

“NEVER WAS SO MUCH OWED BY SO MANY TO SO FEW”
Prime Minister Winston Churchill, 1940

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Hurricane Rita cut a vicious swath through Vernon Parish in west-central Louisiana in a twenty-four hour reign of terror from the Sabbath sunset, Friday, September 23, 2005 through sundown on Saturday, September 24, 2005. I suffered relatively mild material loss in comparison to others. My eight-foot high wooden privacy fence that surrounded my spacious back yard was blown away. As I later came to realize, an inner wall was also torn down.

As is my habit of many years, I kept a daily journal of events as I experienced and witnessed them and recorded my reactions. This diary has always taken a form that vaguely resembled a Puritan’s spiritual journey, as in the quest during the seventeenth century in which John Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony posed the central paradigm which is to live in this world without becoming of the world. After considerable reflection regarding the voluntary forfeiture of my valued privacy, that which is most precious to me, I decided to share my personal experience to express gratitude and pay tribute to the fourteen men of the Leesville Fire Department who saved my life. I owe my eternal appreciation and freely given admiration and affection to this remarkable band of brothers who rescued and protected me. I am guided by my deepest understanding of a moral code, a gift from my father, may his precious soul rest in peace, who, in his personal life, was a living example of his study of the Talmud. During World War Two, my parents spent their fortunes, both inherited and independently earned, rescuing imperiled Jews after Kristallnacht (the night of the broken glass) in Nazi Germany in November, 1938. Milton and Clarissa (“Bobbie”) Gutman brought strangers, who became life-long precious friends, to our great house in Rydal, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia, to live until they were able to move on with their lives. My father quietly instructed me during those years of my childhood and youth that according to the Talmudic teachings of the great rabbis, “whoever saves a single life is as if one saves the entire world.”

In addition, my writing about this experience includes the possibility of mitigating an inaccurate image the national media has portrayed of the Deep South’s reaction in New Orleans to the earlier Hurricane Katrina: a media portrayal for political and cultural motives of looting by blacks, embezzling police officers and elected officials, physicians who lean towards euthanasia as a treatment method, and incompetent planning and performance by state and federal agencies. The Radical Right with its flimsy veil of merely proud white people pursuing a peaceful struggle for dignity portrayed blacks as savages who turned to looting and rape as soon as the power of the state collapsed. Equally disturbing were the photos of blacks in the most abject misery and abandoned black corpses rotting in the scorching sun. The impression I had from this journalistic material was fodder produced for white supremacists to build upon a political foundation they already had established. In the German language, there is an appropriate noun to

describe this kind of revelry in the misery of others: schadenfreude. Certainly the history of the German Third Reich bears a cautionary warning regarding this type of mind set.

In contrast to the saturation coverage of the New Orleans fiasco, there were no national reporters on the scene in Vernon Parish where public officials and public servants handled a major catastrophe with amazing efficiency, courage, dedication to duty, and with an intelligent plan. As one benchmark, no one died as a direct result of the hurricane. My perception was that blacks and whites helped each other. Civil unrest and disturbance never occurred. To correct this one-sided perception of the earlier hurricane by the national media, I have labeled as “black” my contacts with African-Americans and have also labeled those who were strangers to me until Hurricane Rita. I also wanted to share my very personal response to severe trauma and its aftermath in the hope that it may be of benefit to anyone either undergoing trauma or trying to help anyone experiencing it. This part of my reaction I learned in the 1960’s at Bryn Mawr College Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research. Another reason was to provide a primary personal account for the historians who will be studying this catastrophe that ravaged the coastal regions of Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, and Texas, created material damage equivalent to that caused by a civil war or foreign invasion, and necessitated a vast demographic migration that will have permanent long term political, economic, social, and cultural consequences. The scope of this report is limited to the first person point of view, one who never had an over-all picture nor all the facts. Whatever I saw, heard, and perceived was also filtered through my own baggage. And last, but certainly not least, is my wish to report how the Wellesley College class baby of 1958, the first female child born by a graduate of the class, saved my life. My only daughter, Lauren Leigh Katz Cortes, DOB 6-29-58, has evolved into the most magnificent woman I have ever met!

Thursday, September 22. There were dire warnings by newspaper, radio, and television that Hurricane Rita had reached a category 5 status and had forced evacuations from Calcasieu and Cameron Parishes. I contacted the Leesville Department of Public Works to request sandbags to protect my house against flooding and received them within several hours. Dr. Cindy Gillespie, superintendent of the Vernon Parish School System, sent a letter to all the parents and guardians of students and to the staff in the office where I have worked for the past twenty-one years (pupil appraisal services in the department of special education) stating that school would be closed the following day. She also sent copies of this letter to Brigadier General Michael Barbero, commanding officer of Fort Polk Army Base, which is within Vernon Parish, and to the local radio stations and newspaper where she promised to deliver further information. She dismissed the central office staff at 3:30.

I went to Market Basket and bought \$117.00 worth of food that included fresh produce, TV dinners, fresh eggs, fresh meat and fish, and so forth, all of which subsequently rotted with no refrigeration due to no electricity. In other words, I stock-piled for a major New England snowstorm, something I knew about, rather than the tropical hurricane headed my way. I came to later regret that I had not purchased a single gallon of bottled water when I could have. I had planned to fill the gas tank of my car before going home, but the

line at the gas station stretched around the block. I was rather pleased to have some extra free time to work on my dissertation for my Ph.D. in American history. I have completed all the research but have been writing and re-writing for the past four years.

Friday, September 23. I spent the day doing laundry and putting away items that had accumulated in the kitchen area. I was far too distracted and anxious to do anything that required major concentration and focus. Also, clearing away and cleaning up was a must, an imperative, in order to have any room to work on my dissertation in a house stuffed to the bursting point with books and boxes of papers. This portrait in clutter in my house has a system and organization to it known only to me. At noon I went to the gas station around the corner and then to another one further down Highway 171 South. Both stations had long lines of motorists seeking to fill their gas tanks. I noted the bumper-to-bumper endless line of motorists on Highway 171 North struggling to get out of town. Back at my house, I worked on my “to do” list as I was becoming too alarmed to contemplate any work on dissertation writing. Returning to the gas stations at 5:00 P.M., thinking that the long lines would be gone, I discovered that every gas station in town was closed and out of gas. I had about a half tank of gas in my car.

At 6:00 P.M. I telephoned my daughter, Lauren Leigh Katz Cortes (“Laurie”), in West Jordan, Utah, a residential suburb of Salt Lake City, to let her know that I was fine, that there was just a light rain. She warned me that this mild weather was only the calm before the storm. Laurie went on to say that they had been worried about me all week as she and her husband, Gary, listened to television news reports about the increasing ferocity of Rita. I told Laurie that it might be a good idea for us to stay in touch with daily telephone contact for possibly a week. If the worse came to pass, I wanted her to know where my Last Will and Final Testament was located in my house and that I thought it important at this time for her to fully understand that I considered her to be the dearest gift my life had brought to me, that she had been a great blessing to me from the moment I first gazed into those laughing brown eyes on her first day in this world.

Next I telephoned Suzie Frusha in Leesville to ask if her parents, Percy and Pauline Rogers from Sulphur, one hundred miles south of Leesville, were safe. She informed me that they were already at her home. Suzie, a generation younger than me and about the same age as my daughter, is a forty-nine year wife, mother, grandmother, and special education teacher assistant for the Vernon Parish School System. Her husband, Shine, works on the roads as an employee of the Vernon Parish Police Jury. Several years ago, Suzie, and later her large family from south Louisiana, informally adopted me so that I would not be alone at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and birthdays. Since distance prevents my being with my grandchildren, Suzie includes me in the birthday gatherings for her grandchildren.

My final telephone call of the evening was to my friend, Dr. Karen Cox, associate professor of public history, a tenure track position at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She completed her doctorate in 1996 in the same program I am in and had the same blue ribbon dissertation committee that has included Dr. Marjorie Spruill as chair and Dr. Neil McMillen, both of whom have published extensively and won major prizes

for excellence in historical scholarship. Karen and I actually became good friends after my sabbatical year in Hattiesburg, Mississippi at the University of Southern Mississippi. We have supported each other by telephone and shared triumphs and tragedies. Karen has a brilliant mind, an essential core of integrity, and is the only peer I currently know with whom I can discuss our mutual area of focus in American history. She has known considerably more triumph than I have in recent years with the completion and publication of her dissertation, Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture, University of Florida Press, 2003. Her book has won a major prize for excellence in history after being reviewed by prominent scholars. She has presented papers at conferences, nationally and internationally. Daily she has contacts with historians/colleagues whose books I have read and admired.

On that Friday night, Karen encouraged me by telephone to stay calm and to use the time to work on my dissertation. What else could she possibly suggest! I had already told her how trapped I was. There was no gas available. Hotel rooms were booked within a hundred mile radius. People I knew in Vernon Parish had already opened their homes to many friends and relatives that had been evacuated after Hurricane Katrina. I felt somewhat reassured by having affirmed my out-of-state support network. However, I was not able to stave off a nagging underlying fear and foreboding so I decided to use the "count your blessings" strategy. Months earlier I had videotaped a movie, "Hitler's S.S.: A Portrait in Evil," the fictional story of a Berlin family seduced by Nazism and eventually destroyed. I was distracted by the entertainment and the reminder that things could have been a lot worse for me: I could have been born in 1936 in Hitler's Germany had I not had ancestors who immigrated to America in the nineteenth century.

At 11:30 P.M., the electricity went off. This event was not particularly alarming as power outages are not unusual in the rural South. I knew the drill, retrieved a flashlight, and went to bed, confident that the electricity would be back on in the morning. As I lay in bed, I heard for the first time that evening the loud sounds of the wind, a great primordial force that moved in ferocious, rhythmic swells as in ocean waves without the water. I also heard loud crashing sounds of gigantic objects falling outside my house. I was relieved not to hear the cries of the neighborhood dogs as in previous storms and hopefully assumed that their respective owners had brought the poor creatures indoors. I was not about to look at what were the results of the loud crashing sounds as I pulled the bed covers up to my head. Sleep was impossible because of the menacing noises outside the house and because I was unable to use my CPAP breathing machine without electricity. My house seemed to be swaying with each strong gust of wind. I realized that my situation had become critical, that my circumstances seemed to be completely out of my control, and that it was definitely prayer time. While my tap root is in Judaism, I have also read widely and deeply in Protestant and Catholic philosophy and theology and have gleaned what was meaningful to me from an ecumenical feast. That night I developed a personal liturgy that began with the Lord's Prayer which I consider to be Protestant, followed by the ancient Hebrew prayer, "Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Ehad" ("Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one"), and concluded with my creation of a Catholic ritual of worship that combined the Gregorian chant of the medieval monks

with what I remembered from high school years of studying classical and medieval Latin to include frequent mea culpas, ave Marias, and pax vobis cums. I decided that if I survived this ordeal, I would next study Buddhism. I am open to all roads to the great truths. Whatever it was that I was doing, I had reached a state of calm that was either: 1) the religious peace that passes all understanding; 2) a self-induced hypnotic state; or 3) a retreat into a total state of denial.

Saturday, September 24. Laurie telephoned at 7:30 A.M. to see if I was O.K. She told me that she wanted me to know that she loved me “so very much.” Then she told me that she had contacted the Leesville Fire Department with a request to check on me and to determine if I needed to be evacuated. I told Laurie that I was fine, hanging in there, and that Hurricane Rita was still in process with all its strength and power. I told her that I had lost electricity. After we finished speaking, I thought that she sounded truly alarmed for my safety as well as frightened that I might be angry at her for calling the fire department as a way of taking charge of my life, the reversal of our roles. I’m the mother, she’s the daughter, and that is the natural order that I fought desperately to preserve during her adolescence to prevent anarchy. As she blossomed into a mature wife and mother with all the grace, dignity, and humor that has always been part of her nature and ambience, our relationship has shifted into close and loving friends. Still, I am the mother. At 8:30 A.M. two men, Mark Phillips and Dan Singletary, from the Leesville Fire Department knocked on my door, stating that my daughter in Utah had telephoned them and had asked them to check on me. I told them that I was fine and accustomed to taking care of myself.

I looked outside my back door where I saw that my wood privacy fence had been completely blown away by the hurricane. The house in back of mine had a large tree fallen across the roof. It began to dawn on me that my current situation was unique to anything I had experienced. I took stock of what assets I had. The electricity was out which cancelled all the appliances. I still could get a trickle of water from the kitchen sink and could flush the commode. The empty water bottles were in the shed, but I was too scared to venture out in the wind, still blowing at hurricane level. My gas stove worked. The telephone was operative. And I had a battery operated mini combination Coleman radio and lantern. I lay down in bed for the rest of the day, exhausted by a dull fear and uncertainty.

Throughout the days and nights, my attention was focused upon listening to radio station KJAE, Country 105, the only radio station I could reach on the dials of my Coleman battery operated radio and my only source of information. The local newspaper, to which I subscribed, was not publishing as it had lost their press to Hurricane Rita damage in Sulphur. In the almost quarter century I have lived in this area, I had never listened to KJAE. Louisiana Public Radio, then unreachable by dial, was where I normally turned for classical music, jazz, and news. In the past, the blowout event of my week, the anticipated treat that kept me going from the exhaustion that began to set in after work on Wednesday evening and reached a great crescendo by Friday night, was the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts on LPB from Saturday noon to 3:00 P. M. from December through April. In the privacy of my kitchen, I could let it rip with great arias and chorale pieces.

This section of my life was my private sing-a-long with the world's greatest sopranos and tenors. No one could hear my voice that never had the ability to carry a tune in the correct key. Nevertheless, my passion has long been world-class opera.

Now I was confined to Cody and Boomer, two disc jockeys, D.J.'s, at KJAE. Quickly I came to enjoy their humor and attitude of "we'll get through this thing." Through these two men I received my only news of the outside world: Lake Charles had been severely damaged, people in Cameron and Calcasieu Parishes were being evacuated. In Vernon Parish, the houses on Columbus Circle, two blocks from mine, were hit much harder than the houses on my street. They delivered advice: don't go out (not that I had any intention whatsoever of doing so) as trees were still falling and power lines were down. I became aware that my situation was far better than so many others in the area: no tree had fallen upon my house; my phone still worked; I still could get a trickle of water in the kitchen faucet; and the commode flushed. Over the next several days, I came to realize that KJAE with Cody and Boomer were producing journalism at its best by forestalling mass panic and by giving practical advice and straight talk about local news. They never stooped to local gossip nor cruel innuendo from unchecked sources. They did make it clear that they would not broadcast any slamming of local officials who were working non-stop to alleviate the situation. For a brief moment in time, I did not care a tinker's damn about national and international news. The great world leaders would have to manage on their own without the telepathy of my silent thoughts. It was KJAE that I turned to twenty-four hours a day. Without any commercials, these country guys made me laugh and believe that I would get out of my predicament.

Laurie called in the evening with some suggestions of what I could do with what I had in the house. She warned me not to use the stove until I was sure that the gas lines had not suffered storm damage. She has always had this wonderful method of making me believe her ideas were mine. I agreed to locate the neckerchief she had sent me years before that swells in water and is a coolant when worn around the neck. Karen called to ask if I had positioned myself in the hallway, away from an outer wall. I didn't want her to know that I needed the comfort and security of my bed and quilts. She went with the flow of my preference to avoid the current reality and to talk about better times in the future, when my dissertation would also be published and receive scholarly accolades similar to those she won.

Sunday, September 25. The dangerous situation continued with no electricity in the midst of an Indian summer heat wave and a scourge of lovebugs (two black insects attached to each other and flying around until they died of exhaustion, somewhat like the mating of adolescents) getting into the house through every crevice. Listening to KJAE focused my attention and staved off depression. I kept busy gift wrapping some presents I had bought to send my good wishes to two new brides and one new mother. It took me eight hours to wrap three gifts. Under normal circumstances, it would have taken thirty minutes. My next door neighbor, the wife of Mike Elliot, a local politician, knocked on my door at 2:00 P.M., pleading with me to cash her personal check for fifty dollars. We had spoken previously once or twice over the fence connecting our properties, but I had not remembered her name. I did remember that I instinctively liked her for her forthright

manner without the layers of defenses I have acquired out of necessity. She was in a state of panic as she described being in her house alone for the past two nights with no water or electricity. This young woman has no experience in being alone. During the hurricane, she had been in her bathtub, clinging to her small dog. Her husband was in Alexandria. She knew that there would be no electricity for nine days due to the severity of the damage from fallen trees on power lines and blocking the roads in Lee Hills, our housing area. Rather than comfort her as I hope I would have normally done, I was terrified of catching her panic. I chose not to believe that there would be no electricity for at least another seven-to-nine days in this terrible heat wave: at that point in time, I could not have handled that truth. I was surviving not just day-by-day but also hour-by-hour. I knew that I had to hold on to the cash (\$45) I had as there was no certainty when the banks could reopen because their transactions depended upon computers plugged into electricity. Cash would be the only totems of exchange for survival needs. I offered the coins in my purse and some food from my freezer. She refused what I felt able to offer, left, more discouraged than when she arrived, and probably hurt that I had offered no warmth or reassurance. I realized that I was hanging on for dear life and had nothing within to give at that time.

Angela DeGray, a black co-worker and friend, came by my house at 3:00 P.M. to check on me. She was upbeat as usual, although she had no electricity or water in her house, had eleven extra people staying with her and her husband, and they were using the water she had filled the bathtub with. Angela had nothing to offer me but her inner strength and optimism which I greedily and gratefully took. At 6:00 P.M. I called Laurie and Karen Cox. Karen had at my request e-mailed Dr. Bradley Bond, director of history graduate students at the University of Southern Mississippi, that progress on my dissertation would be delayed due to the fall-out from the hurricane. She had not e-mailed the rest of my committee, Dr. Spruill and Dr. McMillen, which I pleaded with her to do immediately as I might not have phone service tomorrow. I gave her McMillen's e-mail address. She told me that Spruill was in Italy as her husband was presenting a paper at an international conference. She reassured me that Spruill was not going to give up on me as the dissertation has taken forever even prior to the hurricane. With Laurie, I mainly wanted to hear about her life, not too eager to share the lonely and grim outline of my life.

Monday, September 26. The water system was completely down which I learned at dawn when I was unable to flush the commode. There was no longer a trickle of water from the kitchen faucet. I returned to bed, realizing that I could die in this heat, that it was my fault for not adequately preparing, particularly in the water department. The house, crudely slapped together after World War Two in a get-rich-quick building boom, was poorly constructed and badly insulated. Not surprisingly, it was far hotter inside than outside. My indoor thermometer read 105 F. I decided that I would listen to KJAE until I finally expired. At least Cody and Boomer, the two local DJ's, made me laugh. I thought that I had given everything my best shot, tried my hardest in my own well meaning but bumbling fashion. I just could not figure any way out of the hot box my house had become. Passivity is not characteristic of me nor is meekness an attribute of mine: usually I am a fighter. However, I had one pitcher of warm water left in this setting of intense and exhausting heat.

At 7:30 A.M. I telephoned the Leesville Police Department, spoke to a female operator, who promised to contact the Red Cross in my behalf. Nothing came from my plea for help as I never heard from the Red Cross. At 8:30 A.M., I telephoned my neighbor, Mary Casarez, who lives across the street. For twenty-one years, we have waved friendly hellos but rarely spoken. We both work full time and live busy lives. I told her that I had almost no water. She was just leaving as her son had arrived to take her to his home elsewhere. Mary offered me the gallon and a half of water she had left. I told her that I was too weak to walk across the street, and that I was in the same yellow cotton house dress I had worn for three days. Waiting for Mary on the wrought iron bench by my front door, I saw her sprint up my driveway carrying her two water jugs. Not only was I grateful, I also marveled at her energy as we had lived through the same conditions and were probably in the same age category. She shouted "I'm out of here" as she drove off in her white sedan with her son, who had spent the previous day clearing her yard of fallen tree limbs and branches, followed in a red Land Rover. Lingered on my bench, I called across the street to Susie Moore at 2003 Allison Street. Her husband works for Brown and Root Corporation, an international construction firm with a branch operating at Fort Polk Army Base. She promised to deliver her issue of the Alexandria-Pineville Town Talk when she finished it. She never did. I must be quite frightening to her, what every woman fears most: to be old, in poor health, and alone. Oh well, my situation is not so bad and has its advantages: at least I can lock the door and take the phone off the hook when I have had enough of people.

At 10:30 A.M. I received an unexpected telephone call from Delores Yates in Katy, Texas, residential suburb of Houston. A black woman of my age, she had been a student in history courses, American and European, I had taught at night at a local university from 1984 to 1994, when I needed second and third jobs to make ends meet as my son completed high school and college. Over the years, Delores and I had become friends. She was grateful for a pamphlet published by the Texas Historical Commission I had mailed to her in August and wanted me to visit her in her new home and together explore the historical/cultural sights in the Houston area. I explained that my current circumstances were not conducive to socializing or sightseeing. She told me that she would try to secure some water for me. She would make some telephone calls. Within ten minutes, there was a knock on my door. Harvey Garner, a black man whom I had never met, handed me a gallon of fresh spring water and told me to telephone him should I need further help. Several weeks later I realized that I knew his mother and brother, Rev. Joseph Garner, pastor of the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church.

At 3:00 P.M. Suzie Frusha and her mother, Pauline Rogers, arrived unannounced. I told Suzie that I was too weak to go for the FEMA water in tankers announced throughout the day on KJAE. I had repeatedly heard the information on KJAE that FEMA was giving away ice, MREs (meals ready to eat), and water from their tankers at two locations, each less than a mile from my house. I did not have the strength to put on clothes and get these resources. Suzie knew that I wanted her to help me but was too proud (or stubborn) to ask. She quickly offered, and I immediately gave her several thirty gallon Glad trash bags and told her that my empty water bottles were in the shed. Within a half hour, Suzie

and Pauline brought to my house thirty jugs filled with fresh water from the FEMA tanker, more than enough to flush the commode with bacteria from the human waste multiplying exponentially.

Suzie, Pauline, and I visited in my kitchen and re-connected. Both were concerned about Percy, Pauline's husband and Suzie's stepfather, who had returned to Sulphur to check on their house and to care for their three pet cats. In addition to the dangers of returning to a storm devastated area, Percy has been battling prostate cancer this year, undergoing chemotherapy and radiation treatments which robbed him of the little appetite he ever had. Tall and thin, Percy only ate now to please Pauline when she tempted him with his favorite recipes. Last year, before cancer attacked him, Percy was named the outstanding citizen of Sulphur. Now in their seventies, Percy and Pauline are living a late-in-life love story. They married decades ago, combining their families, each bringing four children into the new family. Now all the children have grown into adulthood and have created their own families, producing a large and wondrous crop of grandchildren to love and to nurture. I have been included in their family reunions that are joyous events. Pauline is a retired social worker, a unique one, who continually astonishes me with her extraordinary understanding of the human heart. Over a period of time, Pauline built a close friendship with Percy's first wife in order that the first wife not be excluded from the family circle. These two women, one who bore Percy's children, the other who understood and met the deepest needs of his heart, have bonded and become devoted friends. Amazing!

I was too weak to do anything but lie in bed with a cool wash cloth over my forehead, Laurie's neckerchief around my neck, listening to KJAE. Dr. Beverly Blount, a co-worker from Pupil Appraisal Services, grabbed her moment in the sun with a telephone call to KJAE suggesting that people give away their food in freezers since it would rot anyway. She suggested outdoor barbecue gatherings by neighborhood. In an ideal world, I thought. Dr. Gillespie spoke on the air with Cody and Boomer several times throughout the day, advising that Vernon Parish schools would be closed for the entire week. As mandated by the state legislature, the gymnasiums of the schools were housing evacuees from Cameron and Calcasieu Parishes, victims of Hurricane Rita. My heart went out to these displaced persons. I knew that the plumbing in all the schools was substandard. How could that antiquated plumbing possibly function with all these people, no electricity, and no water to drink or to flush the commodes. It seemed to me to be a recipe for the most abject misery. I was grateful for my solitude. The thermostat at my house had reached 107 F. The air felt so thick that when one moved, it felt as if one was moving through solid mass.

Laurie called at 6:00 P.M., 5:00 P.M. her time in Utah when she returns home from work and before she starts the evening meal for her family. We reverted to an old familiar pattern of conversation from the time of her childhood when I would get home from work and before I started our evening meal. First, she would report the events of her day. Then, since I have always worked as a social worker with children and could not reveal confidential material nor would I want her to know the daily tragedies I witnessed, I would tell her what I ate for lunch, who wore what to work, what movies were coming to town, and so forth, i.e., details that were the outer trimmings. On this critical evening, I

reported the miracle of the water, that I had received life-giving water from three unexpected sources. She reported that her second-born son, Andrew, age sixteen, had earned an “A” in advance placement physics, news that made me glow. Overall, I thought it was a pleasant exchange, nothing remarkable, and that I had put a brave, “I’m handling things” face on my circumstances. Days later Laurie revealed to me that she found that particular conversation between us to be deeply disturbing, that she had been unable to shake the feeling that something was terribly and dangerously wrong.

At 8:00 P.M. there was a knock at my front door. Mark Phillips, Len Edwards, and Dan Singletary had arrived in a fire truck from the Leesville Fire Department. Michael Wilson in his patrol car from the Leesville Police Department had joined the congregation in my driveway. Mark, a great bear of a young man in his mid-twenties with a warm smile and kindly ambience, broke the news that they were there after receiving another urgent telephone call from my daughter, Laurie, in Utah. He checked my house and noted that the back door was open to get some air but that the windows were closed and locked because I was a frightened old woman living alone. Mark grasped the obvious: that it was hotter inside my house than out-of-doors. He understood that I was too cautious to unlock the windows. He tested the oxygen in my blood by placing a clip on my finger. Then he tested his blood oxygen and showed me the difference. I agreed to go to triage in the emergency room of the local hospital, Byrd Regional. Young Michael Wilson, a police officer, the son of John Wilson, retired from the maintenance department of the Vernon Parish School Board, drove me to the emergency room. It was too dark to see the damage done to the neighborhood by the hurricane or to observe the vast number of fallen trees and tree branches. It occurred to me that I might have some serious explaining to do if I was seen at 10:00 P.M. in a police car wearing nothing other than a yellow cotton house dress I had worn for three days and nights. However, I was beyond caring about the social niceties. Triage took over with a man checking my vitals, giving me several bottles of cold drinking water, and telling me that I had exhibited serious symptoms of severe shortness of breath, quite visible edema in my lower limbs, and a measured low oxygen level in my blood and tissues. A young lady in a lavender pant and tunic outfit took my vital insurance information.

I felt vastly improved after an hour in an air-conditioned setting and the consumption of several bottles of cold water. I suggested that I return home before seeing the doctor that would entail an expensive emergency room bill. The sweet young lass in the lavender outfit with a blonde ponytail told me firmly but kindly that if I chose not to see the doctor, knowing that I had edema, swelling of the limbs, shortness of breath, and a low oxygen level in my blood along with a history of congestive heart disease, they would not treat me if I returned. I agreed to behave. As I waited, I noticed an elderly woman wheeled in, shivering despite the intense heat. I learned that her symptom was the next step in the process I was in, that of heat prostration on the road to cardiac arrest. Around 11:00 P.M. I was escorted to a booth in the emergency room where a nurse was waiting with a cup and the instructions to produce a urine sample. I couldn’t. Next a young man took blood, and a young female nurse took a chest x-ray. I briefly saw Dr. Charles Krin, emergency room physician, who said he would return when results were back on my x-ray and blood work. I already knew that I was older than everyone in the place. Not

wanting to waste the luxury of an air conditioned private booth, I requested a pillow, turned off the lights, and went to sleep on the examining table, my first sleep in four days. When Krin returned, he advised me that there was water in my lungs, my kidneys were not functioning adequately as I was not urinating, and he planned to correct this. Quickly, before I could ponder my situation or raise objections, he gave me an injection in the calf of my left leg, and his nurse handed me two bottles of water to drink successively, no cheating as she would be standing over me to observe. Results were swift, and I urinated. As Dr. Krin discharged me with instructions to stay well hydrated (i.e. drink a lot of water and pay attention to whether or not I urinated) and to go each day to one of the free breathing rooms, one at Byrd Hospital and one at the Leesville Rehabilitation Center, where one can plug in their own CPAP machine, sit in a comfortable chair, and replenish the oxygen level in the blood and tissues. I thanked him but told him that by not admitting me to the hospital, he was sending me back into the same dangerous environment I had come from. He explained that there was absolutely no hospital bed space, and they were only admitting the most seriously ill patients. I accepted his decision, thinking he had no idea how reluctant I was to enter any hospital anywhere, knowing all too well that mistakes made in all hospitals everywhere were fatal. I thought to myself that the only times in my life that I eagerly sprinted into hospitals were when I was in advanced labor and about to deliver my babies, a very long time ago.

I returned to the lobby of the emergency room where human traffic was still heavy at 2:00 A.M. I initiated a conversation with a tall, sturdy man, elegant even in Bermuda shorts and a tee shirt, an elderly Creole of Color with an aristocratic bearing. He was waiting for his wife to be seen by a physician. He explained that he was among the evacuees from New Orleans and that he and his wife had lost their home and all its contents. They had been staying in a shelter in Lake Charles until they were evacuated to Leesville when Hurricane Rita hit. I knew without asking the unnecessary question that would have been too painful to answer: that they had lost a century's heritage of family heirlooms, the exquisite Creole furniture, silver, paintings as well as the greatest treasure of all, family photographs. Their material roots were swept away in a holocaust. I asked if he planned to return to New Orleans and rebuild. He told me that he wasn't sure what they would do, that he and his wife had considered rebuilding in Lake Charles where they had been treated with unexpected kindness and generosity. I noted that New Orleans was "a life style." Swiftly he corrected me with the statement that it was "a way of life." His wife returned, and they prepared to leave. He said good luck to me, and I said "God bless you," awed by his grace and dignity in the face of having lost so much while retaining his ability to move forward with hope and courage. Weeks later I realized from listening to people from all walks of life and backgrounds, many of whom had lost their homes and all their possessions, that they were grateful their lives had been spared. To a person, they all realized that they had spent their time and money, their treasure, so to speak, accumulating too much "stuff" and that our society was geared totally to consumerism. It took a cataclysmic event to realize that the valuable was in the spiritual world, faith in that not visible to the eye.

As life became quieter in the emergency room, the pretty young woman with the blonde ponytail, wearing the lavender pants and tunic, called the police to take me home and then sat next to me to visit. She told me that just hours before my arrival, Byrd Hospital had recovered their electricity and water, that they had been operating for the previous sixty hours on an emergency generator. Electricity was provided only for the most seriously ill. Their water supply was cut off, causing the same problems I had at my house of flushing human waste but on a vastly increased scale. Not only had the emergency room been flooded with the elderly such as me whose body systems were shutting down in the extreme heat as well as with accident victims, but they had also been inundated with people seeking an air- conditioned haven. She had been on duty since Friday, as had many of her co-workers, catching a cat nap whenever possible for a few minutes in a temporarily vacant room.

Police Officer Michael Wilson arrived to take me home. Regardless of how many hours he had worked, he and his patrol car were immaculately clean. As he carefully tucked me into my seat as if I were the most precious cargo in the universe and closed the passenger side door, I confronted him with the query if he had taken careful notice of the attractive young lady in the lavender outfit with whom I had been conversing when he arrived. He swiftly responded that indeed he had. I told him that she had impressed me as a fine young woman whose name I unfortunately did not know. However, since he was a young man starting out on life's long highway and would need a good and true partner, I suggested that he use his social skills to create conversation with her on his next trip to the emergency room with another elderly person and to ease into an invitation to an after-work coffee. He told me that not only had he been aware of the young lady of the lavender attire, but he also agreed that I had sized up the situation correctly. Then he told me that he had been on patrol the night of the hurricane and was frightened that the wind was going to sweep him and his patrol car off the road. I realized how proud he was of his police badge and his dearly won position on the Leesville police force. What a brave young man, I thought to myself. I would not have ridden in any vehicle, including an armored tank, the night of the hurricane even had I been promised an eternity in heaven with a seat on the right hand side of God!

As I entered my house at 3:00 A.M., I said a quick prayer of gratitude that I had not run into any school board member or school official as I, wearing only a thin yellow cotton house dress that I had not changed for four days, had been delivered in a police patrol car to and from a rural hospital in the middle of the night. I thought of my elegant, aristocratic mother, may her precious soul rest in peace, who would have gazed at me with that deep hurt look in her eyes and whispered that I had been raised in a great home with my own governess, given every possible advantage including a world class education, to end up functioning at this level of behavior. Oh well, you gotta do what you gotta do.

Tuesday, September 27: Mark Phillips from the Leesville Fire Department knocked at my front door at 10:00 A.M. My daughter had telephoned him again from Utah and indicated how worried and concerned she was for my safety. Mark told me that the chief of the fire department had approved a plan whereby I could stay in the vacant Trailway

Bus Station now owned by the Leesville Fire Department. The electricity and water were operative in that setting. There was an old sofa on which I could sleep, several folding tables, and some chairs. Mark had the wisdom (or had been prepped by my daughter and son-in law) to use the correct carrot: I could bring my books and read and write to my heart's content in splendid isolation. He cautioned me to bring my CPAP machine as he did not want me to be without the life-giving oxygen for too long a period of time. Instinctively I liked and trusted this great bear of a man who, with incredible kindness and insight, was handling me like a skilled diplomat. Mark did not have to issue the invitation to the Trailway Bus Station twice. I asked him to check if my car was still operative which he did. Up to that point, I had been too frightened to leave my house alone to check on anything. He checked the car and demonstrated that it was working. With a surge of energy that I could not believe I still possessed, I changed into a pair of khaki slacks and a white tee shirt, packed up my CPAP machine, grabbed an unread book, and drove over to the fire station with alacrity.

I entered the den of the firehouse, a large room with a kitchen and eating bar at one end and two sofas in the L position at the other end and a television/VCR at the apex. Immediately I was greeted with great warmth and kindness by the men of the Leesville Fire Department and some of their wives. Mark Phillips was there to take charge of me as clearly he had demonstrated skill in handling the elderly curmudgeon I have become. Len Edwards gently helped me set up the CPAP machine so that I could start to use it immediately. A third person whose face I can not bring into focus delivered glasses of ice and water to me. I felt that I was at home and lapped up all their affection like a hungry puppy. I spent the entire day on one of the sofas, seated next to Carol Singletary, wife of Dan Singletary, watching slapstick comedies, movies on DVDs, and laughing with her until my sides ached. The men of the fire department shared their home-cooked dinner with me. I drove to my house at 6:00 P.M. to quickly gather a blanket, pillow, toothbrush and toothpaste, and my medications, seven prescription drugs as well as over-the counter vitamins and minerals. Like Peanuts of cartoon strip fame, I chose as my security blanket the afghan Suzie Frusha had knitted for me for some recent birthday or Christmas. I stuffed all my travel items in a thirty gallon Glad trash bag, clearly not thinking straight as weeks earlier Nita Mallet, a black woman, one of the dearest friends I have ever had, showered me with birthday gifts, including a magnificent name-brand weekender/carry-on piece of luggage.

As I drove back to the fire station, I saw the long line of cars stretching for a half mile, seeking gas from the limited supply at Tobacco Plus, the gas station near my home. These were desperate people but orderly and law-abiding. I did not have enough gas to wait in any line. I saw Police Officer Michael Wilson, still working, cleanly dressed in his uniform and freshly shaven, directing traffic at the intersection of Highway 171 and Boone Street. None of the lights at the intersections worked without electricity. Long lines of cars were also outside McDonald's. Like the other fast food restaurants in Leesville, they did not have enough help to allow people to come inside to eat. However, people were desperate for food. Everyone had thrown out rotten food. No one had electricity with which to refrigerate or cook food. Although KJAE had repeatedly announced that FEMA was offering free MRE's at two major locations and the Southern

Baptist Conference was giving away free meals in styrofoam boxes at the First Baptist Church, Vernon Parish residents, for the most part, were proud and independent people who despised taking free hand-outs. On my travel back to the fire station, I did not dare deviate one centimeter from the course as my gas supply was shrinking, and I had no idea when I would be able to buy more.

Laurie called me at the Leesville Fire Station at 7:00 P.M. to tell me that she and her husband, Gary, my son-in-law, had spoken to Mark Phillips several times throughout the day. Mark had spoken to officials at CLECO, Central Louisiana Electric Company and had learned that the power lines would be down for another seven-to-nine days as the damage had been most severe in the Lee Hills area. Laurie advised me that they had worked out Plan A and Plan B. Plan A was to stay at the Trailway Bus Station for several days until the weather cooled off. Plan B was to buy a generator and window air conditioning unit for my house (I already have central air and heat but that only works when electricity is available). I sweetly ignored Laurie's plans for my life. I thought to myself that I had never heard of a home generator before Hurricane Rita, had no idea whatsoever how to work a generator, knew it would be impossible in this crisis to find someone to install it, wondered how it was possible to install a window air conditioning unit when my windows opened sideways rather than up and down, yadda yadda yadda. I knew I was much too happy and content at the fire station to do anything to precipitate my departure.

At 10:00 P.M., I left the fire station and walked across the street for the first of five nights at the vacant Trailway Bus Station. I slept fully clothed in my khaki slacks and white tee shirt on an old sofa with my head propped up on a pillow and the arm of the old sofa and Suzie's hand-knitted afghan wrapped around me. During the five nights at the vacant Trailway Bus Station, I slept more soundly than I had since my youth. I did not have a single instance of my recurrent nightmare since moving to Vernon Parish that I was lost in a strange city where all the guideposts were unfamiliar, and that I was desperately and unsuccessfully trying to find my way home. I was aware that during the first several nights, Mark Phillips and Len Edward, both trained emergency medical technicians, had quietly checked that I was still breathing and was safe. Their vigilance was performed while they were still on duty and going on around-the-clock calls to rescue other hurricane victims.

The large empty hall of the Trailway Bus Station was the size of a large formal ballroom and reminded me of the great halls from my youth where young ladies of my parents' social class were introduced to society as available for marriage. I especially remembered the ballroom of the Bellevue Stratford Hotel in down town Philadelphia, around the corner from the Philadelphia Academy of Music. My parents had given me a world-class wedding with an international guest list in that ballroom in June, 1956. In hindsight, that elegant and extravagant event in exquisite and matchless refined taste was my expulsion from the Garden of Eden, an incredibly happy, innocent, protected, and privileged childhood and youth, on a country estate we called "Bobalum," (Bo for Bobbie, my mother's nickname, ba for Barbara, my older sister and only sibling, lu for Lucy, and m for Milton, my father). As I, wearing a size eight designer gown, the traditional white

status symbol that announced I had succeeded in reining in my raging adolescent hormones, walked down the aisle on the arm of my father who had adored and spoiled me, I saw my equally beloved black family, my parents' household staff who had also nurtured and taught me for my first two decades. On the front row next to the seats reserved for my parents were Lil Staley, the housekeeper and cook, Cora Thomas, the laundress, Diamond, the chauffeur and handyman, and L.D., who did the heavy cleaning. Mr. Bach, the white gardener, had declined. Miss Peters, my governess, had been dismissed with a generous severance package in 1940 as it was impossible at that time for a non-Jewish German national to be part of my parents' household. The carefully chosen prince/groom, a graduate of an elite boys' prep school, Yale B.A., '54, and Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, M.B.A., '56, who stood under the chupah with Howard Johnson, Jr., one of his groomsmen, in a white satin yarmulke, awaiting me with an expectant smile, left permanently twenty-seven months later when Laurie was age ten weeks.

Out of a disaster that almost destroyed me came the greatest blessing of my life, Laurie. She taught me the most basic lesson in life: to love another human more than myself, to put another's needs above my own. It had been a fifty-year journey from 1956 to the deep understanding that the only mansion worth seeking was the one built within and furnished with hard won spiritual lessons. My journey has always been blessed by unexpected angels.

Wednesday, September 28. I had quickly settled into my new home. Shortly after I awoke and had finished brushing my teeth, there was a gathering of men in the Trailway Bus Station, conferencing in a circle of chairs. Later I learned that FEMA was exploring the possibility of building showers in the abandoned bus station in order that FEMA fire fighters from Ruston, Louisiana could use the building as a dormitory. Later in the week the National Guard was exploring the possibility of installing showers so that out-of-state guardsmen could use the building. Nothing came to pass while I was a resident.

I drove home to pick up some items and make some phone calls. I was impressed by the long lines outside the gas station as well as the clean-up effort going on in every neighborhood I passed from my direct route between the Trailway Bus Station and my house. I dared not deviate one block from the route as gas was becoming scarcer and scarcer. Mark Phillips came by with Dan Singletary in a pick up truck to warn me not to stay in my house too long as it was another hot day and the interior of my house was even hotter. I made my long distance telephone calls from my house, leaving messages throughout the campus of the University of Southern Mississippi and finally reached Dr. Bradley Bond, director of history graduate students. Although we have only met by telephone, he had a reassuring manner and a warm sense of humor. Dr. Bond had received Karen's e-mail describing my plight. He quickly brought me back to the reality that I was not the only person affected by a hurricane. The hurricanes had hit Hattiesburg, USM students were also without electricity and water, and that he had lost his home to five fallen trees. With sympathetic and empathetic humor that reassured me, he asked me why I was afraid they would abandon me after a hurricane when they had already stuck by me for so many years on this dissertation. We discussed my proposed schedule for

completing the dissertation. He inquired whether there was any immediate help the university could offer me which I refused, telling him how well I was being cared for by the fine firemen. He conveyed his confidence in my ability to prevail by saying that I should mention these firemen with great affection in my acknowledgements when my dissertation was published as a book.

As I was leaving my house, Daniel Lewis, who had been my next door neighbor for more than a year but whom I had never met, came over to say he had some extra bags of FEMA ice that he would be glad to give me if I could use it. I snapped up the offer, and Mr. Lewis put the ice in my car. He told me to telephone them if I needed anything.

When I returned to the fire house, I gave the ice to Stacy (married to Rhonda who is a beautician at Billye's Barber Shop but I don't know their last name) who was barbecuing meat outside. Mark Phillips showed me where I could take a shower, in a bathroom off the chief's bedroom that had a door that led to the dormitory where all the other firemen slept. I realized that I had forgotten my bath towel. Mark quickly said that I could use one of the men's towels, and he would replace it from his home supply. He explained that he was going home for two days as he had been working around the clock since the night of the hurricane. He said that my daughter, Laurie, had asked him in their last conversation whether she should come to Leesville to take me back to Utah. I said that it would be impossible to get here now, given the situation, and even more impossible to get out. He agreed and said that his wife, Tammie, and their three-year-old daughter who have been staying in Shreveport with his wife's sister were returning to Leesville to take care of him despite the lack of electricity and water in their neighborhood. Mark had earned his emergency medical technician certification on his own time and dime, has three other certifications in emergency medical care, and took a major pay cut to move from the fire station at England Air Park to Leesville where he now earns \$26,000.00 per year. On the night of the hurricane, he and the other firemen, usually working in teams of two, had gone on rescue calls that the private ambulance companies in the area had refused to take because the driving was too dangerous.

While the firemen continued on their around-the-clock missions of rescue, although they are only funded to put out fires, I had another perfect day, watching slapstick comedies on DVD's with Carol Singletary and feasting on the meat Stacy had barbecued along with a cake with pink icing his wife, Rhonda, had baked. The black female receptionist brought enough meals in styrofoam boxes from First Baptist Church for all of us to have an evening supper. I met a fine black family, Marvell and Roxanne Bowman and their ten-year old son, who looks exactly like the father he clearly worships. Roxanne and their son were visiting to have dinner with Marvell who was on duty. I observed that it was the common practice for the wives to bring the evening supper and the children to see their fathers who worked long round-the-clock shifts. Also, I noted the total absence of racism. Marvell has worked for the fire department for more than ten years and was and is well liked and highly respected among the men. He stands tall with a head held high, deservedly so. I immediately joined the ranks of his admirers. This fire department is not only equal opportunity in employment but also rescues victims of all ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds.

Thursday, September 29. I slept late this morning and did not arise until 9:00 A.M. I was completely relaxed and comfortable in this setting, although I had nothing with me other than the clothes on my back, a change of underwear for when I showered, my toothbrush and toothpaste, an afghan, a pillow, and a book I never opened. The hurricane had certainly demonstrated that one did not need all the possessions one accumulated.

A retired fireman in a wheel chair rolled himself over to the Trailway Bus Station to see how I was doing. His sermon included the need for me to purchase a generator and air conditioner in order that I not be dependent upon others. He announced that he was unmarried, comfortably fixed with pensions from the military after service that included Vietnam tours and a pension from the fire department, drove a 1999 Cadillac, and was planning a custom-built house with a six-thousand dollar generator on his to-buy list. The man was toxic with his anger.

Hungry and not wanting to sponge anymore on my already too-generous hosts, I drove to Teriyaki Wok, a small Chinese restaurant, for lunch. Dr. Guru Ghanta, general surgeon, and Dr. Alla, allergist, were lunching there. I took it upon myself to join them and tell of my miraculous rescue. Both agreed that my earlier circumstances could have led to cardiac arrest. It had just occurred to me that morning to try to write about my experience in a personal way. Both thought it was a good idea that the firemen receive long-overdue recognition. Dr. Alla though it was important to counteract the racial hatred stirred up by films on CNN of blacks looting in New Orleans. I had a leisurely lunch. I always enjoy visiting with Shu Pang who manages the restaurant with her husband, Hu. Their sons, Gordon, 10, and Jackie, 7, often completed homework there under their mother's watchful eye. On the occasions that my first fortune cookie was disappointing, Shu usually gave me a second. Today's fortune was "you will continue to take chances and be glad you did." I was satisfied with that prediction.

At home I attacked the refrigerator and freezer where the food had spoiled and was beginning to rot and to smell. The water was back on, but warnings issued on KJAE were to boil the water before drinking. I filled four thirty-gallon Glad trash bags with rotten food and hauled them to my car. Back at the fire station, Len Edwards helped me get the bags to a dumpster. Again I was astonished at how swiftly the town's clean-up was progressing and how resilient the people of Leesville were. Law and order had been maintained. Food and water were immediately available to the community by a combination of governmental and church agencies. The entire event was a significant testimony to a model of careful planning and collaboration among the community power structures.

When I returned to the fire house, Len Edwards offered me food and allowed me to turn on the air conditioning in the den and place a funny movie on DVD, "Stepford Wives," on the VCR. I had brought with me a DVD, "Betty Boop and Her Friends," as a small gift and with the hope that Carol Singletary would be there, which she was not. Later in the evening Harold Lafoe came to eat dinner with his wife, Debra. I apologized for having set the air conditioning low and having my choice of DVD on the television and

said I hoped he didn't mind. He said it wouldn't matter if he did. Whenever he saw me, he started to clean: wiping the kitchen counter and sweeping the floor. I liked him immediately and realized I had pretty much taken over the den with my post-menopausal need for a cool temperature as I don't have great thermostat control over my body. My taking over the television remote I realized was my being accustomed to watching on television what I chose in my solitary existence at my house. Not only did I immediately become aware that I was on the road to becoming the houseguest from hell, but I also recognized his anger management technique as the same one that prevailed in my family. When I had lived with a husband and teen offspring that drove me nuts, I cleaned and cleaned and cleaned as a method of fencing in anger. Since I have lived alone, my housekeeping standards have gone to hell in a hand basket. When we were a family before the children went to college, Laurie took walks around the block when I infuriated her. James jogged five miles whenever I hiccupped.

Laurie called me at the fire house around 8:00 P.M. She and Gary think that Mark Phillips, Len Edwards, and Dan Singletary are great men, that I am extremely fortunate that I connected with them, and that they are allowing me to stay at the Trailway Bus Station until the electricity is working again at my house. Laurie was coming down with a flu bug that she said was going around the office where she worked. I knew otherwise, that she had been under extraordinary stress due to my situation. Throughout her life, when she has been under unusual stress for a prolonged period, she came down with flu-like symptoms. I went to sleep that night determined to mend my ways and to become more considerate of others, particularly my hosts who had opened their den to me. It was possible to teach an old dog like me new tricks.

Friday, September 30. Josh Foster, a young fireman in his mid-twenties, came over to the Trailway Bus Station to let me know that fresh coffee was brewing in the kitchen, and I was welcome to partake. I was there in a flash. Dan Singletary was there. I told him about the DVD ("Betty Boops and her Friends") I had brought and had hoped to watch with his wife. He said that she was home resting, that she tired easily after having three strokes last year, but that she had also enjoyed laughing with me as we watched DVDs. I sat down to watch CNN. Marvell Bowman was on the other sofa. The newscaster was describing the remarks of former Secretary of Education William Bennett, also the author of The Book of Virtues, who was quoted as saying the solution to the crime problem in the USA was to abort black fetuses. I knew that Bennett was being quoted out of context but he should have known that the press corps included piranhas salivating for sound bites. I just groaned, "Oh, my God." Marvell rose and walked out of the room. A few minutes later he returned with his wife, Roxanne, who looked stunning with her hair twisted into a French bun, her face carefully made up, and dressed in a freshly laundered and ironed uniform to work at Wendy's, a fast food restaurant which was re-opening that morning but only to serve in the drive-through lane. She and I agreed to have coffee together when "things got back to normal," a goal on everybody's mind. I also wondered whether we would ever meet again and if she would accept my invitation to come by my office where a pot of coffee was usually brewing.

As I walked into the garage where the fire engines were housed en route to return to my quarters, I ran into a young lad whom I learned was doing “community service work” at the fire station. I immediately noticed the cotton stuffed in his nostrils and realized he had nosebleeds as I did. He walked over to the bus station to visit with me. I learned that Jerry Schewe lived in Anococo with his grandparents and had been caught by authorities in the school gymnasium with the wrong crowd during class hours. He was tall and slender. Jerry had the appearance similar to that of a bar-mitzvah boy, the twelve-year-old who spends a year studying after school with the rabbi, perfecting his knowledge of Hebrew and gaining a beginning understanding of Jewish moral law in preparation for the bar mitzvah ceremony and celebration, marking the youth’s acceptance as a member of the community of men. I thought to myself that this intervention was brilliant: this young man needed to model himself after men only a generation removed. This group of men at the fire department was the best possible role model for an evolving spirit and male identity. At that moment in time, I think I might have considered giving the devil a lien on my soul had I known about this intervention possibility, community service with the men of the Leesville Fire Department, when my only son was twelve and all hell was breaking loose because he did not have a male model and felt threatened by my authority (“No woman is going to tell me what to do!!!”).

I spent a delightful hour with Jerry, sharing with him information on nosebleed medication as well as a description of my youth at Abington High School, a half-century ago, when life was simpler and less complicated. I told him that it was also a time when youngsters had less materially, regardless of their family wealth or lack of it, and when the authority of parents and the school was unquestioned. For me, it had represented security and clear boundaries, something today’s youngsters don’t have.

There was something about Jerry that also reminded me of West Point from a long ago weekend. Indeed, Jerry shared that his great-grandfather had been the brigadier-general at Fort Polk in the 1960’s. Recalling the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, I remembered the tradition that pervaded that carefully scheduled 1954 prom weekend, the uniformed parade of cadets, a generation of young men, on Honor Field, and the repetitive theme throughout the three days of planned activities that emphasized “duty, honor, country.” My long ago escort, a young man from Philadelphia, four years my senior, with whom I had played tennis doubles in the Pennsylvania interscholastic tennis championships, was a figure from a watershed in time when it mattered more how you played the game than whether you won or lost. When he was no longer a plebe and became a cadet, we shared a weekend at West Point followed by ten years of annual letters, holding on to a friendship too precious to allow to lapse, until he lay down for his eternal rest in a rice field in Viet Nam. As I talked to this wonderful young man, the next generation, I thought to myself that if I ruled the universe and could establish one moral imperative for leaders of all nations, it would be a mandatory week-long trip to Normandy, France, to Omaha Beach, and to the American cemetery as well as to the other cemeteries of fallen soldiers, generations of the finest.

Throughout the next several days I watched Jerry as he began to model himself more and more after these modern day knights of the round table. One fireman, whose name I do

not know, Jerry shadowed like a young puppy, although his mentor kept him stepping lively with one light task after another. The identification process had taken place like a charm, and Jerry was safely on the road to his Christian bar mitzvah.

I had heard Dr. Gillespie on KJAE state that the Vernon Parish School System would meet the payroll today. There had been apprehension as not all Louisiana parishes were able to do this. I had heard on KJAE that St. Bernard Parish in south Louisiana was not able to meet payroll. I drove over to the school board central office to pick up my paycheck. Throughout the years I have chosen to receive my paycheck at the office rather than deposited directly in my checking account. I have always enjoyed the momentary feeling that I had some money even though the reality was that it was spent before it was earned with all the bills I had. I spoke to Jimmy Funderburk at the central office. He told me that the central office staff had been working since Tuesday to make sure that every employee who was not on automatic deposit received by mail a full paycheck on this payday. I also burdened him with a long detailed account of my rescue after which I vowed to myself that I would never again bore another human being with an oral account of my rescue story, knowing full well that they had suffered the same hurricane and aftermath as I and probably with more material damages than I had experienced.

Confident that I would have a paycheck to deposit in my checking account, I drove over to Jack's All Ya Need to buy gas. It was the first time in a week I had allowed myself the luxury of driving so much as a block out of my circumscribed route without an assured outcome due to the scarcity of gas. Quite miraculously, there was gas available at Jack's, an upscale convenience store at the north end of town, and even better, there was no line at that moment so I was able to ease to a pump my 1991 second hand Buick LeSabre with the white paint peeling. I went into the store to prepay and to announce that I had never learned to pump gas and didn't want to learn now. After all, I thought that was my last vestige of ladyhood. A tall, slender, elderly man, missing his upper front teeth, wearing an old tee shirt with some motto on it and old dungarees, stepped forward in a courtly manner, announcing that he would "gladly assist the lady." As he pumped my thirty dollar quota of gas, Larry Kitchen, as he introduced himself, gave me a truly wonderful toothless grin and said: "We have to help each other at times like these." Amen, brother, I thought.

As I took a side road back to the Trailway Bus Station, I drove by a small home with a particularly huge tree across the roof. While it was not unusual to see houses with trees on the roof, this house had one of the most gigantic trees. Also, I remembered the house which I had photographed a year ago as the residents flew the confederate flag from a standard by the front door and had a yard full of toys for their pre-school children. I also knew from the evaluations we did of their children that the father was a graduate of hard time for armed robbery. It was the perfect photo of how a mythology of racial supremacy was passed from generation to generation, ad nauseam. I never believed that the hurricane was God's wrath, but I could not help but say "amen" to the damage to that particular house.

Driving home to await the mail and my paycheck, I was pleasantly surprised, in fact amazed, at how quickly the clean-up effort had progressed. I noticed that under the

driveway arch of the fellowship hall at St. Michael's Catholic Church were huge piles of clothes. A home-made sign read: "Free clothes. Help yourself." I knew as an absolute fact and truth that in this town every church of every denomination had been helping hurricane victims, but I only mentioned what I directly observed. As I drove down Highway 171 South, the traffic lights still were not working so extreme caution had to be exercised. The most dangerous intersection was now Highway 171 South and Fertitta Boulevard where the traffic light was not working. Police officers were at every major intersection directing traffic. There continued to be long lines of cars waiting to place an order for food in the McDonald's drive through. The parking lots of Lowe's and Walmart were jammed. As I drove onto Allison Street, I was duly impressed by the immaculate yard at Myra and Jesse Tilghman's house. They had gathered and removed a veritable sea of tree limbs and debris.

The mail came promptly, and the desired paycheck was there. Not only did I receive my correct pay, but also I and everyone else received the small promised raise. I was most appreciative, although the monthly raise only covered the July first increase in my medical insurance monthly premium plus a few dollars. Elated that I had gas in my car and a paycheck in my wallet, I treated myself to lunch at Wagon Master Steak House. Their cable television was still off. Paul Estep, the manager who always saw to it that I was pampered, told me that he and his wife had suffered minor damage to their newly built home, nothing compared to his brother-in-law who lost his home and its contents in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Back at the fire station, Mark Phillips had returned from his rest and recuperation at home. Marvell Bowman and Mark repeatedly and patiently explained to me how to use a generator. It was as if they were speaking in a Martian language. I had brought another DVD to add to their collection: "Superman," a series of cartoons. Later that evening, Mark Phillips and Josh Foster were in the den, having come in to relax and watch television after an exhausting number of rescue missions. I decided that I wanted to do something truly wonderful for them, give them a very special treat: I would tell them about my doctoral dissertation. As I described the story of Cammie Henry, Melrose Plantation, and the literary community she established there, I noticed that they were dozing off. I reminded them that I was telling a gripping tale and that they should be hugging the edge of their seats in anticipation of what was coming next. I noted that they did not seem to be paying attention. Mark stood up and said that he had to take a shower and go to sleep in the men's dormitory. He looked at me sheepishly, said he had once had a job that included delivering coca cola to the drink machines at Melrose Plantation, told me that he didn't usually like to read books but promised to read mine when it was published.

Josh brought out his ten inch by twelve inch color photos of landscape jobs he had done in DeRidder, Sulphur, and Lake Charles. His work was exquisite. He had designed beautiful gardens and built magnificent fountains in pools, quietly elegant. He also played the guitar which he brought out. Josh was also in his mid-twenties, about 5' 10", stocky, had dark black hair and eyes, and was quite handsome in a very masculine way. He told me that he had owned a landscape business which he gave up to join the fire

department. Marvell had told me earlier in the day that what they did there was from the heart, that it was certainly not for the money that they earned. He joined Josh and me as we watched television. The discussion of my dissertation was over, and no one seemed to want me to resurrect it.

Saturday, October 1. Today was warm and muggy. I drove home to pick up my mail, water the house plants, and get a change of underwear for when I showered. Strangely, it did not occur to me to get a change of clothes as I had been wearing the same khaki slacks and white tee shirt since Tuesday. This behavior was not characteristic as I am usually meticulous about my grooming and always changed outfits every day. The only explanation possible was that I was hoarding my clean clothes, unsure of when the electricity would return so that I could use the washing machine. I was also completely focused upon what I had to do to survive and trying not to make mistakes that would create more problems in the current situation, especially to take all of my medications and not to eat anything that would provoke an attack of Crohn's Disease (a chronic and degenerative disease of the gastro-intestinal tract).

I deposited my pay check at the branch of Merchant and Farmers Bank by Cinema Six. There I ran into Myra Tilghman and congratulated her on her immaculate yard. She said that she had done all the work herself and has since felt "awful." I thought to myself that I bet she did feel miserable as the heat has been scorching, and the lack of electricity in Lee Hills meant no air conditioning. I did not dare tell her that I was staying cool at the Trailway Bus Station, courtesy of the fire department.

I drove to Market Basket with the thought of contributing something to the kitchen at the fire station. I had no idea that there was a major football game that afternoon. For the first time ever, the shelves were empty. There was absolutely no meat or fish. I bought two dozen beautiful red apples, and the last three bags of doughnuts. I saved the \$13.41 receipt as one of the local Leesville witches was sure to claim I bribed the fire department to allow me to use the Trailway Bus Station. Because there was very little to do in this town for entertainment, gossip, often quite malicious, has been a blood sport. The shrews never found the real material. I ran into Charlie Draughn, manager of Market Basket. He told me that he was unable to keep the shelves stocked fast enough, unable to find enough hired help. Charlie and I began our cordial acquaintance about a year and a half ago. I shopped for groceries once a week after work when I was usually dogged tired. One night I got home to find that I had paid for a carton of low-fat cottage cheese but it was not in my bags. I called the store, spoke to Charlie, described the error, and was told I could come in at my leisure to pick up another carton of cottage cheese at no additional charge. I told Charlie that I was exhausted, had planned to eat the cottage cheese for my dinner, and if they had one ounce of character, they would deliver the cheese to me since the error was theirs! Charlie just laughed at my hissy fit and had the cottage cheese delivered within fifteen minutes. In return I gave him this past Christmas a large, twelve inch by twelve inch 2005 calendar with monthly pictures of post-impressionist French paintings. Charlie, bless his heart, has left the calendar up in his non-enclosed office for all to see and get a quick lesson in art history of the modern period.

When I returned to the fire station, I found several of the men sprawled on the sofas watching the Louisiana State University v. Tennessee football game. The ceiling fan was on. I instinctively knew that I dared not say a word, nor even try to turn on the air conditioner, nor touch the TV remote. I asked young Jerry Schewe to bring in the groceries. When he heard the word “food,” his legs sprang into action as in an involuntary reflex. As I arranged the doughnuts on three dinner plates, Jerry gazed at the food with the same “concentration camp survivor” expression that James, my only son, once had as a teen. I knew that Jerry could gobble the food in a heartbeat so I told him to come back in fifteen minutes. I slipped into my gender-proscribed role and served successive plates of doughnuts and apples to the grown men in a trance over younger men on television racing up and down a field on a scorching hot day to catch a pigskin ball and then fall on top of each other. One jolly old man who loves to hang out at the fire station, probably in his eighties, toothless, said: “There’s a real nice lady.” I think he meant that I knew my place.

I walked across the street to the Trailway Bus Station to take a long afternoon’s nap on the sofa. I had gladly surrendered in the battle of the den, the control of the air conditioning and the television, and had left a small offering on the kitchen counter in penance for my past sins, a two DVD set on the NASCAR 2002 Winston Cup championship.

Several hours later I awoke to find a small battalion of ants marching toward the sofa. All week I had focused excessive attention on not doing anything to further incapacitate myself in a situation where medical resources were already over taxed. I had made sure that I had taken all my medications, had done nothing to exacerbate the Crohn’s Disease, had not lost my car keys, and so forth. I knew that ant bites could be serious. There was no bug spray so I had to use whatever was in that deserted bus station. I self-talked into thinking like General Douglas MacArthur planning the landing at Inchon Bay, Korea. In this mode, I found a gallon jug of DMQ damp mop disinfectant cleaner and poured the stuff over those suckers. As I gazed over the battlefield, I saw that the ants were still approaching and climbing on a chair with a bag of two MREs that Marvell Bowman had given to me. I grabbed the bag, ran across the street, and handed them to Stacy, announcing that they were filled with ants. Stacy sent Jerry, the young knight of the round table in training, with insect exterminating powder and instructions to cover the chair in the Trailway Bus Station, to stamp out permanently the enemy invaders!

Later Kyle Bush helped me to file a FEMA application on the computer in the dispatch room for the purchase of a generator and window unit air conditioner in order that I not be displaced again by the next hurricane. While we were working, his wife called for the nightly routine of his good-night to their children. Another emergency call for help came in, and Stacy and Josh went out on a rescue mission. Kyle told me how the men had gone out on rescue missions during the night of the hurricane, missions that the private ambulance companies had refused due to the dangerous conditions, and how the firemen had volunteered to expose themselves to real peril. Theirs was and is a job of long hours, low pay, and often dangerous conditions, which has cost several of them painful divorces. I told him how greatly I had come to admire this unique band of brothers. He said that

there was a strong bond of loyalty among them. He knew that if he or one of his family members became ill or incapacitated, the men would take turns coming by his house every day to check on them, bring whatever was needed, and do whatever needed to be done. I said that I believed him, that these men would do that. I told him that I had known very few people who would do that for me, that I have usually been on the giving end. I also told him that this experience had been unique for me, that I had been given what I needed without being made to feel obligated, humbled, or inadequate. Hopefully he will remember that I said this band of brothers will always be held with love in my heart and as an ideal in my soul that I shall try to follow.

After a quick shower while all the men were out on missions, I tip-toed into the den at 8:45 P.M. where some of the men were sprawled on the sofas watching a boxing match. I attempted to gingerly and diplomatically introduce the fact that at 9:00 P.M. on ABC was a re-run of the Tuesday introductory program of “Commander-in-Chief,” a fictional story set in modern times of the first woman president of the United States of America. Wouldn’t everyone want to watch it? These men were ready for me and for this situation. Stacy cavalierly ushered me into the dispatch room where there was a small television. The room had already been cooled to a freezing level, I assumed for my benefit. He set the television to the channel I wanted, placed a chair in front of the screen, and dashed back into the den before that particular boxing round was over. I can not remember enjoying a television production as much. The television series began with Mackenzie Allen, vice-president, stepping into the presidency after her predecessor was felled by a stroke. The malevolent speaker of the house, Nathan Templeton, portrayed brilliantly by Donald Sutherland, failed in his efforts to get her to resign and then set out to destroy her. It was political drama at its very best. I felt as though I were seated front row center at the Shakespeare Globe Theatre at Stratford-on-the-Avon, outside London, watching a production of Henry the Fifth performed by the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company. Young King Henry, recently ascending to the throne and shedding his adolescent mentor, Falstaff, gave the first clue that he was to become one of England’s great kings as he addressed his troops before the fifteenth century battle of Avignon. He addressed the men as “we band of brothers,” and they rose to the challenge from an inspired, great leader as they raced across the fields of Avignon and defeated the French. When the performance was over, I strolled through the den where the men were still watching the boxing match. They were as in a trance. Although these men were and are still my heroes, I was grieved that they found entertainment in watching two men, one in purple satin under shorts, one in gold-colored satin under shorts, stand on a wood platform with a rope around it and seek to kill each other with leather gloves. I did not bother to say good-night as no one would have noticed. Happily I walked across the street to my quarters in the Trailway Bus Station. There was literally a song in my heart as I thought, “Thank God, I’m not a man!” Obviously there was not only the marvelous anatomical difference, but men were just wired differently. They enjoyed brute sports, but they also defend, protect, build, and all the other good stuff. I felt such joy that the big boys in the media were laying the ground work for the possibility of a woman president of the U.S.A. in the 2008 election. Somehow the human race might be spared from totally destroying itself by figuring out what the ancients already knew in the tenth century B.C., when they created fertility goddesses as the supreme life power. No

woman would abuse and destroy Mother Nature until there were tsunamis and monster hurricanes, just to mention a few consequences of ravishing the environment. No woman would send her sons to fight in foreign civil wars.

Sunday, October 2. I awoke feeling more rested and refreshed than I can remember. I drove over to McDonald's which was now open for customers to sit down and eat breakfast. Back at the Trailway Bus Station, I spent the day writing about my experiences of the past week. I wanted to be sure to get down all my thoughts and feelings while I still was able to remember. I had had a close brush with death. My daughter's quick thinking had spared my life. I had spent the week in the company of a remarkably fine group of men. I had not met their leader about whom I was curious as I knew he had to be a moral force, spiritually evolved, in order to sustain the loyalty of men of this high caliber. I was writing in great detail as a way of holding this amazing experience forever.

As I wrote, I gazed across the street where the Labby Funeral Home was located. I had attended a number of visitations and memorial services there over the twenty-one years I have lived in Vernon Parish. It was terrifying to think that I almost became a customer. The small office in which I work, the twenty-four people who constitute the Vernon Parish Pupil Appraisal Services, had experienced three deaths between March and August of this year. First, Alice Lack, long time office manager, died in March from a stroke provoked by a hidden brain tumor. Then Martha Anne Maxwell Allen died in June, an educational diagnostician who had everything in the world to live for: a husband of twenty-seven years who still adored her and whom she loved, two adult children who never really caused her any anguish, a beautiful home in DeRidder, and professional respect. Martha and I had worked together as a team on more than a thousand student evaluations over a ten-year period. We worked well together but were never friends that would have lunched together. One week before her funeral, on June 9th, 2005, Martha brought me a huge bouquet of blue hydrangeas from her garden, a first time personal gift, as she said good-bye for the summer, brimming with plans for seashore holidays with family and friends. One week later her funeral took place. She had worked in her garden over the weekend, cut herself, developed a staphylococcal infection, and died. I just could not shake her death off. I kept the flowers on my desk for months, trying to keep them alive by all the wizardry with flowers I had learned over the years. Martha's lesson to me was that no one is promised tomorrow. There is only today, the present, the gift: treasure and use it; make your life a blessing. Then, in August, Joyce Week's only son, thirty-four year old Jaybo, died of congestive heart disease. Joyce, a school bus driver and secretary in our office, returned to work a week after the funeral, never allowed us to see her cry, and moved forward with a grace and dignity that was breath taking. I do not think anyone in this office, myself included, can handle another funeral at this time.

Across from the funeral home is the Agape ministries which I have never been to. The men of the Leesville Fire Department were a living testimony to agape, the ideal of Christian brotherly love in its highest manifestation, the love of God for man, the spontaneous self-giving expressed freely without calculation of cost by the giver or gain to the receiver or merit on the part of the rescued. I had just spent six of the most

memorable days of my life at the Leesville Fire Department, certainly some of the happiest since I've been in Louisiana. I realized that I was trying to use a pen and paper to capture the experience so that I would always remember. These men were an ideal of what a human being could be and could become. Yet they were so human, so much fun to be around, each possessing a wonderful sense of humor, each one of them highly intelligent, particularly in the problem-solving domain, a brotherhood of tolerant, compassionate, mature men. They managed to accomplish much with meager financial resources and equipment. It seemed to me that they were as close as any I had known to the ideal of King Arthur and his knights of the round table. I had always thought of Arthur as a mythic figure, although I had visited the remains of the round table in Winchester, Great Britain. Perhaps Arthur had been real. Perhaps in the apostolic succession, he was here, today.

Next to the Agape Ministries was located the A and C Car Wash. Electricity and water had been available sooner in this part of town than in Lee Hills, which had sustained the most severe hurricane damage. I had observed the people of Vernon Parish using the do-it-yourself car wash from dawn to dusk from the moment water and electricity became available. These people were tireless in their efforts to restore cleanliness. As for me, I have always used the other side of A and C, the do-it-for-me section.

Len Edwards came over to the bus station several times to check on me, to offer to get me food at McDonald's when he made a group run. Instead of eating with the group, I drove to Teriyaki Wok Restaurant for dinner and went home at 5:00 P.M.. The electricity was on and water flowed from the faucets. I worked around the house for several hours to make sure the electricity was on permanently before I knew that it was time to return home for good. At 8:00 P.M. I went to the Trailway Bus Station, gathered my CPAP machine, afghan, pillow, and radio/lantern, put them in the car, and walked over to the fire station with a good-bye gift of another DVD, about World War II battles in the Pacific, and another note on a white index card expressing my gratitude and admiration. Len Edwards was there and I told him how grateful I was and am. Several of the men had expressed concern that the DVDs and the food yesterday would be misconstrued as they are not permitted to accept gifts. Harold Lafoe stated that gifts were not permitted, against the law. I thought I could have a field day with anyone so stupid as to misinterpret \$13.41 worth of groceries and four cheap DVDs given in gratitude to the men who had saved my life.

THE AFTERMATH

On Monday October 3rd I returned to work as did the rest of the school board staff. I wanted to be left alone, did not want to discuss my hurricane experience, did not want to hear that of my colleagues. It was hard to get back into the groove. I was distracted. I found that I was making numerous careless mistakes that I ordinarily never do and had to triple check my work. Also, when I walked from one room to the next, I forgot the purpose, what I wanted to get. I was extremely cautious in driving my car, knowing everyone's nerves were taut, and noted the high number of fender benders taking place. I telephoned Don Goins, pharmacist, about refilling my prescriptions. He told me that this

week he planned to attend the funeral of a cousin in DeRidder, whose body thermostat had gotten totally out of control. I told him that I thought that although there were no deaths directly related to the hurricane, there would be many indirect deaths in the weeks to come that were provoked by the lack of electricity and water during an intense heat wave. The very young and the elderly were the ones who would be impacted the most.

Within the first three days back to work, I saw three physicians on standard pre-scheduled appointments. When I was at Dr. Loi DaiVo's office for my B-12 shot, I told him that I had been seen in the emergency room of Byrd Hospital. He said that I had an anxiety attack. Several weeks later, during an annual check-up, Dr. Vo did two electrocardiograms and added Coumadin, a blood thinner to my medications. The next physician I saw was Dr. Hemant Pande, gastroenterologist. I was being seen for a six month check up for the Crohn's disease. As soon as I arrived, I asked Ruthie Martin, head nurse to Drs. Ghanta and Pande, to get my record from Byrd Hospital for my 9/26/05 emergency room visit. Before the record arrived, Dr. Pande saw me. I told him about the emergency room visit, the week at the fire station, and that now I missed the fire men. Dr. Pande, a truly fine, kind, competent physician, dropped my chart and the hundreds of pages of medical records of my seventeen year battle with Crohn's Disease went sprawling all over the examination room. I had clearly unnerved him. He said that I missed those men but he was not prepared to discuss these feelings. We ripped through a discussion of my medications, and he left in haste. I told Ruthie that I had truly upset the good doctor, an excellent physician from India, probably born into and raised by an upper class family and educated at a very proper British private school. Ruthie laughed, said not to worry, and handed me the medical records from Byrd Hospital, just coming through on the fax machine. I asked her to fax a copy to Dr. Jose Mathews, cardiologist, as I was seeing him that afternoon.

Dr. Mathews was ready for me, and I received exactly what I was seeking: a mental status exam. He had two young residents in training with him, a man and a woman. I told him that I was concerned about my uncharacteristic self-absorption of the past week, the tendency to travel back in time to happy periods in my life, memory lapses, being distracted, and making careless errors. The young male resident asked if I was familiar with Maslow's scale. I said I was, indeed. He said that I knew then that when survival was at stake, one focused all attention on the self, that as one's basic needs and security were met, the higher evolution and fulfillment followed. He was right on target. I wanted Dr. Mathews to review Dr. Krin's Byrd Hospital emergency room chart notes from Monday, September 26th in which he stated my mental status was mildly delusional, memory only fair, and disjointed conversation with the clinical impression of 1) heat stress; 2) chronic congestive heart failure; 3) early dehydration. I questioned Dr. Mathews about the term "delusional". He stated that Krin meant that I was acting like some one inebriated. I told him that I had not had a drink in ten years due to all the medicine I take. He said that was probably what my daughter had found so disturbing and alarming, that I had sounded as if I were drunk. Dr. Mathews noted that had the intervention not taken place, I definitely would have gone into cardiac arrest with an increase in shortness of breath and, later, foaming at the mouth. He noted that I had been extremely fortunate that Dr. Krin had picked up on the early signs. The young male

resident explained that I had experienced hypoxia, an induced mental status change caused by a reduction of oxygen in the body tissues below physiologic level. The young medical resident told me that my observations had been accurate but the symptoms were temporary. I asked Dr. Mathews if I had suffered brain damage due to oxygen loss from the inability to use the CPAP machine for five days. He noted that I was having difficulty with information retrieval, but I had received help in time and was not damaged. He said that I would be fine within a week, as sharp as ever. The young male resident handed me a lollipop and said that I would be fine. Dr. Mathews told me that I still could write a Nobel prize-winning book from my dissertation and to quit the angst.

Laurie called several times during the week that followed my return to my house. I tried to express to her how amazingly fine and outstanding she had turned out to be despite my mistakes and bumbling, particularly during her adolescence when there had been days in which the only thing we agreed upon was that we were never going to speak to each other again. When she told me that even when we were arguing, I had always been her moral guide, it would have been possible to blow me over with the light wind from a feather.

During the first two weeks following my return to my house (I have never considered this building a home, just a pit stop and a storage center), I received dozens of job offers by postal mail, e-mail, and messages on my answering machine from some of the upper South's elite private, public, and governmental agencies providing social services to children and adolescents. As the evacuees from the hurricanes have migrated to the upper South, social and emotional problems have emerged. The need has become urgent for experienced social work supervisors in my area of clinical expertise, particularly those such as myself, who have trained social work graduate students. I have ignored all the job offers, although twenty years ago I would have salivated over the one from Charleston, South Carolina. My first reaction was where were these agencies and clinics twenty-one years ago when I was desperate to get out of this backwater. My second reaction was that their behavior was a form of looting, an attempted brain drain. It took some time before I finally realized that I did not respond to any of the job offers because I was content and wanted to keep my quiet, obscure life, flying under the radar.

And finally, what is the point of this long epic? I travel back to my original purpose, back to the beginning. The setting, Leesville and Vernon Parish, demonstrated an amazing performance of civic and communal responsibility in the face of a catastrophic disaster. There was neither civil unrest nor any crime wave. I was away from my house for almost a week. There was no looting or vandalism. Nothing was touched. The power company and local officials worked day and night to restore electricity. Crews of electrical linemen were brought in from other states. Generators were obtained to restore the water before the electricity was repaired. Strangers helped strangers, regardless of race, which never became a factor. All the churches of every denomination extended themselves. FEMA and the Red Cross did arrive immediately and provided relief. The FEMA water, ice, and MRE's were critically important to many. Cody and Boomer, two DJs at KJAE, Country 105, broadcasted day and night, maintained humor and disseminated crucial local information. Most importantly, these two DJs prevented mass panic. Life slowed down to a pace where I recognized aspects of the rural South I had

hitherto under-valued: the tremendous pride and dignity these people felt as manifested in their efforts to clean their yards and cars despite scorching heat and no electricity for air conditioning, the kindness and generosity to strangers in need, the independence, self-sufficiency, individualism, and self-determination, all of which are, of course, the bed rock attributes of the American character.

Living in Vernon Parish in the heart of the rural Deep South's Bible Belt for more than twenty years has not been easy, not a piece of cake, for an over-educated older woman such as myself with no family within two thousand miles, one who has never been a fundamentalist nor an evangelical Christian, and one who has never been a political right winger but rather a liberal in social matters, a conservative in fiscal matters. This place was the only spot on earth that wanted me twenty-one years ago as I, freshly divorced and having waived alimony, arrived with my youngest child, a boy with a genius I.Q. who gave adolescent rebellion new meaning. It has been a lonely journey during which I have learned the contentment of solitude, to give without any expectation of return, and to expect nothing from anyone. Leesville was the last place on earth where I expected to meet people of the calibre of the Leesville Fire Department. On the surface, they chew and spit tobacco, but I have learned that the most precious people, sometimes angels in disguise, do not necessarily come in Tiffany or Cartier gift wrapping. I also believe that the Supreme Judge of the Highest Court of the Universe has a breathtaking wit and sense of humor as each person eventually gets exactly what they deserve. As Dr. Karen Cox wrote to me after I returned home, "It seems as though God was looking after you." Indeed, I was protected by a circle of angels, a band of brothers, some of the most remarkable men I have known.

The fourteen men of the Leesville Fire Department live in harmony, are co-operative rather than competitive. They share a true sense of community. Their rescue missions are freely given as they are only funded for extinguishing fires. The Leesville firemen do not seek to own or control the world or even to interpret the world according to their light, but rather to save one person at a time, in spontaneous self-giving acts without thought of cost to the giver or to the gain by the receiver, regardless of merit or racial, religious, or ethnic background of the rescued. Despite their good works, these men are scandalously underpaid. Any one of them has the skills to triple their income in a heartbeat by accepting a job from one of the international contractors, such as Brown and Root Corporation, with branches at Fort Polk Army Base. Yet, they do not seek fortune or glory. They are also under-equipped for their rescue missions. They should be driving fuel-efficient vans, at least two, with adequate equipment for medical emergencies for the preponderance of their missions. Save the huge fire trucks for the conflagrations!

Finally, why not look upon this selfless band of brothers, this amazing example of agape love, of Christ-like love for mankind, as a model for our republic. The federal government has a remarkable opportunity at this moment in history to be an example of magnanimous generosity, to rebuild the Gulf coast, the towns of the southern states with coastlines on the Gulf of Mexico. Louisiana is much more than New Orleans, admittedly the most important southern port. The Pelican State is an interesting variety of small towns and communities such as Leesville, which functioned admirably, like steel

magnolias, when disaster hit. Now Louisiana is bankrupt, and a significant portion of its tax base is destroyed. Florida and Texas will undoubtedly be well cared for due to their substantial electoral votes as well as their dominant positions in the Bush kingdom. Mississippi and Louisiana have almost always been the poorer states. Why not end the sectionalism that has marked the region since the Civil War when these two states have been at the bottom of the government dole! The United States of America for the past sixty years has bombed its enemies (Germany, Japan, and now Iraq) back to the Stone Age and then rebuilt them with state-of-the-art infrastructures, roads, housing, hospitals, schools, and government buildings. Why not apply our foreign policy domestically to our own Third World? Why not use a series of natural catastrophes (Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma) to eradicate the poverty, racism, anti-intellectualism, and illiteracy in the American Deep South and to fulfill the Judeo-Christian ideal of the City on the Hill, the American Eden? It is possible with the right imagination. Consider the powerful political, social, and cultural influences that kindness, generosity, and compassion engenders!