

Hurricane Harvey's Lessons Part 1

By
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Hurricane Harvey's Lessons Part I

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As I sat on the phone with my mother in Texas at 11:00 p.m. central on Tuesday, Aug 29th it was clear to me that Hurricane Harvey's water would be coming into her Port Arthur, TX house shortly. By that time, her landline had stopped working due to rising water in her backyard and we were cell to cell. At that point, I knew the horror I'd seen taking place in Houston on T.V. days before, the horror of my cousin being rescued by a friend with a boat from his flooded home, would be her horror.

I had to manage more than a few Katrina flashbacks of walking into my brother's completely flooded home in New Orleans. I had to manage my outrageous fear that something would happen to my mom. I had to manage thoughts of the past, and future so I could be in the present. So I did what I do best – flipped into coach mode and asked her what she needed to do to be safe. She said she needed to take things upstairs – she identified her purse, medication, insurance policies, and her old-school address book. She put her phone in speakerphone mode and put it in her shirt pocket so I could “be there” with her.

My mother is 82. She has COPD, two knee replacements and other arthritis. She went up and down those stairs as if she were twenty years younger. Adrenaline is a youthful elixir when you need to move swiftly and with strength you don't usually experience. She was less winded in this aerobic workout than walking fast at the mall.

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Just before midnight, she saw the water coming in from all directions – front door, side door, backyard door, the fireplace, floor-level windows. The inside doormats started floating.

Enter **The Dragon** called my **Chief Operating Officer of Control** – Cortisol ripped through me, my body shook and every muscle in my body was tensed. My Chief Operating Office of Control Mask was having a screaming hissy fit that I wasn't there to take over and rescue. She loves to make me think **ONLY I** can fix things. She loves to make me think **ONLY I** will make things okay. She is full of bullshit. I took a deep breath to acknowledge my COOC, which allowed me to breathe deeply two more times, which allowed the shaking to diminish, which allowed me to lean into faith and say, "Mom, we are going to get through this. I am here. What else do you need to get before *you* go upstairs?"

She made several more trips up and down the stairs to turn off lights, and grab up a few last items like her phone charger, laptop with precious pictures scanned into it and an extra flashlight as the water rose in her house. On the last trip up, her tears started to flow.

It was time to call 911 to be rescued and pack a suitcase. Her little cul-de-sac street's neighbors called to say they'd put in a call to be rescued. The water was waist deep in their house. Her dear friends a few blocks away had called for rescue and were standing on their dining room table. I told her to keep her phone plugged in as long as power was on.

Earth Angel #1 – Stacy – Mom's neighbor across the street. Stacy told me she would have come to get my mom and taken her to her house, but the water in the street was chest high already. The way she promised she would not leave my mom behind when the rescue boat came made me believe her.

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In the meantime, I was on FB watching the photos come in from friends whose homes were flooding in the wee hours of Wednesday morning. I read posts from panicked friends who are far flung, hearing from their parents of water rising in their homes. Frantic posts rolled through my feed – please – somebody help me get my mom, parents, grandmother – out of the rising waters. We all felt so g-d powerless. It was 2:00 a.m. central.

Then Carly Raines, Earth Angel #2, a FB friend who happens to be from Texas and live in CA like me, messaged me that she was in contact with the Cajun Navy and would get my mom on their rescue list. BLESS HER! She'd downloaded some app and was getting them the info they needed to rescue people. She let them know there was an 82-year-old woman who needed assistance. She put in multiple rescue tickets to multiple sources and stayed up with me until almost dawn in CA.

August 30th, 7:53 a.m. the text came from my mom – she heard the boat coming. We spoke briefly before she went downstairs to let her rescuers in. She asked if she should take pictures and I said no, fearing she would drop her phone. Which is exactly what happened to her friend standing on her dining room table a few blocks over.

Earth Angels #3: The Cajun Navy. Mom had trouble getting the door open against the water and finally got it open with the assistance of one of the men. He went upstairs and got her little bags and put them in the boat. On their way through her kitchen to the side door, he asked if she had something with a handle they could use for bailing. My mother, handbag on her shoulder said yes, and in above-knee rising water, she tugged open the pots and pans cabinet and felt around the floating pans until she grasped the handle she was searching for – the 3 quart Paul Revere copper bottom saucepan, a gift from her wedding shower in 1957. Of all the tasty soups, beans, collard greens and buttery white rice she cooked in that pot over the last 60 years, I think I am most grateful that the Cajun Navy could be helped by it.

I didn't hear from my mom for another two hours. All I could do was pray, pray and pray some more. I was on the phone and texting with family and friends spread across the U.S., letting them know she had been rescued. I was on my bed but had not slept.

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I feel like I need to share at this point: my mother is TERRIFIED of being on a boat. She doesn't get seasick. She does love *looking* at the ocean, loves being on the beach, and loves the salt air. Her inner-ear balance is off and she has the physical experience that she, and the boat are continually rolling over. I knew this fact about her when we were in Hawaii in 1986 and in spite of it she decided to go to Pearl Harbor with my friend Connie and me. She made this decision in spite of having been to Pearl Harbor with my father and experiencing the same sensations. I have witnessed the effect being on a boat has on my mother. It is the effect of needing several Mai-Tai's once on dry land.

She was rescued by the Cajun Navy in a flat bottom, low sided fishing boat. She was the last person on and clung to the back of the boat by the motor. It was still pouring rain. The wind was still howling. Other boats passing by created more than a few waves and whitecaps. When I asked her the next day how the boat ride was, she said, "I've never been so terrified in my life. Or grateful."

When the boat ride ended in the middle of Highway 69, she waded through shin-deep water to where the dump truck waited to take rescued people to higher land. She could not get up the ladder on the back of the truck in spite of trying and trying. A kindly firefighter said, "Sweetheart, we are going to get a pick-up truck over here for you." She stood in the middle of the highway in the pouring rain, her little bags as soaking wet as she, for a half hour until an enormous pick up truck came by. A wonderful Port Arthur fireman picked her up and got her in the truck. She made it to the makeshift shelter, otherwise known as Max Bowl. It was dry and the power was on. She found a chair to sit on and sent me a text telling me where she was and that she was going to try to find her neighbors.

At this point, I burst into tears and began a gratitude prayer to the tune of Amazing Grace.

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She found her neighbors, and they huddled together for an hour or so before their local family members and friends showed up in very tall pick up trucks to take them to their dry homes. At that point, my mama was alone. I was working the phone, FB messenger and texting frantically to get her to a friend's home that was dry, who'd already taken in the rest of their family and another couple. Good news, they would send their son to come get her when he got back from rescuing others ... and it would take another boat ride to get there.

And then, Earth Angel #4 appeared. A man walking by saw my mom, stopped, and said, "You look familiar." My mom replied, "You do, too!" In a moment they figured it out. Aaron is the parts manager at the car dealership my mom has done business with for 30+ years. He said, "Let me take you to my church and get you a warm meal." Mom said she was waiting for her friend's son to come get her by boat after he returned from rescuing others. Aaron said, "I'll come back and check on you before I leave here." He did, and by then, she knew she needed to get out of her sopping wet clothing and eat something warm.

Aaron took Mom to St. Elizabeth's Catholic church in Port Neches. There, young girls in their school uniforms carried her bags inside, wrapped her in a blanket and got her a hot cup of coffee. The church was coordinating to take people to a newly set up Red Cross shelter with cots and showers at a local middle school that was high and dry. Then, two women brought Mom a bowl of gumbo with plenty of spice, which is one of the quickest ways I know to warm up. Gumbo is filled with flavor, love and comfort when you grow up eating it. As Mom slowly ate her gumbo, the two women sat with her and they continued to talk.

Enter Earth Angel #5 – Leah, one of the two women keeping mom company. When she found out Mom didn't have family close by, and that she was a widow, she said, "I want you to come home with me." Turns out, Leah is a widow and couldn't imagine my mama being alone. In the last 72 hours, Leah and Mom have become BFF's, staying up late sharing their growing up stories, talking about their grandparents, marriages, children and everything else.

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Each time I think of Earth Angels Stacy and Craig, Carly, the Cajun Navy, Aaron and Leah's kindness, help, generosity and caring, I well up with tears. I am on the airplane as I type this flying to New Orleans where my brother lives. We will drive to be with my mom tomorrow and begin the process of mucking out our childhood home.

As I drove to the airport this morning, I realized I've not cried many of the tears yet to be cried. I've not let myself drift into the heartbreaking horrors I saw in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike and have compartmentalized them as "The Past" in my brain. I've also compartmentalized "The Future" into a box that not one look is to be indulged in, for panic lives there. I've been in the moment. I've put one foot in front of the other. And with each mile flown, I can feel my resolve to continue to stay present. In fact it has become my mantra.

My COOC has really learned that others do step up, care as much as I do, and can get the job done. And here's the truth I've also had to see: IF I'd have been there in the house with my mom, I'd have needed to be rescued, too. Yes, I could have run up and down the stairs for her, but I'd also have been waiting for a boat to get the heck out of there. And as it was, that rescue boat was full up with the people who live on the cul-de-sac.

Love and Light,

Cat Williford

