catastrophe only to be proven wrong? Or the administration for diverting levee repair money to the war in Iraq for the last 4 years? Can we fault the New Orleans mayor for instructing the local police to focus on protecting rescuers rather than performing search and rescue, or not ordering that the buses be used to ferry people out of the city ahead of the storm?

We who are not involved directly in the rescue effort have the chance to look at where this leading in the coming months. We are now a nation with over a million refugees. How we deal with this extends beyond tomorrow and next week. It even extends beyond a demonstration of our compassion by making a cash donation to the Red Cross before we move on to the next disaster. There will be a domino effect throughout the economy and the nation, not just from the loss of gas production in the Gulf, but from the newly jobless defaulting on mortgage and credit card payments, the newly homeless seeking shelter in a ripple spreading outward from Mississippi, the tsunami of building supplies (that used to be for sale at your local Home Depot) headed into the South and raising the price of those

replacement windows you've been contemplating...the list goes on and on as you think about it.

It's easy to get sucked into the vivid images streaming out of the South as satellite video phones make their way into the area. But we need to think about the end result, how it will affect us, and how we might aid and direct our nation's response. Any good ideas you have would be welcome, and please RAISE YOUR VOICE so that we may weather this crisis in the most humane way possible. We can make a difference.

My biggest complaint through the years about FEMA is their method of making job assignments. It is changing as so many people see the folly of the old method, which was to have a list of jobs, start at the top of the list, and the next person in the door gets the next job on the list. They took no account of experience either within or outside of FEMA. When I got to Atlanta, I wanted to manage a DRC like I had in Alabama the year before. So I went from person to person, asking for that assignment, and getting directed until finally I got to the correct person. She asked me to sit tight for a bit while she tried to accommodate my request. After about three hours, she came to me and gave me the name and contact info of someone in Jackson, Mississippi. I drove the next day, and got to Jackson when it was nearly dark. I was instructed to report the next morning.

I checked in and was asked, “Where did you work as a DRC *Coordinator*?” I hadn’t, I replied, and clarified I had been a Manager. That wasn’t acceptable, I was told, and again I spent hours waiting to see what would happen next. Finally at 3 in the afternoon, my contact explained that there were no Coordinators available, so I was going to have to do the job. I kid you not, these were my instructions: “Go to the Field Office in Biloxi, find the desk where JS was working, read the note he left you, and do what it says.”

And so began one of my most rewarding experiences in FEMA.

On the Back Bay side of Biloxi

It turned out that the *note* John left for me was short and to the point: “This operation is hosed. I need to leave before I get blamed for it.” That is

paraphrased and modified to get it past the censors... And so I asked around and discovered that my job was to supervise the DRCs in the 6 Gulf Coast counties of Mississippi. I have had lots of management experience, including within emergency services, and so I got to work. First order of business, get a tour of the coast from someone who had been there more than a day or two:

> *"The roof down there, near the beach...that's* *Miracle Church**" my navigator said as we drove about 300 yards inland from the water. I had seen the piece on CNN a few days after Katrina blew through Pass Christian. The church, just yards from the water, still has most of its stained glass windows, in a town without another complete pane to be seen. The water didn't reach the crucifix above the altar, in a town where the water was over every roof.*
> *"Did everyone here evacuate?" I asked.*
> *"Most did. The 32 that didn't died. They opened a second food tent Monday."*
> *The casual monotone wasn't meant to sound apathetic. I hope I don't come home that numb.*

Although everyone heard about New Orleans, the problem there was the levee break, which happened 36 hours after the eye had passed. The eye of Katrina, with 145 mph winds and 35 feet of storm surge, came onshore in Hancock County.

*I visited a FEMA Disaster Recovery Center today in Waveland, Hancock County, MS. There is one convenience store open **in the entire county**, five weeks later. The DRC is in the KMart parking lot, the same KMart where helicopters lifted citizens to safety minutes before the water covered the building. The center is not inside a building, because only a few are left in the county. Generators run the laptops, a satellite modem connects with the FEMA database, and the wind blows everyone's papers across the lot. If it wasn't for the wind, it would truly be unbearable in this afternoon's 95 degree heat. But two weeks ago, they received canopies at the center; for a week before that they were out in the sun **all** day. I had to leave the county before finding gas, and still waited for 20 minutes to pay $3.25/gallon for 87 octane, at a station where over half the pumps had been destroyed[5]. Part of the wait was because the rear of the pick-up truck in front of me had a dozen gas cans that needed to be filled. Generators need gas too.*

We've been instructed not to wear our FEMA shirts outside the Centers. Unless you WANT to be a target. But I will tell you that so far everyone is happy to see us. I am sure that will change soon…

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[5] Compared to half that price in CA when I came here

I stayed at a hotel that used to have a casino attached. Biloxi had 14 casinos; not one stayed moored to its hotel. Mississippi had a law that casinos could not be on land, so there were all of these hotels with the lobbies and the rooms on the beach, and a casino moored to the back. You would walk through the lobby and into the casino, never realizing you were on a boat. FEMA leased rooms in one of these; the water had flooded the lobby and the next two floors. A month later, even three months later when we moved out, the carpet in the lobby was still wet. No elevators worked, and no smoke alarms, so everyone took stairs to their rooms and there was a 24-hour fire watch posted on every floor (more local survivors with new jobs). We pass thru a National Guard checkpoint to get there every night. As the shoreline is off-limits to residents, government ID is required to get through the martial law line. It is spooky to drive along the shoreline past hotels with no lights on.

> *I'm now committed to staying till 3 January, unless they get tired of me, or I get tired of the turf wars. And there are some **big** turf wars going on here. I'm having to think *politically* for the first time in a long time....and have already fallen back on my "ask forgiveness, not permission" philosophy twice. Five weeks into this recovery, they are finally getting a handle on clearing the debris. No stores damaged by storm surge have even begun to rebuild.*

Bridges are closed, so traffic is horrendous. Restaurants that are open are serving limited menus because so much food had to be replaced. Only about 40% of the street signs remain. Whole neighborhoods are dark at night.

The day I arrived was the day the water was turned back on in Biloxi. What came out of the tap for the first week was dirtier than anything you could hope to wash in it, including your own sweat-soaked, mud-splattered body after a day spent toting drywall to the curb. Power came back on two days later. However, I was one of the lucky ones: Mississippi Governor Barbour hosted a week-long conference of architects from around the globe in our hotel. Their task was to *re-imagine* the Gulf Coast; since so much had been destroyed, his idea was to scrape everything clean and start over. Of course, world-renowned designers need internet access, so within two days of getting power, we also had a T-1 connection to the 'net. Can't get in the tub, but can surf the Web better than ever before. What's not to like about that? And, by the way, none of the ideas coming out of that conference were implemented; it seems that the people of Mississippi couldn't agree on implementing building codes for the first time, never mind rezoning the entire coastline.

Biloxi: We're just entering the part of the process, 9 weeks after landfall, which we were at last year in less than 3 weeks

following Ivan, FEMA-money-wise. And Recovery-wise, there's a county I work that's barely a week past landfall in terms of getting back to normal. Hancock County was where the eye came onshore, and it looks like an H-bomb went off without all the heat. Only one convenience store is open, 2+ months later, in the entire county. The third restaurant opened last week. I was so grateful to be able to eat lunch in-county that I chose to ignore the high water mark, dirt and leaves and small twigs, which ringed the dining room seven feet off the floor. The food didn't taste any worse for that fact…

Most residents are eating at the free café set up by (I'm not kidding here) some folks from California, driving a psychedelic-painted former school bus, and being supported supply-wise by two Buddhist temples from CA. ARC is nowhere to be seen there. There's still upside-down cars on the median of the state highway as you enter the county seat. It's unbelievable….

I find that I am very hesitant to take pictures, when I'm in the middle of this kind of chaos. The pictures in this book are mine, but I've printed here almost all of what I have taken over the years. I'm just not much for ogling someone else's tragedy.

Trash in Biloxi

You don't notice until you need one, but all the trash cans are gone. I don't even see them in the debris piles. I suppose they float, and must have ended up further inland than I've gone. I haven't seen regular trash pickups other than dumpster dumping, and it took this long to figure it out....there's no cans left to dump at the homes around here. It's just one more occupation that's left folks unemployed.

Monday is when you see the biggest changes. Over the weekend, hundreds of volunteers come down here to help gut homes, pile yards-worth of debris on the sidewalk and remove the horizontal part of the snapped trees. Without a stump grinder or back hoe, the 6 or 8 foot trunk remains, a testament to what has already gone to the burn site. There's a column of smoke non-stop from a few miles north of town, where the vegetation is being put to fire rather than landfill. The other side of the weekend is the vulture tourist. I have always felt queasy about snapping photos of other folks' misery, and come home with few, if any, pictures. I've already emailed a few back home, but have taken less than two dozen in my two months here. But on Sundays, it's dangerous to drive with all the folks stopped along the road to create that Kodak memory. They jump out of the car with hardly a glance at who might be coming, as if the tableau was going to run

off into the distance before their auto-focus can react. Hey, it's been here two months, it's not going to disappear in the next 5 seconds, all right?

In late October, Wilma was born and it was unclear where she would end up. Plans were drawn up to evacuate all FEMA personnel from the coast, and we held our collective breath and waited.

Re: Hurricane Wilma

Here's the question from a friend, and my answer...

What's that new hurricane in the Gulf doing for you, more job security?

a) making me work harder, as people are being pulled from MS to go to FL

b) moving me further up the food chain as people above me get sent to FL

c) making me grateful my room is on the 8th floor of a building that held up well to the winds of Katrina

d) making me requisition a week's worth of MREs....and what will I POSSIBLY do with THAT when it goes to FL and NOT HERE??!!??

As luck would have it, Wilma went to Florida. My biggest memory of those few days are about the sound bite on CNN: an elderly couple, nicely dressed and blinking in the camera's bright light, complain, "*We haven't had fresh lettuce for two days!*"

> *Biloxi, Nov 2005: Florida is already past 'Response' and into 'Recovery', another word for 'repair'. Wilma was* **only Cat 3***, so they'll clean up, fix a few roofs and carry on. I think in one more week, after the power is all back on, Florida will already be ahead of the Gulf Coast on the road to normal. You hear about Florida's recovery efforts, but in Mississippi the proper term is rebuilding. And here's why: You've seen pictures of the aftermath of tornados, I'm sure. Lots of concrete slabs and kindling that used to be homes and barns. Picture a tornado that sets down on the [*biggest street in your city*], and then follows [*that street*] for 50 miles. Now picture that same tornadic destruction, for 10 blocks on either side of the street. And for another 12 blocks on each side, destroy one in three buildings. And for another 20 blocks, take the roof off every fifth house. That's the Gulf Coast in Mississippi. That's rebuilding, not recovery. And that doesn't mention Florida, Alabama, Louisiana or Texas, some worse some not.*

Here's a few other perspectives on Katrina:

Hurricane Survival Kit

Toilet Paper.....check
Bud Light.....check
Keystone Ice.....check
Budweiser.....check
Red Dog.....check
Misc. other bottles of alcohol.....check
Piece of plywood to float your old lady and booze on...check

Next time let's all be more prepared.

FEMA Recovery Update for Hurricane Katrina (First 100 Days)

1 With an estimated 90,000 square miles impacted combined with 400,000 individuals displaced by Hurricane Katrina, the storm is the **single largest natural disaster** in FEMA's 26-year history.

45 44 states and the District of Columbia received **Presidential emergency declarations** following Hurricane Katrina. This total is the most declarations made for a single disaster in FEMA history.

132 **Disaster Recovery Centers** open in the Gulf Coast. DRCs are one-stop information centers where victims can learn more about different types of state and federal disaster assistance, including loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) for homeowners, renters and business owners.

2,400 The (800) 621-FEMA teleregistration and help line has been up and running for approximately **2,400 hours straight** since Hurricane Katrina struck. Never have the registration and help line call centers operated for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for 100 days straight.

14,000 More than **14,000 federal personnel** have been deployed to help state and local officials along the Gulf Coast recover from Hurricane Katrina.

40,000 More than **40,000 travel trailers and manufactured housing units** are temporary homes for Hurricane Katrina victims, nearly triple the number of units used following all of last year's Florida hurricanes and far outnumbering any housing mission in FEMA's history.

107,344 **Damaged roofs** that have been temporarily covered by FEMA's "Blue Roof" program[6] operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers so that families can remain in their homes as they rebuild. These are the most roofs covered following a single hurricane in the "Blue Roof" program's history.

1.7 Million FEMA has handled approximately **1.7 million registrations** through www.fema.gov and (800) 621-FEMA for Hurricane Katrina alone. This more than doubles the number of registrations made following the historic 1994 Northridge Earthquake in California.

53 Million Since Hurricane Katrina, more than **53 million cubic yards of debris** – or five and a half football fields covered a mile high - have been removed in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. FEMA reimbursed the states at 100 percent for this expense for 60 days in Alabama and continue this 100 percent rate for Louisiana and Mississippi through Jan. 15, 2006.

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[6] "Blue Roof" refers to the bright blue tarps distributed and tacked to a roof to prevent leaks until repairs can be made.

190 Million FEMA has obligated nearly **$190 million in disaster unemployment assistance** for eligible Hurricane Katrina victims from Alabama, Louisiana, Florida and Mississippi who signed up for this assistance during the application period.

325 Million FEMA has paid or reimbursed more than **$325 million for hotel and motel rooms** being provided to Gulf Coast hurricane victims who were in need of short-term lodging since Hurricane Katrina. The hotel/motel population is down 50% from a high of 85,000.

392 Million FEMA has approved **$392 million in Community Disaster Loans** to municipalities in Louisiana and Mississippi to date, the first phase of a loan program that will help keep essential services online in the hardest hit communities, including a $120 million loan to the City of New Orleans.

1.7 Billion **Federal dollars allocated for Public Assistance projects** such as debris removal and emergency services in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi, already surpassing the $1.1 billion allocated for Public Assistance grants in Florida over the eight months following the 2004 Hurricane Season[7].

4.2 Billion FEMA has provided more than **$4.2 billion directly to Katrina victims** for financial and housing assistance through the Individuals and Households Assistance Program (IHP). This amount is

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[7] In 2004, Florida experienced four major hurricanes.

the most ever provided to victims by FEMA for any single natural disaster, nearly doubling the **combined** total of IHP dollars for the Northridge Earthquake in 1994 and Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

8.3 Billion More than $8.3 billion has been paid out to National Flood Insurance Program policyholders. NFIP had closed out $607 million in the 100 days following Hurricane Ivan, then the second-largest flood insurance event ever.

FEMA manages federal response and recovery efforts following any national incident. FEMA also initiates mitigation activities, works with state and local emergency managers, and manages the National Flood Insurance Program. FEMA became part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on March 1, 2003.

And a tongue-in-cheek look at those same first 100 days; again, author unknown:

You Know You're a Katrina Survivor When....

- you've lived in three cities just in the last month
- you can distinguish between flood and wind damage
- your ear is always hot from cell phone use
- your day is spent on hold, or using phone trees and voicemail, or listening to recorded messages to call back later because all the lines are full

- you have used all your vacation time from work and haven't seen or done a damn thing
- you respond "none" to the blanks for address, phone and occupation on questionnaires
- you've been to visit every out-of-state friend you have. And all in the last few weeks...
- you hug anyone who hails from New Orleans, including strangers
- you can quote the current water levels of Lakeview, Lakewood South, Uptown, 9th Ward and Metaire
- you no longer pay electricity, water, cable or any other home-related bills
- you look for mold before touching any of your possessions
- you know the rates of U-Haul and storage units across 4 states
- you have spent hours in bumper-to-bumper traffic only to find the restaurant closed early due to a lack of employees
- you could teach a class on government assistance programs, county, state or federal
- your social conversations focus on the details of demolition, mold removal and roof repair
- you have worn the same Old Navy t-shirt for three weeks (and NOT because it's your favorite...)
- you are living with 7 other people, not all of them family, in an apartment smaller than the one you rented after you got married
- your patience is thin

- you can no longer make logical decisions, since nothing seems logical anymore
- you realize how comfortable you were, and you just want to be comfortable again
- you realize what a great life you used to have, and what a great crew of friends you STILL have

That last one is very important; we will visit this theme a few times in this book. The real healing that happens after a tragedy or disaster, happens when neighbors help neighbors. After Ivan in 2004, I worked in the small town of Atmore Alabama. Atmore had no power for ten days following the storm; aid was slow in arriving because there was so much to do and Atmore was not on many people's radar. What kept that town alive was not FEMA, nor the Red Cross or Salvation Army, or any of the large organizations one is likely to see during the early phases of recovery. Rather, what got Atmore through those first six weeks were the twice-weekly tractor-trailer-full deliveries of food, water, clothes and blankets ***collected and delivered by a church in Tennessee***.

This points to one aspect of disaster that also has many dimensions: how can you help when you are **not** close by? The short answer is that there is not one answer that fits every situation. Donating clothes and cans of food may be better than giving money, especially if there are no stores ~~left~~ open in the affected area where someone can buy goods or services. But donating *stuff* means there is a need

to transport it, usually over long distances, which is problematic in many ways including the trouble caused when roads are blocked by debris or trees. Donating money, on the other hand, often means that only a fraction of your donation will actually reach a survivor; too many of the organizations that solicit donations have huge overhead and solicitation costs. I know I should not slam such a widely recognized charity, but I have issues with American Red Cross. Not only does its high-level staff make handsome salaries, but there was a particular scene I cannot forget from Atmore. The State legislature passed a relief bill that would benefit small towns; and because the Mayor of Atmore was friends with someone at a local TV station in Mobile, and that friend had managed to run a banner across the bottom of the broadcast for several hours 2 days after Ivan that read, "*Atmore needs help!*", the Governor decided it would be politically expedient to sign the bill into law in Atmore. The media showed up early that morning, set up their cameras and satellite feeds, and just before the dignitaries arrived, Red Cross set up a table and began to distribute $200 vouchers for food, to replace what was lost in refrigerators and freezers that had gone 10 days without power in town. Although ARC had not been seen in town during the entire event so far, word of the vouchers spread quickly and soon there were more than 100 people in line. The Governor signed the bill, spoke briefly for the cameras, and got back on his helicopter to return to the Capitol. With half the line to go, ARC folded up their table and left, too. It

will take a lot to get that bad taste out of my mouth....

> *Biloxi: This morning on the way to work, seven tractor trailer rigs were turning into the military checkpoint where I was trying to leave to go to work. Following the National Guardsman's instructions, I waited for all to pull through. My gaze fell on a man, a thin man, not more than 5' 6" or so. He stood next to the waist-high chain link fence at the only section that still stands straight up. The nature of the yard on the other side is unclear, so much kindling you can't tell if it's grass or driveway or garden. Someone's roof gable caps it all like a crown. The house he's staring at has a roof, a portion of the front wall and most of the rear wall. Unbelievably, the roof is still upright in spite of the fact the front wall is on the sidewalk and there are neither side nor interior walls left. He stares into the home. Just as I get the ok to drive on, he collapses to his knees and sobs.*

Holidays are difficult, when you spend many of the big ones away from your family and instead are connected with others for whom *normalcy* is something we all desperately crave.

> *Biloxi: It's Halloween, and I wouldn't want my kids wandering these neighborhoods either. But I've been intrigued by the*

solution, it's called 'Trunk or Treat'. That's right, come to the parking lot and decorate your car trunk or pickup bed. And be sure to bring that bowl of candy for the little ones who will make the parking lot circuit a few times before going back home. And of course, there's a prize for the best decorated trunk. But there's no street lights to speak of, and most of the neighbors aren't here anymore, so this is an idea whose time has come.

The week before Thanksgiving, we were visited by the politically-correct police:

*Things are just moving along. Always seems to be a fire to put out. We're far enough into this that we now have to worry about handicapped access and political correctness, when before the need was so great that the *niceties* were ignored for the greater good. That's not a complaint, just a statement. Is it better to open the hotel without a usable elevator for someone in a wheelchair, or keep it closed for everyone, when housing needs are intense, until the elevators all get fixed?*

But this need to follow all the rules that had been suspended by the sense of emergency that has slowly faded, can best be illustrated by the *eight-year-old rule*. The entire third week of November, Monday morning through Friday afternoon, was

taken up by discussions, presentations, and field trips, all to resolve one critical issue: how should we dispose of debris? The big problem was East Biloxi: a 12-block square area that had been under 25-feet of water and was literally leveled. Nothing was more than 4 feet off the ground; in most cases you would be hard-pressed to tell what any particular piece of wood used to do, or where any bottle or refrigerator came from. The state had used bulldozers to clear the roads around the periphery, but the debris remained evenly spread over yard and road in the center. From a public-safety perspective, removing this woodpile was critical; we were already beginning to see (and smell) rodents proliferating in the pile and if a fire started there it would be impossible to stop before losing half the town. And yet, even as the work began to shovel the pile onto dump trucks for disposal, the EPA arrived and assessed situation, concluding that there *might* be asbestos intermingled with the wood and plastic, and thus protective gear, inspections, and a special landfill were all required before work could continue. The entire week this issue was negotiated, between factions among FEMA, the federal government, the state and local officials, all of whom had particular needs that needed to be met. The resolution of Friday afternoon was the eight-year-old rule: if any 8-year-old would look at that thing and say, “That used to be a house”, then the proper disposal procedures would be followed. If that same child could not tell what the wood used to be, then it could be quickly handled and ~~disposed of~~ burned. What would you have decided?

THANKSGIVING, 2005

We truly have many things to be thankful for this Thanksgiving Day. Every day, I see progress returning this area to 'normal'. Another debris pile is gone, another one created by gutting a house, another business has its lights on at night where before there's only been darkness. There is so far to go, it's still depressing at times. But baby steps are made each day, as Mississippi claws its way back into routine, away from chaos.

So my list begins with thanks to all the thousands of people who have come here to help. If it were not for the faith-based groups, the Salvation Army, The American Red Cross, the firefighters, the people who have volunteered through groups like Hands On USA or FourSquare, this holiday would not give any reason for feeling thankful. These groups have made a tremendous difference in the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of your neighbors. There are homes that will be saved because of volunteer work performed by people from every state in the Union. There are people alive today because of search and rescue work performed in the days following the storm. We must all be thankful to those who put their own lives at risk for others. But distributing water and ice, diapers and

jackets and tents, saves lives just as surely. I've seen lists from groups that detail the hundreds of volunteers who have committed to spending a week or two here, all the way through Easter. **This is where the healing happens, neighbor helping neighbor**.

I want to wish you and yours a very Happy Thanksgiving. And ask that you pause for a moment with your family and friends, or by yourself, and reflect on how good life is. We never know if we will see the next sunrise, but it is important to recognize and communicate our love to those we care about, and to help those less fortunate than ourselves. And there are a few of those in this world, less fortunate than you. I feel particularly blessed that I've been able to share my life with so many dear friends and family, and appreciate your support through my own tribulations.

Thank you.

I would be leaving you with a very incomplete picture of Mississippi after Katrina if I do not mention the infamous *FEMA trailers*. What a headache they represented: for FEMA, with all of the issues from determining the need, acquiring them, hooking them up, repairing them, to eventually decommissioning them; and for the residents, for their size, and the health problems that resulted from some of the units.

The loss of housing stock in Mississippi was tragic. Literally millions of people had evacuated; by Christmas, 4 months after Katrina struck, still fewer than 60% of the residents had returned. Some never would. But most people who were near the coast had serious housing concerns: immediate repairs, mold, rent price spikes, and overcrowding in the few places that were safe. FEMA had brought **manufactured homes** (in FEMA-speak, Transitional Housing Units, or THUs, but commonly referred to as trailers by survivors, so I will call them that here too) into areas where these issues had been present only a few times before, and never more than a few hundred units. The trailers remain the property of the federal government; and that mandates a whole set of issues you are unlikely to think about ahead of time. They have to be sited and hooked up by a sub-contractor approved by the government; they have to have local approval; they cannot be in a designated flood plain, nor in an area that flooded in recent years; they had to be on land where the land owner has signed a release of liability (a *hold harmless* agreement, basically); occupants had to agree to abide by rules concerning the care and use of the trailer; occupants had to continually re-certify that they met the criteria to remain in the trailer; and at some point, the occupants are expected to find a better housing situation and leave the trailer, returning it to the government's inventory.

Each one of these points was a point of contention that had to be resolved by Individual Assistance,

especially (but not only) within the THU unit. FEMA first identified there was such a need for housing that trailers were a viable option; certainly they were thought in the beginning to be better than paying a year's worth of hotel bills per family. Then enough trailers had to be found; and as the need exceeded the inventory of trailers for sale in the entire country in September 2005, more had to be quickly manufactured. These units were driven to the coast from literally every state in the country. Then FEMA ran into issues finding places to put them; the worst problem was when local town councils would refuse a permit for a trailer on suitable land, because they – and I quote directly from one meeting I attended – "don't want *those people* in our town…"

Gulfport Mississippi, December 2005

Getting thousands of trailers hooked up to power, water and sewer in places where there aren't existing connections is problematic, even if you have the money to pay people to do that work. This can never happen soon enough for someone who is staying 7 to a room, or living out of a car. And if corners were cut in the manufacturing process, like by not letting the glues cure for a sufficient amount of time to avoid potentially-toxic off-gassing, then who takes the blame for occupants getting sick? You guessed it. And if someone wants a trailer in their own driveway so they can monitor the rebuilding of their home, yet they live in a flood plan and are prohibited from doing that, who takes the blame? Same answer, again.

By late October, we began to experience a series of town hall meetings. Some were at the request of the

local Congressmen, some sponsored by local groups like Rotary Clubs or churches. FEMA was expected to have someone present to answer questions about the trailers, and other issues about slow or inadequate responses to survivors' needs; and often I was that speaker. By the end of November, some of these meetings were so contentious that I had a four-person bodyguard team from the Federal Protective Services, the federal police that normally protect government buildings. Besides the FEMA issues, the other hot topic at these meetings was the discussion about incorporating a building code into the rebuilding process. I honestly don't know how that turned out, although I suspect the no-code side won, in the interest of saving money and *maintaining our freedom to live as we like*.

We did what we could to manage the process for maximum benefit; but you can't possibly stand up an operation of this magnitude to everyone's satisfaction. And again, as with the payments to cover hotel bills, or money to replace food in freezers that had spoiled, or sending FEMA checks to households without any kind of inspection; this trailer program created a mindset that carried over into the next round of hurricanes in 2008, Gustav and Ike. So much of the Katrina response was, rightly so, outside the box of normalcy; yet people quickly reset the bar of what is *normal* to whatever happened before. I have to repeat: *every event is different, your benefits may change*.

We 15 Hands On USA volunteers arrived at 8 am sharp, about 10 minutes before the

homeowner. This home had been flooded 3 months earlier by Katrina's 25-foot storm surge. The glass in the front room windows that overlooked the Back Bay had not survived the water's onslaught, and the moldy smell of rotted carpet wafted against our faces as we huddled together in small groups on the muddy front lawn, softly chatting in the early heat of the day. The upside-down love seat leaning against the front door was proof no one had entered the home since the night the hurricane passed by.

An SUV, windows darkened against the sun, pulled into the driveway and stopped. We couldn't tell why it took several minutes for the driver to emerge, but when she did it was clear she didn't want to be here. Her reddened eyes couldn't bear to look at the house; her steps towards the front door were small, hesitant. She walked on the balls of her feet, as if ready to spring away at the first sign of danger.

We were unnerved, having come to remove her life's possessions as refuse: garbage to be hauled away as unceremoniously as the food that rotted in the flooded, unpowered refrigerator ("Please, whatever you do,*" said one volunteer with experience in these matters,* "don't open that thing! The stink will knock us all down!*"). Wedding picture, moldy; foot locker, still full of water; her child's stuffed*

animals a soggy, muddy testament to Nature's reach. Everything joined the wet and crumbly drywall and stinking carpet in the ever-growing mountain along the curb in front of her house.

Near noon she began to share that awful night; the howling wind, the moment the first sounds of water entering the house reached her ears as she huddled with her daughter in the bathtub, the mad and impossible crawl through the backyard, fighting off branches and shingles and pieces of 2X4 lumber hurled by the wind, over the one fence still standing strong against the onslaught, and finally into the neighbor's home 3 doors further up the hill.

By late afternoon, with the drywall gone and debris stretching above our heads like a sand dune along the sidewalk, hope began to dawn. A new beginning took shape in her mind's eye; she began to plan, to dream of what would replace what had been lost. She became animated, not just in thanking us, but in brainstorming what she would rebuild: "I'll take out this wall… I'll extend the bar into this area… I'll paint this room beige…" For the first time in 87 days, she came to sense that a future existed for her here in Biloxi. Her sense of belonging restored, she knew she would be strong enough to see this through.

Seeing her relief was priceless.

Ah, the inspections. When I am assigned to a DRC, the focus of IA work is answering questions about the claim process. That includes why no check has arrived yet, as well as why the check is *so small*. I fully understand the difficulty people have when they are unable to live in their home and they get a check that is half what the family next door got, who only lost a portion of their roof. Typically, once you have made your application to FEMA, you are scheduled for a home inspection. The inspectors; sub-contractors, not FEMA staff, visit the home and ask the resident to sign waivers and show proof of occupancy and of citizenship. It only takes one U.S. citizen in the household to qualify for aid; that can be the baby, as it is in many instances. But the issue of non-citizens getting help is a sensitive one in the South. On the other hand, I will not forget going into a lumber yard in Alabama in 2011, and offering to leave enough flyers with the registration info to reach every employee of the company. We spoke with the owner, made our offer, and were politely turned down, “Nearly all my employees are here illegally; I know they don’t qualify…”

A typical complaint about the inspection process is that the inspector didn’t see every bit of damage. That is because they aren’t required to: they work off of a chart that lists the *average* cost to repair and replace the contents of a typical room. Kitchens are more than bedrooms, for example, but the charts change according to geographical area as well as by adjustments for inflation. They are however, using pre-disaster pricing. Thus an

inspector doesn't make an inventory of every cabinet that needs to be replaced, nor do they care about the decorative oil painting on the living room wall. FEMA's mandate is to help survivors have a clean, safe, and sanitary space, not to rebuild the entire home. Yes, inspectors go too quickly and make mistakes; yes, a resident can request a re-inspection; and yes, your neighbor may not be telling you the whole story about his or her situation, details that may affect the amount of money they receive. And missing or incomplete paperwork, duplicate registrations, or an inability to meet an inspector within a several-day window of time, all of these may suspend your application and delay your access to funds.

The third aspect of FEMA is Community Relations. I worked this section first in July of 2005, for Hurricane Dennis.

Florida, late July 2005, Dennis

When FEMA called Sunday afternoon, Dennis was just touching land as a Category 4 storm, same as Ivan, in almost the identical place. But Dennis literally collapsed at that moment. Sure the rain was heavy, even into Illinois, but there was no wind damage to speak of. When I finally got to Pensacola, I could see a stretch of 30 miles of coast where you would see a tree down, or a sign blown over. But almost no damage. The Panhandle took some storm surge of 10 feet or so, but if you were 100 yards off the beach you were fine. Most of the damaged property we found was second homes, vacation homes or rentals, and not eligible for FEMA aid anyway. I spent about

20 hours actually doing WORK…the rest was training or waiting or driving. Yet we still got paid our 12 hours/day, 7 days/week in the beginning, though that pared down near the end. I was the 118th person to sign into the Command Post in Atlanta, at 120 they began turning folks away, sending them right back home. They truly needed 30, not 120. But you can't just send EVERYONE home, now can you?

Part of our frustration stemmed from the lack of materials to work with. Our task was to distribute flyers with the FEMA phone number to as many folks as possible, hitting churches and food/gas businesses first then

door-to-door residences next in areas where we could find damage. So the first day (6 days after the storm) we had no flyers at all…they hadn't been delivered yet. Same the second day. The third day we got 250 flyers for our team of 8. We were staying at hotels that had business centers, advertising free copying. So we would go to the hotel center and make copies, as many for free as we could, then paying for the rest ourselves.

Community Relations (CR) has two primary tasks: one, to communicate to the community the information needed to facilitate their recovery. That means answering questions about all aspects of the process, including PA and IA, as well as other federal and even non-governmental programs that may be useful. It also means spreading the registration information so that everyone touched by the event can register. We recommend that you register even if you think you have no damage; the window to register will close at some point, and if you find out later that something was broken during the storm but didn't register, you may miss out.

Second, most of the FEMA people who are in the field, face-to-face with survivors outside of DRCs, are working in CR. So it is vital that CR staff gather information: key contacts, trends, needs, problems, all of the information that is needed in order to solve problems and conflicts, as well as pro-actively prepare for survivors' upcoming needs. There is an arc to the process of response, recovery, and

rebuilding. It is helpful to know where survivors are in that arc.

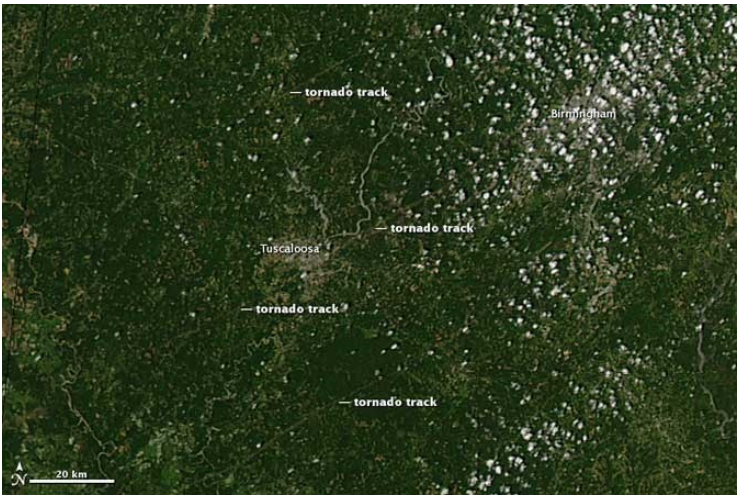
> *On reflection, the moment in Florida following Dennis that stands out most for me is this one: My partner and I were going door-to-door through a subdivision in Taylor County Florida. Sub division is generous….it was more like about 20 residences along the same twisting road, half of them manufactured homes. We had seen maybe two that were occupied by the time we reached the last one at the end of the road. I stayed by the car, as it was Doug's turn to go to the door. He went to the front door and knocked, and as we saw no cars anywhere and assumed no one was home, began to tuck our flyer in the door jamb. A young girl, I'd say about 8 years old with blond hair, came out from the yard behind the trailer. Doug asked to see her mother, and the girl told him no one was home right now.*
> *Oh*
> *My*
> *Gawd*

Emily, 2005

I worked in CR in Alabama in May 2011, following the infamous Tuscaloosa tornado. Over a 36-hour period, beginning 4:30 am on 27 April 2011, 336 tornados touched down over a nine-state area. They came in three *waves*; Wednesday morning and late afternoon, and again Thursday afternoon. Weather forecasters had predicted a *brutal* set of conditions on Wednesday as two storm fronts came together at least three days in advance, but of course were unable to predict when or where the tornados would strike. The biggest of the bunch destroyed 20% of Tuscaloosa Alabama, population over 800,000.

The mile-wide monster outside Tuscaloosa 27 April 2011. I like this picture because the increase in the intensity of tornados has prompted discussion about climate change; and this photo shows not only a tanker truck on the highway, but a gas station in the foreground.

It was over a mile wide in town, and while we normally discuss tornados in terms of a few hundred feet wide and on the ground anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes, this bad boy scraped 184 miles over a four-hour period.



Three tornado tracks seen from the GOES-13 satellite 29 April. The middle one is the one that went through Tuscaloosa.

The people in Tuscaloosa had about a half hour warning; police drove up and down the streets using their loudspeakers to urge people to flee. Those that did, lived. Those that sought shelter deep inside their home, although not in a *storm shelter*, died. The funnel missed the hospital by a few hundred yards, and over 600 people were treated there over the next few hours.

My work with FEMA was based in Pickens County, just to the west of Tuscaloosa. Five twisters touched down as part of the first wave Wednesday morning, and my partner and I were tasked with ensuring that anyone impacted by the storms managed to file a claim for assistance with FEMA.

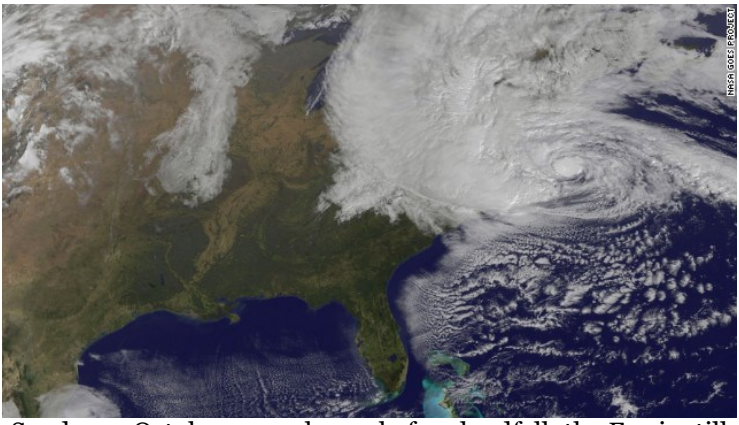
Pickens County Alabama, 4 am, 27 April 2011: The couple woke from sound sleep, sat up in bed, looked at each other, and asked, "What woke us up?" Unable to answer the question, they got up, opened the door of their manufactured home, and looked out into their yard on top of a ridge north of the town of Gordo. All was quiet; no dogs barking, no roosters crowing, no wind rustling leaves, nothing. No hint of what had awakened them. They crawled back into bed.

At 4:15, she sat up again, and said, "We have to go!"

He asked, "What do you mean?"

"We have to get out of here, now!" She leapt from the bed and began hurriedly to dress. He took the hint and got up too. They jumped in their car and drove half a mile along the ridge to the fire station; he was a volunteer firefighter and that felt like the best place to go. They had barely turned the car around in the station's lot when they saw the tornado come up the hill, lift their home like a toy, carry it across the road and fling it down in a thousand pieces. They would have been dead; but she had listened to that small inner voice when she could have dismissed it as paranoia, and he had listened to her when he could have said, "You're nuts! Go back to sleep."

And that brings us to Sandy. I was called 8 am on Sunday 28 October 2012 by FEMA to report to Trenton NJ the following day. That Monday evening, Hurricane Sandy, initially dubbed *Frankenstorm* and later referred to as *Superstorm* was expected to make landfall. The weird names were the result of factors that have only rarely come together in this way. Often, hurricanes travel in a pattern similar to the Gulf Stream: moving north out of the Caribbean, parallel to the East Coast and then arcing eastward before fading away. Sandy was a particularly large storm although its winds weren't that strong. But as it moved north, another large storm moved south out of the Arctic. As the two storms met, they blended to gather into one mass of swirling air, rain and snow that was wider, at over one thousand miles, than any storm we have measured before. So close to Halloween, and such an unusual mix of wind, rain, snow and sleet, it was an easy jump to *Frankenstorm*. Once it had taken out power in 12 states and snowed in or flooded out several million people as well, *Superstorm* seemed plenty appropriate.



Sandy, 29 October 2012, hours before landfall: the Eye is still over the Atlantic and yet the edge of the storm reaches the Great Lakes

I had expected the call; the storm had been in the news for more than a week. Already packed, it was easy to tie up loose ends and leave for what seemed likely to be a *big one*. Of course, I never know when I leave how long I will be gone, or what I will do. That's part of the mystique! By the time I had the travel agency on the line in the late morning, the east coast airports; New York-Washington D.C.-Philadelphia had all canceled their Monday flights, despite there still being 36 hours before landfall. I managed to get a flight that left San Jose, stopped in Los Angeles and Detroit overnight, before arriving in Harrisburg, in southeastern Pennsylvania and close to Trenton, 8 am Monday. And of course, nothing goes to plan…

We pushed out from the gate, backed up about 100 feet, then the plane stopped. The Captain came

on the intercom, saying, “We have a red light up here, and we won’t be flying tonight.”

I was lucky: I was third in line to get an alternate flight. They were able to route me from San Jose to Atlanta, then to Pittsburgh, arriving just an hour later than my original booking. Thinking this was better than stopping in Detroit, and possibly having Harrisburg close during my flight overnight, I was happy. I confess my ignorance of East Coast geography: I had not been north of Atlanta or east of Ohio before, and didn’t realize until I picked up the map at the rental counter that by landing in Pittsburgh, I had to drive the width of the state to get to New Jersey. As I left the airport in my rental car, Sandy’s rain was already falling. As the day wore on, I was literally driving directly towards the eye, moving the opposite direction as it moved towards shore.

About 50 miles short of my goal, a motel just inside Pennsylvania and 13 miles from Trenton, the PA State Police had blocked the interstate, forcing everyone off the road. This was about 4 pm. I could only figure on keeping the interstate in sight, to guide me to my destination; but at the very first on-ramp, no one was blocking my entrance, so I got back on the road and continued, virtually alone, the rest of the way. Winds had been picking up, but even when I got to the motel just before 6 pm, it was still under 60 mph. Forty minutes later, the eye went overhead; everything gets spooky-quiet, trees stop moving, and there’s a break in the rain. Then it all kicks up again…

The power at my motel went out for 5 minutes just after 8 pm. When it came back on, just as I had managed to get out the two lights I had brought for just this occurrence, I decided I couldn't do much more than to rest my weary body and quickly fell asleep.

Waking early the next morning, the motel's breakfast room had opened early, and after a quick bite, I ventured towards Trenton. Sticking to city streets, there were trees and power lines down, and it appeared that the motel was in about the only part of town that still had power. FEMA's temporary Field Office was in a hotel just a block from the NJ State Capital; it also had power, although no other part of Trenton did. I was the 15th person to check in; and amazingly, of the 50 people who checked in that day, nearly 80% were out with FEMA for the first time. The person in charge, although a permanent FEMA employee and not intermittent like the rest of us, doesn't normally work in CR-type responses. As newcomers were asking questions as basic as, "What is CR?" I offered to give an overview of FEMA so that the first-timers would know more about what they would be expected to do. Following class, we received word that the eight coastal counties of NJ would likely be declared at any moment, so we divided up into teams and began using the hotel's internet connections and personal laptops to research our territory.

We were nearly two hours' drive-time from the coast, so did nothing that evening. The next morning, Halloween, when I came in and found

that a lot more people were checking in and there was little actually being done, I offered to act as *gofer, flak-catcher, shadow* for the Boss; and she gratefully accepted. Within seconds, she had passed along two tasks, and I never looked back. At 11 that morning, the teams we had put together on Tuesday left the hotel for the coast, to begin our work assessing the situation and reaching out to survivors. I have always sworn that *if I am in charge* we would not do what normally happens in the first days of any deployment: sit around waiting for FEMA laptops and FEMA phones before getting into the damaged areas. Every team I put in the field had cell phones (which wouldn't work in much of the coast anyway for the first few days) and at least one laptop for writing their daily reports. Nearly every team had a smartphone among them, and I pushed my personal email address on everyone so that we could use that for communication as well. We beat NYC CR out into the field by more than two days.

And that in itself was a blessing. That very day, President Obama came to NJ to tour the coastline with Governor Christie. At about 3 pm, they visited a shelter on Brigantine Island, Actually, *shelter* is generous: it was a warehouse that someone had opened as a dry place for people to use for shelter. It was not run by any organization; it was just a space that remained following the disaster. During the visit, the President was introduced to a lady who stated she had no diapers or formula for her newborn; telling this story recently, someone noted at this point of the story that she remembered that

encounter, having seen it on TV. Anyway, FEMA's Administrator began an email chain instructing us to fix that problem; by 4 pm it was in my email inbox and I managed to contact the team that had just left that shelter. They drove 40 minutes and found a store that had power, was open, and had what we needed. Problem solved!

You might also remember something that happened that day: in the evening, Governor Christie stated to the press that the President was doing a great job and was taking good care of the people of NJ. This is six days before the election; having the Republicans' convention Keynote Speaker *endorse* the Democratic candidate did not go down well with other Republicans. In fact, when the Democratically-controlled Senate put together a Sandy relief package a few weeks later, the $32 billion allocated to NJ came in the form of *redevelopment funds*, not the typical detailed request of funding for particular rebuilding projects. Was this *blank check* some kind of payback? Of course that is not for me to say; but that bill was also never passed by the House. Even on New Year's Eve, the end of the Congressional session, the Speaker stated that the House would act on the bill and then they never did. Once again, politics takes precedence over helping the people…

Forgive, please, the diversion. The fact remains that while we think of FEMA as coming in following Nature's worst and making everything better immediately, that is definitely not what really happens. Like with any legislation, there is a focus of a bill or new law, but our representatives take

something they are certain will pass and through in all kinds of unrelated ~~pork~~ spending hidden in the fine print. The point, stated by one Republican refusing to grant NJ the requested relief, is well taken: why would a *Sandy Relief* bill include projects in Hawaii and Puerto Rico? Or spending that won't *begin* for five years? One solution is to just take away their ability to do this; another is to require that the full text of any proposed law be published online for at least 2 weeks, and that any amendments would restart that clock, allowing citizens the chance to see what is being done in our name. Of course this would not make it more likely that Congresspeople actually read what they are voting on, it might only make it harder for them to trick us into believing they have our interests at heart. [Rant over]

Over the next ten days, we ramped up to having 685 staff in the field throughout NJ. My official title became *Assistant Deputy External Affairs Officer – Community Relations – New Jersey – Field Operations*. My first boss, the one who leaned on me that first day, was replaced even as the President visited the shelter on the island. And then he was replaced the following day, again by a permanent FEMA employee working in the field for the first time. Through it all, I did my job as I saw it, just like in Biloxi. I asked forgiveness when needed, built up my networks of contacts I could access for resources within the Field Office, and was as helpful and supportive of *my people* as I could be. I had 2 laptops open, an iPad, a cell phone, a Blackberry, a smart phone, and a well-known chair where people

could tap me on the shoulder and task me or my people in the field. I put 200 hours on my timesheet, not everything I worked, the first 13 days; and couldn't charge for the 20 minute drive to and from the hotel. To say I had no time for eating is an understatement, those first four weeks. And I loved every minute. We were making a difference, not in every person's life, but in many.

I felt *extremely* blessed. I had managed to land a job that utilizes my talents. In the five most-damaged counties, I was able to assign a manager who either had grown up in that county and had worked with Emergency Services, fire or medical, before, or someone who had worked a position with FEMA following a Type-1 disaster (the highest ranking there is) in a position at least as high as my own. I only made one big mistake[8]. Everytime I needed something, **the resources I needed appeared**. And I was in NJ, not NYC. When my people attended town hall meetings, a *big* crowd was 100. NYC was dealing with an average of thousands at their meetings. We did not have to cope with buildings with 40 floors without power; a situation that won't be remedied anytime soon[9].

And, as evidenced by the dearth of photographs, I did not spend any time being confronted with the damage other than driving from the office to my

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[8] ... and I am not going to tell you what it was...

[9] These old buildings have the power and heat in the basement; when that is flooded, you have to rewire the entire building, not just replace the circuit breakers. That takes time, manpower, resources, and money.

hotel. (It is entirely possible that I should not be in this line of work; I am very empathic and have grown tired of seeing people's homes destroyed…)

Taken outside my room at my second (of three) motels. The ocean and beach are just out of sight to the right; the woodpile is what remains of the boardwalk in this area, and it sits on what used to be a paved parking lot. Just to the left, out of sight, is a pile twice as large of plastic and one of vegetation, gathered from the streets in the surrounding area.

I stayed past everyone taking time off for the end-of-year holidays, leaving a basically new and greatly reduced crew on 4 January.

We are moving into a new era for FEMA. Until Sandy, my work has always been as a Disaster Assistance Employee (DAE). I had to be available two months each year. Now I am a Reservist, and can only **not** be available two months a year. There is a new qualification/training regimen, and new rules about who gets deployed, both aimed to solve

the problem I have highlighted here about people not being used where they are trained and experienced. I get no credit under the new system for my work in Sandy; I was working above my *qualified* position, so nothing I did will get into my record or guide future deployments[10]. This is good for FEMA, if it ensures having the right people in the right place. But just like in the fire service, you never know who will be at the fire, so every team needs to know how to do every task. There is a suspicion among the Reservists that this new paradigm is meant to weed out those of us who have longevity; as we are paid much more than any new hire will be. In an age of austerity – FEMA's budget has been cut 40% under sequestration – in order to have enough bodies, you can't be paying those bodies well. On the other hand, and this is a big reason why more than half of the DAEs either didn't make the conversion to Reservist or have quit since discovering the fine print on the new contract, we are not paid any kind of stipend yet are expected to be on 24-hour call. It was this conversion process, which began in mid-2012, that more than half of the people in the field for me in NJ were rookies. It means that the FEMA workforce has lost decades of experience. But it means they can better meet their budget, which is all-important, trumping even service to survivors.

[10] Less than half of the people in NJ working for FEMA were working their assigned job category.

In early 2008, I searched for a way to volunteer in Thailand. I came across a United Kingdom-based group that was working with schools that taught Burmese refugee children in Mae Sot, on the Thai-Burma border. This organization needed English-speakers to assist teaching the youngsters the language of business and the internet. As is typical with schools in Southeast Asia, schools close during the hottest months of the year, April and May. I agreed to volunteer for the month of June.

First let's set the scene:

> *Finally, two days under my belt working with the Burmese migrant children, and lots to tell. I have been placed in one of the best migrant schools. After multiple admonishments to be aware of spies who might follow me to discern the location of the school, and advisories on the proper procedures to follow if the school is raided by authorities (walk away, say you're just a tourist who thought it would be fun to see a school, and whatever you do, don't intervene to 'save' anyone, you'll just drive up the bail at the immigration detention camp), I arrived at the Irrawaddy Flower Garden. It is a *building* made of concrete block walls 5 feet high, mosquito net between the top of the wall and the roof, and a corrugated tin roof. There is a concrete floor. The fact that this school has a floor and a roof that doesn't leak makes it a great school for Burmese children. It is a single room, about 25 feet by 60 feet, with a*

kitchen taking up one end, two electrical outlets and one light.

Lunch at school: this is the lunch that parents pay for as part of their tuition; the children who bring their own, a smaller group, are behind me as I snap this picture. Kindergarten and first grade *desks* are to the right, kitchen in the back.

*There are 75 pupils, in 5 grades, K through 4. There are about 30 children in kindergarten, and less in each successive grade. There are 5 in grade 4. It seems that the older children often have to work to help support the family, so fewer older kids can *afford* to go to school. There is one English teacher, and as she rotates among the different grades, the*

other teachers also move from class to class.

I had only been in the building 20 minutes, when a group of white men entered, each one carrying a camcorder or camera. One came to me, and after introductions, said he was a missionary from the Phillipines, escorting these other missionaries from America. He mentioned in passing they were from Indiana[11]*. The headmistress of the school stopped all classes, and the entire school joined together to sing two English songs, one the alphabet song, and the other the kid's song, "Jump up and down, then shake your leg to the right, shake it to the left…."*

Once they finished, the leader of the group of foreigners addressed the school, saying they were bringing with them the 'Good News'. Another man proceeded to read some Bible passages about Noah, and then told the story of Noah (with the man from the Philippines translating into Burmese) with heavy emphasis on the ***everyone is going to hell*** *part of the story. I don't know any Burmese, so I can't tell you how well this was being translated to the children, and frankly, neither do the missionaries. They are taking that part of this presentation on faith. (Pun intended). Following the story-telling, the speaker*

[11] I was born in Indiana…

*asked if anyone was ready to be converted. There was silence while he asked three times, yet finally one girl raised her hand. That was all it took, all the rest of the hands went up in a few seconds. He said a short prayer, all the men passed out candy, and then they left, returning the school to normal. I asked later, and was told this doesn't happen often, but the school can't say *no* because sometimes these visitors leave money instead of candy. One last bit: speaking with one other man while Noah's story was being told, we found that we know someone in common. It's amazing how small the world has become.*

Burma schooling methods are not quite the same as American ways. In Burmese schools, the teaching method is rote learning. What this means in practice, is that the teacher writes on the board, reads what they have written, the children repeat out loud until the teacher is satisfied they can speak it well, and then the children write in their exercise book everything that is written on the board.

Reading aloud what the teacher has written on the board…

Each class is 40 minutes long, and I now know that a first grader can speak and write four short sentences in 40 minutes, not 5.

*This method of teaching has two major results; first, remember we are teaching in a single room, 5 classes at once, 75 kids in the space about 50 feet long, everyone talking at the same time. Can you say *chaos*? The children end up shouting (go figure) which just makes the noise worse. And when the rain is beating on the tin roof, how can you hear anything? You can't…..*

And secondly, there is not a lot of thinking going on here. Today, I drew a picture on the board (without realizing that meant the

children had to draw the picture, too) of 3 glasses on a table, and the question I wrote was 'How many glasses are on the table?' The children could read the sentence without any help from me. But when I tried to ask the question, "How many glasses are there?" I first had to get the English teacher to try to explain to the children that I wanted them to answer, and she spoke with them and then told me they don't know how to answer me. With learning by rote, there's no practice with thinking for one's self. If the word is not in the sentence you learned, you can't process the new information in a useful way. I realized this must be incredibly helpful to a military dictatorship….a weapon in the constant battle to keep the public under control, a way to limit thinking, questioning and creativity.

Today, my second day at the school, one of the teachers was sick and not present. So imagine this, I am on my own as a substitute teacher. The kids got two English lessons today, since it's the only thing I can teach, and the other English teacher still had to take her turn teaching as well. It can't be much more challenging than this, teaching kindergarteners English when teacher knows no native language, and the kids hardly know their own alphabet, not to mention a second language alphabet too. We focused on numbers, 1 through 15, and

the alphabet. Not much else I could do. With the higher grades, their larger vocabulary seemed helpful at first, but as I tried to do things like play games with their knowledge, it just wouldn't work, as they can't process information and use it in any other way other than to recite. In all classes, I fell back to writing sentences on the board, recite and write, as is the norm for them. Oh well.

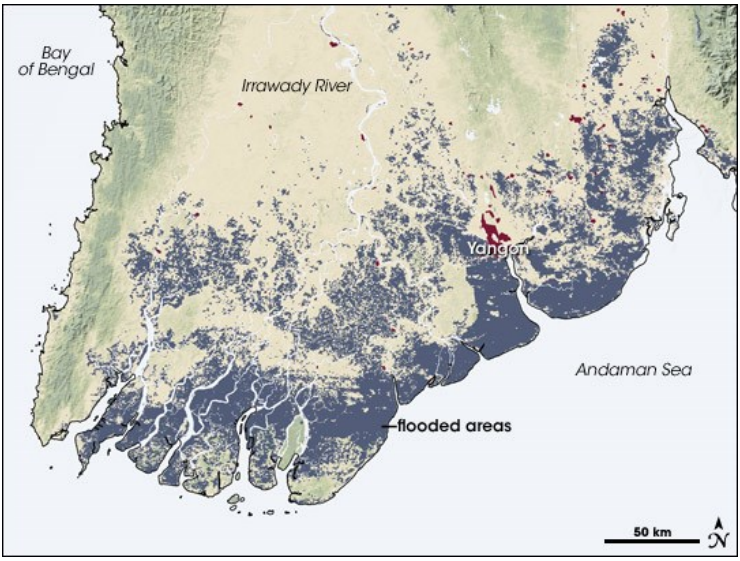
A few other notes and sidelights… Monday was the first day of a new term. All classes are working on lesson 1 in their grade's workbook. There was a girl, can't be more than 3, having her second day at school on Tuesday. Class gets out at 3 pm, and the next 30 minutes are spent cleaning the room and cleaning up the play yard outside. At 2:30, she began to cry. I'm not sure why she was crying, but she was allowed to cry until the end of class. As soon as the bell was rung for the end of class, a third grader ran over to her. Once together, you could see the family resemblance, this was her older sister. Older sister stood her up, put one arm around her shoulder, and began to dry the tears on her face with the other hand and whisper in her ear as they walked out the door. I'll not forget that scene soon.

Irrawaddy Flower Garden School

I've also been teaching a class for the teachers, for an hour after school. It has allowed me to find out a little bit more about their situation. The English teacher was studying physics at a university in Burma but had to leave when the government cracked down on students at her school. She's now applying for a student visa to New Zealand. She wants to return to Burma someday, "It's my motherland". Two other teachers don't want to go back, bad memories, and I've not had the courage to ask what those bad memories might be.

[Later I did find out that 80% of the children in the room had lost a family member to violence perpetrated by government troops.]

In keeping with my tendency to find bad weather, Cyclone Nargis devastated Burma overnight, on 2 – 3 May 2008. Tens of thousands of people died or disappeared; numbers are hard to come by when a despotic regime refuses entry to even the most well-respected international relief agencies. The storm surge of Nargis penetrated deep inland, since southern Burma is basically a river delta and only feet above sea level for dozens of miles inland.



Darkened areas were affected by flooding or storm surge; 50 km = 30 miles

Mae Sot, Thailand: Friday, my last day at the school, was an extraordinary day. I had warned the school that I would leave at the

beginning of lunch, I was anxious to catch the last bus from Mae Sot to Tak that leaves at 5 pm. I didn't want to push my luck, and miss the bus.

I checked out of my hotel before going to school, and asked the front desk to watch my bag until I was on my way to the bus. I didn't want to leave my laptop and camcorder with them, so I took them both with me to school. As soon as the headmistress realized I had brought a computer and camera to class, she asked if I could stay through the lunch hour and take some photos. Of course, I agreed. There are 5 teachers at school, and 3 of them go home for lunch (the three who do not take a free lunch as part of their pay). The other two mind the children.

While outside taking exterior shots of the children planting some flowers that were given to the school, an older man I have never seen came up to me. He smiled, shook my hand, and said something in Burmese. I didn't understand, and he turned to a teacher and asked something. She said "Thank you", and he turned to me and repeated, "Thank you". He mimed writing on a whiteboard, and then mimed speaking. He again said "Thank you" and turned and walked away.

It began to rain (again, it had rained off and on all morning) and we went inside. One of

the teachers returned from home, and held out a flash drive. “Nargis” was all he said. I opened my laptop, copied the file “Nargis” and discovered over 450 photos, over 200 original that he had taken, and 250 copied from the web and other cameras. There is a full range of subjects, from bodies to building destruction and people queuing in line or sitting in destroyed homes.

Burma after Nargis

These are just two of the photos on that flash drive

The Photographer/Teacher mentioned above, with his painting that **he** gave **me** as a thank you gift

*This school is amazing. They serve rice and vegetables to the children for lunch most days, as they only have the money for meat once a week. I bought each child a pencil as many were writing with stubs or borrowing from their neighbor. The children have access to games like *Chutes and Ladders* and *Sorry*, although they make up games and use the pieces in creative ways; they don't know or care what the *rules* are. They find ways to play together, fight together, learn together, and help each other just like American kids. But they endure untold hardships; out of 100+ people in the building, I was the only person that*

*could be called *well-fed*. One girl, a 4th grader who is 14 years old and lost both her parents in a government raid on her village, has arms so thin that I can encircle her bicep between my thumb and forefinger. Please count your blessings now.*

I have also worked with All Hands in Haiti and Mena Arkansas. In September 2008, Haiti endured three tropical storms and Hurricane Hannah. When Hannah blew by, the second largest city, Gonaives (pronounced "Gon-eye-eve") was inundated with runoff from the mountain that towers over it. Haiti is 95% deforested; in this photo you can see how exposed this mountain's soil is to rain.

Gonaives Haiti, November 2008

As the fifteen feet of water from the flooding receded, it left behind about five feet of mud. You can also see from the photo above that most buildings are constructed of concrete or stone; so the task at hand in the months following Hannah was to get the mud out of the homes and businesses.

Two shovels of mud per bucket, two days per house, 15 volunteers, PRICELESS!

I arrived in November, and All Hands had already been working 6 weeks. They had between 30 and 40 volunteers at any one point for the six-month project, and while I was there I met people from more than twenty countries. It was truly an

international response.

Two months after Hannah

There were several projects ongoing during my three weeks there; mucking out homes, of course, as well as rehabilitating a school, and safeguarding and helping to distribute tools and school supplies for Oxfam and UNICEF. The school was run by three Catholic nuns from India, and served kindergarten through fourth grade students. At the time of my arrival, Hands On had managed to borrow a backhoe from the United Nations and clear the mud from the central courtyard of the school, to hand-shovel four feet of mud from every classroom, the office, the kitchen, the library, and

the two-story section in which the nuns lived.

One section of the schoolyard. Note the high water mark just under the eaves.

Rooms and benches had all been repainted, and the school had been the first to reopen in town. In fact, no other school reopened for months after this one. The final touches were being completed, painting the exterior walls of all the buildings, when I came in with my photo printer.

> *I had watched her during recess and the lunch break. Even by the standards of Gonaives, Haiti, she was small and thin, but not 'hungry-thin'. Her uniform was impeccable; blue and white checked blouse & dark blue skirt, both very clean and ironed, and new black shoes. Her hair had*

been braided into dozens of cornrows, each one entwined around a plastic bead or bauble, leaving her head an explosion of bright colors; red, white, green, blue, yellow.

She walked slowly, cautiously, as if afraid she might slip in the mud that is everywhere in Gonaives since Hurricane Hannah came through, even though Hands On had done a good job of getting the mud out of the schoolyard. This elementary school, run by Catholic nuns from India, was the only school that had managed to re-open following the flood. A coalition of NGOs, the UN and our group of international volunteers (Hands On Disaster Response) had pitched in to clean and repaint the school, trying to give the nuns and students their lives back. I wasn't sure if she was still reacting to the trauma of the flood that probably destroyed everything she (and her family) had accumulated during her 7 years of life, or if she was just shy. In either case, she stood out because she stood back; not participating in the games of tag, not chatting with classmates, not rushing to watch the fight that breaks out in the corner of the yard like the other children. She was attentive, but her fixed expression gave no hint as to what she thought about anything happening around her.

Tuesday, my partner Keely and I were wrapping up our weeklong project. I had

brought a photo printer and enough ink and paper to give each of the 579 students a photo to take home. Keely had done an amazing job of taking and editing the photos, and I spent 3 days printing them. Now we were distributing them to classrooms full of students, some of whom may have never had a photo, or even seen themselves in a mirror, before. As I expected, while the other students were standing or sitting eagerly forward on their benches and talking excitedly as one photo after another was received with a gleeful shout, she remained placid in the rear of the room, almost oblivious to what was going on around her. With hands folded in her lap, she stared at the notebook that lay on the desk before her. Her photo was one of the last in the pile, and Keely knew it was hers without having to ask. Keely laid it down on the notebook, then turned and made her way to the front of the room with the last 2 photos, while I watched the second grader. She focused on her photo for no more than a second, and without warning, broke out into the most awesome, bright smile. She brought her hands up, and just before touching the photo, thought better of it and laid her hands on the desk on either side of it. For a few more seconds, her smile could not have been bigger as it lit up my world. Her left hand rose and touched her eye (wiping away a tear?), and then picking up

the photo with her right hand, she tapped the shoulder of the girl on her left and showed it to her. Her friend nodded, said a few words, and together they admired the photo. Still grinning from ear to ear she retrieved her sack from the floor, tucked the photo into the notebook, placed the notebook into the sack, and hugged the sack tightly to her chest.

I couldn't see what happened next, through my own tears. To touch a life like this is… priceless.

Keely, and a new friend:

I hope that thing is moving *away*...

Mena, Arkansas, May 2009

My father tells of his tornado experience, when he was 12 years old. He was alone inside his family's farmhouse in Indiana when he heard his Mother shriek his name, calling him outside. "Get to the shelter!" she beseeched. He began to hear the roar of a train, and dashed to the door that led to the yard where the storm shelter was buried. He pushed open the ***screen door***, but tripped as he went through the doorway and fell. The tornado, at that very instant, took the roof off the home and the suction in the center of the twister pulled that screen so hard against his foot that he was unable to free himself. He could only look up into that swirling tube, and watch as debris, some recognizable and some not, spun crazily onward…

In 2009, a tornado visited Mena Arkansas. It set down outside of town and then followed the main road through town, lifting just shy of the WalMart, then setting down again for a few more miles, and destroying most of half of the town.

A week after the tornado, clean-up already begun

As luck would have it, there wasn't enough damage for this event to be considered a FEMA-sized disaster. Several volunteer groups came to help clean up, including Hands On USA. I joined for a month, the highlight of which was taking 2 ½ days to demolish a house using only hand tools, just the 8 of us.

House almost gone, following our *vicious* attack with hammers and crowbars, one day to go.

From an article written by Suzanne DeChillo and published in The New York Times:

> *When a handful of retired homeowners from Osborn Island in New Jersey gathered last month to discuss post-Hurricane Sandy rebuilding and environmental protection, L. Stanton Hales Jr., a conservationist, could not have been clearer about the risks they faced.*
>
> *"I said, look people, you built on a marsh island, it's oxidizing under your feet — it's shrinking — and that exacerbates the sea*

level rise," said Dr. Hales, director of the Barnegat Bay Partnership, an estuary program financed by the Environmental Protection Agency. "Do you really want to throw good money after bad?"

Their answer? Yes.

Time to look at that most touchy of subjects: what is our role in helping people recover from disaster, both natural and man-made. Does the government have a responsibility to care for residents following a nuclear disaster, such as what happened in Fukushima Japan? Are citizens entitled to free housing until they are able to repair their own home, if it is destroyed by something outside of their control? Should people be allowed to collect funds for rebuilding more than once, in areas that are prone to disaster such as tornados, hurricanes, earthquakes, or flooding?

In particular: should people be allowed to rebuild on the sand dunes islands off the Jersey shore that were just inundated by Sandy? Surely this is only a sign of what is to come. Or what about New Orleans: built under sea level, with only levees allowing homes to be dry. Can those residents expect to be taken care of every time a levee breaks and floods the lowlands? And because the risk of flooding lowers the value of the land, it is thus the poorest among us who tend to suffer in this scenario; what do we owe them, in return for not allowing them to earn a wage that would facilitate their purchase of more suitable land?

These, and other, issues are presented in stark relief in other countries as well. Of course it is heart-rending to see children die from starvation; yet paying foreign companies to ship food, often not typical of the national diet, into a country like Haiti does little to solve the problem; at best it continues the sense of dependence upon outside aid in the long-term, if it even manages to help in the short-term.

The United Nations Demonstration Garden,
Gonaives Haiti, 2008.
Am I the only person disturbed by the rifle slung over the shoulder, in order to be prepared to *control* the crowd which is pressed up against the fence, should they get *out of control*? How much can you learn about gardening by peering over the fence?

Going to Haiti, or Indonesia, or Pakistan following some natural disaster brings along its own baggage:

how can we effectively aid others without it being a projection of our privileged status as Americans, as people who can walk away at any moment when things become too overwhelming?

> *Michele Chen: "We are engaged in a complex dance with our Haitian counterparts. We work for free because we can. They work for free because they have no choice. Most of us come from places that will never know anything like the poverty Haitians experience every day. Most of the Haitians know that they are the objects of bittersweet admiration. While their will to survive puts an American like me to shame, we don't know whether to feel sympathy for the forsaken but defiant nation, or frustration at the folks trying to rescue it. In the end, if we are unable to teach and to hand off projects to the local population, we have failed. We should not create dependence in the local people on aid from abroad just to feel good about ourselves."*

Can we approach these situations with a deep respect for the people we hope to serve? Can we find ways to ease our post-colonial guilt, or shame over past injustices, or to express our compassion for others who have come into some really bad luck, ways of helping that **leave people more empowered and capable, not dependent and weak?**

Is it any different if it is deep in Mississippi following Katrina, and I am from California?

Should there be a requirement that a homeowner have flood insurance in order to get FEMA aid following flooding? Should we limit aid to once per type of event? Is it acceptable to suspend the normal rules of business (no longer requiring proper documentation before hiring day-labor, as happened in Louisiana and Mississippi after Katrina)?

And here is an issue you likely haven't been exposed to before: disaster relief as a tool of enslaving people through debt. Part of the FEMA registration process is gathering information about your financial situation before the event, and if you had *enough* income, then you are required to apply for a loan to rebuild, rather than receiving a grant that does not have to be repaid. This presents several issues: chief among them is the response of many upon learning of the loan application requirement, "Hell, no, I don't want a loan. I won't rebuild if that's the case." Yet as we have seen, FEMA grants aren't all that much money, especially if you have to start over. So, we aren't helping those who need it most, nor are we truly helping those with more means and resources.

Short diversion here; the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) supervises public housing for over 380,000 people, more than half of them elderly. In the hours and days before Sandy came onshore the Mayor issued a mandatory evacuation order for areas likely to be flooded by storm surge, and the NYCHA opened shelter space that could hold 70,000 evacuees. Following the storm, when only 7,000 had shown up in the shelters, the

NYCHA breathed a huge sigh of relief, but failed to ask why so few people showed up. What had happened was that the elderly, being unable to travel freely or in many cases, without additional assistance, had not evacuated at all. Following the surge, they were then trapped in apartments, often many, many floors up in buildings with neither heat nor power, without communications, any way to get wheelchairs down the many floors to the ground, nor anyone coming by to check up on them. People ran out of food and medicine, and were huddled under many blankets as protection against the cold as snow fell outside during the Nor'easter 9 days after Sandy. It wasn't until Occupy Sandy volunteers began going door-to-door two weeks after the flooding that this issue came to light and people began to get assistance: President Obama's Katrina moment… How can we better care for those among us who don't have the luxury of jumping into a private vehicle and racing away ahead of disaster?

As we identify ways to make large-scale disaster response better, those lessons should also translate into the small-scale events as well. Even a one-house event: if fire or water or wind should take your possessions, your shelter, or a family member, is a tragedy in your life as big as Katrina. How can we prepare for disaster, recover faster, rebuild better?

Have you experienced an event in your neighborhood that could be called a disaster? What was it like, those first few hours or days? How was life different, what was suddenly important that

hadn't been so much before, how long did these *special* feelings last? Are there ways you can foster those feelings of camaraderie, mutual aid, and neighborliness ahead of their need?

It has often been said before that you should have three days' worth of food and water available in case of emergency. Recent events have shown that this amount is seriously inadequate: the power outages after Sandy were the third time in 14 months that more than a million people remained without power for more than a week. In the two events prior, heavy snowfall had knocked out power over large areas just like Sandy. It is hard to get by in today's world without electricity, as ATMs, phones, and internet connections are stripped from our toolbox. How do you buy water, when the local store, if it open for cash-only sales, won't sell to you and your plastic card? What if you can't work for a week? What would that do to your food budget? How do you cook without heat? Dried food gets old after a week, but not inedible!

If you have a neighborhood that is already coming together in anticipation of mutual aid, you might investigate setting up a program in advance with any stores in your area that would allow certain people to get into the store even if it is closed, in order to use credit to buy supplies. Maybe you even offer to provide bodies for security, in exchange for special access.

And what are some other, specific ideas around this idea of being better prepared?

- Food and water for at least a week, if not two stored and rotated to remain fresh. Focus on

what you actually use; *testing* food for the first time when you have no access to an alternative meal is not the best way to prepare! When you buy something that stores well; a can of soup perhaps, buy two and put them in your stash, taking out one you bought previously to use tonight.

- Light sources; flashlights, as well as lanterns or other means of lighting a room. Don't forget what you need to power the lights, extra batteries, rotated to keep them fresh. Investigate LED lights that use much less battery power. Find solar chargers that might allow you to recharge during the day the batteries that you use at night.
- Know if you have neighbors with special needs, who might need you to check on them following the event.
- Learn how to perform light search and rescue, if only to know for certain that no neighbor is trapped in a damaged building. Important to learn, too, when NOT to go inside a damaged or collapsed structure.
- Learn about electric, gas, and water shutoffs: when and how to shut them off, and where they are located.
- Communications; build up a supply of walkie-talkies, good replacements for the cell phones we are accustomed to but which may not work, or may be overloaded, immediately after the event.

- Stash your sleeping bags, tents, lights and other gear in a location that you can access from outside the home, even if that is *just* under a window that you can break if necessary.
- Keep all your important documents, like passports, Social Security cards, and birth certificates together in a place where you can grab everything in one motion, rather than having to go to various rooms or drawers if you have to leave quickly.
- Keep some cash at home. Hollow out a book, or if you fear fire, keep it in a jar or fireproof safe. In any case, you aren't getting anything by keeping it in the bank, and it won't do you any good as electronic bits when there is no power.
- PRACTICE!!! Whether in your home, on your block, or in your neighborhood: take a weekend periodically to practice. Tape the refrigerator shut; hide all the chargers for your electronics, unplug the router, eat cold out of the pantry, and tell stories when it gets dark. Make it a bonding experience with the neighbors who will have your back when things get tough. Make it a block party!

Last of all let me address an issue that bugs me no end: scams. Again a slippery slope, where does *supply-and-demand* start being *gouging*?

Atmore, 2004: The elderly man approaches our check-in desk, carrying a photo album. He speaks briefly with Kathy, who turns and glances my direction before pointing at me. He looks at me, and comes my way. He asks if I am the manager, which I confirm. He asks for a few moments of my time, and I motion for him to take the seat at my table.

"I have many trailers, staged a short distance away from here. What I need from you is a list of the people who have registered with FEMA who have no place to live; I can lease them a trailer for their use until their own home is rebuilt."

It sounds innocent enough, and I'm curious, "Tell me more," I say.

"Insurance pays $500 per day for Alternative Living Expenses (ALE)," he says, as he opens the photo album. "I lease these to people for the $500 per day, so they don't pay anything themselves. Once the insurance runs out, or they can move back in, I take the trailer back."

Even as I process the bit about $500 a day, I am aghast at the photos he is showing me; none of the two dozen trailers in the album is less than ten years old. If you have any experience with trailers you know that that is a lifetime; these things could not be

sold for a thousand dollars, even to someone otherwise homeless, with any conscience. And of course, due to privacy laws, I am unable to provide him with the information he requests. Still, I ask him to let me work on getting him the names, and to come back tomorrow at noon.

*As luck would have it, the Liason Officer between FEMA and the State of Alabama Office of Emergency Services was chatting with the DRC's security guard just inside the door. A State Trooper when he's not the LO, he is intrigued by the story I tell him, and true to his word, the next day at about 11:30 he returns and introduces me to the *undercover* officer… and when my trailer owner returns at noon, I direct to make his pitch to the *applicant*. It takes only a few minutes before the handcuffs come out and the scammer is led away.*

And the stories: people selling generators out of the back end of pickup trucks for $5,000; or in the case of Sandy, rent for a 2-bedroom apartment going from $800 to $2400 per month, with the renters being kicked out if they are unwilling to pay the new rate.

Lest you think I have been exaggerating, especially the stories about Katrina, let me end both on a note of hope and a second voice describing the damage, this time by a respected author. Published the day before I arrived in Biloxi, his message of determination, courage, hope, and even pride is one that we can all take to heart.

The Gulf Will Rise Again

By JOHN GRISHAM

[Published: September 25, 2005, Biloxi, Miss.]

On Aug. 17, 1969, Hurricane Camille roared onto the Gulf Coast with winds of more than 200 miles an hour, only the second Category 5 storm to hit the mainland United States. It killed 143 people in Mississippi, and 201 more in flooding in central Virginia.

Over the years, Hurricane Camille's legend grew, and it was not uncommon when I was a child and student in Mississippi to hear horrific tales from coast residents who had survived it. I myself was sleeping in a Boy Scout pup tent 200 miles inland when the storm swept through. Our losses were minimal - the tents, sleeping bags, some food - but over time I managed to spice up the adventure and add a little danger to it.

For almost 40 years, it was a well-established belief that the Gulf Coast had taken nature's mightiest blow, picked itself up, learned some lessons and survived rather well. There could

simply never be another storm like Hurricane Camille.

After walking the flattened streets of Biloxi, though, I suspect that Hurricane Camille will soon be downgraded to an April shower. The devastation from Hurricane Katrina, a storm surge 80 miles wide and close to 30 feet high, is incomprehensible. North from the beach for a half a mile, virtually every house has been reduced to kindling and debris. At least 100,000 people in Jackson County - poor, middle-class, wealthy –are homeless.

I search for a friend's home, a grand old place with a long wide porch where we'd sit and gaze at the ocean, and find nothing but rubble. Mary Mahoney's, the venerable French restaurant and my favorite place to eat on the coast, is standing, but gutted. It's built of stone and survived many storms but had seen nothing like Hurricane Katrina.

Even without Hurricane Rita chewing its way across the region, the notion of starting again is nearly impossible to grasp. Some areas will have no electricity for months. The schools, churches, libraries and offices lucky enough to be standing can't open for weeks. Those not standing will be scooped up in the rubble, and then rebuilt. But where, and at what cost?

So much has disappeared - highways, streets, bridges, water treatment plants, docks, ports. The next seafood harvest is years away, and the shrimpers have lost their boats. The bustling casino business - 14,000 jobs and $500,000 a day in tax revenues - will be closed for months and may take years to recover. Lawyer friends of mine lost not

only their homes and offices, but their records and their courthouses[12].

At least half of the homes and businesses destroyed were not insured against flood losses. For decades, developers, builders, real estate and insurance agents have been telling people: "Don't worry, Camille didn't touch this area. It'll never flood." This advice was not ill intentioned; it simply reflected what most people believed. Now, those who listened to it and built anyway are facing bankruptcy.

As dark as these days are, though, there is hope. It doesn't come from handouts or legislation, and it certainly doesn't come from speeches promising rosy days ahead. Folks dependent on donated groceries are completely unmoved by campaign-style predictions of a glorious future. It's much too early for such talk.

Hope here comes from the people and their remarkable belief that, if we all stick together, we'll survive. The residents of the Gulf Coast have an enormous pride in their ability to take a punch, even a knockout blow, and stagger gamely back into the center of the ring. Their parents survived Camille, and Betsy and Frederic, and they are determined to get the best of this latest legend.

Those who've lost everything have nothing to give but their courage and sweat, and there is an abundance of both along the coast these days. At a

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[12] True: what do you do when the county Courthouse disappears, along with every record of land title, marriage, divorce, birth, and death?

school in the small town of De Lisle, the Superintendent, who's living in the parking lot, gives a quick tour of the gymnasium, which is now a makeshift food dispensary where everything is free and volunteers hurriedly unpack supplies. Two nearby schools have vanished, so in three weeks she plans to open doors to any student who can get to her school. Temporary trailers have been ordered and she hopes they're on the way. Ninety-five percent of her teachers are homeless but nonetheless eager to return to the classrooms. Though she is uncertain where she'll find the money to pay the teachers, rent the trailers and buy gas for the buses, she and her staff are excited about reopening. It's important for her students to touch and feel something normal. She's lost her home, but her primary concern is for the children.

"Could you send us some books?" she asks me. Choking back tears, my wife and I say, "Yes, we certainly could."

Normalcy is the key, and the people cling to anything that's familiar – the school, a church, a routine, but especially to one another. Flying low in a Black Hawk over the devastated beach towns, the National Guard general who is our host says, "What this place needs is a good football game." And he's right. It's Friday, and a few lucky schools are gearing up for the big games, all of which have been rescheduled out of town. Signs of normal life are slowly emerging.

The task of rebuilding is monumental and disheartening to the outsider. But to the battle-scarred survivors of the Gulf Coast, today is better

than yesterday, and tomorrow something good will happen.

When William Faulkner accepted the Nobel Prize in 1950, he said, in part: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice and endurance."

Today, Faulkner would find in his native state a resilient spirit that is amazing to behold. The people here will sacrifice and give and give until one day this storm will be behind them, and they will look back, like their parents and grandparents, and quietly say, "We prevailed."

John Grisham is the author, most recently, of "The Broker."

And this, written after Katrina but applicable to each and every experience I have had as I live in the wake of disaster:

> *This has been an outstanding experience and I come home with many, many memories and friendships from these last four months. I'd do it again in a heartbeat… but now it's time to get away. I feel for the locals who don't have this luxury, to escape to somewhere with fewer daily struggles. But everyday a business reopens, or a trailer gets delivered, or the debris truck makes it down your street… and it looks a bit more normal than it did yesterday. I haven't written as much lately because I've become a little bit numb to it all. I'm grateful I haven't lost sight of why I'm here, and I'm satisfied with the work I've done to make things a little bit better for some folks who desperately needed (and still need) a helping hand. But I can't wait to get back to my own *normal* for a while. See you soon!*

The author and proof-positive that he gets dirty from time to time!
He has never come across any verification of the existence of FEMA concentration camps, although he continues to look.

Other books by Derek Joe Tennant include:

Walking Buddha's Path

Derek returns to Thailand to finalize a divorce from his Thai wife. She takes him to a police station instead, where she has bribed officers to put him in jail for 20 years for child molestation, an untrue charge. He tries to call for help and is beaten and severely injured.

A few days later he is placed in a prison outside Bangkok. Derek tries to find the benefit in every situation, and sees the opportunity to grow spiritually from this adversity. Each day he recalls what he has learned about one of the ten paramitas (virtues) of the Bodhisattva Path. He tries to put them into action, even within the confines of his prison life.

A friend from America, a neighbor from Thailand, and US Embassy staff try to locate the missing American. His relationship with Neung, a teenager tasked by the warden with caring for the American while he is imprisoned, deepens quickly before a crisis in Neung's life affects Derek in profound ways.

The spiritual teachings here are useful to any who follow them. *Walking Buddha's Path* is an introduction to a way of being that permeates everyday life and fills it with spiritual energy and delight. One doesn't have to be Buddhist to understand and benefit from this approach to life. These virtues help all who utilize them.

Breaking Trail

As our worldview changes, as our growth in consciousness brings new awareness that we are not separate from each other or our Universe, the old paradigm will be replaced by a new spirituality that recognizes this reality. Not a religion per se, this new spirituality will complement the consciousness that

recognizes our connection with all that is. It will guide us to find our purpose, our heart's goal, and to grow into this new paradigm of consciousness.

Breaking Trail is designed as a 43-day course presenting a spiritual topic each day that you give your attention to on a minute-by-minute basis. You may take each chapter a day at a time, or spend as long as you need with the ideas of one before moving onto the next. Search your heart for answers that are true for you, not what you think others want to hear. It may be helpful to journal about the questions being posed, or you may find that having a trusted partner who is open and willing to discuss these questions with you will help you clarify your thinking and feelings.

Breaking Trail asks that you manifest the change you want to see, that you be a role model, a change agent. New solutions to our problems are required, and that can only come from a new way of thinking and a new understanding of reality. In turn, this leads to a new paradigm, one that speaks to inclusion and awakening to Truth.

Breaking Trail challenges you to begin to sense your connection with all that is. It is filled with questions for you to explore, asking you to pay attention to your world and to awaken to your true nature. Please open your heart and enjoy the journey!

What Color Is Your Sky?

We dance with the Universe, our spirits free to touch the Earth and one another lightly and with loving attention. We learned that attempting to dominate and exploit others, that pushing against the Universe, triggers a fundamental law of physics: for every action, there is an equal reaction. If we want to avoid being slapped by the world, we must keep our touch light and

free. Can we blend our energies and begin to move together, rather than in competition?

In "*What Color Is Your Sky?"* we question some of the assumptions that underlie our current, modern, technological society. I offer some solutions as a way to open a discussion, a brainstorming session, an inquiry that hopefully will lead to changes that get us through these troubling times. There is abundant energy in our world for life and for love, if we can but share. Will we pull together in cooperation, or pull apart in conflict? We, the people must speak to this. Change will not come from outside, politicians and corporations will not instigate this change themselves. If we desire a world as we have just pictured it, it falls to us to speak up, to inspire our family and friends, and to begin to take the steps we can to bring it into existence. Change begins when we let go of the old to make room for the new. All around us now, *today*, the old ways of living are cracking and beginning to crumble. What new vision will succeed in oozing through the cracks and into manifestation? Can you add your voice to shaping our future?

2014

George Orwell wrote 1984 and focused upon Big Brother, government propaganda, surveillance and thought control as being responsible for creating a dysfunctional future. In 2014 we look again into the future, one where control is exerted through debt slavery as America copes with the aftereffects of economic disruptions following a solar flare. Winston Smith, in 2014, finds true love that he is forced to betray as he struggles against the machine of economic tyranny.

All of these books and more are available as free PDF downloads (donations appreciated) on Derek's website: www.derekjoetennant.net

Derek welcomes comments, questions, and suggestions. You may email him using derek@derekjoetennant.net