Katrina – Ten Years After

Today, August 29, is the ten year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina making landfall on America soil. More specifically, the hurricane made landfall on Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, that day but the sheer size of the storm impacted the Gulf of Mexico coast for over 150 miles in both directions. Winnie and I were living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast then, and on storm day we were sheltering in a friend’s house only 30 miles east of landfall. Katrina’s landfall was a life-altering event.

The house we sheltered in took four feet of flooding and at the peak of the storm my wife, two other women in our group, and two little children were floating on a makeshift raft in the living room while another man and I swam outside to get his boat in preparation for evacuation. But the storm and floodwaters started to recede at that point and we all survived, abet shell-shocked at the sheer magnitude of destruction. That evening we returned to our home to discover it had been flooded three feet and suffered extensive roof damage.

I wrote a number of posts about the storm during the year we spent rebuilding our home. All those posts can be found in my “Katrina Diaries” category. I also wrote an extended story “The Year of Hurricane Katrina” around the one year
anniversary that rolled a lot of those posts together and tried to make some sense of everything Winnie and I experienced. After ten years I’m in a better place to reflect.

As bad as the storm’s impact was to us, Winnie and I were much better off than many other people along the Gulf Coast. Our house was still standing and mostly habitable even as we rebuilt. I kept my job and with the flood insurance that I had taken out after Hurricane Georges six years earlier we had all the money we needed to rebuild, and actually ended up in better financial condition. But the money wasn’t enough. The biggest single impact of Katrina was that we ended up moving away from the community I loved. After ten years I still feel a sense of loss for leaving the Gulf Coast, even though Winnie and I have built a decent life here in Northern Virginia.

I continue to feel frustration that whenever anyone outside the Gulf Coast thinks about Hurricane Katrina they only think of New Orleans. Even now, all anyone is talking about for the ten year remembrance is New Orleans. What happened in New Orleans was horrendous, and the Government’s failure to provide aid was unforgivable. But it was only a small piece of the entire Katrina story. The impact to the entire Gulf Coast was overwhelmingly more horrendous than New Orleans, and experienced the same shocking Government failure to provide aid on a much bigger scale. I believe that this narrow media focus on one small piece of the entire disaster is mostly deliberate, a diversion that allows people to deny the devastating reality of our changing climate and our future.

We’ve had a major hurricane disaster since then. In October 2012 Hurricane Sandy, now colloquially referred to as a Super-Storm, wiped out Atlantic City, New Jersey, Staten Island, New York, and impacted a total of 24 states. Super-Storm Sandy also had an unexpected personal impact on me.

I had experienced symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) starting about seven months after Katrina and gradually
got past it, or so I thought. In the aftermath of Super-Storm Sandy, seeing the images of destruction looked too much like what I had witnessed in Mississippi. Those images triggered flashbacks and serious emotional upheavals I wasn’t prepared to deal with. It was only then I realized the depth of my trauma from Katrina. I don’t doubt that many people who suffered through Katrina and its aftermath are just as traumatized.

That trauma runs deep in the material world as well. There’s a lot of news about New Orleans’ Ninth Ward still not fully rebuilt. But there’s no news I’m seeing about the number of homes along the Mississippi Gulf Coast that were never rebuilt either. Flood insurance was not mandatory for many people prior to Katrina, and many people who lost their homes didn’t have the insurance money they needed to rebuild. Adding to the financial losses, post-Katrina flood insurance became mandatory for many more areas, and comprehensive hurricane insurance rates skyrocketed, making it financially nonviable for many people to rebuild. The last time I was on the Mississippi Gulf Coast (about November 2012) there were still large swaths of former residential neighborhoods turned into vacant land, with an occasional lonely foundation marking what was once a home.

My stories of Storm Day and our year-long recovery has received some publicity these past years. My story “The Year of Hurricane Katrina” was adapted into one chapter of the book “Katrina: A Freight Train Screamin’,” by author Cary Black. He corresponded with me as he put together his book and comped me with signed copy of the first printing. It was flattering to be discovered and have my story appear in print. Cary’s book tries to cover both Mississippi and New Orleans, and is probably the one book I’ve found with the best balance in coverage of the storm and aftermath.

I was shopping at my local Big Box Home Improvement Store one day and happened to spot a book titled “The Ultimate Survival Manual: 333 Skills That Will Get You Out Alive,” by author Rich Johnson. As I idly thumbed the pages of heavily illustrated large-print narratives describing how to survive assorted natural and man-made disasters I spotted “Armand Charest,” my father’s name. Further reading revealed that my story of surviving Katrina had been adapted into a “case study” on surviving a hurricane, with the author’s critique on what I did “right” and “wrong.” Of course, I had to buy a copy of the book. I did locate the author’s website and sent an e-mail but never received any response. Although flattered that my story was published, I was annoyed that the author had gotten my name wrong, never asked permission to adapt my story, and offered no comps.

Seeing this adaptation makes me wonder if other schlock writers and publishers have adapted or otherwise used my story without my knowledge. If they at least get my name correct I guess I don’t much care.

So this is ten years after surviving ground zero of what is still called “the worst natural disaster in American history.” Although I once called the Mississippi Gulf Coast my home, I know I could never be comfortable moving back.

The one feeling that has never escaped me, even after all these years, is a feeling of dread for the future. Super-Storms are becoming the new norm, and I firmly believe it’s only a matter of time before a hurricane larger than Katrina strikes the Gulf Coast. I vividly remember, when I announced my intentions of moving to Northern Virginia, the number of people who told me “You’re lucky. If I didn’t have family here I’d move away too.”

I think the many friends I left behind in Mississippi feel that same sense of dread.
Editors Note: Cross posted to my Daily Kos diary account at Ten Years After. Follow-up Note: This diary was pushed to the “Community Spotlight” section by Daily Kos editors.

January 7, 2016: Changed the title to be more descriptive of story contents.