PROLOGUE

"It's all about hope . . ."

"When you've got hope, you can handle anything.
If you've lost hope, there's not much else to stand on."

These stories of the good in people when overcoming challenges, seen through the eyes of three natural disasters—Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and the Asian tsunami—will give anyone a lift.

Hearts
Across The Water

Stories of hope from hurricanes Katrina and Rita

Curt Iles

Creekbank Stories
www.creekbank.com

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.
Isaiah 43:2

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A Spent Bullet
Deep Roots
Christmas Jelly
A Good Place
The Wayfaring Stranger
The Mockingbird's Song
Wind in the Pines
The Old House
Stories from the Creekbank
Uncle Sam: A Horse's Tale

DEDICATION

Hearts across the Water is dedicated to the survivors, overcomers, and volunteer aid workers of Katrina, Rita, and the Tsunami. These are the unsung heroes who risked their lives to save others. They are the givers who have sacrificed greatly to help those affected. These tireless workers who have worked endless hours to aid the victims of these natural disasters are heroes to all of us.

May these stories tell their stories.
These stories from the heart.
Stories of hearts helping across the flood.
Hearts reaching across the water.

IN APPRECIATION

There is a special group that I've come to love and appreciate even more than ever—the staff of Dry Creek Baptist Camp. These are my co-workers and friends. From two days before Katrina's landfall until the week after Rita struck our area, they worked day and night operating "The City of Hope" evacuee shelter at our camp. During this thirty-three-day period, I was reminded of the privilege I have of working beside the finest people in the world. I will forever be full of gratitude and deep emotion toward them.

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Book III

INTRODUCTION

"A story is intended to stab and wound you to the heart...
So it then can stir, heal, and change you forever."
–Franz Kafka

There is nothing good to say about Hurricanes Katrina and Rita or the Asian Tsunami.

All three natural disasters brought death, destruction, and untold human misery. The areas along the Southern Gulf coast as well as Indian Ocean areas of Southern Asia will never be the same.

No, there is nothing good about these hurricanes and this tsunami. Yet, there is much good to tell about the people that came through these storms. Their stories of "passing through the waters" should be, and must be, told.

I'm just the storyteller.

These are their stories.

It is simply my duty to share their stories,

So their lives and deeds may be remembered and celebrated.

There is no way my writing and re-telling can ever adequately express their loss, grief, and heroism. My prayer and hope is that you will glimpse into their hearts and know them through the words of this book.

AN OVERVIEW—THREE CITIES

This book is essentially about three cities. More than that, it is about the people of three cities.

First, it's about two large cities… both about the same size. Well, about the same size until two fateful days that will mark both of them forever.

For Banda Aceh, a large city of 700,000, the fateful day was Dec. 26, 2004. Pronounced Bond-AH AH-chee, it is the capital of Sumatra, the northernmost island that makes up Indonesia. On that December day over 100,000 of its citizens died within a matter of minutes when a huge wall of water surged over the coastal areas of the city.

In March 2005, eighty days after the tsunami, I was part of a Louisiana medical team sent to Indonesia. Although most of the tsunami-related injuries had been taken care of, many medical problems persisted due to the stress and strain of living outdoors under tropical conditions.

Upon arrival our team quickly learned that our main purpose in coming was to listen to these people and their stories. They wanted to tell their stories. Over and over they said: "Please tell our stories in America. Do not forget us when you return home. Tell the Americans about the Acehnese people and our great loss."

This book is the partial fulfillment of that promise to remember these Indonesian friends. May they touch your heart as they have mine.

Hearts across the Water is also about New Orleans, a city of comparable size to Banda Aceh until the twin days

of August 29–30, 2005. On that Monday Hurricane Katrina rushed through and on Tuesday the levees broke and a large American city was flooded—and changed forever.

Thankfully, the loss of life wasn't as dramatic and sudden as at Banda Aceh. But in its own way New Orleans also experienced a death of sorts on that day, never to be the same.

Twelve thousand miles stretch between New Orleans, Louisiana, and Banda Aceh, Indonesia. It takes about thirty hours of flying with six changeovers through seven airports. To go by boat, whether through the Panama Canal and Pacific Ocean, or across the Atlantic and the Cape Horn of Africa into the Indian Ocean, would take weeks.

Two cities so diverse …

Half a world apart.

Both touched by tragedy in the period of less than a year.

Connected by a circle of water,

The waters of the Tsunami, Katrina, and Rita.

The Indian Ocean and Gulf of Mexico.

This book is about three cities and I only introduced you to two.

The third one is a small southwestern Louisiana town called Dry Creek. It is more than a little ironic that a book about floods, walls of water, and the raging ocean would include a town named Dry Creek.

Dry Creek is my lifetime home.

It's the place where several hundred diverse New Orleanians came to find shelter and instead found a home, after Katrina.

We laugh that their arrival instantly doubled the population of Dry Creek.

Dry Creek is the same community where weeks later, rural coastal residents escaping from Rita came to ride out the storm with these New Orleanians. A stranger cultural

mixture has probably never been combined.

Just like Banda Aceh and New Orleans, Dry Creek will never be the same. When you open your hearts, as our camp, community, and schools did, you can never return to your former state.

By the way, that stretching to a new level of compassion and understanding is good. We all need to get out of our comfort zone and get stretched in love and involvement. That is exactly what happened in our community.

But Hearts Across the Water is not really about cities, big or small.

Large masses, numbers, and statistics do not touch our hearts and connect with our soul.

But individual stories do.

These are stories of our own community and the shelter at the camp. Stories of the comfort of a good dog in the midst of the hurricane. The memory of a nineteenth-century man who built a building to withstand a storm in the twenty-first century. Reminders that you can be displaced, but never misplaced by God. Reminders of the goodness and dignity of humans as they reach out to strangers.

All joined together in stories of tears, sadness, hope, and joy.

The story of hearts joined…

Joined and connected…

Hearts across the Water.

IVAN - SEPTEMBER 2004

It was obvious from the crowd in the parking lot at Jet Stop that these folks were evacuees. As we drove by, I told my wife, DeDe, that they looked lost. It was a Wednesday night in early September 2004. Hurricane Ivan had forced much of Southeast Louisiana, including New Orleans, to evacuate.

Jet Stop is a convenience store south of DeRidder, Louisiana, on US Hwy. 171. I've always loved the name of this store. A field behind the store is where a US Air Force jet crashed into the ground in the 1960's. So the name of the store has implications not related to how fast you can stop in and leave.

This group stopped outside Jet Stop was huddled around several cars and large vans. Several men were gathered around a map spread out on the hood of a car. DeDe and I turned around and went back to the parking lot. I eased out of my truck and walked up to one of the men. "You guys look like you are lost? Can I help you?"

This man looked at me as if I was some kind of con artist or slicker. He cautiously said, "Let me take you to my pastor." As we walked over there, he pointed out his pastor, Rev. Johnson. It was my first, but definitely not my last, time to meet the Right Reverend Dwayne Johnson of the Ministry of Truth Outreach Center.

A nice-looking, well-dressed black man, Pastor Johnson looked me in the eyes. Warily he said, "Can I help you?" I replied that I'd like to invite his group to come home with us.

He told how they had been driving for thirty hours. Their trek had taken them from New Orleans to

Alexandria and now they were trying to get to Beaumont. They'd found no shelter or motels open. Most of their thirty hours had been stuck sitting in traffic. Pastor Johnson looked tired and discouraged.

I could tell he was suspicious of me. In New Orleans you learn not to trust friendly strangers. He told me he needed to talk to the men of the church about my offer. I walked back to my truck and waited. I told DeDe that they didn't seem too open to going with strangers off into the dark of the night.

Eventually, Pastor Johnson called me back over. With his men present he questioned me. Later he told me that his men had been equally hesitant about trusting this stranger. I explained that we had a church camp where other Ivan evacuees were staying and we'd take care of them with lodging and meals, and treat them like family. As a disclaimer I told them that it was twenty miles of dark country road to the camp. If they'd trust me, I'd take them to a place of welcome.

While they discussed it further, I thought about my many visits to New Orleans.

I love New Orleans
But I'm scared of New Orleans.
Especially after dark…
I've read too many stories of visitors and tourists
being mugged, beaten, robbed, raped, and killed.

I tried to compare my fear of their city to their fear of my rural area. I wondered if they saw images of white robes and hoods as they looked at this rural white man.

Finally they agreed to go. I was elated. I warned them, "Now it is twenty miles to the camp. Most of it is on dark roads. Don't get scared and turn around before we get there!"

As we led the caravan through the piney woods to Dry Creek, I would glance in my rear view mirror to ensure

that they hadn't turned around. When we arrived at the camp, Todd and Jake came roaring up out of the dark on their four wheelers to help greet our guests. I'm surprised the evacuees would unlock their cars and get out after that loud welcome. By now they were so tired and far from home that they simply gave up on not trusting us.

Reverend Dwayne Johnson later told me of their trepidation in following a stranger deep into the country night. "When we neared Dry Creek I saw the white illuminated cross on the church." (Our church sits in a curve and has a white cross on the front. It is the first thing drivers see as they near the community. In fact people call Dry Creek Baptist Church the "Church with the white cross.")

Reverend Johnson continued, "When I saw that cross I sang out, 'The way of the cross leads home!' One of my members called out, 'That cross is not on fire is it, pastor?' From that moment on, this church became our special friends." Their three-day stay during the Ivan evacuation cemented the bond between their people and our staff. Hurricane Ivan veered slightly east and spared the Crescent City the direct hit everyone had feared for decades.

We knew these new friends from New Orleans would come back for future evacuations. We also knew they would bring more friends and family with them. We just didn't know, and neither did they, that their next visit, not quite one year later, would be for over a month as their lives, city, and church were changed forever by a storm that will always only need a first name to be remembered. Her name was Katrina.

BOOK I

THE TSUNAMI—DECEMBER 26, 2004

It was a typical sunny tropical morning along the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia's northernmost and third largest island. Being a Muslim nation, the days around Christmas were nothing to be noticed or celebrated, especially here in the Islamic area known as "The Porch of Mecca." Even though it was Sunday morning in Sumatra, in America it was still Christmas night. Thirteen hours behind in the Central time zone found many Louisianans still enjoying a day of eating, opening presents, and being among family.

Back in the Sumatran capital of Banda Aceh, it was just before 8:00 am when the first shaking and rumbling began. Earthquakes are common in this part of the world where a great fault line lies under the mountainous island, which is why many of the most active volcanoes in the world are on this island. Off the western coast is where two giant plates of the earth's crust meet. Due to these geologic features Indonesia has always been a land of earthquakes and volcanic activity.

But the earthquake on the morning of December 26, 2004, was not just any earthquake. Measured at 9.0 on the Richter scale, it was the fourth largest recorded quake since 1900. Most earthquakes last a few seconds, but this one shook for ten minutes. The entire planet even vibrated a few centimeters back and forth.

The epicenter of this earthquake was in the Indian Ocean, just north of Simeulue Island off the western coast

of Northern Sumatra, Indonesia. The center was about 150 miles southwest of Banda Aceh.

This earthquake was the result of the slipping of one of the two great land mass plates under the ocean. This sudden upward surge of a land plate nearly one hundred miles long created a huge amount of seismic energy. This energy lifted up an enormous amount of seawater that began traveling outward as a seismic sea wave, or tsunami.

As the people along the coasts of Indonesia came outside their homes to view the damage caused by the strong tremors, little did they know that within minutes, a much deadlier force was moving toward them—a killer tsunami wave.

SIMEULUE ISLAND

The small Indonesian island of Simeulue (pronounced Sim-ah-LOO) sits about 150 miles off the coast of Sumatra surrounded by the Indian Ocean. It was the closest land to the great earthquake on the morning of December 26. Despite its proximity to the earthquake and subsequent tsunami waves, surprisingly only seven people died that morning.

The minimal loss of life there, and the reason for it, is an amazing story.

But first, I must tell a much sadder story from the nearby coast of Sumatra.

Lampuuk (pronounced Lom-Pook) is a coastal village on the western shore of Sumatra. On the morning of December 26 it was the home of about 10,000 people. The village sits in a valley between two small mountain ranges. Thirty kilometers through this valley is the large seaport capital of Banda Aceh.

Because of its ocean setting, Lampuuk is a village of fishermen. The aqua-colored Indian Ocean is the source of life and labor for the village. Many of the fishermen were already on the ocean on the morning when the earthquake occurred.

That morning, the residents of Lampuuk ran outside during the first tremors of the earthquake. They knew it was safer outside and everyone wanted to see what was occurring. Within a few minutes of the tremors, shouting started down near the beach.

Word quickly spread that the sea had receded a long way back exposing a large area that had been underwater a few seconds earlier. The excited shouting told that

flopping fish were everywhere on the newly uncovered beach areas.

Villagers, especially children, ran hurriedly to catch the fish. They grabbed buckets, nets, and even plastic bags. It was a field day of squirming fish and laughing children. The women of Lampuuk followed their children down to the beach. Anxiety showed on their faces as they wondered about their fishermen husbands out on the strangely behaving ocean.

Men who were still on the sea after the earthquake felt the first wave come under their boats. These tsunami waves were traveling over 500 miles per hour out on the open sea. The waves were only a few feet high as they went past the boats.

As the first wave began nearing land it slowed down considerably. However, the sloping continental shelf caused the wave to stack up on itself similar to what happens with a hurricane storm surge.

In the village of Lampuuk and along its beaches, everyone was unaware of the coming tragedy. A field day of fish catching was soon to become a killing field on this beach.

Everyone was unaware except for one woman.

This woman was not a Lampuuk native. She had grown up on the nearby island of Simeulue. The strong quake coupled with the shouts about the water receding caused a jolt in her memory. As a girl she'd heard the oral history of a great tsunami of 1907 on Simeulue in which thousands died. Older family members had told her that an earthquake followed by the ocean's receding were the ominous signs of an incoming tsunami.

This woman grabbed her children and ran screaming in the streets of Lampuuk of the coming tsunami. Even her husband, a Lampuuk policeman, ignored her pleading and screaming as he went toward the beach.

This woman's anguished warnings were ignored by all that morning.

As you can guess, the same cries were going out throughout the coastal areas of Simeulue Island. By the time the tsunami arrived there, the coastal areas had been evacuated to the nearby higher ground. That is why only seven people died there that same morning.

The story of Lampuuk, sadly, is much different.

THE SILENT CITY

Our medical team, working in Sumatra for two weeks, made daily visits to at least two clinics. These were displaced centers for those who had survived the tsunami and were just trying to survive before deciding to rebuild.

Our team leaders who had been in the country for years would tell us before we left for that day's clinic, "Today you'll be up on the mountainside in an older village." Or, "This one is the farthest out. You'll see monkeys in the trees there."

But as they talked of our upcoming visit to Lampuuk they said, "It's the one where there aren't any children. It is the silent city."

As we arrived at most clinic locations a huge rush of children met us. They had figured out we would have crayons, coloring books, candy, and even toys from America. We quickly learned not to hand any of this out until we were ready to leave. Even then it was a chore to hold them back. Mothers would be in our face gesturing and speaking fast in Acehnese saying that their children had gotten left out on the candy allotment.

But no laughing children or arguing mothers greeted us in Lampuuk. There was an eerie silence there that said more than any words could have ever spoken. The children were gone. Most of the sad-faced men present there had lost everything, including their precious families.

Out of a thriving village of 10,000, only 600 people survived the tsunami. Saddest of all, only six children survived. This included the two children of the Simeulue lady who ran through the streets trying to warn others. When no one would listen, she loaded her children in a car

and rushed them to safety ahead of the first wave.

Our clinic at Lampuuk left a deep impression on all of our team. We became silent ourselves and talked in lowered voices as if in a cemetery. Looking around at the hundreds of white foundation slabs in every direction, we knew we were in the presence of a great flood of death had occurred.

I remembered the words of an old country preacher at our cemetery in Dry Creek: "We've come today to the city of the dead. This is as far as we can go before we lower this body into the ground." Looking around at the white grave markers and tombstones it did resemble a city.

A city of the dead.
A silent city.
That is exactly how Lampuuk looked and felt.
A silent city.
Once alive, but now empty.

Later the following weekend our team had Sunday off, so we each had time to do what we pleased. For some reason I wanted to return to Lampuuk. I felt this strange need to be at this village once more. The motorcycle taxi driver looked strangely at me as I requested a ride to Lampuuk.

There are few people living there now. That sunny day there were only a handful of men.

Most are gone, lost. I'm sure others have left never to return… too many bitter memories.

I spent the afternoon walking the empty streets and along the beach. I stopped where a golf course had been on the outskirts of town. I remembered one of the aid workers who lost a friend playing golf on that fateful morning. I couldn't help but wonder how it would feel to be standing here, golf club in hand, seeing the great wave approaching.

I found a shady spot under one of the few surviving

trees and spent the afternoon just sketching, painting, and thinking. I painted a simple watercolor picture of what I felt Lampuuk would look like in the future:

With houses,
and gardens,
and bright colors again.

And best of all, with children running and playing and laughing. The painting was not really great but it came from my heart. In pencil I wrote on it:

To the village of Lampuuk. May the ocean once again be your friend.

May your streets be filled again with laughing children.

Before leaving Lampuuk I took it to a group of young men sitting on the porch of a makeshift store. They shared a bottle of water with me and I shared my painting with them as we attempted to visit. They knew no English and my phrasebook was inadequate for what I wanted to say. In fact, any language was inadequate for what I wished to say to them. I had no words anyway.

So I just left them the picture. They passed it around with many comments and gestures. One of them tacked it up on the wall of the little store. My own gesturing and pointing probably couldn't convey my prayers and good wishes for them.

But I'm sure someone came along later and explained the English writing. I hope they understand it and the heart it came from.

I hope it is still tacked up somewhere years later when the streets of the silent city of Lampuuk are once again filled with the sounds of laughing children.

HENRY

I met Henry among the ruins of Lampuuk on our first visit there. It had been over eleven weeks since the tsunami. Henry lived in a tent not far from the only remaining building in Lampuuk: the local Mosque. A handsome twenty-year-old with an infectious smile and wonderful personality, Henry quickly became the favorite among all of our medical team. He had excellent command of English as well as the widely spoken Basra Indonesian and the rarer Acehnese dialect.

As we began to set up our medical clinic at Lampuuk, Henry came out of his tent to greet us. He seemed to be the official goodwill ambassador of the village. Henry had a cheerful, contagious smile that said, "I've been through a lot but I'm still standing." He also possessed a great pride that led him to question every American visitor with the same inquiry:

"Hey, have you ever met a president of your United States of America?"
Most of our replies were an honest, "No."

Our new Indonesian friend would then break out into a wide grin and proudly say, "Well, I've shook hands with two of your presidents right here where we are standing. I visited with your presidents Bush senior and Clinton three weeks ago. We talked for over thirty minutes." I could easily envision Henry schmoozing with our two leaders as they visited the Banda Aceh area earlier in February. I have no doubt he held his own in conversation with both of them.

Our team had earlier been told to meet Henry by a Los Angeles medical team that had befriended him and actually stayed overnight at his tent as guests.

As we visited, I asked Henry to show me where his house had been. We walked through the rubble and debris of what had once been a thriving village. He pointed to a nearby road and warned me not to cross past it. "That is rebel-controlled territory and the government cannot assure your safety past there." He shrugged as if it was no big deal. I was once again reminded that we were not only in a disaster zone, but a war zone where the Free Aceh movement had battled with governmental troops for over a decade. Due to this ongoing revolution, martial law was in force.

In every direction the only reminders of human habitation were the cement foundation slabs swept clean by the waves. We finally came to the slab that had been Henry's home. Then he began his story.

"On the morning of the earthquake everyone ran outside to look around. My dad and younger brother were with me. The shaking continued and was accompanied by a great deal of shouting and running around. When the message was passed around about the receding ocean and fish, many folks ran toward the ocean. For some reason, my father, brother, and I did not run. We simply stood there wondering what was next.

It was probably 10–15 minutes after the quake when we first heard it. You could hear the roar of the wave before you could see it. When we saw it coming everyone ran. My father and brother were behind me as we fled for our lives toward higher ground."

As Henry spoke, he pointed off to a grove of tall coconut trees about one-half mile away. "That is where I was headed. The wave, it was actually three waves traveling together, was moving about 30 kilometers per hour- slow enough to outrun for a short distance. Looking back I saw

my father and brother trailing farther behind me. When the wave washed over the Mosque it was about to there on its side." Henry pointed to a spot about thirty feet high on the Mosque wall. Although it had stood, the entire Mosque was gutted and the stairwells had been torn away.

Henry continued as he pointed back toward the grove of trees, "The last I saw of my father and brother was when they were overtaken by the water. Eventually the water reached me and I frantically tried to run in it, and then swim. The debris being pushed along hindered free movement. I passed out and later awoke on higher ground near the trees. I have no idea how I escaped."

Henry's story and the way he so dispassionately told it touched me. It was as if he was describing a normal event or the happenings on another planet. I wondered how many times he had related his tale. Just because he told it without much emotion did not mean it was not burned deep into his soul. Here was a young man, the age of my sons, who had lost everything.

In the coming days we spent a great deal of time with Henry as he traveled with us to many of the clinics. He was a great help with the older patients who spoke mainly Acehnese. He would "interpret for the interpreters" as he translated the patient's Acehnese symptoms to the interpreter who translated it into English for our doctors.

I think back to the difficulty of starting the renovation of an area so utterly devastated. Then I think of Henry. He had an optimism that the storm had not washed away. A deep inner resolve that was evident and indicative of the Acehnese people we met and grew to love.

The task of rebuilding northern Sumatra, just like our task now in New Orleans and throughout our part of Louisiana, is completely overwhelming. In Lampuuk that day very little rebuilding had been done, even after three months. I thought to myself, "How would you even know where to start?"

Then I think about the young people I met there—Henry and his wonderful smile and "can do" personality. I see the faces of Raihail and her student nurses. I think of Saeed our driver each day.

And Dedek, a young Indonesian who worked with us. Then there is Jenni, a vibrant young Indonesian from another part of the country, casting her lot with these Acehnese to rebuild their lives and cities. Plus there will be countless others who will be called upon to rebuild their cities.

The new Lampuuk will be different. Just as the new New Orleans will be also different. And as always, it will be young minds, and young hearts, and innovative minds that lead the way.

6 “GET IT DOWN…KEEP IT DOWN.”

Even in the midst of the human tragedy of a tsunami and its aftermath, humor still finds its place. This is my favorite story from Sumatra.

Upon arriving in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital of over eight million people, we went through orientation of how to act and behave when we were to later travel the 1000 miles to Northern Sumatra. We were instructed as to the unusual customs and social taboos found in this part of the world. I knew what my major challenge would be: my left-handedness. In Asia, the use of your left hand for many things is forbidden. This is due to their view of the left hand as unsanitary and offensive. To put it delicately, they use their left hand for cleaning themselves after going to the bathroom. Therefore to point with, touch with, wave at, or hand something with your left hand is a cultural taboo.

I've only been left-handed for 49 years so it is extremely difficult for me to remember this. Our team was constantly reminding me of this genetic shortcoming of mine.

Chris, an American who had been a lifelong Indonesian resident, also talked about the ins and outs of eating what is set before you. He laughed as he told us this prayer,

"Lord, I'll get it down, but you'll have to keep it down."

Eating habits and cuisine in Asia are very different from ours in America. Once in China I looked down at a plate of rice and chicken to see various parts of the chicken staring back at me, including the feet and head. That image still lingers in my mind.

Upon arriving in Sumatra we found the meals to be

extremely to our liking. The Indonesian cooks at the house enjoyed watching the hearty appetites we had toward their cooking.

Emma, one of our American volunteers, had previously spent two years in Indonesia. She understands the customs as well as the language. On this particular evening, Emma was in the kitchen inspecting the pots filled with food for supper. Nearby two Indonesian women scurried back and forth in preparation. She paused at one boiling pot and smelled it in search of what was cooking in it.

The older of the two Indonesian women saw Emma's inspection. She sniffed derisively and commented, "What is the matter? Do you not like what we are cooking for you Americans?"

Emma quickly replied that she loved their food and simply was curious what tonight's entrée was.

The Indonesian cook was not satisfied with that answer so she added, "I don't see why you wouldn't eat that. You Americans will eat anything!"

Now Emma didn't want to get into an argument but couldn't resist asking for elaboration,

"What do you mean we will eat anything?"
The Indonesian's mood lightened up as she smiled and replied,
"Oh yes, you Americans will eat anything. You even eat worms!"

Emma's curiosity was now heightened, "What do you mean about we Americans 'eating worms?'"

"Oh yes," replied the cook, "You Americans eat worms. I saw that on 'Fear Factor.' "

Emma laughed, as we did too, when she later related the story. In fact, I know you are laughing now as you read it.

But there is a serious and sad thought to this story. In much of the world, especially Northern Sumatra, which is shut off from the outside world by the combined elements of civil war, martial law, and Islamic extremism, what they

know about the United States is what they see on television. The idea that people perceive is that Americans eat worms and do the disgusting things shown on reality TV as well as live, dress, and act like the stars of American television and movies.

In the coming days of our Sumatran sojourn I was reminded that I was representing my country as well as my Lord. How I carry myself and behave will influence the perceptions of my country among these folks who've never seen an American until the tsunami arrived.

Our Indonesian cooks would bring our meals to us. I wasn't always quite sure what the majority of it was. But once again I would mutter under my breath the words of the foreign traveler's prayer,

"Lord, I'll get it down but You'll have to help me keep it down.

P.S. And Lord if possible, don't let it be worms.

I'm not sure this American is man enough to eat any worms today. Amen and amen."

"NOT YET"

In Indonesia there are so many unique and unusual things...chief among them are the nuances of their language. The following illustration is probably my favorite:

When an Indonesian is asked a specific question, they qualify their answer in many ways and terms. For instance, the question," Are you married?" may not get the yes/no answer a Westerner would reply with. Instead a married person would answer, "Ya" which means yes.

But the chances are an unmarried Indonesian would answer, "Belum." Ed, one of our team fluent in Indonesian and familiar with culture, pointed this out. "Belum" simply means "not yet." It is pronounced "be-loom."

Even the older lifelong bachelor or spinster would not answer this marital status question with "Tidak" ("No"), but instead they would answer with the eternally hopeful and optimistic, "Belum."

A whole list of "Belum" questions comes to mind:
Have you ever been to America?
"Belum."

I like a people that have that kind of outlook of life. This "No I haven't done that/been there/seen that yet" attitude is pretty neat.

I began a list of some of the questions I would like to answer "Belum" to:

Have you been to California to see the giant Sequoia trees? "Belum."

Have you held a grandchild in your arms? "Belum."

Have you hiked the entire Appalachian Trail? "Belum."

Have you returned to Sumatra since your last trip? "Belum."

I like that word, "Belum."
It has an air of expectancy to it.
Hopefulness.
A holding out that it may (and shall) come to pass.
It has to be spoken with a certain faith to it.

It is a good word for the follower of Jesus to carry with him/her. Above all peoples, we should be living with that hopeful believing seed of faith in our heart and mind.

Such as in...

Are you as close to Jesus as you wish to be? "Belum."

Has that loved one you've prayed decades for come to the Lord? "Belum."

Is God through with you (at age_____?) "Belum."

Have you been to Heaven? "Belum."

Best of all, I like the "Belum" answer for the tough spiritual questions that stared us in the face on this trip. Questions such as, "Do you understand why God allowed this massive disaster and loss of life?" "Belum."

I do not understand it...and very likely will not on this side of Heaven's obscuring curtain. But in spite of my present "Belum," one day I will see this disaster from the vast infinite eternal vista of God's will and plan.

Until then I'll follow the wise words of the great English preacher, Charles Hadden Spurgeon:

"God is too kind to be cruel and too strong to be confused.

So when I cannot trace His hand, I simply trust His heart."

Another important eternal question with that same one word reply:

Have the precious people of Aceh Province turned to Isa Almasih, or as I call him, “Jesus the Messiah?" Once again, the answer is "Belum." But it is a "Not Yet" with the firm knowledge that the seeds being planted are being faithfully watered and nurtured by the Master. The harvest, as always, is His and not ours.

Belum...It's a word I like.

FRUIT BATS

Each evening in Indonesia would be the time we all tried to make calls home. The thirteen-hour gap in time meant our early morning was suppertime back home. To use the satellite phone meant going outside where the reception was better. It also meant dodging the fruit bats. Just before dark these B-52-sized bats would begin their evening bombing runs. The first time we saw these Indonesian bats at dusk we thought they were crows. But an Indonesian pointed out they were fruit bats. They would fly and glide through the street in front of the house. I am not exaggerating when I say they were the size of crows. One resident of the Aid House said they were "buzzard size" but I believe he was from Texas where exaggeration is genetic.

But the sight of those huge bats dipping and circling would make us all duck when they flew near. I saw enough Dracula movies as a boy to have a healthy fear for any bat as big as a crow or buzzard.

Well, anyway I would go in the back yard after dark to make my calls bat-free. Nightly in a house across a nearby field a man would be playing the guitar and singing. Sometimes he would sing solo and other times he would be joined by others. Of course I didn't understand a word, but I could catch both the joy and sorrow as I listened nightly.

One of his songs was a fast-strummed piece that had a Mexican Mariachi band sound to it. I'd nearly swear that he was singing "Louie, Louie" in Acehnese. (I've never been able to understand the words to the English version of the Kingsmen classic, "Louie, Louie," either. Even the

FBI once launched an investigation into the song's lyrics, feeling they might be subversive or obscene. After playing the song backwards and at various speeds, they found it indecipherable any way they listened to it.)

As I heard this seemingly Indonesian version of "Louie, Louie" nightly, it had a sound of hope to it. A sound of "we've been knocked down here and lost so much, but we are still standing." Then the singer would follow that song with a mournful ballad that regardless of the words, I knew it was a song of grief, loss, and sadness. It had the same mournful cry that the first prayer calls had each morning as the Muslim faithful were called to prayer.

The first several mornings in Sumatra we all had jet lag so we were up during the early morning hours. That earliest prayer call at five each morning was so sad. Over the loudspeaker it seemed as if it was not the mullah who was crying out, but the voices of the dead calling out to those left behind. As I listened to the prayer call and the Louie/Louie singer, I wondered about their faith. Had it been strengthened or broken?

It is something how a song…music can get into our soul so intimately.

It can seep down into a broken heart and heal.

It can unclog a stopped-up heart and release the tears and hurt…

A song can touch and connect.

Even if it sounds like "Louie, Louie."

THE ROAD THROUGH SAMARIA

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the less traveled by,
And that has made the difference."
–Robert Frost
"The Road Not Taken"

Well-meaning people will often say to anyone who travels far away for ministry:

Why did you want to go way over there when there is so much to do here?"

Jesus' mandate in Acts 1:8 was not just to the disciples of the first century, but also to us.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

We are to be His "witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth." This verse is not an either/or statement. These four geographical areas are not the buffet at Ryan's Restaurant, where we can choose one, several, or even none...it requires a world-sized balanced vision of both our Jerusalem ... the place where we live daily...as well as the faraway hard-to-reach places that can be summed up as "the uttermost parts."

Like Sumatra...
It is literally the "uttermost part" for an American.
It seems to be at "the ends of the earth."

In Sumatra you have two pretty equal choices to get back home to the U.S. of A. You can go up through SE Asia and the across the Pacific...or you can get there via the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Atlantic. Either way it is about 12,000 miles... or three days of planes, airports, delays, and airline food.

But we are called to go to "the hard places." The places where the road leading there is long, dusty, and less traveled. That is exactly what the "Samaria" was in Jesus' Acts 1:8 mandate.

To the Jewish listeners, Samaria was a place they would walk miles out of the way to avoid. It was the homeland of a group they hated...and who hated them in return. There were generations of misunderstandings and stereotypes among these two people groups—the Jews and Samaritans. The fact that the Samaritans were "partly Jewish" only made the divide wider and the hatred more bitter.

But Jesus, the Son of God, didn't avoid Samaria. He simply walked right through it. And He touched lives while traveling through. He had appointments to keep with hurting and sinning Samaritans, just as he did among his own Jewish population. His encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well is the greatest example of his ministry in this strange land.

John's introduction to this encounter is prefaced with this statement that we would be wise not to overlook. John 4:4 states, “He left Judea and departed again to Galilee. But he needed to go to Samaria."

Samaria cannot be ignored by the concerned follower of Jesus.

Even though it is a hard place.

And the work there can be thankless and difficult.

And the recognition and rewards will be few.

And we may not be understood....a different language...strange culture...and worldviews divergent from

ours. But followers of Jesus still "need to go through Samaria."

A reminder to myself is in order; our "Samaria" does not necessarily need to be on another continent. It can be as near as a part of our community or state. For me, New Orleans is part of "my Samaria." We jokingly tell Northern visitors to Dry Creek that you cannot get into New Orleans from our part of Louisiana without a passport. New Orleans takes me out of my comfort zone and is always different and strange. My Samaria, as well as yours, will nearly always be an uncomfortable place.

The story is told that an English missionary society wrote to the great missionary David Livingstone and asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to know how to send other men deep in the heart of Africa to join you." Livingstone wrote back, "If you have men who will only come if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come even if there is no road at all."

The road to Samaria...
As well as the road through Samaria...
Neither of these are ever "good roads" or "easy roads"
but they are the place to be and
will always be the road of blessings.

LISTENING…LOST

"There is a way of listening that surpasses all compliments."
–Van Ligne

Dr. Tim Nicholls is a gifted internist at Willis Knighton Hospital in Shreveport, Louisiana. Dr. Todd Pullin practices as a pediatrician in Eunice, Louisiana. Dr. Pullin has a special way with young people and children.

These two men were the true leaders of our medical team to Sumatra. Over and over for two weeks we watched them showing the compassion of Jesus to the hurting people of the coastal areas affected by the tsunami.

The American Heritage Dictionary aptly defines compassion as "deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it." This is what these doctors did as they sat hour after hour seeing long snaking lines of patients.

After we had been there for about a week, one of the doctors made a statement that will stay with me for the rest of my life. He said, "I thought I was coming over here to take care of the medical needs of these wonderful people. In reality, my being a doctor is only the common ground where I can sit down and listen to their stories. They do not need my medical training as much as they need my ear."

It was a defining statement for all of us. For me it was a watershed experience teaching that the greatest gift we can give others is to listen.

The first Westerners to arrive in Sumatra discovered that. At the Aid House they related a story about eight Tennessee men who came in the early weeks after the tsunami. Each day they did one thing… and one thing

only. They recovered and helped bury the dead. This thankless task brought incredulous questions from the Indonesians, "Why have you come to do this? We thought Americans hated us and here you are helping do the toughest job of all-- burying our dead."

Then the grieving Indonesians would stop the recovery team to tell their own story of loss, grief, and survival. Everyone had a story and, amazingly, they wanted to share it with these strangers.

Over and over as relief workers arrived, they found just as our doctors later discovered that these people wanted someone to listen. All of them, including our team, heard these comments,

"Please go home and tell other Americans about us and what we have lost."

"Promise that you will not forget us when you go home."

"Do you have time to hear my story?"

As the people of Aceh province told their stories, a word continually was used by all- "Lost." It was a haunting word when used this way, "We were all together as the wave hit and then they were…lost."

It is a word without closure. The vast majority of the thousands of bodies recovered were never identified and simply buried in mass graves. Others were washed out to sea never to be recovered. Even as we were there eighty days after the tsunami, bodies were still being found. All over the city of Banda Aceh were sticks with red or white cloths tied to them. This meant a body had been found in the rubble at that spot.

Very few of the survivors were able to bury the bodies of their loved ones. So they used that word, lost. "They are gone. They are lost." Many times they would nod toward the Indian Ocean as they said this.

And our job was to listen…over and over…as long as it took.

Another person from the Aid House told of an earlier

team about the heart-wrenching story of two American nurses who were tending to an Acehnese mother. She told them of how her two babies were washed out of her arms during the tsunami. Her husband dove in after them. "All three of them are gone…lost," she quietly shared. The mother continued, "I'm dry from crying. I have no tears left inside of me." So the two nurses sat silently and cried for her. Just sitting there for a long time and showing that God-like word: compassion.

In one Banda Aceh clinic we met a grandmother with her three preteen grandchildren. She shared her story: On the morning of the tsunami she went walking with four grandchildren. Her daughter, with two younger children, stayed home. While they were gone walking in a nearby neighborhood, the tsunami struck. Once again we heard the term, this time from a grieving grandmother. She shook her head, as she said, "When we returned they were gone…gone forever." The grandmother's eyes had such an unusual mixture of pain and dignity.

Listening—it is an art and it is a habit. It is not conducive to our American way of life.

Another member of our team, Jesse Koski, was the team optometrist. Jesse is a renal nurse in Lafayette but on this trip he was the resident eye doctor. Jesse is a tough-looking guy with a football player's build and a shaven head. He loves people and showed it over and over on this trip. Our team took hundreds of pairs of eyeglasses to distribute. Many of the tsunami survivors lost their eyeglasses in the water. Others needed glasses but had never had the opportunity to have them before.

Jesse would open his large locker of glasses and excited Indonesians would go through the process of trying them on for the right fit. It was fun to watch the process. Jesse was good at it and it afforded a great opportunity to once again do what we were really there to do: to build relationships through listening.

Jesse's satisfied customers would walk away with big

grins on their faces seeing things they hadn't seen before.

In one displaced person's camp we were shutting down our clinic and loading up the medicine lockers, tables, chairs, and equipment we used daily. I was over by the temporary buildings the government had erected to get the people out of the weather.

A middle-aged Indonesian man came up and grabbed me by the arm. He had on a pair of Jesse's glasses. He got right up in my face and began talking rapidly in either Basran Indonesian or Acehnese. At first I thought he was mad, but I quickly realized he was telling me something important. I looked around for an interpreter but no one was near.

Then it hit me: He was telling his story.

I hope you understand it when I say I didn't understand one single word he was saying; yet I knew exactly what he was saying.

My job was simply to listen as he told his story. The passionate waving of his arms and gestures told me all about the giant wave. His facial expressions and voice inflection told me of the great loss he had suffered. I looked at his dark eyes through the lens of glasses that had been sent from Bossier City or Baton Rouge. His eyes told his story even better than his words or gestures.

I'm not sure how long it took him to tell his story. That's not important. The main thing is that he got to tell his story. It was really the most eloquent of the many stories I was told. Without a doubt it is the story that has rooted most deeply in my heart.

One of America's most beloved authors, Erma Bombeck, shared this story about sitting in an airport and trying to enjoy the peace and quiet before a flight. An elderly lady sat next to her and said, "I'll bet it's cold in Chicago."

Bombeck knew the lady was trying to make conversation, but she was not in the mood for small talk. She replied to the stranger without looking up, "It's likely."

But the lady did not take the hint and continued the one-sided conversation with, "I haven't been to Chicago for nearly three years." Bombeck grunted, "Uh-huh." Then the woman said, "My husband's body is on this plane. We've been married for 53 years."

Erma wrote, "I don't think I've ever detested myself more than I did at that moment. A desperate human being had turned to a stranger. She needed no advice, money, assistance, or expertise—just someone to listen. She talked steadily until we boarded the plane. As I put my things in the overhead compartment, I heard her say to her seat companion, 'I'll bet it's cold in Chicago.' I prayed, 'Please, God, let the fellow sitting next to her listen.'"

Later in the days and weeks after Katrina and Rita, this same ministry of listening was needed. And right at The City of Hope evacuee shelter in Dry Creek, Louisiana Dr. Tim Nicholls and Dr. Todd Pullin did exactly what they had earlier done in Southern Asia. They sat and listened as they doctored. Except this time the stories weren't of a tsunami wave, but a storm surge wave. This time it was New Orleans instead of Banda Aceh. And this time, thankfully, there weren't tens of thousands dead. But still, regardless of the culture, city, language, or religion, people wanted to tell their story to a listening ear and a caring heart.

Their stories of loss…
Heard by a compassionate and caring heart.
Hearts across the water.
Always listening…always caring.

A MILLIONAIRE NAMED BRUCE

Bruce is the type of guy everyone likes when they meet him. A fireman for the City of Shreveport, he is a country boy who grew up in rural Mooringsport, Louisiana. You would wonder how a bachelor fireman would end up being part of a medical aid team to Indonesia. However, Bruce's responsibilities with the Shreveport Fire Department are as an Emergency Medical Technician.

On our nine-member medical team, Bruce ran the triage unit. He was the first contact with the patients and would learn their needs and symptoms and route them to the correct station. He was a natural for it. A big nice-looking 25-year-old former football player, this was his first mission trip of any type, but he quickly took to the people with a big smile.

When we arrived in this country at the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, our first chore was to change our money from American dollars to Indonesians rupiahs. The going rate was one dollar exchanging over into over 9,000 rupiahs. In other words, when you had 100,000 rupiahs, it was actually worth only about $11 USD. We even had pocket cards showing the comparison of sums between dollars and rupiahs. It helped us keep clear perspective on what were fair prices for taxi rides or cups of coffee.

We had been instructed to bring only the very newest, crispest, and unfolded US $100 bills we could. This would ensure the highest exchange rate for us. We all walked to the nearby money exchange office. Two smiling Indonesian women, replete with their jobab head coverings, began the task of changing our money.

It was comical as they painstakingly looked over every

bill with the most tender care and concern. Invariably after consulting in the Basran language, they would announce some flaw or defect with every bill. It either had a mark, the wrong signature by some Secretary of the Treasury, a folded crease on a corner, or a serial number they did not like.

No one got the highest exchange rate. We all had to settle for a somewhat less favorable rate. I thought of Romans 3:23, "For all have come short of the glory of God. There is none righteous, no not one."

Just as none of these bills could meet their "exacting standard," we humans face the same problem when we are "examined by God." Our personal sins cause us to be declared, "flawed." That is why my plea when presented before God will not be my flawlessness or any good works, but the perfect forgiveness and cleansing provided by Jesus.

Anyway, back to the Jakarta exchange office: Bruce was the last to go inside. I asked him, "Bruce, have you ever wanted to be a millionaire?" He just grinned at me.

I continued, "Bruce, take $125 dollars in there and exchange it. He was gone a few minutes and came out with a huge stack of rupiahs in denominations of 10,000 to 50, 000. It was 1.15 million rupiahs. Bruce laughed as he announced his new designation as a millionaire.

On the trip Bruce was great. Nothing flustered him and he naturally was attracted to the Acehnese people. His already compassionate heart bloomed during our two weeks of work there. There were several younger people in our group: This mix of Americans and Indonesians easily merged together and obviously loved each other's company. They all spent a lot of time together having fun.

Among this group of twenty-something-year-old workers was Erin. Erin lived in New Orleans where she had just finished seminary at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Erin, a Virginia native, was thrilled to be on this trip. She had spent two years previously in

Indonesia and had a great love for these people and a good command of their language.

Erin was amazed that we were going to Northern Sumatra. Her two years in Indonesia had taught her that this area was strictly off limits to westerners. The idea of going into this area was non-existent until the tsunami hit at the end of 2004. Now doors were wide open in Indonesia and she couldn't wait to return to her adoptive land.

If there was ever a spark of romance on that trip I missed it and so did the rest of our team. Bruce later told us that he asked Erin if she would go out with him if he called her after returning to the states. Erin laughed at him probably thinking of the distance from Shreveport to New Orleans.

But Bruce meant it, and when Erin later returned to Louisiana a week later than the rest of the team, she got the first call. Bruce meant it. Soon, in spite of their long distance courtship, they were in love.

They spent two weeks in our summer camps this past summer. They shared with our campers about this life-changing trip they'd been on. Their heart for the hurting people of Indonesia was exhibited each day. And were they ever in love! It was evident for all to see.

Bruce and Erin were married in September between the arrivals of Katrina and Rita. They are living in Shreveport but are making the necessary steps to return to Asia. Of course, Indonesia is their top choice. Right now, however, they have been busy working with disaster relief right at home.

According to the world's standards, they are making some bad career choices. You'll never become rich working in a foreign country helping others. The hardships and dangers are daily. The difficulties of living so far from family and among a different culture should never be underestimated. Some would claim that the worst mistake

Bruce made was messing up his ordered, simple life by wandering off on a two-week disaster relief trip.

But in my mind, I see Bruce's grin as he holds up over 1 million rupiahs in the market area of Jakarta, Indonesia. Yes, he is still a millionaire—not of the earthly kind, whether measured in dollars or rupiahs.

But Bruce has found his calling

And he has found his life partner.

And he has found that simple secret, a secret so simple and plain that most of the world trips over it. The secret that real fulfillment in life doesn't come from amassing wealth But rather from serving others and having the joy this service brings.

The kind of joy and purpose that makes a man a millionaire.

GOATS, BOATS, AND \ A HAND UP…. NOT A HANDOUT.

One of the Displaced Person's Centers along Sumatra's Northern Coast is named Garut.

It is one of many nondescript assortments of crude buildings, tents, and amassed people you find all along the coast. It was not a village before the tsunami.

This new village of Garut consists of 300 families from five different areas. The village leader explains that the residents all come from coastal villages wiped out by the wave. They have come together here on higher ground to build a new life and a new village together.

This conversation took place under a large United Nations tent that serves as the village school, hospital, and meeting area. I am simply an eavesdropper on the amazing conversation I'm going to relate to you.

The village leader sat down with Jim. Jim is from an American aid group and has the wonderful but daunting task of allocating $16 million worth of tsunami aid throughout the affected areas of Southern Asia.

Beside Jim sits "C" (as we will call him), an American who has spent his entire life among the Indonesian people. C's job is to interpret this important conversation.

I'm sitting ten feet away playing dominoes with a group of children. However, I'm not going to miss one word of the conversation going on behind me. I've been with Jim for two days and am very impressed with his spirit and vision. He is going village to village to find out firsthand about the needs and how best to be good stewards of the resources available.

After some visiting and pleasantries, Jim asks the village leader what they need most. There is a long silence as if the leader is going over a mental shopping list in his mind. Then he replies in Indonesian. C seems puzzled and asks a question back. The village leader repeats his word.

C smiles as he tells Jim, "He said, 'Most of all they need goats.'"

Jim says, "Did you say goats?"

"Yes, he says if every family in Garut has 5-7 goats, they could make it. This would allow them to have milk and food, and build large flocks."

Everyone sat in silence for a few seconds. I don't know what the others were thinking, but here was my thought:

Here is a man and a village that are not looking for a handout.

They are looking for a "hand up."

But the village leader wasn't through. There was another lengthy exchange between C and the Garut leader.

C then turned to Jim, "They would also like boats if possible. The men here were mostly fishermen. They lost all of their wooden boats in the tsunami."

C pointed toward the sea, which was about one kilometer away across the lowland wiped out by the wave. "Right now they are still too scared of the ocean to go back out on it, but they know they must, and will, go back to fishing. You can't fish without boats. They need boats."

Once again: A hand up…not a handout.

The third conversation between the Indonesian and C was long and full of many gestures. I don't know about Jim Brown but I was nearly leaning in awaiting the next interpretation.

C smiled as he related to Jim, "He says they would love to also have cutting tools. They do not have any tools to properly cut wood. Saws and axes would allow them to cut

firewood for use and sale." I could see in my mind these "industrious Indonesians" cutting and sawing up the fallen timber that was everywhere in the tsunami-devastated areas. For some strange reason I thought of Marcel Ledbetter with his lightweight McCullough chainsaw. I wondered if any of these villagers had seen a chainsaw in action.

That was the extent of this conversation. At this point it began to rain. I'd already noticed that the area under the tent and around it had earlier been a barnyard. I knew this because the soil was rich with dried "barnyard fertilizer." Outside the tent the ground became wet, sticky, and smelly. But that didn't take away my strong belief that this village of Garut was going to be an oasis of peace, growth, and prosperity.

It was lunchtime. A nearby tent was dispensing sealed bowls of Japanese rice. A village woman checked off the name of each family as they received their allotment. Everywhere in Garut there was a feeling of looking forward, organization, and teamwork.

Right about then is when something started burning a hole in my pocket. That burning sensation came from a large gift of over $1000 sent by the children of Fairview High School in Grant, Louisiana. They had instructed me to use it where it would help most. All of a sudden I had a pretty good idea that those Fairview students were going to be in the goat, boat, and saw business. It looked like a good investment to me.

When we returned to Jakarta I went to our Aid Office and deposited this money. I told the staff accountant to use it to buy "goats, boats, and saws" for the northern coastal village of Garut. It was my privilege to be the middleman in linking the two villages of Grant, Louisiana, U.S., with Garut, Sumatra, Indonesia.

People ask me, "Will you return to Indonesia?" I don't know the answer to that question. I hope so. But I know there are so many other places to go and see also. But if I

do, I know one place I'll go…

And if you should ever go to the northernmost island of Indonesia, the large island called Sumatra, go to this village. From the capital city of Banda Aceh, head north in your vehicle toward the coastal mountains. You'll cross the river and then the canal. As you travel along the one highway leading out of the city, you'll have the beautiful Indian Ocean on your left and the foothills of the mountains on your right. About twenty kilometers or so, just right past the curve in the road where you normally have to slow down for monkeys on the road, you'll see a sign for a village called Garut.

I believe you will find a warm welcome there.

They'll remember other Americans who have come before you.

And while you are in Garut, do something just for me.

Visit their goat herds and pet one of them on the head just for me,

And especially for the students at Fairview High School,

Grant, Louisiana,

United States of America.

TRIPLE ANTIBIOTIC

We spotted this man before he saw us. He wasn't the only one digging in the ruins of houses and debris in an area south of Banda Aceh. There were many others. The smoke from numerous fires gave the air an acrid odor that burned your eyes. The thick smoke only seemed to maximize the surreal scene of destruction in every direction.

As I neared I could see this man was working among the piles of bricks and mortar that had formerly been a house. I have no reason to believe it was anyone else's home. I believe it was his. He sat on a slab of concrete with a hammer and chisel. On each side of him was a rising pile. As he broke loose the bricks from the mortar, he would throw the whole bricks onto one pile and the broken ones into another. The broken pile was much larger. He would have a difficult time having enough to rebuild his home.

Watching the people of Aceh attempting to rebuild, I thought to myself: "Where do you start? How do you start? When you've literally lost everything, including those closest to you, how do you begin again?"

As I neared this man, he looked up and gave a shy smile. I sat down beside him and began handing him small sections of brick wall. The sound of the hammer on the chisel was sharp as he broke the sections apart one by one.

Because of the language barrier and no interpreters nearby we really couldn't communicate. But that was okay because I'm not sure what I would have said. I knew my job was just to sit there with him. Sometimes words are not needed and can only serve to hinder.

His dark eyes looked at me from time to time as we both sat there with only the clank of the chisel breaking the silence. I had time to look at this man without appearing too nosy. He was filthy. He wore an old faded orange soccer shirt and some cutoff jeans. His clothes were stained with soot, sweat, grease, and who knows what else. I really believe these were the same clothes he had been wearing on December 26.

I wondered about his family. He looked to be in his late 30's. Surveying the scene around us with flattened houses all around, I knew that the odds were that he had lost what family he had on the morning when the ocean came pouring in.

In every direction strips of cloth tied on sticks and pieces of lumber marked the spots where bodies had been found. Looking at his dark sad eyes, I knew he had suffered a great loss. Then I looked at his hands. They were rough and covered with healing sores. His legs and feet were the same. It was evident that he had suffered major abrasions over the visible parts of his limbs.

A small crowd came by on their way to our nearby clinic. My friend dropped his chisel and hammer on the brick pile and joined them. We walked along to the nearby house where our medical team had begun seeing patients. When we reached the house, I felt in my pack until I found what I was looking for. Deep down in the pack bottom I felt the small tube and pulled it out. I remembered why I had come:

When the tsunami hit Indonesia it was just after 8 A.M. on the morning of December 26. In America, it was still Christmas night as families all over our country were putting the finishing touches on a full day of eating, opening presents, and being among family.

The next day is when the first horrible pictures began to be shown on TV. Most of the early footage was from the resort areas of southern Thailand. It was amazing to see the power and destruction of this wall of water.

In the coming days we continued to see the pain and suffering of the peoples of Southern Asia. As one missionary stated, "This is a disaster 5,000 miles long and one mile inland deep." Later that week I told my wife, DeDe, as well as my pastor, "I just feel I need to go over there and help. If all I do is rub a dab of triple antibiotic on a cut as a representative of Jesus, it would be worth the trip."

That desire did not go away. Even as the TV began to cover Michael Jackson, Terri Schiavo, and the deteriorating health of Pope John Paul II, this tsunami-ravaged area of the world stayed close to my heart. I prayed that God would open the door for me if it was His will. Then I continued a succession of pushing on some doors and each door, one by one, miraculously, swung open. And those open doors led me to where I stood this day.

So I stood there in Indonesia with a tube of triple antibiotic in my hand. My new friend in front of me held out his hands as I began applying the ointment to each place on his hand. He closed his eyes just like a cat will when being petted. If he had starting purring, it wouldn't have surprised me! I spent a good deal of time rubbing on those sores, much more than what was needed. I just wanted this Indonesian man to sense and feel the compassion I had. I didn't realize it then, but what this man needed much more than ointment was the touch of a human.

Stupid me, I didn't realize that until I returned to America and saw the pictures of this man and me. One of our team members had snapped several pictures of our encounter. Looking at this picture I could sense that this was a man in need of human touch. I wondered how long it had been since someone had touched him in love, hope and compassion. Had those he loved to be touched by, all disappeared when the three huge waves surged through this valley? Did he even have a torn cloth flag to mark the spot where a body was found? I wondered if he used that

phrase with no closure, repeating over and over, "They were lost. They are gone."

Studying the gospels, we take note in the ministry of Jesus how many times He touched people. The healing power of the Son of God was such that only a command or even a thought could heal. However, usually Jesus would first touch the person. Many times they were people who had not had a compassionate touch in a while... a leper, a loose woman searching for this compassion in all of the wrong places, an outcast from society and religion.

This man lifted his other hand to me and pointed out the sores. I anointed his other hand with antibiotic and turned to start with the next patient. But my dirty friend would not let me go yet. He pointed down to his feet. They were a patchwork of sores and healing scabs. It did not bother me one bit to get down on my knees and touch his sores. This was why I had come...and if all I did was ease this man's pain, loss, and suffering for a short period, it was worth the time, long flights, and sum of money required getting to Sumatra. It was worth the six flights and seven airports to come here. I handed my friend the tube of triple antibiotic for him to keep. He would need it. I pulled out another tube and begun to apply salve to an older woman. Behind her waited several other middle-aged men.

I wonder if my Acehnese friend will remember me. We didn't exchange names and really didn't say a word to each other. But I know I will never forget him. He will be with me, in my heart, until I draw my last breath. They say life is a long succession of snapshots that we carry with us. Most are stored away and never return to our conscious mind, while others reemerge again and again. The man in the dirty soccer shirt will be with me. I'll show his picture again and again as I share about this trip. This very story you are now reading will help him to be remembered.

Yes, I wonder if he thinks of me. Does he ever think about our brief time together in the rubble.? Does he

remember that stranger from America—a country he'd been told hated them and was so selfish and worldly. This American—a Christian—a follower of Isa Almarazee—Jesus the Messiah—who came and touched him during the dark days after the tsunami.

EAVESDROPPING INTO HEAVEN

Monday, March 28, 2005

It is just after lunch in Louisiana. I'm working outside when my wife DeDe comes to get me. "You'd better come see what's on the TV. There's been another earthquake in Indonesia."

I've only been back from Sumatra for three days. During our two-week visit there were continual aftershocks and tremors. Sheepishly, I have to admit that I slept through all of the ones during the night. But what I see on television is not related to any light tremor or minor earthquake. The scenes show nighttime in Banda Aceh with people running, yelling, and seeking higher ground in the dark. The quake is measured as an 8.7 on the Richter scale. Although it is one third smaller than the December quake, it is still one of the strongest quakes of the last century.

Coastal Indonesians are all seeking to get to higher ground in case there is a tsunami. The initial quake was an hour ago so knowing the time span from the December tsunami, no great wave is coming this time. Too much time has already passed. But anyone can understand the panic and confusion.

Later that afternoon our Louisiana team communicates with each other through phone or email. Our emotions share the same thoughts: What about all of our friends in Sumatra? One by one we see their faces and their families in our hearts. Each of us shares a deep desire to load up right then and return to our Indonesian and American friends in the quake-affected area.

My concern is not about a tsunami. This earthquake, because of its depth beneath the ocean, is a killer because of waves. Secondly, I'm not as concerned about the damage to homes in Banda Aceh. There aren't too many homes still standing to fall this time.

What worries me is the emotional shock to the peoples of this area. Less than 100 days after the big quake/tsunami, just as many of them are trying to settle back into the routines of life, another jolt has hit them. Men who need to return to the sea to fish, and the wives who need to let them, are once again shaken by nature. No prediction… no warning…. Just sudden violent shaking.

Children who had earlier survived the December tsunami were now standing and shaking as they wondered what was coming next.

All of that afternoon I think about them. The faces of these people return over and over.

And I wonder about my fellow Americans at the big Aid House. How are Bill and Liz, our house parents? What about fellow Louisianans Ted and Glenda who are cooking for the volunteers? Are sisters Bobbie and Billie still there?

That evening after supper I can wait no longer. Knowing this quake occurred around midnight their time, I wait until it is evening in Louisiana and then call on the phone. It is about 8 am back in Banda Aceh. I know folks will be stirring at the Big House where about thirty volunteers are staying.

I don't really expect the phones to be working but I call anyway. I'm surprised when someone answers. I hear voices in the background and then the phone is hung up. But something has happened. Whoever hung up the phone did not disconnect. I'm still connected although evidently no one in the room knows this. It is then that I get to eavesdrop.

The phone in the house is located in the living area where the volunteers meet each morning to pray and plan the day. From listening, it is evident that the Banda Aceh

volunteers are having morning prayer.

Someone is reading scripture from Psalms 46. It is a very familiar passage that we read during our sojourn in this same house:

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed,

and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;

Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled,

though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof."

I can see in my mind the room where these scared but courageous people gathered in a circle listening to words that have "comforted the shaken" for over three centuries. I'm eavesdropping from 12,000 miles away. There is a silence after the Scripture reading.

I hold the telephone close to my ear. Then a beautiful voice—the alto voice of a woman—begins singing,

Why should I be discouraged?
Why should the shadows fall?
Why should my heart be lonely?

His eye is on the sparrow
And I know He watches me.
Yes, His eye is on the sparrow
And I know He watches me.

Sitting in my home in Louisiana I realize I've been given a very special gift. I've been allowed to eavesdrop in through the cracked door. And I'm not sure if what I'm hearing is earthly coming from Banda Aceh-- or Heavenly from the very presence of God.

Because even though I'm listening through an audio device that is transmitting the sounds from a room in South Asia, I can sense the very presence of God in that

room as His followers, shaken but solid, worship Him.

Yes, I'm truly eavesdropping in…on Heaven.

Postscript:

The quake cracked the foundation of the Banda Aceh Aid House. No one definitely slept through this earthquake! Fortunately, there was no great tsunami wave with this quake. The epicenter was once again near the island of Simeulue. This time greater damage occurred on the island with hundreds of collapsed houses and buildings and a death toll of over 1,000.

Many of those volunteers in the Banda Aceh house left within days to help with the rescue and medical needs on nearby Simeulue Island.

BOOK II

KATRINA—THE CITY OF HOPE

August 29–30, 2005

And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13 NIV

This is the story of a place where faith, hope, and love collided in the last days of August 2005. It is the story of The City of Hope evacuee shelter where hundreds of people fleeing Hurricane Katrina came to seek shelter, but hopefully found much more.

A place of faith.
A place of hope.
A place of love.

If you'll notice from the dates above, Katrina is listed for two days. This is due to the fact that while the hurricane itself came ashore on the morning of Monday, August 29, its worst lasting damage occurred the next day

when the levees were breached and a major US city flooded.

This story begins with those two days.

But it encompasses so much more.

It is a story of hope—a story of recovery.

It is the story of two vastly different cultures that came together.

Urban New Orleans and a country crossroads named Dry Creek,

The City of Hope.

SOUTHERN MAN

"Southern man, you better keep your head.
Remember what your Good Book says."
- Neil Young "Southern Man"

"Whenever you've done it unto the least of these my brothers,
you've done it unto me."
Jesus quoted in Matthew 25:40

My new friend David's statement pierced deep into my heart and anger flared in my soul. His innocent comments began with, "I never knew about real prejudice until I came South and saw how you Southerners treated the blacks."

I was traveling in a car with several folks in South Dakota when David made this statement. As I bit the end of my tongue off, he continued with a monologue on his one and only time to be in the South—years ago in Arkansas. As he shared about the segregation, veiled distrust, and hate he saw, I knew exactly what he was talking about. I'd seen it also as a young man, and sadly still see it bubble through from under the packed surface of decades of slow painful change.

I thought back to a childhood visit to the State Fair in Shreveport. I was just learning to read and therefore could not understand why some folks could use one restroom and others could only go to the one labeled "colored."

As a college student, I worked a forestry job where even though the colored and white signs had faded off the buildings, it was still understood who went where. This included the two water fountains in the storage building. I

persisted in feigned ignorance of switching back and forth on bathrooms and water fountains just to make my own statement.

So David's statement and semi-lecture heated up two strong emotions in the pit of my stomach.

One emotion was that he was right. Our history of racial disharmony and injustice was something to be ashamed of. However, another equally strong emotion also gripped me. I wanted to lash out and tell David it wasn't what it had been and progress had been made.

Before I could say anything, one of the other South Dakotan passengers in the car let me off the hook by saying, "Now David, our history with the Native Americans is not something to brag about either. We'd better clean up our own backyard first."

I haven't yet gotten David's statements off my mind. The events since August 29, the day Katrina roared ashore, have caused me to re-examine his statements against my own beliefs.

My travels throughout the world have shown me prejudice exists everywhere. In Vietnam, they hate the Chinese residents of Cholon, an area of Ho Chi Minh City. In Cambodia the native Khmer hate the immigrant Vietnamese. In China the majority Chinese distrust the minority Zhuang and the minority tribes return their negative feelings. This list could go on and on.

Prejudice is wrong wherever it is found.

David's South Dakota conversation with me was on my mind as I cut my upper Midwest trip short to fly home during the night as Katrina bore down on New Orleans. The Camp was already full of evacuees and I wondered what the next few days would hold for them as well as our staff.

My midnight drive from the Houston airport to Dry Creek was four hours of being glued to all-night radio as

the storm approached. I greeted one announcer's question of "Are we going to lose a major American city due to this storm?" with a snort. "What an exaggeration!" was my thought.

Never would I have dreamed of that exact scenario taking place.

On Katrina's landfall day of Monday, our Dry Creek evacuees stayed glued to the television in the Dining Hall. The looks of uncertainty on their faces were hard to ignore or forget.

In the early hours of Tuesday is when the levees were breached. Evacuees who had gone to bed with relief that this storm wasn't as bad as it could have been were greeted at breakfast with the sad news that most of New Orleans was flooding.

What was expected to be a few days away from home was now an unknown time with uncertain results for these evacuees. We put up a large map of the New Orleans area and each evacuee showed us where their homes were in relation to the flooding. Throughout that day I watched them:

• The newly immigrated Castaneda family sat mesmerized by the television news. Originally from Columbia, they had arrived as an extended family and were committed to being together no matter where this ordeal led.

• My black friends from Orleans Parish knew their neighborhoods were being flooded as they watched. What about their homes? What about their church?

• Then there were the Hispanic families from Horeb church—a wonderful mixture of Puerto Ricans, Hondurans, and native New Orleanians.

• Cajun families were from "down the bayou" in

Lafourche Parish with their thick accents and pride in the self-sustaining trades of fishing and trapping. What would they have to return to?

• Danielle Smith and her children: Her home parish of St. Bernard Parish had been destroyed. She had arrived with her parents and in-laws. Her husband was serving in Iraq. As I watched her holding her babies and realized she was only twenty years old, it was evident the weight of the world was resting on her.

To me they weren't a specific color, race, or nationality, they became my family.

In the coming days and weeks,
they cried together,
shared together,
hoped and despaired
together.

And our lily-white community came to their aid. Truck after truck coming with food, supplies, and clothes. So much we ran out of space to store them. Help on jobs. Help on housing. Was it without problems and misunderstanding? No, there were plenty of them also. People always are going to be, and have, problems!

But the tremendous wave of love that washed over Dry Creek Baptist Camp in those weeks overcame whatever problems came along.

In those crazy but blessed days of the first week as we helped people get registered with FEMA and the Red Cross and unemployment and school and food stamps and SSI and Veteran's info and doctor visits, and immunizations and…

There in the busy days at The City of Hope shelter, I thought about my South Dakota friend David and wished I could transport him to Louisiana to see a different

picture than the life-long image burned into his mind.

I wasn't at the Superdome in the days after Katrina. I know exactly where the Morial Convention Center is although I've never been inside it. I've driven through New Orleans East but wasn't there when people sat on rooftops for days. I couldn't help those older folks at the St. Rita's Nursing Home in St. Bernard Parish. But I was an eyewitness to the events during and following Hurricane Katrina:

When Southern men and Southern women
Of all races,
All hurting due to great loss,
Came together,
To make the best of it…
In a small piney woods community called Dry Creek.

LYLE WHITLAKE

It's 2:30 am and I'm driving from the Houston airport east toward my Louisiana home. The westbound lanes of Interstate 10 are full of vehicles slowly crawling toward Houston. It seems as if all of Louisiana is heading west to escape Katrina.

Katrina is scheduled to make landfall after daylight somewhere to the south of New Orleans. I am glued to the all-night radio as they give reports from Biloxi, Gulfport, Houma, and New Orleans. The announcers are talking to all kinds of experts on hurricanes. Some are in the midst of the storm determined to be there for all of it. There is a tension in their voices you can sense even through the radio. Others give dire predictions from hundreds of miles in the sterile safety of a weather station full of gauges, maps, and screens.

One forecaster predicts the possibility that we could "lose a major American city if this storm hits New Orleans head on." I shake my head in disgust at this overreaction, never dreaming that thirty hours later we will see it nearly begin to take place.

I finally settle on the late-night call-in show of radio commentator Art Bell. He is broadcasting from "high in the Nevada desert" but tonight's show is centered on the approach of Katrina to New Orleans. Art Bell intones in his radio voice, "After the next station break, I'm going to try to get hold of one of my old Air Force buddies who is a weatherman."

After the promised break, Art returns to tell about his friend from their Air Force days in Wichita Falls, Texas. "My friend Lyle Whitlake and I would chase tornadoes

during the spring. Our goal was to capture them on film and sell the video footage to local TV stations."

Sure enough, Art's tornado-chasing buddy joins him on the air via telephone. It is obvious Lyle Whitlake knows about the weather. He converses clearly and excitedly as they relive their storm-chasing days. Lyle's voice sounds familiar but I can't seem to place him.

Lyle Whitlake eloquently explains to Art Bell and listeners everywhere about the role of the temperature of Gulf water in strengthening hurricanes. He explains about collapsing eye walls and gives a thorough but understandable explanation of what we can expect in the next few hours from Katrina.

After the next station break, Art returns to his conversation with Lyle, "Now Lyle, you live and work in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Are you being affected by the storm?" As Lyle explains that not even rain is predicted for western Louisiana, I'm much more curious. Art Bell introduced him as "a Lake Charles weatherman," yet I've never heard of him.

Finally Art asks, "Now, Lyle my understanding is that you don't go by your real name as a weatherman. What's your name now? Isn't it Rob… uh Rob Robin?"

All of a sudden I realize that this Lyle Whitlake is really Rob Robin, Southwest Louisiana's most famous and trusted weatherman for the past thirty years. To think that his real name was not Rob Robin shocked me just as if I'd found out I had a brother or sister I'd never met. I've grown up in an area where people still say, "But Rob said…"

Rob Robin began his weather career in Lake Charles with KPLC-TV. He quickly achieved a cult-like following. His long, straight hair and odd-looking face and body were not made for TV, but it was evident that here was a man who ate, slept, and reported the weather.

Early in his career, Rob would get very excited about impending weather systems. For him to get words tangled

up was not uncommon. Rob is famous for once excitedly pointing at his weather map as he told of an approaching cold front, "Now we'll have to watch this cold mare's ass coming out of Canada."

Legendary stories abounded around Rob. We'd always heard that he took his vacations to go chase tornadoes in Kansas. (He continued that storm chasing he'd picked up in the Air Force.) His whole life was tied up in the weather.

When owner Russell Chambers sold KPLC-TV, Rob left television but continued his weather reporting on the radio. He now has a studio/weather station in his own home.

My wife DeDe always loves to tell the story of once when a bad spring storm was approaching and Rob said, "Folks, it's going to be bad, and I'm going to be up and waiting for it and tell you all about it."

So Lyle Whitlake's eloquent explanation of the mechanics and physics of Katrina was no surprise as I listened for the next hour to The Art Bell Show. Art Bell may or may not have known it, but he was interviewing a true weather legend.

Yes, that's our favorite Southwest Louisiana weatherman, Lyle…oops, I mean Rob Robin.

C-O-I-N-C-I-D-E-N-C-E

It's a word we use often. But it is a word that shouldn't really be in the dictionary of a follower of Jesus.

The word is coincidence.
As in "what a coincidence."
I like the word… I like the way it sounds.
But when I look at the definition, I'm not sure it should be in my vocabulary.

Webster's puts it this way: Coincidence: "the occurrence of events that happen at the same time by accident... but seem to have some connection."

How many times in our lives do we cross paths with something or someone, and we are never the same? Can we mark it off to Fate or luck? Luck means "to prosper or succeed especially through chance or good fortune." Or can we claim even coincidence or chance?

If I truly believe what I say I do
That our steps are ordered by God
That He never leaves us or forsakes us
That all things work together
Even the so-called 'evil-meant' things.

Can we believe in paths crossing just by chance/fate?

Here is my favorite Katrina story. You can decide for yourself if it is coincidence, chance, fate, or part of a bigger plan.

As I shared in an earlier story, I flew home from South Dakota as Katrina honed in on New Orleans. My plane

arrived in Houston at midnight, and I began my four-hour drive home to Dry Creek. Traffic traveling west away from Katrina was steady in the opposite lanes of I-10. At Vidor, Texas, I exited off the interstate to begin the two-lane half of my journey home. To my amazement, westbound traffic was still slow and steady, as it seemed as if all of Louisiana wanted to get west and get away.

Traveling along US 190 near Reeves brought me within fifteen minutes of Dry Creek. I planned to go by the camp, check on things, get a hot bath and sleep a few hours before getting back up to speed at the camp.

I passed the Lone Pine Bluegrass Park also known as The Hope Center. It is run by our friends Mancel and June Reeves. They host bluegrass music weekends here but also run a wonderful ministry of food, clothing, and help and, as their name aptly implies, giving hope to hurting people.

Normally at 4 am in the morning the Hope Center would be dark and shuttered. But tonight, the early hours of Monday August 29 were anything but normal. Lights were on at the Hope Center. Cars were parked around and silhouettes stood in the lit doorway. I wheeled around and drove back. Curiosity had the best of me.

There were people everywhere at The Hope Center. Some were outside milling around cars while some folks slept on the floor or on couches. Mancel and June were doing what they do best—handing out food, directions, coffee, and encouragement.

They were serving as a way station for the weary travelers who were heading west via US 190 instead of the interstate. Many of those in the room told stories of leaving New Orleans 12–16 hours ago to make the 250-mile journey from there to here.

There was a feeling of weariness and uncertainty showing on the faces of those fleeing the storm. Yet here was a place of hope… a drink, some good advice, a phone call.

Mancel and June were plenty surprised to see me at 4

am. I explained about my interesting journey of nearly two thousand miles in half the time it'd taken them to travel across Louisiana.

June pointed out a family. "I believe they could use your help. They are Spanish and don't speak too much English and seem confused."

They were a family of five—a father, mother, and three teenagers. As people from New Orleans are known to do, they looked at me suspiciously as I began to question them on their plans. It seemed they had no definite plans… head west to Texas and escape from Katrina. I shared what the radio had repeated over and over… No hotel rooms from Beaumont to Houston… your best chance was San Antonio… nearly 400 miles west.

I simply asked them to come home with me. That was the point in time when our paths crossed:

Dry Creek Camp and the Arguello family from Kenner, Louisiana.

From that point on, Aldo and Soledad Arguello became part of our family. The Arguellos and their teenaged children, Aldo, Alden, and Ashleigh and two cats became residents of dorm 6 at Dry Creek Camp.

Soledad, who was more comfortable with crowds than her husband, became a key member of our "Dry Creek city council." I quickly found that she could be depended on to get things done in the background. Alden and Ashleigh enrolled at East Beauregard High School.

Aldo, age eighteen, had just spent his pre-Katrina week as an entering freshman at Delgado Community College in New Orleans. It was evident his carefully planned semester had ended much earlier than planned. As true with most of the universities and colleges there, classes were cancelled for the fall.

However part of the wonderful reaching out for Katrina folks, McNeese State University in nearby Lake Charles announced their willingness to enroll new

students. So Aldo became a McNeese Cowboy. A member of our summer staff, Thomas Bethke personally took care of getting all of Aldo's details straight. Aldo moved into a McNeese dorm and started classes the next day.

But his McNeese semester was changed, too. This time her name was Rita. Just like Katrina she affected every segment of life in the areas of her landfall. Lake Charles was dealt a crippling blow by the storm. Classes at McNeese were cancelled for the foreseeable future.

So Aldo Arguello's college semester road trip continued. He could only shake his head in disbelief as he told of being evacuated from two hurricanes.

As of now, the late fall of 2005, McNeese is back open. Aldo Jr. is back in school. Things are far from normal, but classes are being taught. Last week the television showed a class meeting under an oak tree near Farrar Hall.

Not by chance… not even by coincidence,
But by design… all part of God's plan.

Yes, God does have a plan. Just like the Arguello's appointment to meet me along US 190 in the pre-daylight hours of that fateful Monday as Katrina roared ashore, it is part of His plan.

I asked my friend Soledad about this chance encounter. She shook her head and quietly said, "It was not by chance. It was by God's design. He knew where we needed to be."

I call it being "caught in the crosshairs of God's great plan and design." It is comforting to know that as a follower of God, nothing can happen without his permission. Then everything that happens can, rather will, be used for His good purposes and to use us. Don't ask me to explain the bad things that invariably come to us. These storms happen to the just and unjust. I only know that God is working through it all.

Yes, wherever it is—even along US Highway 190 near

Reeves, Louisiana, God has His hand working.

It's not luck.
Nor can it be called coincidence.
Be careful calling it fate.
Rather, I call it "being caught in the crosshairs of God's plan."

NEW ORLEANS—CITY I LOVE, CITY I HATE

Now as He (Jesus) drew near, He saw the city and wept over it.

Luke 19:41–42

Only a native Louisianan can understand it. And even we cannot fully grasp (i.e., wonder) if some psychology doctoral student has ever written a dissertation on it: The unique love/hate relationship that exists between the state of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans.

The best description of this long-term relationship is told by John Maginnis in his book, The Last Hayride:

"New Orleans is part of the rest of Louisiana on the maps only—not in the minds of its residents… New Orleans is its own world, a city and a state of mind separate and apart from the rest of the country, the South, and the state—especially the state.

"The average Orleanian will acknowledge there is a state of Louisiana, a vague, distant, desolate hinterland, somewhere 'across the lake.' Thousands of adult Orleanians walking the streets have never set foot outside The City…

"The rest of Louisiana has this love-hate relationship with New Orleans. The farther north you go, the more likely you are to run into people who revile New Orleans as a stinking sinkhole…"

Maginnis, a long-time Louisiana political observer, states it as well as I've heard it.

In traveling I meet many people whose first comment

on knowing you are from Louisiana is to say, "Oh, I've been to your state—I've visited New Orleans." I love to shock them with this comment, "Oh no, that is not part of Louisiana. In fact, it is its own country."

During the winter at camp we host many Northern volunteers who all want to go visit New Orleans. We remind them that their passport must be up to date to get in or out. That draws some strange looks.

New Orleans is like that eccentric uncle that every family has. (I have several). You love them because they are family. But you never know what they will do or say next. They can just as easily embarrass you as make you proud.

We love New Orleans.

It is a great place to visit. Like no other American city.

Beignets at Café du Monde, riding the streetcars along St. Charles,

The French Quarter, street musicians, Jackson Square, the aquarium, and the D-Day museum.

One of the best experiences of my life was taking a group of East Beauregard basketball players to a tournament in New Orleans. Most of these Sugar town and Dry Creek boys had never been there before. Twenty plus years later they still comment on that trip when I see them.

However, we rural Louisianans are embarrassed by New Orleans. The homelessness. The crime. Oftentimes the murder capital of America. Bourbon Street.

My parents once took my older grandfather on a walking tour of Bourbon Street. He ducked his head and sadly repeated over and over, "Iniquity, iniquity."

Even our Saints… such a love-hate relationship with our state.

Resentment over footing the bill for the Superdome,

Yet loving and hoping for a championship…. Still waiting.

I remember the first official game of the Saints. I was

about 10 years old and their first regular season game was with the Los Angeles Rams. The Saints received the opening kickoff and Walt Williams returned it 100 yards for a touchdown. I thought to myself, "Man, we've got us a team!"

As I said, we are still waiting.

Much of the hate part of Louisiana is due to our inferiority complex due to our bigger, older, and more famous sibling. The first question an out-of-stater will ask is, "How close do you live to New Orleans?" That will make any non-Orleans Louisianan cringe. I always want to answer, "Closer than I want to be."

It is 240 miles from Dry Creek to New Orleans. Culturally, it is much, much more like light years apart. We not only march to the beat of a different drummer, but even march in a totally different direction.

However, since Katrina, I've felt different about the Crescent City. She has been hit and hurt. That swagger that my protestant redneck rural inferiority always saw is gone. It's easy to hate a big braggart. But we Americans always love an underdog. And since Katrina that is exactly what New Orleans has become, even to other Louisianans.

It is now our city. Its citizens have fanned out all across the state. They are family. And when this new family returns to their city, it now has become my city too.

Recently I made my first visit there since Katrina. It is hard to describe the destruction and desolation. It amazed me as to how much of the city is empty. People are simply gone.

Whether it was the upper class Lakeview area or the Ninth Ward, floodwaters are equal opportunity destroyers. What was painful to see was the "empty U-Haul syndrome." As many residents have returned to the City to gather their belongings from their flooded homes, it has been so sad. A house sitting in six feet of nasty water for two weeks leaves few items to gather up and take with you.

Families came home pulling empty U-hauls and left

New Orleans with them still empty. There is little to salvage from these homes. Pictures, books, furniture, and even table settings do not escape the mold and toxic water. At one nice residential home we saw a lifetime of family pictures, documents, framed diplomas, and memories of a lifetime scattered about the house and yard. There was nothing worth taking. All gone… All lost.

All of a sudden, the largest city of our state needs all of us. She has not always been kinfolk to be proud of. But where I come from, you take care of family.

New Orleans,
The city I love
The city I want to help rebuild,
However that rebuilding may take shape.

P.S. Go Saints.

DISPLACED… BUT NOT MISPLACED…

So often similar words can sound alike but mean totally different things. One word can soothe, while a similar word can irritate and divide.

On my first trip to Asia, I quickly learned that there is a word you don't want to use.

It's a word called "refugee…" According to the UN, a refugee is a person who has crossed a national border to escape war, famine, or natural disaster. A person who is still in their country but has moved due to the above factors is considered a displaced person, not a refugee. Government officials are very sensitive on this issue. They are displacees not refugees. Where they live is called a Displaced Person's Camp or "DPC."

Back in 2002 I stood amidst a dusty, hastily built DPC in the floodplain north of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Our host, Mickey, kept reminding us not to call it a refugee camp.

During our trip to the tsunami areas we visited many Displaced Person Camps. Some were pretty nice while others were primitive and unsanitary.

Those who fled Katrina and then Rita were called evacuees even though they were displaced persons. Don't ask me the difference. But they weren't and aren't refugees.

However, there is a point of clarification I wish to make. They have been displaced. But they have not been misplaced.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines misplaced as "put in a wrong place" or "place (something) where one cannot find it again." It means to put something

somewhere and forget where it is.

As I'm writing this tonight I cannot find my truck keys. They are misplaced somewhere. Later on I do find them… right where I had misplaced them while I was preoccupied with this story.

However, the term "displaced" carries a completely different connotation. It means moved but not forgotten or lost.

We can all be displaced and it doesn't take a hurricane or tsunami. A job change, a family tragedy, an illness, a financial setback, persecution from without or even within. All of a sudden we realize we are somewhere we did not expect to be. We've been displaced.

Many Katrina evacuees sat shaking their heads as the 17th Street and New London Ave. levees flooded New Orleans on Tuesday. That morning's headline read, "New Orleans dodges bullet." The cold, chilling report that the city was slowly but surely flooding brought sadness to the faces of these strangers who would soon become our friends. Where only hours before they were planning to return in several days to their neighborhoods, they now saw those plans drowned under the murky waters from Lake Ponchartrain.

They were displaced… No home to return to.
For now at least…
And maybe forever.

Being displaced is bad.
It is tough.

But it is not the same as being misplaced. If I misplace you, I forget where I've "laid you down." If I displace you, I've moved you but I know exactly where you are.

I want to share a story from the Scriptures that illustrates the difference between these two similar but diverse words.

One of the greatest heroes of the Old Testament is Daniel. He is an example of courage, coolness under pressure, and commitment to his own value system. Daniel has been displaced. That is the main story of this book in the Bible. As a young boy, his homeland of Israel is overrun by the Babylonians and Daniel is exiled to live in a foreign kingdom.

Except Daniel never forgets where he came from. His belief in God and commitment to do what is right is shown in all he does. This leads him to advance to the inner circle of the Palace. When the Persian King Darius overthrows the Babylonians, Daniel's character endears him to the new ruler.

In Daniel chapter 6 he becomes the victim of an evil plot by jealous associates of King Darius. Daniel breaks the king's edict that no one can pray to anyone but him. Daniel, committed to praying three times daily, is arrested and thrown into the den of lions.

Now, you talk about displaced! He has come from his boyhood home, had his name changed to the beautiful tongue twister of "Belteshazzar," gone from one kingdom to another, and now is thrown into the den of lions. But he was only displaced. Not misplaced.

God allowed him to be displaced. Now don't ask me to explain all about the "permissive will" of God. I do not understand why God allows his people to be dumped right in the middle of the most terrible situations.

Displaced but not forgotten

The next morning when Darius, who has fasted and prayed, comes running to the lion's den, Daniel is safe and whole. Daniel's reply is all about displaced but not misplaced: "My God sent his angel, who closed the mouths of the lions."

Yes, God knew right where Daniel was. And as always he was faithfully there. As we've watched the evacuees

struggle through this terrible ordeal, we've seen that Daniel-type faith shine through. They've searched (and are still searching) for the direction to go… rebuild or move on… Hang on or let go… Displaced, yes. But no, no, no…not misplaced.

AL, THE FEMA GATOR MAN

"Amos Moses was a Cajun.
Lived by himself in the swamp.
He hunted alligators for a living,
Just knock them in the head with a stump."
–"Amos Moses"
Jerry Reed

He was the first federal official I met in the days after Katrina. Our New Orleans evacuees had the same question day after day, "When is FEMA coming?" I would return from our daily Emergency Preparedness meetings with no good answer for their inquiries.

Here they were stuck out in the piney-woods loneliness of Southwest Louisiana at a non-Red Cross-approved shelter. I know they thought they'd never see a federal official. I was nearly starting to think the same thing myself.

So on the day when these first two FEMA workers got out of their car to visit the City of Hope, I was elated. They quickly informed me that they were lower echelon personnel with no real information, $1,500 debit cards, or proclamations to share.

I immediately liked them for their smiles and openness. It was nice to hear someone just be honest. One worker was named Pam and the other introduced himself as Ellsworth Cobble. Their accents gave them away as upper Midwestern United States. Pam was from Indiana. Ellsworth Cobble was from Chicago. I nearly knew it without his admitting it.

Their blue shirts and official nametags with ID pictures

made them look very official and important. I quickly escorted them to the dining hall where most of our evacuees were. The majority of our evacuees had already found jobs and were working out in the community today. However, I wanted those present with us to meet "FEMA."

A quickly convened crowd followed them into the Dining Hall and excitedly gathered. Pam repeated their assertion that they had no big news or funds to give, but had simply wanted to let our evacuees know they were not forgotten and help was coming.

You never know when a crowd can turn into an ugly aggressively verbal mob. I knew how badly many of these evacuees were hurting for cash and reassurance. But instead of any angry retorts, the evacuees seemed satisfied that help was coming. The sight of live FEMA employees in the wilderness of Dry Creek was proof enough that help was coming.

Ellsworth Cobble, who looked to be in his early sixties, stepped forward. I wondered how his Chicago accent would go over with the "Who Dats" and "Boudreauxs" gathered around him. Even his name—Ellsworth Cobble—sounded Chicagoan.

But he introduced himself by saying, "Hi, my name is Al and we're here to help you. I'm just a worker bee and not really important, but we do want to help." Ellsworth, I mean Al, and Pam did help by doing what these folks needed the most: simply listening.

Each evacuee present told their story… one by one… sad detail by detail. Al and Pam listened... and sincerely replied along the lines of, "I'm so sincerely sorry this has happened to you and we are going to try to get the help you need."

I'm positively sure their listening was sincere and open. There are some things you can fake, but being a good listener is not one of them. A person's inflection, eye contact, focus, and non-verbal gestures all tell you about

what their mind and heart is. There was no doubt to these displaced New Orleanians that Al and Pam's ears and hearts were right there with them.

Right there I made up my mind that I liked these two, and what anyone had to say about FEMA, the organization, and its tangled disorganization, just didn't hold water on these two.

Sadly, we never saw Pam again. She had to return to Indiana for a family emergency. But Ellsworth "Al" Cobble kept crossing our path in the days and weeks to come. He always had that smile and kindness about him that I knew would connect with the good people of rural SW Louisiana.

I saw Al four days before Rita came to our part of the state. He had now been in Louisiana for over two weeks. He greeted me with the statement I love to hear from visitors, "I can't wait to get home and tell my friends about the good people of Louisiana." In spite of Katrina's wrath, or maybe because of it, Al had seen the generous and giving side of our state. That made me happy.

But on this Monday before the next storm, Al had a tale to tell. He excitedly started in his thick Chicago gangster accent, "You'll never believe what I did this weekend! I went alligator hunting."

He began this story of making friends in Johnson Bayou, the westernmost community along the Louisiana Gulf coast. In great detail he told of riding through the marsh in an airboat and the thrill of hurdling levees at thirty miles per hour and tearing through the tall fields of marsh grass at full speed.

But he saved his best descriptions for the actual capturing of the five 'gators his hosts had caught. There was no detail left out as he described the thrashing about of the huge 'gators on the bait hooks and how they let him shoot three of them himself with a .357 pistol.

"They pulled one large gator on board…it was about ten feet long. I believe they purposely threw it over by me.

Its big tail was still whipping about and I thought I was going to have to jump overboard!" I could just see his good-humored Cajun hosts laughing heartily at FEMA Al's excitement. I told Al, "Well, I hope you got some pictures of your alligator hunt because no one in Chicago, even your wife, will believe your story."

Al smiled, "Oh yes sir, I've got it all on film." He sidled up to me and elbowed me as he smirked, "I've got a good friend in Chicago that loves to brag about his fishing exploits. He's always caught one bigger than everyone else. My friends in Johnson Bayou helped me out by propping up that biggest 'gator and taking a picture of me grimacing fiercely as I held it in a headlock. I bet my bragging friend won't be able to top that." All of us gathered around and laughed at the idea of FEMA Al wrestling down the big 'gator.

I only saw Al once more. It was after Rita at an emergency-planning meeting in the dark days after the storm. I pointed him out to some FEMA big wheels that had arrived to help out. I asked them, "Do you guys know that small older fellow in the Blue FEMA shirt over there?" They said they'd never seen or met Ellsworth Cobble. I said, "That's Al. He's been here with us for over three weeks. He is one of your best goodwill ambassadors."

Before leaving, we talked once more. We both lamented that his friends in Johnson Bayou had probably lost everything. The eye wall of Rita came ashore just west of this Cameron Parish community. Early reports told of total destruction of the homes, churches, and schools of Johnson Bayou.

I think of Al when I see news reports about lower Cameron Parish and how the coastal marsh areas had been destroyed. I wonder about the alligator population and the fishing. I worry that the large oaks at Peveto Woods, one of America's greatest birding sites, are gone.

I can see Al showing his 'gator-hunting pictures to his

Chicago friends. I'm sure they'll have a hard time believing a place like Southwest Louisiana really exists. I know FEMA Al will also tell them about the good and gracious people of Louisiana, from an area knocked down and torn down by a storm named Rita—an area where the people will return, repair, rebuild, and re-establish their way of life.

IVAN'S RETURN

Due to the fact that Dry Creek Camp had become a shelter for folks from the New Orleans area during Ivan in September 2004, our staff knew any future evacuation of the City would mean even more people coming, since we had had such a positive experience with them. In fact as they left the day after Ivan's miss of New Orleans, they all said, "You'll see us if another storm comes our way."

That was the understatement of the year! Because that "next storm" was Katrina, and our New Orleans friends kept their word. They returned to Dry Creek and brought their friends and families with them.

In the days after Katrina, especially once the levees were breached, this mass of evacuees one by one became individuals with names, faces, and stories. It's a whole lot different when a group of 400 people in the camp dining hall begin to become unique faces with their stories of escape, families, and hurts.

During that week was when I first met Ivan Meza. He had arrived with the Horeb Hispanic Church. Twenty-three years old, Katrina had definitely changed Ivan's world. He was a senior studying engineering at the University of New Orleans. He had arrived with his father.

Ivan shared with me that his mother had been in New Orleans' Memorial Hospital for most of the summer. She had a combination of a whole host of medical problems. As the city cleared, Ivan's mother had been transferred to a hospital in Lafayette, two hours southeast of Dry Creek.

In the coming days I got to know Ivan. A big, strong, nice-looking, young man with a fine smile and a quiet manner that belied his physical size, he was easy to like.

As we visited, Ivan shared about his life and dreams. Of course he had a great concern for his mother. It was evident that she was very ill and their being separated was of deep distress to him.

In the second week after Katrina, Ivan's dad moved back south to be nearer his wife and return to work, so Ivan was with his church family, but not his immediate family.

There are lots of things I'm not good at, but finding talented young people and putting them to work is something I can do. There was a "specialness" in Ivan Meza that drew me to him. It was at this time that Ivan's gift as a teacher began to shine through.

We had a group of fifteen ladies from Ivan's church who deeply wanted to work on their English skills. Most were newly immigrated from the country of Honduras. We made arrangements for them to go daily to DeRidder for English as Second Language classes.

Ivan, who was extremely proficient in both Spanish and English, became their van driver/teacher/ tutor and leader. He was hired by the parish school board to help these ladies. I rode with them several days. It was fun to see the ladies get their children off to school on our own Camp bus and then load up for their trip "to town" as we call DeRidder.

On the bus the visiting, laughing, and joking was all in Spanish. I felt as if I was back in Honduras and we were on our way to the market. In the midst of all of this was Ivan Meza with his quiet smile and soft voice.

He was the favorite of these women and quickly became the favorite of everyone at the Alternative School, where the English classes were held. God had given Ivan a special personality that drew people to him. It was neat to see him interacting with the students. He was a born teacher and this ability to connect naturally flowed out of him.

I talked with him about this ability to teach. There is no doubt that he'll make a lot more money as an engineer than he could in the classroom. That is something he and God will work out.

But I do know this: Ivan will be teaching wherever he is. It may be in Sunday School at his church or by helping others within the framework of his future career.

After Rita, all of our Hispanic friends left. The Honduran ladies returned to the Westbank. Ivan with them. Sadly, not long after the second hurricane is when his mother passed away. I wonder about Ivan and how he is doing. He is an example of how a storm named Katrina changed every detail of thousands of lives.

I have this dream—that Ivan the teacher will return to Dry Creek to help us as a summer camp counselor. I can visualize him in a cabin of twenty boys from all over Louisiana and beyond. Most are country boys from the rural areas of SW Louisiana. A few boys in this cabin are inner city kids from the tough areas of Baton Rouge or New Orleans. Over in the corner are two brothers newly emigrated from some Spanish-speaking country of Central America. They are a little scared of being here but someone sent them to camp believing "it would do them good." They've lost a lot in the recent move from their native homes to this strange country.

Now here they are at this strange camp where everything is different from what they've known. But they are in for a great week, although they do not know it yet, because their counselor is Ivan the Teacher, and God will use him in their lives over these next five days.

Ivan Meza, the teacher, has arrived back in Dry Creek.
Now the lesson can begin.

GRANDMA RODRIGUE

I first saw her one night when we held a meeting at the Dry Creek White House. The White House is the local name for our Adult Center. When Katrina sent hundreds of refugees our way, this two-story school building-turned hotel was filled with folks from all of the areas in and near New Orleans.

We had different nationalities, languages, cultures, and ages present. As you can guess, problems did crop up as folks under the tremendous pressure of losing their homes and livelihoods lived together.

Todd Burnaman and I held a town meeting at the White House one night at ten o'clock. We were there to iron out a few problems and keep everyone on the same page. It was at that meeting I first saw Grandma Rodrigue. She sat quietly in a rocker in her long nightgown. She was old beyond old. Later I learned she was ninety. Even though she was dressed for bed, her hair and makeup were perfect. She had a simple look of peace on her face—a look that I would grow to love and admire over the coming week.

She sat passively throughout our meeting. I'm not sure if she could hear what was being said or not. When the meeting disbanded I went over and kissed her on the forehead and said, "Good night mother." I could tell this pleased her. Several days later is when I found out she had lost her husband in the days after Katrina.

As the storm approached her Westbank home of Westwego, decisions had to be made. Some chose to leave… while others stubbornly stayed. It was at this point where many Katrina families were separated. Decisions

made for a multitude of reasons sent families in different directions.

Grandma Rodrigue's husband, Mr. Rodrigue refused to leave. He had ridden out storms before and this would be one more.

I've wondered what their last words were as she was wheeled out the door and he sat stock still at their house. She would leave with one daughter while another daughter stayed with him. Did they know this would be their final parting?

Grandpa Rodrigue didn't die due to the floodwaters or winds of Katrina, but he is no less a casualty of the storm. His death due to heart failure was the result of too much stress. He had ridden out storms before, and I find no fault with his deciding to ride out this one, probably knowing it would be his last.

In the days following the news of her husband's death, Grandma Rodrigue sat quietly in the dining hall at mealtime. That same primness and properness was evident in her face. I couldn't take my eyes off her—this woman of nine decades—in her own way, in her own time, a casualty of Katrina.

When you see the numbers from Katrina you will see that over 1,000 Louisiana citizens died from Katrina. Is Grandpa Rodrigue one of them? I really don't know.

But in Grandma Rodrigue's mind her husband is a Katrina casualty. In the short years she has left on this earth, Katrina will mean one thing: the storm was the event that separated her from her husband. Next year's first anniversary of Katrina hitting New Orleans will be highly reported on.

But somewhere in the New Orleans area, a quiet over-ninety-year-old woman will sit in a rocker. Katrina's anniversary will also be the anniversary of the death of her husband: A parting of the ways brought on by arrival of the waves from a storm to be remembered for all time.

WHISTLING PAST THE GRAVEYARD

After Katrina, shelters filled up all over our part of Louisiana; there was a need for new shelters to open. My favorite shelter story comes from Smyrna Baptist Church. They were excited to open their family life center to evacuees. They waited for days for word of evacuees sent from the command center in DeRidder. Finally, several folks from a New Orleans group came to inspect the Smyrna facility.

Now before moving forward, let me tell you about our area. Smyrna is near the hamlet of Sugartown. Like Dry Creek, this area is extremely rural and all white. Our school of nearly 1000 had less than ten black students.

So this New Orleans group of black evacuees drives out in the dark to Smyrna Baptist. A fine welcoming committee is awaiting their arrival. The inspecting folks get out and walk around. The Garrett Collins Memorial Family Life Center is lit up and the smells of a country supper greet everyone. But there is one thing the four inspectors cannot quite take their eyes off: the graveyard that sits beside the church and life center.

As they return to their cars, they warily eye the graveyard with its white tombstones glistening in the moonlight. Their last words are, "Thank you. We'll get back to you."

As you can imagine, that was the last we heard from the New Orleanians. The country graveyard was a little too much for them. Now before you are too hard on me, or think I'm a little too hard on them, let me confess: The one place I'm most scared of in New Orleans is their old

cemeteries. I've never been in St. Louis Cemeteries 1 or 2. As a boy I read stories of tourists being robbed while touring among these aboveground vaults. Driving past them, I could just see a mugger waiting behind each one for a lone stranger like me.

I've also seen too many movies where crimes happened among these N.O. Cemeteries. I can still see poor Ashley Judd getting put away in one in the movie "Double Jeopardy."

As I think about it, isn't it ironic that these New Orleanians were scared of our cemetery while I am scared of theirs? Many times I go to our Dry Creek cemetery at night to mark a grave or turn off the water. It's not really spooky to me. But put me in New Orleans in the dark and I'd jump at every shadow.

Isn't it amazing that whatever we are unfamiliar with often scares us to death?

Whistling past the graveyard we go… whether it is at Smyrna Baptist Church or the St. Louis No. 1 Cemetery.

MABEL'S SONG

But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.
Acts 16:25

Anyone can sing when things are bright and the sun is shining brightly and our circumstances are easy. But our song…and heart…become tested when trials come. It's crunch time. Or it can become crunch time. We decide. If it's crunch time, we develop our loser's limp and move to the side and lick our wounds. Or we can take crunch time and use it as a platform to sing the song we have in our heart.

That's how I met Mabel… in the first days of her crunch time.

Nivea Mabel Nunez is a twenty-one-year old Honduran immigrant who lived in the Jefferson Parish town of Gretna. Her family, all members of Horeb Spanish Baptist Mission there, came as a group to Dry Creek to escape Katrina.

Mabel is beautiful—tall with a winning smile and positive personality. My mom commented, "That girl could be a beauty queen." To me what makes Mabel beautiful is the inner beauty she has from the Lord.

I noticed her on the first Sunday our Katrina folks were at Dry Creek. We held a camp evacuee/community worship service in the Dry Creek Tabernacle. I've been in hundreds of services at the camp of every age group and event. But I've never been more touched than by this worship time on September 4.

Horeb Mission has a wonderful praise and worship band. It consists of about ten members including three percussionists. There is something about Latin percussion that makes their music touch your soul. As the Horeb band led in worship I looked across the large crowd of close to four hundred.

There were white faces, black faces, and brown faces. A few were dressed in their Sunday best but most wore jeans and T-shirts. Many folks here on this Sunday had lost everything they had except what they brought to Dry Creek. Others present were from our community and I silently thanked God for how Dry Creekers had reached out to these new friends.

The music was so joyful. They'd sing one verse in Spanish, then one in English. Best of all, as everyone sang together, there was a spirit of worship that united us all. The fact that we'd not known each other a week ago did not matter now.

And out front in the Horeb Band was Mabel, playing her acoustic guitar and singing. There was a joy on her face that can only come from inside—a joy that isn't tied to circumstances. All over the Tabernacle there was joyful singing—a joyful singing that the loss of material things cannot wash away.

And I thought about Paul and Silas in that Philippian jail punished for doing right…Deep down in the darkness of a foul-smelling dungeon cell, beaten and chained to the wall, hungry, thirsty, and rejected.

And then they started singing.
At midnight
In the dark
When the situation seemed darkest and worst.
Singing praises to God…
From their heart.

I watched the Horeb Band sing and glanced at others in the audience who had lost so much. My friends of Outreach Truth Ministry who had lost their church building and homes were singing out with uplifted hands.

When we came home after the service, my 16-year-old son Terry commented, "Daddy, I've never been in a service that touched me quite like that one." I agreed and asked Terry what it was that touched him most. His statement was, "To see those people singing from their hearts when they've lost so much touched me in a way I cannot describe."

I agreed with him. It is impossible not to listen and be affected when we see raw, unvarnished, simple praise to God in circumstances like these. Just as the other prisoners listened in amazement at Paul and Silas' midnight prison singing, the world looks and listens when a child of God sings in spite of the storm or circumstances.

In the coming weeks I got to know Mabel well. She worked in the office for us as a receptionist.

Our office staff fell in love with her. Mabel shared how her family had come from Honduras five years ago. New Orleans is a very popular place for Honduran natives. It has the largest Honduran population outside of the country itself.

What impressed me about Mabel was her rock-solid faith. On mornings when I drove the camp school bus I would see her sitting on the front porch of the Ranch House having her quiet time.

It was evident this was a daily time alone with the Lord.

Mabel and the Horeb Praise Band and their songs of joy in the midst of a great storm touched us. There is something about the human spirit. It may be the most amazing thing about this earth. No wave, wind, rain, or storm can seem to drown it away.

But music, this gift from God, is most touching when it comes from the heart of faith. A heart tested yet true. A heart that has walked that line between faith and fear…

A song from prison…
Sung by someone who is in prison
But still has their song because prison hasn't penetrated into their soul.
Just like Mabel's song.

BAPTIST BEER

It's lunchtime at The City of Hope. It is the first Saturday after Katrina. Our evacuees have been with us for six days now and we are getting to know each other well.

The watchword of the latter part of the week has been, "When is FEMA coming? When will we see the Red Cross?" There is an undercut of tension that our shelter, being in an extremely rural location and not being an official Red Cross shelter, will be passed over and forgotten about.

In the middle of lunch someone cries out, "The Red Cross is here!" Outside the east window a red and white van pulls up. Three workers get out and are greeted by evacuees. Everyone quickly discovers they've not come with $1500 debit cards but rather supplies of food and water. Still they are greeted with warm smiles and handshakes.

I've been amazed all week that whenever any official comes, even if they have no pertinent information, they are greeted warmly. For all of the bellyaching about FEMA and the Red Cross, individuals from these groups are received respectfully. Most of them quickly tell the assembled crowds that they are "worker bees" or "lower echelon" and have no big news. But it is still reassuring to see someone in uniform. Another thing I notice is that every worker I've met from these groups has been extremely helpful and concerned.

I meet the Red Cross workers and then return to my meal. Suddenly someone charges over to my table, "Bro. Curt did you know they're bringing in cases of Budweiser water?" Someone grabs a six-pack off the dolly and

delivers it to my table. Sure enough the white can is labeled "Drinking Water; packaged by Aeunhueser Busch, Cartersville, GA."

I don't know whether to laugh or get mad. They quickly reverse the unloading of the high stack of Budweiser water and reload it for destinations where Baptists aren't in charge. Later I find out they inadvertently left two cases behind. I quickly commandeer them and begin planning some fun with them.

We Baptists have a well-deserved reputation for being teetotalers when it comes to alcohol. We like to say we are dry. In Beauregard Parish there is only one small area where alcohol is sold. In fact we are presently in the beginning stages of a liquor election created by a loophole as decided by the state supreme court.

I'm against the sale of alcohol for a very simple reason: I've seen it hurt too many families. I've helped bury way too many young people whose lives were snuffed out by someone driving while intoxicated. I've never seen alcohol do any good but I've seen it destroy many a man, woman, and family.

In spite of this, I still have a sense of humor about things and these Budweiser waters are passed out to every Baptist preacher I know when they drop by the camp. We have lots of fun with it. Folks even start calling it "Baptist beer."

It brings me back to the allegorical story I once read in the newspaper. It seemed in Texas they were having lots of trouble with the Johnson grass in their crops. The local sheriff had confiscated a huge shipment of moonshine whiskey. He came up with a novel way to dispose of the moonshine and eradicate the Johnson grass. He simply poured the whiskey on the Johnson grass and the Baptists ate it down to the roots.

Being a Baptist I'm used to being the butt of jokes like that and can laugh as loud as anyone.

My father-in-law, Herbert Terry, has a friend named

David Patton. Although Mr. Patton, a former state legislator, is well known in north central LA, his dog "Bo" is better known than he is.

My father-in-law told of going to David Patton's house and the dog being told, "Bo, Mr. Terry has come to go hunting, go get him some boots." Soon the dog obediently returned with a pair of boots in his mouth. Then the dog was instructed, "Mr. Terry doesn't have a gun, go fetch him a gun." Sure enough Bo came back dragging a gun in a carrying case.

Then he told him, "Bo, it's hot today—go get Mr. Terry something to drink." Quickly old Bo comes back with a can of beer in his mouth. Mr. Patton then scolded the dog, "Bad dog, you know Mr. Terry's one of those Baptists. Now take that back." With that the dog left and returned, this time with a can of Diet Coke.

I didn't see this but my father-in-law is a good man and I know if he said it, it happened. In fact I'm so sure of it, I'll bet you a case of Baptist beer it happened.

BOOK III

RITA: "THE FORGOTTEN STORM"

Saturday, September 24, 2005

They are calling Hurricane Rita "The forgotten storm."

You'll have a hard time convincing any of us in Southwestern Louisiana and Southeastern Texas that there is anything forgettable about Rita's arrival on Saturday, September 24, and the days and weeks afterward.

Rita is dubbed as the forgotten storm because she has not kept the headlines hogged by her older sister Katrina.

The tragic loss of life along the Mississippi Gulf Coast and the unspeakable scenes from New Orleans in the days after Katrina are seared on our national consciousness, including those of us who later were in Rita's path.

We understand that the heavy loss of life—over one thousand and counting in Louisiana alone—makes Katrina more noticeable. The delayed breaching of the levees, the sad human drama of victims waiting in vain for help, and the mind-numbing stories out of the Superdome and Convention Center make Katrina a name to be remembered.

But don't forget about our storm. Her name was Rita. And she affected and changed our area drastically also:

- From Cameron to Orange
- Johnson Bayou to Newton
- Calcasieu Parish and Jefferson County.
- All along the Sabine River.
- In the larger cities of Lake Charles and Beaumont.
- As well as small coastal hamlets like Holly Beach and High Island.
- Even 80-100 miles inland, Rita packed a punch that left homes and communities powerless for weeks.

Now that some time has passed, I think we have a better handle on why Rita is a forgotten storm for much of our country and the media. It is also because so much went right. There were only two confirmed deaths in the areas hit by the storm. Cameron Parish, along the extreme western coast of Louisiana, had a 100% evacuation rate. The larger cities of Beaumont, Texas, and Lake Charles, Louisiana, had mandatory evacuations that although not problem-free, went extremely well. Southwest Louisiana, mainly a rural area, banded together and worked as a unit. Law enforcement, elected officials, and government agencies worked hand-in-hand for the best interests of their citizens. In fairness, much had been learned from Katrina's devastation a month earlier. The events surrounding Katrina served as warnings and examples for study.

Most of all, huge groups of volunteers banded together. Southern Baptists cooking food handed out by Red Cross volunteers. Firefighters, national guardsmen. We saw it all. And much of what we saw revealed the goodness in people. Let their stories be remembered. Let their stories be told, not forgotten. In our part of the country where Rita will not be forgotten. Not just because of the destruction and hardships it created, but because of the good people who came forth and helped after the forgotten storm.

Audrey

The September 2005 night that Hurricane Rita struck southwest Louisiana will be forever etched in the minds of everyone who rode it out. Since that Friday night, nearly everyone who stayed to ride out the storm has commented, "Next time I won't make that mistake again. I'll go north with the smart people."

At the camp we decided to hunker down and stay. By Friday evening we had over 350 evacuees with us. Most were from Katrina with about another one-third having just arrived from Cameron Parish. Our only option would have been to turn everyone loose and send them north on their own. There were no lodging options north anywhere until you reached Arkansas. So we stayed.

It seems so often that hurricanes arrive in the darkness of night. I think that makes it even scarier. Several of the old-timers with us were veterans of Hurricane Audrey, which destroyed Cameron in June 1957. In our part of the state all hurricanes are still measured by Audrey, which killed over 425 people in Cameron Parish. Included in this death toll were 154 children.

Audrey occurred in a time when weather forecasting, especially on hurricanes, was much more primitive. This storm developed quickly in the Gulf, south of Cameron, which caught everyone off guard. On the evening of Wednesday, June 24, Cameron and Southwest Louisiana residents were warned of Audrey's approach. Forecasters expected the storm to hit the next day. Residents were warned to be ready to evacuate by morning. But during the night the storm increased in both northward speed and destructive wind speed as it approached Cameron Parish. Residents who checked during the night were horrified to find the roads out were already underwater as the storm approached.

The brave stories of these survivors and their great loss of families are told very well in Nola Mae Whittler Ross'

excellent book, Hurricane Audrey. Ross addresses the benchmark that Audrey has served for Cameron Parish in this way: "And ever since that day, the people of Cameron have gauged every big event in their lives as occurring 'Before Audrey,' or 'After Audrey.' "

I was only one-year-old when Audrey came ashore so I have no memory of it. Being far enough from the Gulf lessened the direct impact it had on our area. However, it was an event burned into my consciousness from boyhood on.

Many Cameron Parish survivors of Audrey purchased land in the Dry Creek or Bundick Lake area. This gave them a place to come when evacuation orders were given. Over the years many moved to our area year round. From many of them I've heard the stories of Audrey.

Once again a nighttime storm approached Cameron. This one named Rita was much stronger than Audrey was. Fortunately, all of Cameron and most of Calcasieu was evacuated. The terrible loss of life from Audrey was not repeated on this storm. In spite of the great material losses suffered, fathers and mothers did not have to go to funeral homes and temporary morgues to identify a child.

That is something to be thankful about.

Back on a day in March, our group traveled along the tsunami-ravaged coast of Sumatra. Our medical team stopped in to visit a woman in labor. She waited in the back room of a store. While our doctors talked with the local midwife, several of us wandered throughout the store. On a crude bulletin board were pictures from the tsunami. Most showed the usual scenes of boats stranded far from the ocean and flattened houses and scattered debris.

But in the corner of the board was a series of pictures that gripped my heart and have yet to have been removed from my mind. Several were of a mass burial service on the beach. It was at night and torches lined the area. Men lowered wrapped bodies into the sandy grave.

But one picture touched me like no other. It showed a nice rug laid out on the grass. On the rug were the bodies of two beautiful small girls. They looked to be five or six years old. In the picture they were laid there with their eyes closed and expressionless faces. It was hard to believe that they weren't simply taking a nap. There were no cuts or injuries on their tanned faces. Their hands were folded neatly on their chests.

It broke my heart. I nearly wanted to yell for them to get up and go play. But they would never play again. Their short lives had been ended by the giant wave.

Katrina and Rita brought back the memories of Audrey in our area. Old interviews and news stories were resurrected. I got my copy of Hurricane Audrey out and re-read many of the stories told by the survivors. Once again the stories of little children ripped from their parents' arms by the waves broke my heart.

Far be it from me to soft-pedal the terrible hardship Rita has inflicted on southwest Louisiana. Its effects will be felt for years. But for every parent that has lost so much, none will have to bury a child this time.

Rita will probably replace Audrey as the storm future hurricanes are measured against. But thankfully the human death toll that made Audrey the name to remember for generations of our residents was not repeated this time. This was due to God's grace, wise planning, leadership by our authorities, and good decisions by our residents.

Yes, Rita caused destruction and devastation. But there is nothing she took that cannot be replaced. May that be so of any future storms we face. May there never be another Audrey in SW Louisiana.

HEADLIGHTS IN THE DARK

We'd never seen anything like it. As far as I could see, looking south on Louisiana Hwy 113, the main (and only) thoroughfare through Dry Creek, there were headlights.

On Thursday the exodus had begun and it seemed everyone knew a shortcut to avoid heavily traveled US 165 and US 171… they decided to turn off US 190 and go north on LA 113. For most of Thursday and Friday there was slow moving, closely packed traffic heading north. To cross over 113 to enter the campgrounds meant a moderate time of waiting.

Looking south after dark, the long string of headlights reminded me of the final scene in Field of Dreams*:*

If you build it, they'll come.
Or if Rita comes, they'll go.

Never had we seen an exodus like this. The mandatory evacuation of both Cameron and Calcasieu parish had led to this. Everyone was wiser and warier due to Katrina's hit on Southeast Louisiana. Cars by the dozen pulled into the Foreman's meat market parking lot. People pored over maps, bought supplies, and discussed where they were headed and what they could expect. Many of the vehicles had stock trailers and utility trailers. The sound of yapping dogs and mooing cattle in the dusty parking lot gave it all an 1880's Dodge City atmosphere.

Looking at the long line of headlights in the darkness reminded me of how this area had changed. As a boy I walked the four miles from our house to this corner and often never saw a moving vehicle.

Friday morning continued with the steady northward migration in Dry Creek. I went to DeRidder and although traffic was steady, there wasn't quite the bottleneck we had seen at Foreman's in Dry Creek.

Then after lunch the traffic suddenly cleared out. Everyone that was going had evidently gone. It was the point of no return. If you were going, you'd better get out. If you were going, the options as to where you could stay dwindled as folks talked about no hotel rooms this side of Arkansas.

The contrasting quietness at the Dry Creek intersection was stark in comparison to the hustle and bustle of the two previous days. As darkness settled and the wind began to pick up, Dry Creek community, with buildings and houses boarded up, seemed like a ghost town.

It wasn't until midnight when we lost our electricity for good. Then we settled into a true darkness… a darkness that would persist for the next week.

As I made my rounds during the worsening storm, the darkness was pervasive. The campgrounds have plenty of night lighting on our campus. With the lights out, this normally well-lit area was in total darkness. The clouds, blowing rain, and moaning wind only made it seem darker.

Daytime on Saturday was a blur as we rode out the storm. Then the darkness returned.

Never had it seemed so dark. In the next week I would travel through DeRidder, Jasper, and Sulphur at night. The darkness in these cities was surprising as well as frightening. Driving along I-10 after midnight I would not have known Sulphur existed if not for the exit signs and a few generator-powered lights.

The first few nights after Rita were cloudy. Then as often happens following a hurricane, the clouds cleared out and the night sky showed off. There was no moon to compete with and no obscuring haze of night lights to dim the natural sky; a lower humidity opened up excellent night viewing of the isolation of the darkness.

To walk outside and see the stars was spellbinding. Never had I seen the Milky Way as brilliant across the entire sky. At its southern end, Sagittarius the teapot was angled above the horizon. I understood how earlier civilizations had seen this constellation as a hot teapot and the Milky Way as the steam pouring out its spout.

I looked north and saw our old friends the North Star and Big Dipper. Cassiopeia the queen still sat on her throne in the same area of sky.

After experiencing the power of Rita, I nearly expected these constellations of stars to be blown away, or at least be misplaced sideways by her winds. But they all were right where they've been for centuries… steadfast and solid in spite of the storm.

It was over two weeks before we got our power restored. We learned a lot about the simple things we take for granted. We were reminded of the comfort, intimacy, and luxury of lights—the comfort of lights—even a long, long line of headlights coming from the south—along our normally quiet country road.

BILL LINDSEY'S HAMMER

It is just before bedtime on the night before Hurricane Rita slams into Southwest Louisiana. A crowd of fifty anxious faces stares into mine as they await words of wisdom from the camp director. The faces are each so different and individual. Some faces are black; others are brown, while others are white. Their ages, language, and dress vary greatly. But there is a commonality they all share as they sit gathered at Dry Creek Camp's adult facility, "The White House"—a fear of the unknown of what the next thirty-six hours holds.

Several ladies are crying softly. Many are Katrina evacuees who have been with us for nearly a month. How ironic it is that these folks who left New Orleans to miss a hurricane are now in the very teeth of another. For them there is nowhere to go. They cannot return to their homes that many have lost. There is no refuge open to the north. It will be better to be here than stranded along some road north of here when the storm hits.

Other evacuees are newly arrived from the coast of Southwest Louisiana and Southeast Texas. They have watched as the track of Rita turned ever so slowly toward their homes. They know that Cameron, Johnson Bayou, and Port Arthur will never be quite the same.

Todd Burnaman has just done a masterful job of welcoming these new evacuees and going over the fine points of living together in a twenty-six room building with inside hallways. A few weeks ago he and I were here and had to referee a spat between two ladies over kids talking too loud near the telephone. There has never been a dull moment at "The City of Hope" shelter!

Now it is my turn to talk with them on our plans for the coming storm. Our Office of Emergency Preparedness has recommended we remain here with our evacuees. The roads are jammed and shelter space is nonexistent to the north, especially for a group of over 300 folks.

So we've made the decision to "hunker down" and ride out the storm in Dry Creek, Louisiana. It's my job to assure them that this is the correct decision. I'd be lying if I said I was 100 percent sure this was the best decision. The horrible weight of leading a vast group of people falls heavily on my shoulders. The rightness or wrongness of this decision will be played out over the next two days.

As I steady myself to speak, a vision goes through my mind. It is the faded sepia-colored black-and-white picture of a group of carpenters standing with saw and hammers in their hands. They are posing in the front of The White House. This crew of Dry Creek men built this building over a six-year period from 1912–1918. The thought of building a schoolhouse this large with hand tools is something. The fact that it took the men of the community that long to finish the school has nothing to do with their lack of labor or ineptitude. It just took time. These men had other jobs in addition to building the community's big school.

As I thought about the picture, I remembered who Bill Lindsey was. He was the head carpenter on this project for the entire building period. In the picture he stands on the far right with his tools at his side. There is a serious but proud look on his face that seems to say, "It took us a while but we built it right."

As I stand before the evacuees who will ride out the hurricane in the building Bill Lindsey built, I think about the construction of this schoolhouse. It was built from longleaf pine cut at the Long Bel sawmill in nearby Longville. The huge hollow columns are cypress and were brought in by oxen-pulled wagon.

I share with the evacuees about the huge attic that sits

above the second floor. The attic is laced and supported with huge beams that give it a solid framework. They are in a safe place for the storm. Maybe the safest place around.

The year this school was finished, 1918, was when a great hurricane struck SW Louisiana. This unnamed storm came ashore on August 6, 1918. Because of the lack of weather forecasting in the early 20th century, Cameron, Calcasieu, and the other area parishes were surprised. Over 30 people died and much of Lake Charles was destroyed.

Long-time Dry Creek resident Frank Miller told me about the 1918 hurricane. He said thousands of large pines were broken off or uprooted. Just as we experienced in Rita, Mr. Frank said the fallen trees all laid facing the northwest.

I'm sure the residents of Dry Creek in 1918 wondered how their new school would hold up to the hurricane. It did just fine as it has throughout ninety more years of storms and severe weather.

Bill Lindsey and his crew built it right and they built it to last. I'm not a carpenter but I've heard enough craftsmen marvel at the design, quality of work, and solidness of this old building to know that Bill Lindsey and his men did not cut any corners. They were building a school for their children and that type of building deserved only one's best.

How strange that there are only a few people left in Dry Creek that ever knew Bill Lindsey. Mr. Leonard Spears, who is over 90, knew him and said he was a hard worker. His wife, the legendary Mary Jane Lindsey, called him "Bill M" Lindsey. She pronounced it sharply, especially when she was upset with him, as "Billum."

As Todd and I prepare to leave the White House, I tell our evacuees about Billum Lindsey and his crew of workers. I describe the workmanship and the extra care they put into this building. I tell them about the huge beams and how this schoolhouse has survived numerous hurricanes and storms in 1918, Audrey in 1957, and Carla

in 1961. April 1993's straight line storm tore the roof off the camp office and felled dozens of trees, but did no damage to the White House. Tomorrow will be simply one more test of its solid construction.

How strange would it be for Billum Lindsey who lived most of his life in the nineteenth century to see a group of over fifty folks from all over our region riding out a storm together in 2005.

P.S. The Dry Creek White House came through the storm with flying colors. There was some minor shingle damage, but its exterior and interior once again proved to be solid and up to the challenge. All present agreed that if they had to ride out another hurricane in Dry Creek, that is where they'd want to be.

SUGAR AND IVORY

It's odd but I will always think of two dogs when I think of the long night that Hurricane Rita struck Dry Creek Camp.

We had 350 people on our grounds. They had been moved and bedded down in our most solid dorms and everyone took enough food and water for the next thirty hours when we were told to expect strong winds. Flashlights and radios were distributed and we locked down and awaited the storm.

DeDe and Terry had gone north to Harrisonburg with all of my immediate family. I went home and double-checked our house and yard. Driving back to the camp I looked at my field of young pines and wondered how different they would look by this time tomorrow.

As I left the house to return to the camp, I loaded up one of our most prized possessions—our yellow Labrador, Ivory. She has been my faithful friend for over eight years. If you've seen one of my first three books, she graces the cover of each one.

Back at the camp office we made a pad for her on the floor. Ivory is very scared of storms. She has pushed her way into the house during loud thunderstorms. At ninety pounds she is hard to drag out when she gets under a table during lightning and thunder.

I commented to everyone that I'd brought Ivory to comfort her during the storm. But I'd really brought her because I wanted her comfort for me.

When I went through a personal storm in my life, Ivory was always there for me. I suffered through a terrible time of deep depression in 2000. During that dark time Ivory

always sat by me in the long days and nights of hopelessness. She never gave me a word of advice but simply gave me her full and undivided attention.

God healed me through a wonderful combination of His grace, great doctors, medication, and time. Among that combination of healing things was a dog named Ivory. Animals have the ability to heal and calm. There is something about petting a dog that brings soothing and solace. It is no coincidence that many therapy centers use pets as part of their rehabilitation. A stroke victim seeking to regain arm movement can pet a dog as part of their therapy. It heals physically as well as emotionally.

Ivory had been that friend of solace in my life. I wanted her company during this stormy night. Our rat terrier, Eddie, was left at the house. We'd prepared him a place in the carport garage where he can be far from the storm but still go in and out. I would have liked to have brought Eddie to the camp also but he is still on probation. Every time I've ever brought him to the camp he has gotten in some kind of trouble. Last time I brought him for a nighttime work session he hid from me in the office. As I got ready to leave the office, he was nowhere to be found. I wondered how he had gotten outside. I searched all over the office and drove through the grounds. The next morning I posted "Lost Dog" posters at the store and post office.

After these hours of searching and asking, I discovered him hiding behind the door up on Diane's couch smiling contentedly at me after a good night's rest in the comfort of AC. So Eddie is not making the Rita road trip to the camp. I can see the little nervous terrier escaping outside and us hunting for him in the midst of the hurricane.

About 11:30 pm, we lose our electricity. We communicate on the two-way radios throughout the camp. I stretch out on the office couch in the dark and try to rest.

From time to time I put my hand down to touch Ivory. It is good to have her with me. In spite of the blowing

winds and flying debris, she sleeps peacefully.

The first radio SOS call comes after midnight. A frantic voice says, "I've got a boy in cabin 7 who has quit breathing and is turning blue." I pull on my raincoat and rush to the cabin. A teenaged Katrina evacuee is laid out on a dorm porch bench. He is breathing but having a hard time. The wind whips and whistles all around us as he seeks to get his breath.

Our paramedic Shane arrives. I am so thankful that he has been with us during the many medical crises of these past weeks. Lewis is hyperventilating and can't seem to calm down. Shane works with him and lets us all know that Lewis is evidently having an anxiety attack. I look around at the worried faces of those from the neighboring dorms.

This is a dorm where we had had some suspected drug abuse in the past week. We'd even had the police drug dog come out to inspect our dorms. I wonder if this teen's problem is related to that.

After the evacuee begins to calm down and breathe better, someone grabs Shane and says, "Come next door, there's a dog that is really sick." Shane leaves and later returns muttering, "I can help people but I don't know much about dogs." One of the evacuees tells me that this dog is having a hard time with the storm.

I walk next door and meet Sugar. She is a rat terrier, just like Eddie. It is quickly evident from his gray muzzle and few teeth that Sugar is very old. She is held by Mrs. Shirley, age 80, whom we call "Nanny."

Sugar is in great distress. Her eyes are bulging out in fear and her breathing is labored and loud. Knowing rat terriers and their high-strung tendencies I am aware that Sugar is having an anxiety attack of her own.

Nanny holds him closely and talks soothingly to her but to little avail. This dog knows that something very wrong is up with the weather and is instinctively fearful of it.

Standing there as the wind blows the rain sideways on us on the dorm porch, I recall stories of the water buffaloes in Indonesia. Several Indonesia men collaborated the following to me:

When the strong 9.0 earthquake occurred on the morning of December 26, buildings and structures crumbled. There was much damage even far inland from the coast. Fortunately there was little human injury due to the initial earthquake tremors. People ran outside in confusion as they looked around and checked on each other.

It would be fifteen to thirty minutes before the first tsunami wave would arrive. During this interim time of confusion an event occurred that many noticed but only later would understand: The water buffaloes, an important part of rural farming in Asia, broke loose from tethers and pens and maddeningly ran inland for higher ground.

Evidently these animals sensed an instinctive knowledge of the coming wave. Ropes and pens that had held the buffaloes secure were snapped and trampled as the bewildered beasts fled.

Looking back at Sugar, the rat terrier, I am aware that she senses a terrible occurrence just as those water buffaloes did. No soothing words or petting can calm Sugar down.

Over at dorm seven, our hyperventilating evacuee is now settled down, so we push everyone back into their dorms and urge them to stay inside.

Going back to the truck someone shouts above the howling wind, "This big dog looks like she is limping because she is hurt." It is Ivory. She's just limping along with her arthritic hips. A big smile is on her face as she tromps through the standing water. She must have followed me out of the office. Why she isn't scared I don't know. We quickly load her up in the bed of the truck and head back to the office.

The rest of the night is a long story of falling trees,

emergency calls to other dorms, and little or no sleep. But as I lay on the couch in the office, I can feel Ivory on the floor beside me. Her snoring and breathing brings a comfort of her own.

The storm's fury is at its worst just before dawn. Trees have fallen everywhere. Throughout the day the hurricane, followed by then tropical-force winds, continue to fell trees. Midmorning, a radio blares out, "Another tree just fell over by the Henhouse on a trailer." I know it has to be the home of Frank and Janet Bogard. Frank rushes down there to find a big pine on his trailer but it is lodged up against the roof with little damage. It is one more miracle of this storm that none of our buildings are severely damaged.

Later that evening as the winds abate, I walk over to Dorm 7. Everyone is okay but a lady Madeline tells me, "Sugar didn't make it." She points to a small fresh grave with a twig-made cross on it. I'm not surprised at Sugar's death. A heart can only take so much.

I promise them that we will get a small marker placed there. Nanny is sitting there on the porch. She looks much older than even her eighty years belies. Losing your home in an earlier storm is a terrible thing. Losing a beloved pet in another storm, especially a pet of fifteen years, is a great loss not to be underestimated.

The night that Rita came ashore will always be remembered. It will not be forgotten for the people of southwest Louisiana, whether they stayed or went north. The hours of waiting and wondering were tedious. At the camp we will always remember the faces of the evacuees. Full of concern, stress, yet resolution as the storm approached and blew through.

But even after time has faded their faces and I've forgotten many of their names, I'll measure this night by the faces of two dogs: a country yellow lab named Ivory and a New Orleans terrier called Sugar.

THE MILLER OAK

The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago.
The next best time is today.

The morning after Rita passed through I couldn't wait to get out and survey the damage. As I'd driven around our community the day before I wondered aloud what things would look like post-storm in our hometown.

So on Saturday morning when there was a lull in the action, I ventured out. There were three things I wanted to check first. I wanted to see if the three grand trees of Dry Creek had survived the storm.

If you've read any of my earlier books, you know how I love trees. They are among some of the best gifts God gives us in the natural world. And I was worried about three of them.

First of all, the evergreen cedar tree at the cemetery was on my mind. This tall gnarled tree is over one hundred years old. As I shared in The Old House, it was planted near the first grave in what was then Spears Cemetery, now called Dry Creek Cemetery. It has lost limbs in recent storms and I wondered if Rita was to be its demise. However, it survived pretty well intact.

The second grand tree of Dry Creek is the huge sycamore that stands between Dry Creek Bible Church's three buildings. This aged tree dates back to the early days when this property was part of Dry Creek High School. It is broad and majestic and has limbs as large as the trunk of some trees.

Early on Saturday morning before our phone service went out, Pastor Sam Burchard called me. He and his

family had wisely evacuated out of state. Sam's first question was, "How did our church and buildings fare in the storm?" Before I could answer, he breathlessly he added, "What about the big sycamore between our house and the church?" Sam's voice showed his concern. I knew he fully expected that this giant tree had crashed on at least one of the buildings.

"Sam, the giant sycamore is still standing as fine as ever." It was sure good to spread some positive news on this. Dry Creek community would have been a little poorer without the cemetery cedar and the Bible Church sycamore.

The third grand Dry Creek tree is my favorite. It is huge cherry bark oak that sits at the entrance of the Camp. It is perfectly shaped and majestic.

Cherry bark oaks are members of the red oak family of which there are a dozen species. They produce the highest quality lumber of any red oaks and are highly valued by sawmills. According to my resident forester, my son Clint, cherry bark oaks grade higher because of their strength, absence of knots, resistant to rot, and "clear wood." Firewood cutters love the red oaks because of their ease in splitting due to the rich red heart in the center of the trunk.

Since Rita we've laughed and given our community forecast—Dry Creek Forecast: Plenty of firewood this winter! That is true, so true. All throughout our community there are hundreds of trees of every size, species, and shape, all laid low to the ground by Rita. Some toppled over with their root system exposed. Others, especially the pines, snapped off at heights ten to twelve feet above the ground. Most are laying facing the northwest, mute testimony to the hurricane-force southeast winds that accompanied the "bad side of the storm."

So it is with trepidation that my first daylight inspection begins outside the office at this cherry bark oak. I've

wondered if this old giant could take on the storm. It has always looked healthy but you never know. One of the amazing discoveries after a hurricane is to see trees down that seemed firm and healthy but had a hollow or rotten spot inside.

It took the storm to reveal this flaw and it revealed it in an unmistakable, and for the tree, in a fatal, way. It kind of reminds me about life. There are plenty of storms in life…many external like a hurricane, while others are internal…but regardless of the location of the storm, it will reveal the internal character of the person. If there is weakness, no matter how well hidden, the storm will reveal the truth.

I'm thankful that I'm not depending on my inner strength because I've got plenty of knots and hollow spots. But the Jesus inside me…"Greater is He that is in you…" is plenty strong enough to take whatever blows my way.

In the gray misty light of dawn I see the outline of the big oak. A swing around the lot shows that only one small limb is down. The cherry bark oak of Dry Creek Camp has withstood the storm.

Forester Clint's words come back… "Highest grade, least knots, clearest wood, worth 3 times as much as other red oak lumber." What a symbol for strength in the storm. I sure love that old tree.

This majestic oak has always been special to me, but several months before hurricane Rita it "grew in stature" in my heart. A favorite story about this special tree was recalled.

I'm not sure how old the tree is, but it was big enough for Lois Miller to remember it as a teenage girl at camp. Here, from the memoirs of camp friend Lois McFatter Miller is her story of "The Big Oak:"

Mrs. Miller shared, "It was August of 1928. I recognized Frank Miller of Dry Creek coming through the main gate of the encampment. With him was his brother Ray, whom he brought over for me to meet. Ray was

tall… very handsome, and the vibes between us were electric and we began dating."

You can probably guess the rest of this story. This Dry Creek boy and Ragley girl married and lived a long life of serving God together in Calcasieu Parish. Just recently, Mrs. Lois died at age 91 and rejoined in Heaven that "tall handsome boy" she met under the Big Oak at Dry Creek.

So this Big Oak has a name. It is the Miller Oak. It symbolizes so much. To me it represents something that still happens at Dry Creek. A boy meets a girl. A girl notices a boy. They fall in love. In a lifetime at camp I've heard literally hundreds of stories of romances that began at camp. I've seen dozens bloom myself.

Each summer as our teenage and college staff arrives in May we seat them in a circle. Over thirty of them sit giggling nervously. They are beginning a journey after which they will never be the same. Some know each other while others have never met but will become lifelong friends after a summer of camp.

I know that some in this room will fall in love…and it will last for a lifetime. Just like the marriage of Ray and Lois Miller—"To death do us part…"—solid, just like that old, majestic, Cherry bark Oak greeting visitors to the camp for eighty years.

Driving around that post-storm morning I'm amazed at the damage. Trees are down everywhere. I'm even more amazed how little structural damage there is. God has been gracious. How else can we explain it?

I meet Frank Bogard and we ride around the grounds. "It's going to take a long time to clean all of this up!" We laugh as Frank says, "Bro. Eugene Reeves is going to love this firewood season." I fully expect Dry Creek's hardest worker and firewood supplier to be at camp by lunchtime with his chain saw.

There will be plenty of wood to cut. We count over 100 trees down on our acreage. Blackjack oaks by the baseball field, ones that have caught many a right field foul ball, are

on the ground. Longleaf pines now lay in bunches all over the grounds ready to be sawed up for the Tabernacle. One huge pine is now taking a late season swim in the small pool. It didn't have the common courtesy to ask for the key, instead taking down a large section of fence. Water oaks down all around the Tabernacle. Several Red Oaks laying prone ready to heat Mrs. Christine Farquhar's fireplace this winter.

But still standing tall,
Not ready yet to surrender to Rita's winds or Bro. Eugene's chain saw.
It is my favorite tree in Dry Creek….
It's a cherry bark oak…
I like to call it the Miller Oak.

Postscript:

At camp we believe this century-old oak, still standing proudly and rooted deeply, is a wonderful symbol for the life-changing work that God has been doing here since 1925.

On your next Dry Creek visit, stop under the "Big Oak" and pray, thanking God for what He has faithfully done for so many years.

Then don't forget to thank Him for what lies ahead in His work at Dry Creek Baptist Camp.

LONG MAY IT WAVE

Sunday, September 11, 2005

In my mind I will always remember it as the enduring symbol of the United States—an American flag in a faraway place where you never expected to see one.

I thought about that flag today on the fourth anniversary of 9/11. The television news balanced a full day of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina mixed with remembrance of another terrible September time of uncertainty four years ago. Over and over we saw the pictures of the flag atop the rubble of the World Trade Center.

But the American flag carried in the mind of our tsunami relief team is one we saw 12,000 miles from home in the middle of a disaster-strewn field along the north coast of Sumatra.

If you've ever spent time out of our country, you are aware that there are things you miss: a good hamburger, baseball box scores, and fried catfish. In past visits to the communist countries of Vietnam and China, there is a constant awareness that you are in a foreign country. Knowing you will not see an American flag is a fact of life.

The northernmost Indonesian island of Sumatra is a hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism. This group, called "the Free Aceh movement" has waged civil war against the reigning government for the last decade. This area, populated by the Acehnese peoples, is under martial law. Because of the strong Sunni Muslim population and an Al Queda influence, Americans have not been welcome there for years, until after December 26, when this part of the

country was swept over by the tsunami wave.

As aid agencies and relief groups arrived, many included Westerners, especially Americans. Suddenly native Acehnese, who only knew of the United States from television and the words of their imams, met Americans for the first time. Eighty days after the tsunami our eight-member team was among those westerners.

The first stop of our medical team upon landing in Banda Aceh was at a large open field covered with fresh red dirt. The field was probably the size of two football fields. Workmen were building a stone wall on one end. People stood quietly and reverently along the roadside looking across the wide field.

We knew this spot must mean something special. There was a feeling in my stomach of knowing what it was. Our Indonesian host walked up and explained that this was the burial spot of 20,000 residents of this city who had died in the tsunami. They had been buried in a large mass grave.

No funerals.
No goodbyes.
No closure for the ones left behind.

As we stood there silently taking in this surreal view, an older Indonesian man approached us. In halting English he asked, "Where are you from?"

"We are…from America."

With a small nod and bow he said, "Thank you for coming to help my people."

We all quickly fell in love with the Acehnese people. They were easy to love and we found that a smile, even an American smile, opened both doors and hearts.

However, we never forgot that the Indonesian people were not crazy about America. There were so many misperceptions and stereotypes (just like we have of them.)

In the capital of Jakarta our hosts pointed out the heavily fortified U.S. Embassy. There were concrete barricades, sandbagged bunkers, and high, barbed-wire-topped walls. This was mute testimony to how our America was perceived by this country.

Later as we reached our aid area one thousand miles from the protected embassy, we found an open and positive reception. Of course we were benefiting from nearly three months of good deeds by preceding Americans.

One day on a trip to a remote displaced person's camp ("DPC") along the north coast, we saw a sight that caught all of our attention. In an area that was completely devastated for as far as you could see, a lone American flag waved from a homemade flagpole. It was beside a humble hut that had been constructed from timbers and materials left over from the tsunami.

The sight of our American flag in a foreign place touched us all. We all showed varying degrees of emotion—some crying, others smiling, others touched by something so familiar and loved in such a foreign and surprising place.

On the second day along this road, we pulled our vehicles to the roadside and went to the hut with the American flag. Carefully we picked our way through the debris and still-standing water. There was an omnipresent smell of decay, death, and ruin that never left your senses. Here along the coastal plain were dozens of house foundations as reminders that this had been a village.

There was a grayness all over the landscape. The intruding seawater had killed all vegetation so the landscape was devoid of color—an ashen grayness that told of death and destruction. The only signs of color were the ever-present rags tied on sticks throughout the rubble. These sadly marked the spots where bodies had been recovered.

This grayness and the meaning of the fluttering rags

only made our American flag stand out. It was a long walk from the highway. The flag waved proudly in the stiff coastal breeze.

To call the small, one-room shack a house would be exaggeration. The owner of the hut had built it from scrap lumber left over by the destruction. It was simple but looked nearly majestic because there were no buildings in any direction as far as the eye could see.

That openness made our flag stand out even more proudly. I've never been more proud to have been an American on that day.

We met the resident of the home. He was in his mid-thirties and seemed to be living here alone. Gerry, our Indonesian interpreter, asked him about the source of the flag. It was anticlimactic when he shrugged and replied that he'd found it along the beach. I'd sure like to know the origin and story of that flag.

Not just any flag,
But an American flag,
The flag of my country,
Seen in a place a long way from home.

A TRIBAL CODE OF HOSPITALITY

… So he asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:29

I've never been to Afghanistan and probably never will go. It is a long and dangerous way from America. Especially hostile is the mountainous area that serves as the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is the area where the Taliban still is active and strong.

If I could travel there I'd want to meet a shepherd named Gulab. Gulab is a shepherd in a village in Kunar province, a rugged area of northeastern Afghanistan. This man is a real hero. I'll tell you why later in this story. Then maybe you'll understand what a simple Afghan shepherd has to do with an evacuation shelter in Louisiana.

After hurricane Ivan in 2004, our staff at Dry Creek Camp sat down with the American Red Cross to look at the process of becoming an official evacuation shelter. Their representatives were very helpful and open to working with us. Eventually we decided to pass on the opportunity. Our reason was due to restrictions on religious services and the ability to choose our own menus and cook our own food.

I want to be the first to compliment the Red Cross. After Rita they delivered thousands of meals in Beauregard Parish. Due to the loss of water, power, and stores being closed, coupled with gasoline being scarce, their delivered meals were lifesavers.

But we were, and still are, comfortable with our decision to be an independent shelter. Due to our current arrangement, we work closely with the authorities and

organizations but still have some final say in what we do.

Throughout the weeks of Katrina and then Rita, many tough decisions had to be made. But our staff had the latitude to make these decisions. Here was the toughest one:

Camp Program Director Todd Burnaman came to my house at 3:30 a.m. It was the third night after Rita and conditions were rough. It was hot and hard for everyone to sleep. Todd was still sleeping in the camp office where we had all earlier ridden out the storm.

A deputy had awakened him telling him that all shelters had to be emptied within an hour. This was an order "from The Red Cross and FEMA." According to this "messenger with bad news," buses were waiting in DeRidder to carry all Beauregard Parish shelter residents north and out of the parish.

This confused both of us because we had been at a planning meeting the day before and nothing specific was shared concerning our shelter. The shelters at the schools in DeRidder were having problems due to the lack of adequate setup to house evacuees long-term.

Our situation in being a camp where our mission is to provide food and lodging for people connects easily with being a shelter. So we felt comfortable with our situation.

I love Todd because he is a young man of integrity and character. He had not agreed to rouse up our evacuees. Instead he came to get me. When we returned to the camp the deputy was gone. Todd and I both knew he was just doing his job and could not have been fully informed on the situation.

We both agreed that no one was going to tell us when to have our evacuees leave. We would make that decision with the help of the Lord. These folks from the New Orleans area and Cameron Parish had come to us for shelter and we were responsible for them. They were under our care and protection.

We had already faced this in a similar way before Rita

hit. Beauregard Parish did not have a mandatory evacuation, but in the two days leading up to the storm, most of our parish residents did wisely leave.

The tough decision was concerning our evacuees. There was no lodging until you reached Arkansas. All other camps were full to the north of us. We contacted several churches with family life centers but they were full. The only two options were to hunker down and stay or to turn everyone out to fend their own way north. To our staff, that was not an option. We would stay and so could they if they so chose. They had come to us for shelter and we could not neglect or abandon them now.

So that early Tuesday-morning wake-up visit from the deputy did not change our mind on the operation of the City of Hope shelter.

As Todd and I visited later, Gulab's story came to mind and I shared it with him as I'm now telling you:

In June 2005, Taliban insurgents in the mountains of Afghanistan ambushed a four-man reconnaissance team of U.S. Navy Seals. They were badly outnumbered and fought a fiery battle with the enemy. When the Seals radioed for help, a MH-47 helicopter with 16 men aboard was dispatched. It was shot down by insurgents, killing all aboard.

Three of the Navy Seals were killed in the fighting. A rocket exploded near the one surviving soldier, knocking him off his feet and down a mountainside in steep terrain. He somehow managed to stay out of sight from the insurgents. Despite multiple leg wounds, the American was able to walk over three kilometers.

Four days after the gun battle, an Afghan shepherd named Gulab found the soldier and hid him in his village of Sabari-Minah. The wounded American now came under the care and protection of this village of seemingly poor and uneducated shepherds. Fortunately for him, these villagers were Pashtun, who are honor-bound to never refuse sanctuary to a stranger.

At some point in the next few days, the Taliban insurgents sent a message to the village demanding that the American be turned over. “We want this infidel.” A firm reply from the village chief, a man named Shinah replied, “The American is our guest, and we won’t give him up as long as there’s a man or a woman left alive in our village.”

Evidently no pleading, intimidation, or threats could persuade the village of Sabari-Minah to release the American. The village leaders and the specific host, Gulab, refused to budge.

It is a story that shows that human dignity, even under the worst of pressures or situations, can win out. I wonder about how this Afghan tribal code has played out over the generations in the rugged, harsh mountainous conditions of this area. How many lost travelers and wandering shepherds had received this same tribal hospitality in this same place?

A tribal code of hospitality to strangers. I like that. "This is my guest and I'll decide what to do with him and when I'll do it. Thank you kindly and goodbye."

Kind of like "This is our shelter, these folks are our guests, and we'll decide ourselves what to do with them and when we'll do it." I'd call that the Dry Creek tribal code of hospitality.

Hospitality—what a positive word in the English language. It is defined as “generous treatment of guests.” In Spanish, it is called hospitalidad. It is a word that our Hispanic guests used for our community and camp.

In the Afghan language of Pashto, Gulab’s dialect, it is closely related to their word for neighbor, “hamsaaya.” A word of compassion and action. A word of responsibility that says, “You are now my hamsaaya and I will, and must, take care of you.”

Finally, Gulab's story and the intertwined story of the Navy Seal has at least a partial happy ending. This villager made the six-hour trek to the U.S. base at Asadabadf to escort the wounded American to safety and reunite him

with his jubilant comrades.

That's a good story. That's a good tribal code to have. I believe it will work in America just the same as in the mountains of Afghanistan.

It combines two words that are special to make society work: hospitality and responsibility.

Let's practice it here.
Hospitality… a beautiful word
Exemplified by an Afghan shepherd named Gulab.

The ending of Jesus' parable that we call "The Good Samaritan" is this:

And Jesus said, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'" Luke 10:36–37

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

It didn't surprise me that Ruth Covington died during Hurricane Rita. She had grown so weak during the days before the storm, her passing was not unexpected. In fact, it was only appropriate that she passed away during the midst of a hurricane. She had lived such a full life in her 78 years and was so full of life that death needed a little extra help to get her. Just as it was said after former president Teddy Roosevelt died in his sleep, "Well, that's the only time death could get on even terms with him… by sneaking up on him while he was asleep." So death came to get Mrs. Ruth Covington when she, and everyone else, was distracted by a hurricane.

Some folks will say that she lost her battle with cancer. But I want to clear up that misconception—Mrs. Ruth didn't lose her battle. Instead she won the prize. She won the prize waiting for the faithful follower of Jesus: Being able to hear, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

She didn't lose her battle with cancer. Many times over her last decade as cancer, or Big C, seemed to be her constant companion, I would jokingly tell her, "Mrs. Ruth, I know Big C is bad, but I've still got my money on you. You're a pretty tough old girl." She would laugh, and in her smile was a grim determination to see this fight through to the end.

Dr. Bernie Siegel, a well-known writer and oncologist, tells of sharing with patients who've been given a terminal-cancer prognosis. Their question is always, "How long do I have, Doc?" His candid but standard reply was, "Well, I'd say you've got ten thousand miles left on your odometer." Mrs. Ruth's odometer rolled over several times, even after

her first breast cancer treatment ten years ago.

As folks read her obituary this week in the American Press, the most common comment was, "Was there anything in life that she and her husband Mr. Bill didn't do?" They lived life to the fullest… they drank every drop of coffee in the bottom of the cup of life.

That's another misconception that we need to clear up: The misconception that Mrs. Ruth Covington died. Nope, Mrs. Ruth didn't die…she lived. And did she ever live! She was "Hurricane Ruth"—full of energy, always on the move, and nothing or no one was the same after she "blew past them."

Her and Bill's lives were full… They had a lifelong addiction to volunteering and serving. At their church they were involved in everything, and she was the long-time church secretary.

They loved to travel all over North America in their R.V. Bill shared a wonderful note Mrs. Ruth wrote him on their last anniversary together. She said, "Bill, thanks for taking me all over our country. I enjoyed it so much."

At Dry Creek Camp, we believe the best trip they ever made was when they decided to drive their R.V. one hour north and stay with us. They adopted the Camp as their specific ministry and worked countless hours beside our staff. She is greatly missed by our staff who valued her as a faithful friend.

That fullness of life always meant that Ruth and Bill were the life of the party.

Anyone who knew Ruth knew this: You knew exactly where you stood with Mrs. Ruth Covington. Frank, honest, and sometimes blunt, she said what was on her mind.

This is probably everyone's favorite story on this aspect of her personality: The Covingtons were members of "the Agin' Cajuns," the senior adult ministry sponsored by Sulphur's First Baptist Church. This fun group had traveled to Branson and was enjoying the sights and

sounds of this favorite city of senior adults. It just so happened that the Sulphur group was seated next to a senior adult from a large urban church. A lady from the big city church began to brag about all of the nice things their group had and done: four big trips per year, a huge budget, a large new building.

The Southwest Louisiana group had just about heard all they could stand from this bragging Midwesterner. Finally she ended her crowing with the statement, "We've got a brand new $400,000 bus that we came down here on. What kind of bus does your group have?"

There was a silence from the Agin' Cajuns until Mrs. Ruth could no longer hold her tongue. She pointed toward the Sulphur bus driver, Johnny Peel.

Johnny is a big man—about 6 foot 6 inches tall and looks as if he could still play tackle in football. With her dry wit, which she aptly could use as a weapon she replied, "Well, I'm sure you all have the best in everything, but I guarantee you our bus driver can whip your bus driver."

Ruth Covington was a great lover. Most of all that love was directed toward her family. She and Bill were wonderful examples during their marriage of _____ years as to what faithfulness and dedication are all about. Our young people on the summer staff saw a good example of what lasting marriage is all about.

She loved her family–her children Billy and Carla, and her grandchildren. It is so appropriate that their family chose to be together at home as Hurricane Rita came through. In death as in life, she was surrounded by family…

And didn't everyone love her back… We loved that sweetness she had… of loving to help others. And we loved her "sourness," that bluntness—that dry, wicked sense of humor. It was like a wonderful Chinese dish: Sweet and sour. Sour and sweet.

That sweetness and sourness made us love her. No one wanted to disappoint her. We wanted to be at our best. No

one wanted to disobey her. We all had a "special wonderful dread" of disobeying or disappointing her.

So many folks have commented, "I would love to have heard what she would say about passing away in the midst of a hurricane and being put in 'cold storage' for three weeks before her funeral was held. Mrs. Ruth, being of thin build, was always cold and carried a sweater even during the warmer times of the year.

There is one last misconception… Here it is: That Ruth Covington is dead… No way! In fact she is more alive today than she has ever been before. She is in the very presence of God… In a place where there is no sorrow, no tears, no chemo, no radiation…only the sweet presence and peace of God. Not for a day or a week, but forever…

She wouldn't come back even if she could. And if we knew what she is now experiencing… we would cry tears of joy for her; tears of sadness that we are not there with her.

The last time I visited with her was three days before the hurricane and her death. She was so weak and everyone, including her, knew her time on earth was short. She sat propped up in her easy chair right by the living room window. This is where she spent her days. She loved this spot because she could watch the birds around her feeder and birdbath.

Mrs. Ruth could tell about each species as they flew back and forth enjoyed the bird seed Bill kept supplied at the feeder. On this final visit, her window was full of flying and fighting hummingbirds as dozens vied for the red-colored sugar water in the feeder.

Even though she was so weak she still commented on the hummingbirds and how she enjoyed watching them best of all.

On the morning of the storm when Bill called, I knew when I heard his voice that she was gone. Throughout the rest of that windy and rain-swept day I kept thinking about those hummingbirds. It concerned me as to what Ruth's

hummingbirds did during the hurricane.

The next week the Lake Charles American Press had a feature on birds and hurricanes. In this article, staff writer Andrew Perzo shared, "As hurricanes move ashore, some birds flee, some hunker down, some die, and some get carried farther inland…" The following comes from Ripley's Believe it or Not! Book of Great Disasters: "The eye of the hurricane is the relatively calm interior around which the deadly winds circulate. Our feathered friends often hitch a ride in the eye of the storm and travel far from their natural habitat."

It was easy to see Mrs. Ruth's hummingbirds flying along to a place they'd never been before. Off on a journey…just like her.

In closing, the official reports will show that the eye of hurricane Rita came ashore somewhere just east of Sabine Pass on Saturday 24, 2005. It then began to drift westward over Sabine Lake and up through the extreme eastern edge of Texas before weakening and finally reentering north Louisiana and the Midwest U.S.

But the true eye of another storm—the place where there is peace, rest, blue skies, and the very absence of confusion and pain—came to settle that same morning at a house on Sam Dunham Rd. in Calcasieu Parish in the community of Houston River. The eye of the storm came to rest on the soul of Ruth Covington.

Even though her life ended at that point, her joy really began. Where "Eye has not seen nor has ear heard the things God has prepared for those who love the Lord" (2 Cor. 2:9).

A LONG SNAKESKIN

My nephew found it near the barn at my father-in-law's home. It was by far the longest intact snakeskin I've ever seen. We measured it at six-and-one-half feet long. There was no doubt with its length and thinness that it was a Texas Rat Snake, or as we call it, a Chicken Snake.

The Chicken Snake gets its name from how it loves to hang around barns and old buildings. Its favorite food is rats but any farmer will also tell you how it loves to get eggs or baby chickens for supper.

It is a constrictor that kills its prey by squeezing it to death, then unhinging its jaws to swallow objects that look impossibly large. I've killed chicken snakes with a huge bulge in its midsection due to a swallowed rabbit or bird.

Due to this snake's ability to climb poles or trees to get into bird nests, a chicken snake in my yard is a dead snake. However, one in the woods might get a reprieve and a second chance.

I proudly brought this long snakeskin home to Dry Creek. I'm fascinated with all things "snaky" so it made a wonderful conversation piece hanging in my camp office. Everyone commented that it was the longest Chicken Snake skin they'd seen.

It hung there as the days dragged into weeks after Katrina. Our evacuee guest load gradually dropped everyday, but even then we still had many New Orleanians with us for a longer term stay than they, or we, had expected.

It concerned our staff how many seemed to bring more and more items from home each time they went home to inspect during the "look and leave" days in Orleans Parish.

Our friends in our Adult Center, the Dry Creek White House, or as guests sometimes call it, "The Dry Creek Hilton," especially seemed to be getting comfortably at home. This twenty-six-room facility features hotel-style private rooms complete with private baths.

Our staff noticed that many of the evacuees had made no plans for moving out or moving on. We reminded ourselves that they had just suffered the greatest shock of all in life: losing their homes and many of their material possessions. The emotional toll of losing so much suddenly naturally creates a paralysis of uncertainty and confusion. In spite of our staff's concerns, everyone was committed to taking care of these new friends however long as needed.

At the same time, we offered assistance in helping evacuees find local housing. It was very touching how many families in our area opened their homes for evacuee families. Others had rent houses or apartments offered for free use.

Everyday we received calls or e-mails from churches all over America offering help. These messages all had this central theme: "We would like to adopt several families to come to our town. We will provide transportation to our area, six months free rent, and jobs. We want to help." It was so touching how Christian churches compassionately opened their hearts.

However, few of our evacuee families took up the offers. It was not a matter of any lack of gratitude, or even a fear of starting all over. Rather, it was an uncertainty of what direction to go. Many had lived in the New Orleans area all of their lives, and had homes and jobs. It was not easy or even realistic to pick up and leave.

Our two church groups had evacuated as a church family and committed to return, or relocate, as a group. We admired and supported that.

Brother David Rodriguez, pastor of the Horeb Hispanic Church, later related how upon returning to later

live in the New Orleans area, he encountered many pastors who lamented, "My church is gone, my people are scattered all over the country, and many are not coming back." They would then ask Bro. David, "What about your congregation?" He then could respond, "All 150 of us left as a group, stayed as a group, and have now returned as a family."

Many of our evacuee families planned to stay at Dry Creek until the schools in the outer sections of New Orleans re-opened. For most of them, this date seemed to be early in October. Other families just weren't sure where or what to do next.

As we talked to a particularly helpful church in Minnesota, they just could not understand why out of over seventy-five families in need, none would take up their generous offer of coming north for a new expenses-paid offer.

Finally I just had to be honest with the Minnesotans, "These New Orleanians have lost so much and are just unsure of making big decisions right now. They are in a type of shell shock. However, I must level with you. Most southerners do not live in Minnesota for one reason—it snows there and is too doggone cold.

In fact, we've heard snow stays on the ground most of the winter, and it is extremely cold for weeks at a time. We all live in the south for a reason—we don't want to live where it snows all winter, and you have to put a heater on your car engine each night."

Of course the Minnesotans are thinking, "So you choose to live where hurricanes blow in, it stays near 100 degrees for weeks at a time, and your humidity makes it feel as if you are in a sauna when you go outside." Now most Northerners were much too nice to say that, but in so many words those were their incredulous thoughts.

Back at the camp, as mid-September approached (this was long before Rita was anything more than a woman's name instead of a hurricane), our staff set Saturday,

October 8, as the official day the City of Hope shelter would close. We were committed in the interim to helping everyone find lodging in our area or otherwise.

As we discussed this one day in an office staff meeting, the concern and tension was evident. Our loving staff are the best people in the world, but by now we were all exhausted both physically and emotionally. Each person shared his or her understandable concerns as to how long we would, and could, go on.

I excused myself and went to my office. I returned with the snakeskin and announced, "Well, if nothing else works before October, we'll get the snakeskin out. If we wrap it around a table leg in the White House lobby, those city folks will be out by the end of the day."

It was just the tension breaker we needed. We laughed and laughed at the mental picture of New Orleanians finding a six-foot long snakeskin in their building. I've seen country women move their entire family out until their husband or pest control found a chicken snake hiding inside the house. The fear of the unknown and unseen is a powerful tool.

My father-in-law's snakeskin was just the item our staff needed to laugh about a seemingly unsolvable problem. We used it as an inside joke for the next week. We were reminded that when you can laugh at a problem or uncertainty, it loses its size and ferocity.

Now I want to add a disclaimer: We would have never, under any circumstances, put that snakeskin in the White House.

Not until October 9th.

Seriously, the Lord sent the snakeskin for us to laugh together. Humor was a needed commodity as the days wore one.

We never had to use the snakeskin to clear the White House. Something else did it much better than a serpent could: Her name was Rita. As you are aware from the

other stories in this book, over 350 evacuees rode Rita out at our camp. About sixty of them were residents of the White House.

Hurricane Rita, as it did all of Southwest Louisiana, hit us hard. We lost our electrical power, water, and all communications. Having no pressure on the community water system was particularly a tough blow. We had filled the camp swimming pool for commode flushing water but drinking and cooking water began to be in short supply.

It was also evident that these conditions were going to be long-term, especially concerning electrical power. This hit everyone very hard in our camp facilities. No power meant no air conditioning, and the days after Rita were brutally hot and humid.

Suddenly, as if a snakeskin had been found in every dorm, each building, and the White House, our evacuees began to leave—one by one, family-by-family, and church-by-church. It was with great mixed emotions that they left.

It was also with these same deep bittersweet emotions that our staff watched them go. We had bonded through extremely trying conditions, especially for them, during these weeks. They had become more than evacuees or even our guests—they had become family.

Although we promised to visit back and forth and even hold a Katrina/Rita reunion in a year or so, we knew it would never be the same. Some we would never see again. None of us could recreate what had occurred on these grounds for the last months

The camp became suddenly much quieter and even lonely with only a few dozen evacuees remaining. It reminded us of when summer camp ends. We've had several thousand screaming and playing teens and children week after week and all of the sudden the only sound is the barking of a camp dog and the faint sound of a potato chip bag blowing across the asphalt parking lot.

I went to the White House on that Sunday after the evacuees left. This big building, with its inside hallways, big

lobby, and two meeting rooms, was quiet and empty after thirty-three days of being filled to capacity.

In fact it was so quiet, I believe I could have heard a snake's skin rubbing against a wooden table leg as it slithered along the carpeted floor.

Nah, that was just my imagination.

“GIT ‘ER DONE!”

I'm driving along in the camp truck near Oakdale on Hwy 10. A black GMC truck comes quickly up behind me. On the top of the front windshield is painted, "Git 'er Done!" As the truck quickly speeds around me, I can hear the bass on the loud stereo speakers. I can't tell what song it is, but it's not Snoop Dog or Eminem.

This is a redneck truck and it's probably playing Skynyrd, Hank Jr. or Gretchen Wilson. As this truck, driven by a pretty woman with long hair, goes around me, I see the rejoinder on the back windshield, “Got ‘er done."

Once again I'm glad I live in the midst of the best people in the world—rural redneck country people. I use each of these terms with the highest of respect. And when the chips are down these good-hearted people can be depended on. Especially in a time of crisis.

They say in a crisis is when you find out what people are made of. I can agree with that statement.

In crisis is when people either reveal themselves as a giver or a taker. We saw plenty of that with both Katrina and Rita. People revealed themselves as a victim, expecting someone else to take care of them, or a victor, who took the bull by the horns and got things done. There were whiners who cried about everything and then there were winners who made things happen. There were those doers who didn't wait around for permission from FEMA or the Red Cross or the mayor or government. They simply did what needed doing and "got ’er done." They had a "W.I.T." attitude: Whatever it takes. Whatever it takes to get the job done.

Here are stories on some of them. Their kinds of

stories seldom make the evening news, but they are the real heroes.

Carl

As New Orleans emptied on the weekend that Katrina approached, Carl Lightell made a decision. He made a conscious decision to stay. As he sent his wife Mamie off, he got ready for the storm.

In Carl's neighborhood of Terrytown, heavy rains often flooded their area. Carl and another neighbor found that if they went out and periodically cleared the storm drains of debris, the flooding could be averted. So these two men took on the unofficial job of storm drain cleaners.

Carl's drain-clearing partner had left New Orleans so the job was left to him. He wasn't sure if cleaning the storm drains would keep Katrina's waters out of his neighborhood, but he planned to find out. He rode out the storm. Many times he went out in the driving wind and rain to clear them out. Several times it looked as if the water would get in the homes of the neighborhood. But it didn't.

And the next day when the levees broke, Carl's area was unaffected.

He told me how he stood on his porch as the looters starting coming through the neighborhood. He didn't say a word and didn't have a weapon. He simply stood there with arms crossed on his porch letting the armed young men know he was there and wasn't going anywhere.

I met Carl when he later joined Mamie at the City of Hope shelter in Dry Creek. He was a quiet, wiry, black man who avoided the crowds at the shelter. He sought to quietly go about his business. It was evident in the weeks he was here that he liked to work. He had made a lifetime of working hard and didn't intend to change now.

It would embarrass Carl to know he was mentioned in a book for simply "doing what he had always done." But

Carl's story and his role needs telling… for every looter carrying a big screen TV out of a store, there were ten Carl Lightell's staying for the right reasons. For every victim screaming at the government or FEMA, there were the "Carl's of the world" picking up the load and carrying it.

Tom

Then there is the story of my friend Tom Dunville. I've known Tom for seven years. He is a wonderful artist and the nicest guy I know… when he is sober. Tom has fought a life-long battle with alcohol. Sometimes with the help of the Lord, he has won. At others, it seems as if the bottle has had the upper hand. But sober or drunk, he is my friend. I love him like a brother.

Tom resurfaced in Dry Creek on the day that the levees flooded in New Orleans. Tom and his son-in-law Tim Evans saw the flooding going on in New Orleans. From their house in Westlake they watched in horror as the city went under. They and four other buddies immediately decided to do something about it. But first they needed a boat. Tom remembered that our pastor, Don Hunt, had a fishing boat. So they borrowed our pastor's flat-bottomed aluminum boat and headed out.

They were stopped at the edge of New Orleans by state police and turned back. But they told "a little white lie" to convince the officers that they were part of the official Wildlife and Fisheries Department caravan coming in. They "had just gotten separated from the rest of them."

Once they were inside New Orleans there was no stopping them. They put the boat in at the 17th Street Canal that separates Orleans and Jefferson Parish. By going through the levee breaches they were able to get to the areas of the city with the deepest water. For the next four days they rescued people from rooftops and the second story windows of buildings.

Tom told me they never saw a uniformed official in the

first three days. Civilians did the entire rescue. Tim Evans and a Baton Rouge marine, Mason Crawford, commandeered (my favorite post-hurricane word) a one-ton semi-truck and five flat-bottomed boats and used them to haul people off rooftops to Interstate 10.

Now if you saw Tim, Tom, and their crew, you'd say they look like a pretty rough bunch. I'd agree with you. But if you were stranded on a roof for three days, you'd see their heart long before you looked at their hair or dress.

When describing his decision to go to New Orleans, Tom Dunville had a simple but deep explanation, "After I saw the flooding, desperation, and great need I just felt compelled to go." That's a good word: compel. It means to "bring about by force." Tom and his friends saw a great human need and something deep within them forced him, in compassion, to take action and go make a difference. Once again, a group of guys who decided to "get 'er done."

The complete story of the Evans/Dunville "fishing expedition" was in the Lake Charles American Press edition on Sunday, September 11, 2005.

Colonel Tom.

Tom McCaig is a DeRidder native who retired as an Army Colonel. He and his wife graduated from high school with my parents in 1953. I'd never met Tom until he walked up to me on the campgrounds on day 3 after Katrina. Trying to organize and deal with over 400 evacuees who now realized they'd have no homes to go back to soon was tough.

When Tom said he'd like to help, I quickly took him up on it. I've never been one to turn down help especially at a time like this. Tom later related that he'd come expecting to help serve meals or clean up for a few days. However, this was a man with the gift of "getting 'er done" and he

was greatly needed in the confusing days after Katrina.

"Colonel Tom" as the evacuees began calling him was just what was called for: A man who knew how to get things done. He took over the process of FEMA registration, Red Cross paperwork, unemployment, SSI, food stamps, and dozens of other aids our evacuees needed. He soon had a van loaned to the camp for the duration of the shelter. Personnel from every state office were personally coming to Dry Creek to see to the needs of our folks.

Behind all of this was Col. Tom in his yellow LSU hat. Evacuees would say, "But Col. Tom in the yellow hat said…" I grew to love Tom in these days as he worked so hard to help these total strangers… all in the name of the Lord.

Yep, another man that knew how to "get 'er done."
Mullets to the rescue…

I took my youngest son Terry to DeRidder with me for the Beauregard Emergency Preparedness meetings on the day before Rita struck. A large group of over fifty men and women from all walks and agencies were there. There was an excitement and tension in the room that is even now hard to describe. Sixteen-year-old Terry didn't comment on the feeling in the room but leaned over to me and whispered, "Daddy, look at that row of guys with the mullets."

Now I must stop and explain what a mullet is, or was. I'm not sure how the name originated but it is a hairstyle. A mullet-wearer lets his/her hair grow long in the back and cuts it short on the sides and back. If you've ever seen the movie "Joe Dirt," you've seen a classic mullet. The official motto of a mullet wearer is: "All Business in the front/All Party in the back." It became popular in the late eighties and nineties. However it still seems to be popular in Beauregard Parish where we've always been about one

decade behind most trends.

All three of my boys can spot a good mullet a mile away. I've had them come up to me at Wal-Mart and say, "Daddy, mullet alert in line 8. It's a beaut." So Terry's mullet alert at the emergency meeting didn't surprise me. I look at the mullet row and tell him, "Terry, that's our local fire department. I taught every one of them in school."

In the coming days after Rita I came to appreciate those mullet-wearing East Beauregard firemen even more than ever. When something needs to get done, they get it done. One of them tells me, "Well, we may be the step-children of the parish fire system, but when something tough needs doing, we'll do it." Then with a chuckle he added the classic redneck "get 'er done" mantra, "It's always a lot easier to get forgiveness than permission any day."

On and on I could go with examples of the "get 'er done" philosophy we saw during the two hurricanes. May we remember that we saw the best of most folks during this time. When crisis comes there nearly seems to always be several groups of people. Some are concerned and want to help and will take action if given permission. Others choose to sit on the sidelines and correct or criticize every action and move of those on the field.

Then finally there are those who are compelled. They see a need and their heart will not let them sit back or criticize. They must act or die. That is what happened when the two "C" words of compassion and being compelled connect. Action results and this action is aimed at helping people. It is when we see the human race at its best.

A compelled person with the "get 'er done" itch grabs what is at hand—a boat, a fire truck, or the telephone. While others turn away from the challenge, they choose to stay. Like Carl Lightell, they remain and clear the storm drains. Whatever it takes… wherever that may lead.

A life philosophy of getting it done.
That doesn't need a hurricane to shine.
They're around us everyday.
They are black, brown, and white,
City-bred and redneck-lived,
Educated and simple.
May we see them
And celebrate their being compelled,
Of being called to action,
Of having compassion no matter the cost.
That "get 'er done" way of life.

THE NINTH WARD

Long before it became the poster area for everything that went wrong on hurricane Katrina, a man named Jack Hunter knew all about the area of New Orleans called the Ninth Ward. Jack loves the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Well to be more exact, he loves the people of that area. He loved them with much more than just words. He showed them that love with actions…….. consistent actions…persistent actions.

Two months after Katrina as Jack drove us through the desolate streets of this recently flooded area, it was evident the people of this neighborhood, now spread all across North America, were still in his heart.

Before you know more about Jack Hunter and why he so deeply loves the young people of the Ninth Ward, you need to know about this area of New Orleans.

The Ninth Ward refers to a voting district that sits less than two miles northeast of the French Quarter. It is composed of two parts separated by the Industrial Canal that provides access to Lake Ponchartrain from the Mississippi River. The area west of the Canal is called "Bywater" or simply "The Ninth Ward." The area across the Canal to the east is called "the Lower Ninth Ward." This term refers primarily to its location as well as partially due to the fact that its elevation is lower than its cousin area across the Canal. When you near the two drawbridges along the Industrial Canal, you are in the Ninth Ward.

This area of the Ninth Ward was once cypress swampland. As New Orleans grew in the 19th century, it was cleared and settled by European immigrants, mainly Irish and German. Many freed slaves later made the Ninth

Ward their home. Any study of the history of this neighborhood reveals that it has always been susceptible to flooding.

Jack Hunter drove my wife and me through the Ninth Ward area west of the Industrial Canal. The other area, The Lower Ninth Ward, was still off limits to residents due to it being re-flooded by Hurricane Rita.

Jack's area of work is the Florida Housing Projects and the nearby Desire Street Academy. As he steers through the still-blocked streets covered with debris, he comments on the teenaged young men and women he has worked with here over the years.

Jack Hunter is a New Orleans attorney. He and his wife Jane live in nearby Metairie. Jack, through his church, First Baptist New Orleans, has chosen to invest his time, effort, and resources in helping the young people of the Florida Projects. Jack's commitment is not the "get in and get out" feel-good type of ministry often found after a disaster. He is dedicated and passionate about helping as many teens break the cycles of poverty, grief, and heartache. This was his heart before Katrina and will continue to be his calling.

I like to joke with him as to what his business card must say. Is he an attorney who works with young people or a youth director who happens to moonlight as an attorney? Jack is a good example of a person who blends their calling and vocation to serve God.

One's vocation is your job. It is how you make your living. Your calling is a mandate from God, and it is how you live your life.

In the weeks after Katrina, Jack Hunter had taken leave from his law firm, now temporarily based in Baton Rouge, to help his city rebuild. Family by family, person by person, he is helping coordinate the gutting of houses, repairs, and food distribution. To be around him is to sense a deep passion burning in his heart for "his city."

As we drive and he points out the homes, businesses, and sights of the Ninth Ward, it is obvious he misses the

reason he comes here weekly: the teenagers of the Ward. Just like everyone else here, they are scattered all over America. Just finding out where they are, even two months after Katrina, has been a daunting task.

Jack Hunter has no magic formula for knowing what is best for the future of the Ninth Ward. He is the first to admit that. Tough, well-planned, long-range decisions are called for. He just knows this: Whatever the rebuilding of New Orleans becomes, he will be a part of it. While listening to Jack share, I feel that the Jack Hunters of the New Orleans area—those volunteer-driven, talented, and compassionate souls—can find that here is Jack's heart from a recent e-mail:

"I've seen God's hand applying the needed stroke of paint in just the right color, at just the right moment, and in just the right amount many times since Katrina punched us in the mouth. As the days go by, things are surprisingly less clear and the future is less predictable. The damage is extensive and its consequences are more far-reaching than any of us can measure.

"But I am absolutely confident that God is working out His manifold purposes in the lives of hundreds of thousands and even in me. Curt, I heard you this summer, as you showed your Tsunami video to a bunch of kids, that if you want to find Jesus then go where people are hurting. The advice was prophetic. And true. It has been joy to comfort the elderly of our church as I have pried my way into their homes, waded through the muck, and chopped through the debris to salvage bits and pieces of their lives from the rubble.

"I've been energized as I've made numerous trips helping Desire Street Ministry relocate their school (now a boarding school), and begin the redevelopment of the 9th Ward in New Orleans. My heart's been enlarged with sorrow over friends who've moved on, and gladdened by being able to help them through the aftermath. My prayer is that I'll have the courage to continue following Jesus as

He opens new directions in the destruction. When the road is strewn with naked and bleeding bodies, it doesn't require special insight to know the will of God."

As we drove by the now-destroyed Florida Projects, Jack showed me the home of Torrey Amacker. We first met Torrey last summer at Dry Creek. Jack brought a dozen Florida Project teens to camp, including Torrey. It was fun to watch these young men, who'd never been off the streets of the city, learning about the fun of country living. Their excitement as we put over twenty canoes into the Ouiska Chitto River was such a joy to watch.

Torrey had a great week. In fact he had such a great time, he returned later for another week of summer camp in the woods.

During the craziness surrounding the evacuation of New Orleans, Torrey became separated from his family. He ended up, along with several other teens, with Jack and Jane Hunter as they left the City headed north.

A few days later, Jack contacted our Camp. He needed help in placing Torrey until he could find, and be reunited, with his mother and grandmother.

Staff member Todd Burnaman's instant response to Jack's call for help was, "Come on down. We'll find a place for him." You see when one is in the thick of the storm and sees the hurt and confusion from its aftermath, the only appropriate words to a request for help are, "Come on down. We can help."

Jack brought Torrey to the Camp. Todd began the work of placing Torrey in a home. Although our shelter was running at full speed and we had room, Torrey needed to be in a home.

That's when Todd approached Dwayne and Allison Quebedeaux. His request for them to pray about keeping Torrey was met with this reply, "Come on over. We can help."

Once again, this Jesus-like love was being exhibited in the lives of the Quebedeaux family, one of Dry Creek's

most compassionate families. Torrey stayed with Dwayne and Allison and enrolled in school, attended our church, and made himself at home.

Torrey's family was finally located in Austin, Texas. He left Dry Creek to be reunited with his mom and others.

Looking at the ruined apartments where Torrey and his family once lived, I feel anguish at what should be done. Most of all I pray…

I pray that Torrey and his family will find the right and best place to live. I pray that they will know whether to stay in Austin or return to New Orleans. I pray that if they return, God will guide as to where they should live.

Most of all I pray that there will be "Jack Hunters" wherever Torrey may be. Men and women who will reach out—across racial, geographic, and cultural lines—to invest their lives, talents, and time in young people.

THE RUMOR MILL

If there is one thing that Sisters Katrina and Rita have taught us it is this: Don't believe everything you hear, unless you know firsthand it is true. The rumor mill is always churning. But when you have a disaster and normal communication is lost and people are displaced, the rumor mill shifts gears. Speculations become "truths" and things spread like wildfire whether they have an ounce of truth or not.

We found this out quickly at our evacuee shelter, The City of Hope. So much was coming out of New Orleans by radio, TV, or word of mouth, such as "Someone's brother who was told by their friend who'd seen it themselves." That is why we developed our town council to keep the leaders and families informed. It is also why we published Dry Creek's only newspaper, The Bugle. At mealtime, we gave announcements in both English and Spanish.

The rumor mill works fastest when it is going from one language to another and then back again! I fondly recall the group of Korean schoolchildren who stayed at the Camp in 1996. They were all city kids from Seoul, a city of 10 million. We took them on tours of our rural community and had a great time for the month they were there. When touring a ranch, I stopped to stir up a fire ant mound. I explained that the sting of these ants can even kill a newly born baby calf if it is laid on their nest after birth. The interpretation of this to the Koreans elicited many oohs and aahs and further conversation among them. Weeks later one of the bilingual leaders told me one of the

children had written home about America and included this statement, "In America they have ants that will kill you if they sting you." You can imagine the reaction of an already worried Korean mom when she read that!

All of us as children played the game where a long line of children would pass along a story. By the time it had gone through ten mouths and ten ears it would invariably be much different.

Over and over in the days after Katrina, rumors would come up and have to be investigated, verified, or squashed. As leaders our retort became, "Who told you that? Do they know it firsthand?"

It was comical and maddening all at the same time.

The most memorable example of this happened on a Monday night one week after Katrina. Our town council was meeting in the office. We were sharing and planning for the week. All of sudden a breathless lady from the Horeb church burst in and shouted, "The Red Cross is giving away money. If you register you can go to Western Union and get your money by wire."

All planning of meals, schooling, laundry services, and trash pickup stopped. A clamor of conversation in both English and Spanish filled the room. The meeting was for all practical purposes over. Everyone's attention was focused on one thing: Red Cross money for the taking!

Before everyone could storm out, order was restored. I asked the lady, "Have you gotten your money?"
"Well, not yet!"
"Do you know anyone who has actually gotten their money?"
"I heard that Cookie has."

I told them to go get Cookie. We had to have a first-hand report before we dismissed this meeting. I thought about visits to black churches where the refrain for

testimony was, "Can I get a witness? Can I get a witness for what the Lord has done?"

In a few minutes they returned with Cookie. She had a big smile on her face. Something good had happened to her for sure! All twenty people in the room had eyes and ears for one thing: Cookie's testimony. I felt as if we were in a grand jury room and the star witness had been called to give the facts.

Cookie, in pretty fair English, told of calling the Red Cross hotline number, getting a confirmed registration number and then going to Brookshire's Grocery in DeRidder where the Western Union office was located.

This was instantly interpreted excitedly to those in the meeting who spoke little English. We had it straight from the horse's mouth. This was one thing from the rumor mill that was true.

Our meeting soon broke up. Everyone rushed out to stake his or her claim. I was happy. These people who had lost so much deserved this. If this made their night a little easier, it was worth more than the $350 per head of household plus $300 for each dependent.

The best "rumor mill" story happened on the day before Rita hit. It was on Thursday, September 23. Rita still seemed poised to make landfall on the upper Texas coast. Each morning we ran our camp bus as a school bus to East Beauregard High. Most mornings Todd Burnaman drove, but this Thursday was my turn.

At our home that morning my teacher wife, DeDe, anxiously awaited any word on school being dismissed. Nothing was on the television and no one from school had called, so we knew school was in session at least for the first part of the day.

Leaving the house that morning reminded me what mornings had been like as a school principal. Everyone would be calling wanting to know about school. Once, the entire community lost our electricity during a nighttime spring storm. I got up early and got word we would go on

with school. Beauregard Electric assured us they would have the lights back on before eight. I hurriedly dressed and was ready to get to school to answer the dozens of calls we knew would be coming in. I marched Clay, age eight, and Clint, age six, to the living room and instructed them, "Boys, lots of folks will be calling the house wanting to know about school. Your mom will be busy getting ready for school as well as getting baby Terry up and ready to go. You two are in charge of the phone."

"Now here are your instructions: Answer and say, 'My dad has already gone to school. We will have school today.'" I had each of the boys repeat this simple message back to me. Quickly I was out of the house, into the dark, and on my way to school.

Sure enough the school phones rang nonstop as we assured worried parents and disappointed students that school would be in session today. After about thirty minutes of this, I got a break and decided to call the house to check on DeDe and the boys. A polite child's voice answered on the second ring. It was Clint, my first grader.

I couldn't resist… in a lowered voice I asked, "Son, I'm calling to see if there will be any school today." Clint instantly answered, "No school today." I yelled into the phone, "Clint Iles, what have you been telling folks?" He proceeded to cough, sputter, and explain that he 'just got confused.' I believed psychologists call what he did "a Freudian slip." Saying what you want even when it is not what you meant to say!

Clint's famous story is with me as I backed out of the driveway and headed to the camp. I love to see the 50–60 Katrina evacuees come to the bus each morning. Most are Hispanic and look so cute in their tan, blue, and white school uniforms. The parents of most walk them hand-in-hand to the bus or from the Dining Hall where they've had breakfast.

But this Thursday morning was different as I pulled the bus beside the Dining Hall. Very few were out front and of

the ones who were, very few were in school uniforms.

Several came to the bus door and hopefully asked, "There's not any school today, is there?"

Another one said, "We were told there is no school today!" My question was, "Well, who told you?" I got various replies from the source of today's latest turn of the rumor mill.

I told them: "Look, my wife is a teacher. She would know if school was cancelled. Also Channel 7 would have announced it if there was no school." A look of dejection filled many faces as they headed back to their cabins for their uniforms and books. Even the ones in uniform had hoped the rumor was true. I was not the most popular man on the campgrounds at that moment. I'd rained on their parade.

One by one most returned. Their looks of dejection were hard to ignore. It was natural in the breasts of students (and even teachers) to always be hoping that the weather/electricity/ breakdown would result in a free day.

They still questioned me as if I must really know for sure. I told them the story of a few years ago when a prank caller informed Channel 7 that school for Beauregard Parish had been cancelled due to the night's rains. The culprit was never apprehended who called and claimed to be Dr. Joe Aguillard, our superintendent. I've always suspected it was a teacher or a bus driver, but definitely not a parent.

These same parents now dragging their children to the bus had clapped heartily two weeks before when we announced that all student evacuees would be starting school. They had had enough of being stuck with these kids all day long in the dorms.

Sadly the bus filled up. We'd be about fifteen minutes later than usual, but they'd be at school in time for the first bell. They were not happy campers. I hadn't driven a bus this blue since my coaching days when we once lost a triple overtime game at Plainview.

As I eased over the speed bumps near the camp entrance, a lumbering figure came charging out of the side office door. It's Lee Crider running, flailing his arms and hollering. It is a comical sight seeing Lee, a very big man, running like he hasn't run since his days as a pulling guard at Welsh High a generation ago.

He was yelling as he waved and waddled. It was music to the ears of the student. Lee hollered, "They've called off school. No school today." Cheers erupted on the bus. I whipped into the parking lot, set the brake and said, "No one gets off this bus until I check this out for sure." Their faces dropped. They believed that I was going to take them to school and drop them off no matter what.

I turned off the bus and went to Lee who was joined by his wife Missy at the office door. They had early duty that morning and had just gotten a call saying school was cancelled. I cross-examined them, "Who did you talk to?"

"Someone from the office."

I'm an old pro at this… I said, "Missy, call the office and get the principal, Tim Cooley, on the phone. I want to hear it straight from the horse's mouth."

She didn't get Tim but gets Mrs. Sugar Ford, our wonderful school receptionist. "No school today" was confirmed. They were opening up schools for shelters and this necessitated this last-minute decision. The Katrina kids had won. But I just couldn't resist one more spin of the rumor mill.

I walked resolutely to the bus with a scowl on my face. I sat down, fastened my seat belt, cranked the bus and eased forward. It was nearly painful to see the faces in the big rear view mirror.

Then I stopped the bus, turned around and announced: "No school today. Go have fun!"

The yelling and hollering is still reverberating in my ears. They ran off the bus, little streaks of tan and blue

running for the hills. Running in joy. Running fast so if the school changed its mind, they'd be long gone.

It ended up being the last time they loaded up on our yellow camp/school bus.

Of course there was no school on Friday.

Rita made her course correction and put us in the bull's eye.

After the storm passed on Saturday, Sunday saw us without power and water.

By Monday all but a few of the seventy plus students were gone. Gone back to Westwego, Covington, Marrero, Terrytown, Kenner, Gretna and Metairie. I miss them.

In the coming weeks, especially after Rita hit, fighting the rumor mill was nearly a full-time job. Twice daily we attended meetings with the Parish Office of Emergency Preparedness. Leaders from every agency in our parish government as well as aid agencies and shelter leaders were present. It was a great time to quiet the rumor mill.

One of the biggest battles in the days after Rita was misinformation called in to radio and TV stations. One caller to APEX broadcasting in Lake Charles criticized longtime DeRidder Mayor Gerald Johnson for "going to Ft. Worth to escape the storm and leaving DeRidder helpless."

All of us had sat in two meetings per day with Mayor Johnson in the days leading up to and after Rita's visit. But due to the rumor mill some people believed he had left for Texas. A lot of the men at the daily briefing loved to rag him about "How are things in Ft. Worth, Mayor?"

In summary I believe the aftermath of these storms is a good time for each of us to develop our own plan for dealing with the rumor mill.

I've always liked the Rotary Club Four-Way test. It reads:

1. Is it the Truth?
2. Is it Fair to all concerned?

3. Will it build Goodwill and Better Friendships?
4. Will it be Beneficial to all concerned?

My brother-in-law Greg told of once being at an Rotary Club meeting where they excitedly announced that Governor Edwin Edwards would be speaking at the next month's state Optimist meeting.

Governor Edwards has a well-established reputation for telling what he felt needed to be told, not bothering to always let the facts get in the way of the party line..

One Rotarian wag raised his hand and half-seriously asked, "Will the governor be speaking on the Four-Way Test?"

The rumor mill. It rolls along
In Spanish,
In English,
In Dry Creek,
In New Orleans.
In Africa, it's called "The African Grapevine."
It's everywhere.

"By the way have you heard that rumor going around that they are giving away generators in the Wal-Mart parking lot in DeRidder?

You can get one if your last name starts with W and your birthday is in April. Sure I know it's true. My sister's ex-boyfriend's cousin was there and got one.

Why sure I believe it's true. Don't you?"

MATT FARMER'S BARN

It is the first Sunday we've had church since Rita. Much of our community is still scattered over four states, but many are returning home to clean up. Most homes are still without electricity, and water pressure is only now beginning to build up for use.

Our attendance is small today, but there is a spirit of worship that is never limited to numbers or size. An impromptu praise time breaks out. Even people who've lost a good deal seem to want to thank God realizing that "it could have been much worse."

In the middle of our worship service, Matt Farmer stands to speak. If anyone ever had a good name it is Bro. Matt Farmer. He is a "Farmer who is a farmer." He and his family run one of the few remaining dairies in Beauregard Parish. Bro. Matt and his sweet wife, Mrs. Dee, are in declining health and their son Don now runs their dairy.

Matt and Dee Farmer have worked hard their entire lives. No one is more loved in our community and church than this couple. They have a good name in more than just being "farmers." They have a good name of good works and being difference makers in many lives, including mine.

When Matt Farmer stands to speak, people always listen. He is the kind of wise deacon that can calm a church storm with wise words. I've seen it happen.

As he stands today in church, he begins to tell a story. It is the wonderful story of a group of men who came to his farm a few days after Rita.

Much of the worst wind damage from Rita occurred on the barns and outbuildings throughout our community and parish. The airport in DeRidder recorded winds of 110

mph. That type of wind will take the top off of barns and hay storage buildings.

That is exactly what happened to the many barns at Farmer's Dairy. Trees were down on buildings and fences while tin roofing was scattered for acres.

Bro. Matt told of this group of forty men, unannounced, who descended on his farm. There were older men mixed with strong younger men and boys. They came with one purpose: to clean up the Farmer dairy.

Matt Farmer knew some of them. They had known each other from a half-century of farming. Most he had never seen before. He later found out that many were from out of state and had journeyed south to help with the cleanup and recovery.

In a matter of hours these hardworking men had cleaned up Farmer's dairy farm. He said it was amazing to see how much they accomplished in these hours. Bro. Matt closed with, "It showed what people can get done when they work together."

All of those present had this thought in mind: Who were these men?

I thought of another barn story told by one of my favorite writers and speakers, Dr. John Maxwell:

Herman Ostry's barn floor was under twenty-nine inches of water because of a rising creek. The Bruno, Nebraska, farmer invited a few friends to a "barn raising." He needed to move his entire 17,000-pound barn to a new foundation more than 143 feet away. His son Mike devised a latticework of steel tubing, and nailed, bolted, and welded it on the inside and the outside of the barn. Hundreds of handles were attached.

After one practice lift, 344 volunteers slowly walked the barn up a slight incline, each supporting less than fifty pounds. In just three minutes, the barn was on its new foundation.

It is summed up in this statement: I have to do this alone and I can't do it by myself.

The forty men who came to Matt Farmer's rescue were members of the Mennonite community who live south of DeRidder in the area we call Broadlands. The Mennonites are hardworking righteous-living citizens who are greatly respected. And greatly loved—due to their good works year round in the area I love and call home—Beauregard Parish.

JODY AND MARY

Jody and Mary and their two children are living in Virginia right now. Their journey up from Cameron Parish's Gulf Coast to the Atlantic Coast of the United States has been a long and difficult trek.

We first met them at The City of Hope. They arrived just before the winds of Rita picked up. By the time they got to Dry Creek, the hurricane had turned enough toward Louisiana that Jody, a Cameron native, knew there would be nothing left to return to.

Jody's family had lived through many storms including Hurricane Audrey. Jody's dad, who arrived with him, related as to how he had lived in a tent for six months after Audrey.

They moved into dorm 4 and rode out the storm. In this dorm was an extended family of brothers, uncles, and cousins.

I enjoyed visiting with Jody and his brother Robert. They were easy to talk to. As the brothers shared, it was very evident that they'd had a hard, difficult life.

You could just tell that they had been beaten down by life. They had a hard look about them. And now after Rita, they were homeless with nothing left but what they had brought with them. It was also obvious they had not brought much with them.

By the fourth day after Rita, the City of Hope shelter closed due to no water and electricity. Family-by-family, group-by-group, our evacuees headed out. Everyone seemed to have found somewhere to go except Mary and Jody. Their family members they had traveled up with had

left. Whether it was true or not, Jody felt as if they had been abandoned.

They had no vehicle and knew no one. Saddest of all, it was evident they had just about lost their hope for the future. The results of the storm had kicked them one more time and they did not quite know what to do next.

Our remaining group of fifteen evacuees traveled in a caravan to our sister camp of Judson Baptist Assembly, located north of Baton Rouge. DeDe and I carried Jody, Mary, and their children. It was an interesting six hours as we hunted for gasoline, enduring ten stops due to an overheated radiator on one of the vehicles.

As we neared Judson Camp, we drove through a series of detours that led us on a long, dusty, and narrow gravel road. It seemed as if our long journey would never end.

Landon, Jody and Mary's four-year-old son had entertained us on the entire trip. As we discussed as to whether we were lost on this dirt road, Brandon piped in, "I haven't been here before, but I know the way."

We had a good laugh at Brandon's comment. When he saw our laughter he would repeat this statement on every curve or at every road intersection, "I haven't been here before, but I know the way."

Camp directors Eugene and Debi Morris opened their hearts and doors to our evacuees. I felt funny about leaving them the next day but knew they were in good hands. We haven't seen Jody and Mary after our parting that morning. I wonder about them often. I still see their sad eyes so full of despair.

Good things have happened to Jody and Mary. A church in Virginia adopted them. They flew them up, gave them housing, got a job for Jody, and basically took them in as family. I hope they are happy and comfortable long-term. It is difficult to leave your lifelong home for a new area. Cameron Parish is beloved by its citizens. They have a long-time commitment for returning and rebuilding.

I'm not sure if Jody and Mary will stay in Virginia or

eventually return to the marshes of Cameron. That is their decision and it will be a personal decision. Relocation is often an opportunity for a new start. All over our nation thousands are getting a new start. Many will stay, choosing not to return south or east. Others will get back on their feet and then return to rebuild their homes and lives.

I've thought often about this couple who passed through our lives at The City of Hope. Often I think of another couple that went on a long unfamiliar journey. Their names were familiar to Jody and Mary's.

Joseph and Mary were a young couple traveling with only what they had on their backs. The journey to Bethlehem was long, difficult, and full of the unknown. Mary being pregnant probably did not need to travel so far, but they were a family now and Joseph wasn't going without her. This was not a journey of choice, but rather of necessity. The Roman government had ordered this census and what the ruling authorities wanted went down whether you liked it or not.

Then to be away from home among strangers and have your first child—what could have been more stressful?

I wonder if Joseph, who was sensitive to following God's direction, had any doubts. He was in tune with God's leading. Just read the passage about the angel instructing Joseph to believe Mary's story of her virgin conception.

I wonder if Joseph had thought this during this time: "I haven't been here before, but I know the way."

Because following God's direction and will is following Someone who has been there before and definitely knows the way.

In its own way, the road trip to Bethlehem was just a warm-up for another trip. After Jesus' birth, another angel visit instructed Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to escape Herod's infanticide by going to Egypt.

Once again Joseph, the chosen earthly father of God's own precious Son, was entrusted with a perilous journey—

a long journey to a foreign land—to a place of different culture, language, and religion. As he sought God's direction step-by-step, there was that thought echoing again: "I haven't been here before, but I know the way."

Well, I don't know the way exactly, but I am following the great Mapmaker who knows where my feet should go.

Jody and Mary, wherever you are, I hope you realize this: God has that same good plan for you. He cares deeply and wants only the best for you. Follow His path. It's the path of peace and joy.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

Y2K + 5

I wonder how my friend Mike fared during Hurricane Rita. Mike, who lives near DeQuincy, is a person who likes to be prepared. Five years ago as the year 2000 neared and the fears about Y2K became common everyday talk, Mike took action. He got prepared for the first day of the new millennium. If America lost power, services, and civilization as we knew it, Mike would be ready.

Everyone in some form or another took some steps for that date. Thankfully, it was not a problem. People good-naturedly picked at Mike about his huge stockpile of gas, diesel, water, and foodstuffs. I've always wondered what he did with his vast stockpile.

In the week after Hurricane Rita, I thought about Mike. I hope he saved all of his supplies because those were the very items in such short supply. In the days after the storm, especially the first week, everything was in short supply. Being without electricity, water, and gasoline really affects how we live in the 21st century.

Generators became worth their weight in gold, which is saying a great deal. With a working generator you could keep your freezer cold and provide light for the dark times of the night. Also because of generator power, you could run a small 110 air conditioner. In the miserably hot days after Rita, that was a luxury above description.

People without any air conditioning began sleeping outside to escape the stale heat of indoor rooms. At the camp many evacuees slept on the porches and on picnic benches. They said that in spite of the insects, being outside was better than suffocating in the nearly windowless rooms.

All throughout Dry Creek community, the normally quiet nights were replaced by the loud drone of these gas-powered generators. Wise people quickly learned to chain down their generators to prevent theft.

The American Press told of thirty generators belonging to Union Pacific that had been stolen along its tracks between Lake Charles and Beaumont. Telephone service ceased at night due to the telephone companies bringing in their substation generators to prevent their disappearance.

Because generators were such a hot commodity, entrepreneurs began showing up with truckloads of generators and power saws. A long line of people would snake around parking lots as these items were sold out of the back of tractor trailers.

In the nearby community of Elizabeth, a truck from Michigan sold generators for $1200 each. Even though these normally sold for $600, people were lined up ready to pay the inflated price for a generator. These "new carpetbaggers" at Elizabeth took advantage of people's losses to make a quick profit.

There was great discussion about what was the fair price for selling needed items like these. No one expects folks to lose money on transporting needed items to an area, but there is a fine line between the free enterprise system and price gouging.

Of course for every carpetbagger there were many more "hurricane angels"—those good souls who came to help. I'll always remember Jeff Farmer driving in from Houston with twelve generators he had purchased. The camp bought three for the purchase price and he refused to let us pay for the gas required for his transportation from Houston.

Over and over these hurricane angels showed up. My camp friend, James Newsom, who had been through Hurricane Lillie, brought all of the things we needed: generators, gas, window units, and water. Once again we saw that hard times can bring out the best in people.

The next thing that became acutely short in supply was gasoline. It takes over five gallons of gas to operate a generator overnight. To have gas to get to work or go find needed food items or supplies became a key concern for everyone. The price of gas shot up quickly to over $3.00 per gallon, but even then it was in short supply. Long gas lines not seen since the oil embargo of 1973 became common again.

As people drove around searching for gas, a now familiar sight became common—gas pump nozzles covered with small white plastic bags. This was a sure sign that there was no gasoline there.

As essential items began to really be in short supply, foraging began. Everyday people drove away from the camp traveling far and wide to search for generators, gasoline, food, or a place to stay with hot water and air conditioning.

Everyone traveled with empty gas cans in the hope they might find a convenience store or station with gasoline.

By Monday after Rita, we began to have a critical shortage of life's most essential item: water. Our community water system was down. There were problems getting the right generators to operate the wells and we had no water at all.

We had filled the camp swimming pool so we could carry water for flushing our toilets. Even so, having little water for cleaning, cooking, and washing made things tough. It is at this point that the majority of our evacuees left.

Finally shipments of water began arriving en masse in gallon-bottled water sizes.

Right behind that was the need for ice. The need for ice was greatly magnified by the extreme heat wave we baked under.

When the ice trucks arrived at Foreman's Grocery, they were accompanied by the Alabama National Guard who organized the fair distribution. They were there to ensure

that everyone present stayed civil. It was amazing to see how every facet of our lives had been affected by this hurricane.

Finally there was the need for food. Most refrigerated and frozen food spoiled quickly. Foreman's meat market had one of their big trucks in the parking lot giving away meat, sausage and boudin before it could ruin. Our evacuees kept their BBQ pits going as they cooked before food could spoil.

After several days, food supplies began to run low. No stores were open anywhere so new supplies were non-existent. Even with a generator most electric stoves would not work, so cooking became difficult.

That is when our community began a love-hate relationship with MRE's. These military meals, called "Meals ready to eat" are the modern version of the K and C-ration. They come in a plastic bag and contain about 1200–1500 calories of various foods. The newer MRE's have a catalytic heater that warms the main entrée through a chemical reaction. We've always used them on summer camp hiking trips. Our teenage hikers called the MREs, "Meals Rejected by Ethiopians." We would have to stay on them concerning their wanting to pour the chemical reaction agents in a plastic coke bottle, recap it, and then watch it explode. Country boys are always something to work with!

But you'll never hear me criticize MREs. They are pretty good, especially when you have little other options. We would gather outside the camp dining hall as we opened our packages and made trades between desserts, spices, and beverage powder. We were able to gather cases of MREs, and share them with the community.

As we learned to look for water, gas, food, and ice, we began to call this time of our lives in September 2005, "Y2K + 5." Five years down the road, the things we feared came to pass.

However they weren't brought about by the world's

computers freezing up due to a number, but instead by the winds, rain, and destruction of a natural disaster—a hurricane called Rita.

We were taught in an unforgettable way how fragile both the necessities and luxuries of our lives are. So many of the things we daily use and need were suddenly gone. What a good lesson in appreciating and not taking for granted both the necessities and luxuries we use daily.

BLACK BUGS

Over and over in the days leading up to the hurricane's arrival, people used this statement that reveals the human tendency to look for the silver lining in even the darkest cloud, "Well, at least Rita will wash away the black bugs."

We heard variations on that sentence many times.

Well, Rita passed, and all was quiet and bug free… for two days. Then on Sunday, the day after the storm, they were back. The hated black bugs had returned. I'm not sure where they rode out the storm, but they evidently weren't blown north because they were still out in force.

Now if you don't live in areas where the black bugs come twice yearly, you may not understand this story. How could an infestation of non-biting, non-stinging insects cause such consternation?

These black bugs, which are really black with orange, are called "love bugs" in the Southern Gulf coastal areas of the United States. This is due to their usually being found in mating pairs as they fly about.

Their scientific name is Plecia neartica. Their emergence twice yearly, in May and September, is always a topic of disgust and great conversation. Instead of the casual, "It sure is hot today," people lament, "Have you ever seen the black bugs worse than this?" That is why their being blown away to Arkansas or Tennessee was such a conversation starter.

Their arrival, especially in the fall during mid-September, occurs in Egyptian plague proportions. They are everywhere. For some reason they are attracted to

anything white. Our Adult Center, "The White House," becomes a huge love bug magnet during this time. You can sweep them off the porches in piles.

The one-sided love affair between love bugs and vehicles is interesting. According to the University Of Florida Department Of Agriculture, love bugs are attracted to automobile exhaust fumes during daylight hours as the day's temperatures warm up. Hot engines and the vibrations of vehicles also contribute to why these black bugs are found along highways and around vehicles.

Because of their attraction to gasoline fumes, any visit to the gasoline pumps is an ordeal in black-bug swatting. Once I observed a well-dressed lady in a white Lincoln Continental gassing up at a convenience store. If she'd been a teenager I would have sworn she was dancing. Her swatting, gyrations, cussing, and obvious physical discomfort were all testimony to the pure aggravation of these insects.

It would be easy for an outsider to claim, "Well, they don't bite or sting so they can't be that bad." But spending weeks fighting a plague of love bugs could test even the patience of Mother Teresa.

The worst result of our love bug invasions is the damage they do to vehicles. During the heat of the day they love to swarm along roadsides. Along roadsides they are so thick that car vehicles will sometimes overheat due to the radiator grills being clogged with dead black bugs.

Additionally, the splat of the bugs on the windshield can obscure vision. Turning on your wipers, even with the washer, creates a special Louisiana gumbo of smashed wet love bugs that makes vision even worse.

A road trip through love-bug country results in hundreds of dead bugs all over the front of one's vehicle. There is an acidic quality to the love bug bodies that causes them to not only stick but to "etch" the paint job if the dead bugs remain on the painted surfaces of vehicle. Left on the front of a car or truck for several days in the hot

sunshine results in them nearly adhering to the paint. Washing them off is a chore requiring lots of hot water, soap, and elbow grease.

After Katrina, many relief workers from outside the South came to help us. One of my best friends, Paul Dear, who works for Sprint, told me this story:

A carload of Sprint workers from Ohio came down to help in Southern Louisiana after Katrina. They were a great help as this telecommunications company tried to help us recover from the communications chaos of the storm. Of course these Midwesterners had never seen anything like the love bugs. The sheer mass proportion of these insects fascinated them.

Their comment was, "I can't wait to get home and tell folks about these black bugs. I've never seen anything like them." Paul said they refused to wash the front grill of their car because "they wanted to show folks back home how thick the bugs were." I'm sure the folks in Ohio were impressed with the thousands of dead black bugs plastered on the front grill.

All I know is that if you took a South Louisianan to a large parking lot in Ohio where the Sprint worker is parked, he could easily pick out their pock-marked vehicle—a lasting souvenir of their visit to our Gulf Coast.

In spite of two hurricanes in a month in Louisiana, these unwelcome guests refused to leave. Despite hurricane winds that blew away roofs and felled century old trees, the black bugs, those "love bugs that we all hate" somehow held on and survived the storm. And they were waiting to welcome everyone back as Rita evacuees returned home.

Then the week after Hurricane Rita is when the other black bugs arrived in southwest Louisiana.

These new visitors were just as unwelcome as the love bugs. They were Salt Marsh Mosquitoes. These large dark biters are much more aggressive than our normal local skeeters. They have the audacity to attack you right out in

the sunny part of the day. Salt-marsh mosquitoes are also called floodwater mosquitoes. They normally are found in the coastal marsh areas.

I remember once reading about the crash of a small plane in the marshes of Cameron Parish. The pilot of the Cessna fortunately suffered only minor injuries. Because he was transporting a large shipment of marijuana, he was flying below radar and had filed no flight plan. When his plane crashed upside down in the middle of the desolate marsh, no one was alerted to search for him. So he spent three days sitting on the wing of the plane hoping for discovery.

Rescuers who got to him in a boat said the drug runner had nearly gone crazy from fighting the Salt Marsh mosquitoes. His body was completely covered with welts from three days of attack. One old Cameron trapper commented, "Whatever jail time he gets won't be near as bad as three days of attacks by the black-marsh mosquitoes."

These big, aggressive, dark mosquitoes normally stay in the brackish marsh areas of the coast. But when a flood or storm occurs, they can travel up to 500 miles with a storm. Normally they stay within 30–50 miles of marsh areas. Jim Olson, a "bug expert" or professor of entomology at Texas A & M, shares this about our post-Rita attackers. "Add water, wait seven days, and cover (yourself) up."

The eggs can lay unhatched for as long as two years until a high-water event turns them loose.

At least these big black skeeters don't carry West Nile. The salt-marsh species, officially of the Aedes species, don't carry disease but are large, vicious, and aggressive.

In a Houston Chronicle article of Thursday, October 6, 2005, Olson shared how "they take advantage of a direct hit from a storm in unique ways. They're able to hide in grass and avoid being blown away by wind. But when the storm surge hits, they ride it inland like surfers into new territory."

My fertile imagination could just see both of these insect species holding hands in the grass as the storm winds blew everything down across the landscapes of Cameron, Calcasieu parishes, and then northward to Beauregard. Then there is the equally imaginative vision of them gleefully surfing up the storm surge from Big Lake and the Intracoastal Waterway to happily greet the returning evacuees of Southwestern Louisiana.

Yes, Southwestern Louisiana,
My home.
The best place I know to live.
Home of the black bugs—Love bugs and Salt Marsh mosquitoes.

LEANING TREES

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22:6

On the day Rita arrived, I made one last survey of my tree farm. I wondered how different it would all look after today. A tree farm is an area where you grow pines for later harvest. In our area there are thousands of acres of pine forest. Large timber companies own most of it but private landowners own smaller tracts.

My tree farm is small by comparison. I have about fifteen acres in slash pines ranging from four to seven years old. It may be a small stand in comparison but I have tenderly cared for my pines. I've bushogged among them, killed the invading tallow trees, and faithfully plowed around the perimeter yearly to protect them from fire.

My fear has always been damage from a storm. Slash pines grow fast and make good trees but have a weakness at a young age if they encounter an ice storm or hurricane. My trees are just at the most susceptible size for wind damage. I worry that most will be damaged or broken after tonight.

On Saturday morning, I drive to my house from the camp. The storm, although abating somewhat, is still in full swing as large trees at the camp continue to topple over. In spite of the weather, I've got to go check on my tree farm.

There is one section where the trees are smallest. These rows of six-foot pines are about three years old. Sadly, many of them are bent over. All are leaning toward the

northwest giving silent testimony to the ferocity of the hurricane force southeast winds that battered Dry Creek during the night.

Happily, the larger rows of trees that represent most of my tree farm seemed to have come through the storm well. Some are leaning and others have broken off wherever there was a weak spot, but overall, they are fine. However, most of the trees in the smaller section look beyond help. I imagine they'll need to be cut due to their future lack of straight tall growth.

Two weeks after Rita, State Forester Paul Frey came to speak in DeRidder. It is pretty interesting what he shared about timber damage from Rita. After relating that Calcasieu Parish suffered fifty percent timber loss and our Parish of Beauregard had twenty percent loss, he wisely added, "I urge you timber owners to not give up on trees that may be leaning but are still firmly rooted. Don't give up on them. From previous history and previous experience, they will eventually straighten back out. You don't want to give up on 18 years of growth and lose the investment."

Paul Frey's words: "18 years…of growth…don't give up…lose that investment…they will straighten up if that root system is still firm and rooted."

All of a sudden, I wasn't thinking about pine trees and hurricane force winds. I was thinking about teenagers. All of my life in several careers I've done one thing: I've worked with teenagers. First as a teacher and coach, later as a school principal, then as administrator of a church youth camp where teenagers come through by the thousands.

I've seen my share of leaning teens, I mean trees. No, I really do mean leaning teens. The teen years are difficult years for the young person as well as those around them, especially parents. Many times, just like my wind-ravaged young pines, they lean badly and seem damaged beyond recovery.

But they are resilient, especially if their root system is firm, deep, and well developed. Don't give up on them. There's a lot of future growth and good return ahead.

I thought about this on a Sunday evening as I slipped in late to church. We had just finished counting new-deacon nomination votes and I was to make the elections announcement later in the service. As I sat down by DeDe, it was good to be in church among the people we love so much.

In front of me sat Randy and Lynda McCullough. DeDe and I first met this couple when Randy was a high school sophomore and Lynda was a freshman. They fell in love that year as high schoolers. DeDe and I, in our first year of teaching, fell in love with them at Fairview High School.

Randy was now a deacon candidate. Like all of the eight young men up for deacon nomination, Randy was extremely nervous. Several had asked, "What if I don't make it? What if the vote goes against me?" I know this is not going to happen due to the long careful process of bringing these men forward, but I understand their concern.

I shouldn't have done it but couldn't resist. I leaned forward to Randy's ear and whispered, "I've got good news. You made it. You only made it by one vote, but you made it."

I'm not a good whisperer, so an entire section of pews burst out laughing.

Later I reminded Lynda that I owed Randy any grief I could give him after having taught and coached him. He was the kind of student that was always waiting to make a statement that would break up the entire class. As a first-year teacher I'd be explaining about mitosis and DNA in biology when Randy McCullough would seriously raise his hand with a question. He'd ask some funny question that more often than not had little to do with the subject at hand. Of course it would break up all of the teen students.

Even I would have to work hard to suppress a smile as I tried to restore order.

Randy was never a bad-leaning teen and neither was Lynda. But when they were fourteen and fifteen, I never expected to be giving Randy's name as a church deacon nearly twenty-five years later.

Here's a word to you discouraged parents out there. It's an encouraging statement to youth leaders, teachers, and all of those who love, correct, and work with teenagers:

Don't give up on a leaning teenager. Help make sure their root system is strong and firm.

Try to look down the road to the future. Don't count them off as a loss and lose your "future investment." I've seen it too many times. Leaning teens often later become strong, tall adults.

In the weeks after Rita bent my pines over, I continued to watch them daily. To my amazement most have slowly but steadily straightened back up. Time, patience, and the wonderful combination of nature, sunlight, rain, and nutrition can sure make a difference.

Some are broken completely over and must be cut. Others of these small pines will always have a lean. But I don't plan to cut them. People will use them as "testimony trees" through the years: "Son when I was a boy, hurricane Rita came through here. That tall slash pine there is now about forty years old. It was a small pine when the storm hit. See how it has a slight lean to it. Rita did that. Yep, that was one bad storm."

The many lessons from a storm,
An unwelcome and destructive storm named Rita.
The strong firm foundational lesson
of not giving up on the leaning trees.

THE WALL IS DOWN

I'm not a fan of the ACLU.

However they have the same freedom of speech I do.

In this story I want to use my cherished freedom of speech to say a few things and ask a question or two.

Since Katrina, there have been great needs in our state. In a disaster we really find out what the basic needs are. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita taught us that basics such as food, water, and shelter cannot be substituted. Also we were reminded of how fragile yet vital our communications systems are. It was amazing how quickly we settled into the dark due to a lack of phones, electricity, and the loss of the Internet.

All over the South the needs of food, water, and shelter were joint efforts. The shelter issue was met through hundreds of churches and religious groups opening their doors. As the government agencies call us, we are "faith-based organizations." I like that term. Everything we do should be based on our faith in God and as Christians, in our following of the teachings of Christ.

After the hurricanes many of the walls of separation came down. It took everyone working together—local government, aid agencies, the federal government, law enforcement, and churches and pastors. For weeks I had the privilege of attending daily briefings where all of these groups came together in a spirit of cooperation. Led by our Parish Emergency Management coordinator Glen Mears, Beauregard Parish worked together to take care of not just our own citizens, but also others "blown into our

parish" by the storms.

And the walls of separation came down. Everyone banded together and avoided turf wars in the spirit of doing whatever it took to overcome the challenges and problems of these turbulent days.

I want to tell you about the place where we saw the wall come down the most and how it benefited our people.

Pleasant Hill Baptist Church sits along US 171 south of DeRidder. From the first days of Katrina, this church was front and center in ministering to evacuees as a shelter and distribution center. Their pastor, Alan Knuckles, is a man who loves to help others and is always looking for ways to do well in the name of Jesus.

When Rita hit, the dynamics of ministry in our area changed. We went from providing shelter and food to suddenly needing it ourselves. That is when the Southern Baptist Disaster Relief Feeding team arrived at Pleasant Hill. They set up their portable kitchen and equipment and began cooking hot meals. These meals were distributed at the site along an unfinished section of US 171 as well as transported from the kitchen to various sites by the Red Cross. As of November 2, Southern Baptist Disaster Relief had prepared over 10.5 million meals. On that same week, I saw hundreds lined up in the Gentilly section of New Orleans receiving these prepared meals by our folks.

In disaster situations The Red Cross and Southern Baptists coordinate feeding together. The disaster kitchen cooks the meals and the Red Cross distributes them. There is an unspoken motto of, "It doesn't matter who gets the credit as long as the job gets done."

In the week after Rita when food became scarce as refrigerated food spoiled and stores remained closed, these hot meals were such a blessing. Each day they brought meals to Dry Creek community. They were enjoyed and appreciated by all. It came down to an attitude of “let's work together.” A beautiful patchwork of churches, the National Guard, FEMA, Red Cross, our sheriff's

department, Beauregard Electric, plus volunteers of every type got the job done.

The artificial wall that we sometimes build between faith-based ministries and the government came down and stayed down. We were all in this together and willing to do what was needed.

After this flood of good works covered our parish, I heard this comment over and over, "Well, it wasn't the ACLU who brought my supper tonight or cut that tree off my house. I wonder where the ACLU is right now?"

May the lessons of cooperation we learned continue. We are all in this together.

TWO SISTERS

Those two sisters, Katrina and Rita, brought nothing but destruction and hard times to Louisiana.

However, for two Dry Creek sisters these hurricanes did bring about a positive reunion. Here is their story:

I won't name them, but they both grew up in Dry Creek. Because they are both older than me, I didn't know them really well growing up. But I love them and their families. Their grandparents were two of my role models and heroes as a boy.

I don't know when or why the sisters fell out with each other. That part of the story is theirs to tell, not mine. Time, distance, and life can do that with a family. The older generation passes and the glue that often held branches of a family close can weaken. The result can be a breakdown in relationships.

These two Dry Creek girls, now older women, had not spoken in years. One still lives here while the other lives in Lake Charles. That distance of 55 miles might as well as have been 5500 miles for all of the communication that went on between these sisters.

But that all changed the week of hurricane Rita. That is when a wonderful reconciliation began. The Lake Charles area faced a mandatory evacuation order. Even though the storm would also be bad in Beauregard Parish, the Dry Creek sister planned to stay. So she then made the first step. She called her long-estranged sister in Lake Charles.

"Where are you going for the storm?"
"I really don't know. I just plan to head north and find a motel."

"No, that's not what you're going to do. You and your family are coming to Dry Creek and stay with us." Both of these women have strong personalities. It runs in their family. It is also one of the things I love about this family.

The Lake Charles sister did not argue. I just wonder if she'd been hoping for this very call. And I wonder if the Dry Creek sister had been looking for a reason to pick up the phone and contact her sister.

So sister Rita, whom we have nothing good to say about, was the catalyst for this reunion. However, in fairness, I want to also give credit to bad sister Katrina.

You will never understand Rita and our reactions to it if you ignore Katrina. We had sunshine and clear skies on the day Katrina hit New Orleans. But the aftermath of Katrina affected everything about how SW Louisiana got ready for, and reacted to, Rita.

So these sister Hurricanes, eternally linked together in the hearts and minds of Louisianans for generations to come, brought about a reunion of two hearts…two families…two sisters.

In science we learn that a catalyst is a substance that speeds up a chemical reaction without itself being changed.

In life there are often emotional and spiritual catalysts. They are events and circumstances that force us out of our comfort zones and speed up everything going on in and around us. These speeded up changes can be good or bad.

These hurricanes became the catalyst for a long-awaited reconciliation between these two sisters. They spent the two weeks after Rita together, visiting, catching up on a decades worth of stories, laughter, and even sorrow.

I'd like to have been there to have watched it unfold in the days when Dry Creek had no electricity, water, and precious little food. I have a feeling that the good feelings from being together again nullified the loss of these luxuries we often take for granted.

The story of the two sisters got me thinking about the

wonderful subject of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a gift we give others and in the meantime we receive the same gift. Forgiveness brings freedom…and freedom brings peace.

Unforgiveness brings bitterness. From bitterness, nothing good can come. It is the least productive of all human emotions. There is a wonderful saying that typifies this: "Holding a grudge and being bitter are like drinking poison and hoping it kills the other person." Bitterness is acidic and it "harms the vessel in which it is stored more than the one on which it is poured."

Forgiveness is not about forgetting. Rather, forgiveness is about saying, "It doesn't matter anymore." That, if possible, is even better than forgetting. It is the heart-thought, "Sure I remember this, but now it just doesn't matter anymore."

Right after Rita I read an excerpt from the recent autobiography by Jerry Lewis, Dean and Me: A Love Story. In it he relates how after ten years of successful partnership he and comedy partner Dean Martin became estranged. This continued until years later when Martin's son, Dino, died in a plane crash. Through the events following the death of Dino Martin, these two partners and friends became reunited.

Once again a catalyst became the tool for reconciliation.

Once again, this catalyst was painful and tragic and unasked for…

But it resulted in a reconciliation that was beautiful and lasting—a relationship where two friends said, "What happened in the past doesn't matter now. Now is when you need me and I will be there for you."

As I think about the two sisters and their catalysts of Katrina/Rita, it is a good time to do inventory in my own life. Who is there out there that I need to pick up the phone and reconnect with? Why should we wait until tragedy or disaster strikes to make these moves? There is no better time than now. It is worth the risk and effort.

If you don't believe that, I know two sisters… one in Dry Creek and the other in Lake Charles… who would recommend that you do it now.

Do whatever it takes…
Whatever it takes to make it right.

A COOL BREEZE IS BLOWING

As I write today, I'm sitting beside the Gulf of Mexico in Texas. It is now one week plus 3 days since Rita came through. The camp is closed, and life is slowly but painfully returning back to normal. Our home is still without electricity although we now have water.

I'm at the Texas Baptist Assembly in Palacios, Texas, for a few days of rest and writing. There is something about the salt air that is good for both the lungs and mind.

Looking out across peaceful Matagorda Bay, it is hard to believe that one hundred miles to the east there is total destruction along the coast. Homes and businesses are still boarded up here. Originally the forecast was for Rita to come ashore near here. But this time this area was spared.

Now a cool breeze is blowing in from the ocean. For the moment it has blown away the mosquitoes, black bugs, and stifling heat that preceded and lingered after Rita.

Folks who were present during Rita will always remember the heat. The days previous to landfall were some of the hottest days ever recorded. A record high of 100 degrees was set on one of the days right before Rita's landfall. The heat index was high and no breeze blew to cool any at all. It was as if the atmosphere along the Gulf Coast were holding its breath in anticipation of the coming storm.

The days, and especially nights, after Rita were brutal. With no electricity, fans and air conditioners were useless. Folks lay there and sweated their beds wet. At the camp many of our evacuees slept outside on the concrete porches or on picnic benches. As I made my rounds in the dark, it was not uncommon to hear loud snoring coming

from anywhere on the grounds.

Then a cool front arrived. Everyone's attitude changed as the north wind brought in relief from both heat and humidity. I'll always remember the feeling of comfort after so many miserable days.

And here along the middle Gulf Coast of Texas, a cool breeze blows in off the sea. It feels so refreshing. It is hard to believe this body of water could rise up and attack the coast again. But I'm reminded that only two years ago in July 2003, Hurricane Claudette came roaring ashore here and wreaked havoc on the campgrounds where I am now staying. The same ocean that has attracted people to this camp for 100 years can very quickly become a menacing enemy.

For the hundredth time, but probably not the last time, my mind goes back to Indonesia. I'm sitting among a group of Acehnese fisherman in what was once their coastal village.

An interpreter quietly shares their words to me, a westerner from a world away. One middle-aged man with leathery skin stares off into the Indian Ocean and then briefly looks around at the area swept clean by the tsunami. He comments, "We've always trusted the ocean as our friend. It was our friend in that it supplied our livelihood. But on December 26 it became our enemy." For emphasis he points a stick toward the beautiful green Indian Ocean, "One day we will trust it again enough to go back on it to fish, but not yet. We still don't fully trust our old friend the ocean."

The Ocean,

Whether at the equator half a world away,

Or along the southern coast of the world's most advanced country.

It is sometimes our friend, and still sometimes our enemy.

We as humans can do so much. But controlling the weather and events are beyond our abilities.

As Rita and Katrina showed we are not so far ahead of our supposedly third-world neighbors in Southern Asia. The ocean…it gives us life. It can just as quickly take away life.

HIGHER GROUND

I'm pressing on the upward way
New heights I'm gaining everyday.
Still praying as I onward bound,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.
–"Higher Ground"
Charles H. Gabriel (copyright 1926)

The analogy of flooding is found throughout this book—the angry waves of the tsunami drowning entire communities; the slow flooding of New Orleans as the 17th street levee is breached.

The sad pictures of what was once the Cameron Parish hamlet of Holly Beach now completely gone, washed away by the storm surge.

In each of these areas, the homes in the lowlands suffered the worst. Higher ground was the place to get to.

As I've watched those affected by each of these floods, I've noticed something. Those who made it through really reached higher ground. I'm not talking about higher ground in the above sea level term. I'm referring to a spiritual place. A spiritual higher ground that the hymn writer speaks of in the verse quoted above. Especially in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita I've seen it. People who have been through the flood, many of them losing most if not all of their material possessions… having every reason to despair. But I've observed a light in their eyes. A joyful peace that cannot be measured in transient happiness, lack of mold, or a FEMA check for $2000.

In spite of the great loss, they've become better instead

of bitter. It is a peace that comes from inside, from in the heart where the mold cannot grow.

And the water cannot flood,
And the hurricane-force winds cannot reach.

It comes from a personal relationship with God. Jesus' promise in Revelation 3:20 still holds, "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in to him…"

It's an open invitation. An invitation to step up onto higher ground. The wonderful higher ground of peace and the very presence of God.

On this higher ground there will still be storms. Following Jesus is no insurance policy against storms. Just ask those disciples who followed him out onto the Sea of Galilee:

"Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!'

"But He said to them, 'Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?' Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, 'Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?'" (Matt 8:23–27)

Following Jesus led them straight into a storm. But the swells and waves of the Sea of Galilee were still higher ground—because Jesus was there.

That is His promise…not the absence of storms, but His faithfulness to stand with you in the storm.

That's all of the higher ground I need.
Simply to be with Him.
Higher ground.
It's a good place to be.

Anytime, but especially in the storm.

My heart has no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay
Though some may dwell where those abound.
My prayer, my aim is higher ground.

Lord, plant my feet and make me stand
By faith on Heaven's tableland.
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

It's only a theory and most serious students of science discount it. But if someone can give a better explanation of how a hurricane begins, I'd like to hear it.

The theory called The Butterfly Effect states that the first counterclockwise wind that begins the process of becoming a continent-shattering storm such as Katrina begins with something as small as the air moved by the flapping of a butterfly's wings.

It is hard to imagine something so simple and small developing into something so complex and large. The idea of the faint immeasurable breeze from a butterfly flapping off the west coast of Africa leading to the havoc and destruction of 165 MPH winds is nearly laughable.

But something has to start it.
And the start of anything is usually small,
And often unnoticed.
Maybe a hurricane does start with something so small.

For the past two weeks I've been watching another form of "The Butterfly Effect" taking place. It's happened in the camp where I work and at the evacuee shelter we call "The City of Hope." All over our parish and area, a steady stream of cars and trucks have driven in loaded with supplies.

Country people of modest means and fixed incomes have pulled out their billfolds and quietly placed stacks of $100 bills in my hand with the whispered request, "Use it to help these folks who've lost everything." These givers are people I've known all of my life—neighbors for whom

I know a gift this large will mean sacrifice and doing without in some area of the coming month. But our job as "God's middlemen" at the camp is to accept these heart-given gifts in a spirit of joy and gratitude and seek to use them wisely to help these new friends who are displaced from their homes.

The multiple beating of these butterfly wings of giving have combined to create a strong hurricane force wind of good deeds. People who want to give, go, and help—

Whenever,
Wherever, and
However—

Just like the wind off the coast of Africa, these small deeds have ended up touching an area we call New Orleans. Yet it affected much more than just the central city of New Orleans. Whether it was the Westbank, St. Bernard, Slidell, or the bayou Lafourche area, lives and homes were flooded and ripped apart, as Katrina came barreling from the ocean, destroying all in its path.

This subsequent "storm of good works" taking place all over our nation cannot be found on any Doppler radar screen or on The Weather Channel, but it is just as real as any storm of nature. As I write this a month after Katrina, evacuees are in every one of the fifty states. I smile as I think of a St. Bernard fisherman in Alaska or a clerk in Utah trying to understand the rich brogue of an Irish Channel resident.

Yes, this good works storm is steadily, day-by-day, spreading all over our nation. And just as steadily it is moving back toward the New Orleans area.

The Old New Orleans pre-Katrina will never exist again. Much of it was destroyed by the storm. It will never be the same again.

Much of it will be rebuilt due to this "good works storm." We are seeing great heroes.

Most of these heroes are the quiet sort. You won't see them on the evening news screaming into a TV camera. They are just solid blue-collar working folks who've toiled hard all of their lives.

They've overcome hardships… poverty, lack of education, prejudice, barriers of language, race, culture, and color. With God's help they will overcome this hurdle.

One of the New Orleans evacuees came up to me and commented, "What this camp has done for us is beyond words. You've opened your heart as well as your doors." He continued with a troubled self-indictment, "If the roles were reversed, I don't think our city would have opened its arms to you in the same way."

But I want to disagree with his statement. Pre-Katrina he was probably right. But the new New Orleans will be different. It will be greatly populated by those who know how it is to lose everything. They will be able to empathize with others who've suffered great loss.

Last Friday I sat in a meeting with the leaders of our evacuees. We jokingly call this group "The Dry Creek Town Council." I asked each group leader to bring us up to date on their plans for the days ahead. Some shared plans to move to a new location for a fresh start. Most expressed confusion as they continued to seek what God wants for their family or church.

David Rodriquez, pastor of the Horeb Hispanic Baptist Mission spoke quietly but confidently, "We feel that we should go back home and help re-build New Orleans." There was an emotional feeling in the room that I cannot describe on paper. Eyes were full of tears as heads nodded and affirming comments were made.

I could see this 150-member congregation, made up of both lifetime Americans and new Americans from Honduras, staking a claim on the Westbank area and spreading out all over greater New Orleans—these good people who've become my family in the last month; these hard workers who ask for nothing more than opportunity.

All of a sudden I feel real excited about the "New New Orleans." Can 150 people change a city for good? Well, if a butterfly's wings can create a hurricane, I guess nothing small is impossible.

Especially, nothing is impossible when God is behind it.

EPILOGUE: NO WORDS CAN EXPRESS…

Saying goodbye is never easy.. After our shelter maxed out at over 400 in the days after hurricane Katrina, we began a slow process of sending folks out. Each one had a unique story of how they got to the City of Hope shelter. The stories of their subsequent journeys were just as diverse.

There were families that left for Kansas to start a new life.

That special day when two country women from Arkadelphia Baptist spent an entire day wading through red tape to get a plane ticket to Honduras for an evacuee to return to medical school.

Families traveling together.
Individuals leaving one-by-one.
Simmie and her mother going to Washington, D.C.
Most came to say goodbye to our staff.
Others left at unusual times and left a note or message with other evacuees.

But the day that broke my heart was the Sunday after Rita. Our power and water were out and realistically we told the evacuees that it might be days or weeks before these were restored. Nearly two hundred of our friends left on this Sunday.. They were heading to other locations where lodging and services would be available.

Most of the Hispanic group was returning to New Orleans' Westbank.

One-by-one and in groups they came by to say goodbye. There were tears, laughter, and a bittersweet mixture of every emotion. They were glad to be returning toward home and restarting life. Yet they were sad to leave

the place they had come to love. Several even argued against leaving by saying, "It will look like we are abandoning our Dry Creek friends who have stood by us."

Our staff had these same bittersweet feelings. We were exhausted and the idea of being shelter-free appealed to us. It had been a wonderful but draining time. Additionally, we knew we could not take care of the needs of our evacuees. The lack of water was especially acute and worried all of us. So we were glad to see the majority of our evacuees leaving.

Yet at the same time we hated to release them. You can never go back and recapture the feelings from a special time. We had been together in times of great challenge. We had become close.

As our friends came by to say goodbye, this sentence started nearly every farewell:

"Words cannot express how we feel about all of you."

Amazingly as if they had rehearsed together, they repeated it: "No words can tell…I cannot tell you how much. Never could I ever say with words."

No matter the accent—New Orleans seaport, Down the Bayou Cajun, Cameron Parish brogue, or Honduran Spanish—they all expressed it. Usually with tears… "I have no words."

And suddenly I was transported back to where this journey through the waters began…on the streets and beaches of Indonesia.

There is a tradition among the Acehnese men of Northern Sumatra. When they meet you, and feel connected with you, they will shake your hand and then draw their right hand back to their chest with several open-handed soft slaps against their chest.

I was enthralled with this. If I understood it fully, this response means I have met you and our hearts are connected. I grew to love it and considered it an honor in

the times when one of our drivers or a village leader would extend this greeting or benediction to one of our team.

I nicknamed it "The Acehnese chest thump." However it is not really a thump or even a sharp slap. It is simply a gesture that softly pats the heart and says, "My heart is yours. Because you have come so far to help our people, our lives and hearts are connected. Take my heart with you as you go."

In addition to bringing back these stories from Indonesia as I promised my new friends there, I also brought back their hearts with me. They are not long out of my mind. I also know that I left parts of my heart there also.

But then unexpectedly, folks have come to my Louisiana hometown and left parts of their hearts here with us. Although they didn't use the Acehnese chest thump to demonstrate their feelings, their tear-choked comments of what "words cannot express" said the same thing:

"Our hearts have connected. We are together. You have my heart."

And my heart has gone back with them.

No longer is New Orleans just the major city of our state.

A city I love and a city I hate.

It is now my city.

It is no longer just a huge metropolitan area that ignores the rest of our state.

It is a hurting city of ruins that needs us.

It is a city of faces—Belkis, David, Ed, Swamp Jimmy, Madeline, Pastor Dwayne, Edwin and Mercedes, Carl and Mamie, Ivan. The list could go on..

We are all united.

Joined at the heart.

Hearts brought together by the terrible destruction of water.

Hearts across the Water.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Curt Iles currently writes from Entebbe, Uganda, where he and his wife DeDe serve with the International Mission Board.

He is a native of Dry Creek, Louisiana.

An eighth-generation resident of western Louisiana's "No Man's Land," he is a storyteller who loves educating, entertaining, and inspiring through his writing and speaking.

His life mission is "To be a man God can use and have the respect of his wife, sons, and their families.

Curt and DeDe are the parents of three sons and eight grandchildren.

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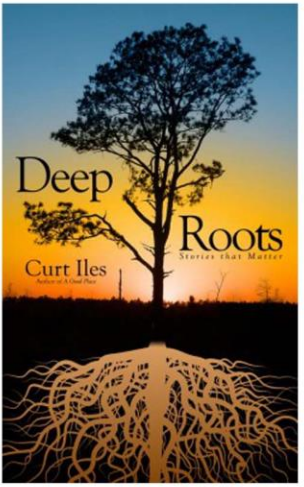
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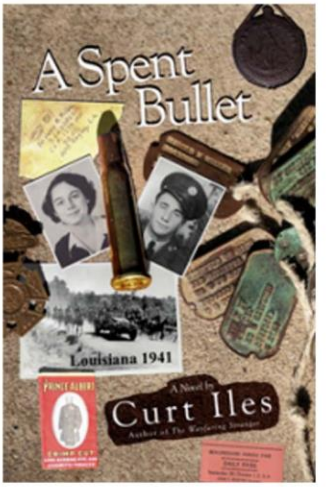
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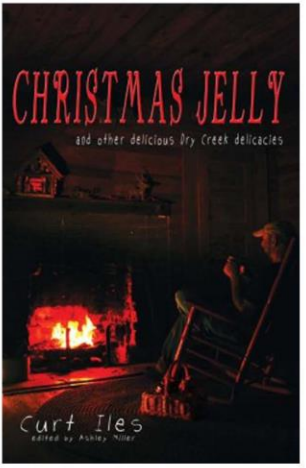
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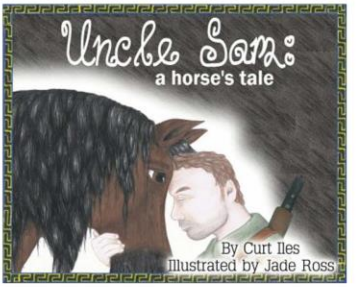
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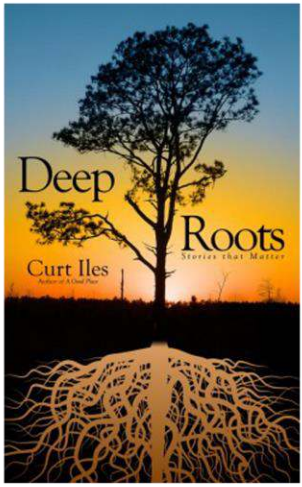
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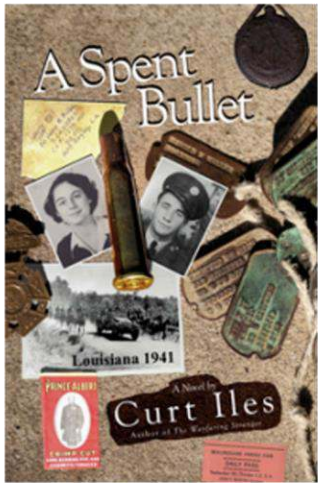
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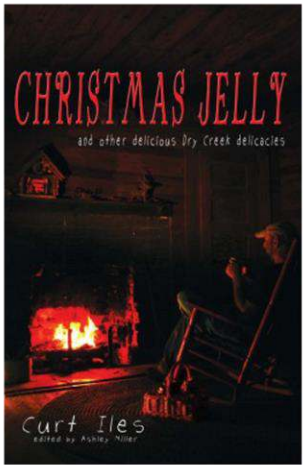
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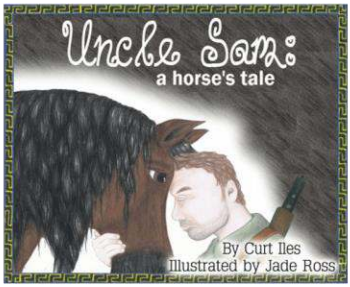
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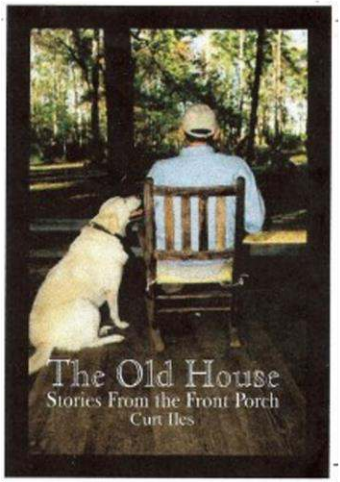
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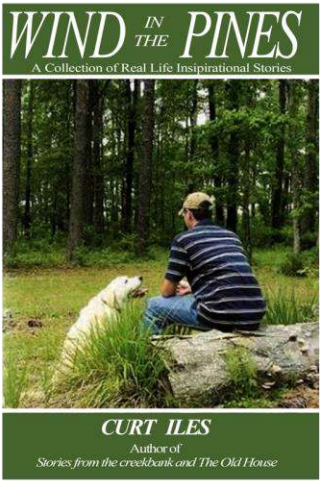
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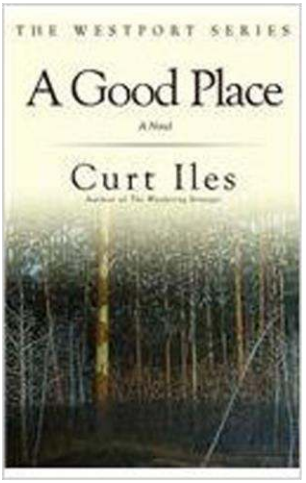
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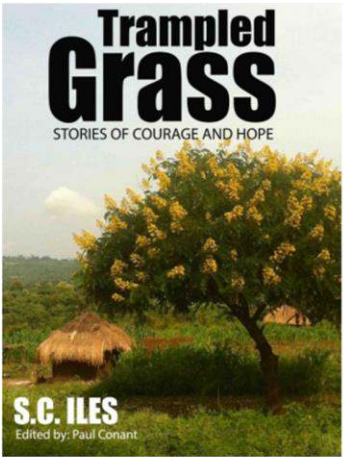
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