

Enduring Hurricane Gustav

"His eye on the sparrow."

by Tom Sylvest, Jr.

2008-2009



Dedication

I dedicate these stories to my wife, Kathleen. She kept me sane, gave me love and forgiveness, and put a smile on my face when I really didn't feel like smiling.

I dedicate these stories to my dad, Tom Sylvest. He has been my enabler.

I dedicate these stories to my neighbors They showed me a shining example of community.

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Prologue

My brother, John, helped proofread these stories. He said that some of the stories were touching and poignant. Many angels appeared before me to help me in many ways when I felt overwhelmed, confused or a bit sorry for myself. John recommended I sprinkle the text with lyrics from the song “His Eye Is On The Sparrow”. I decided to place the lyrics here, in the beginning. As I look back on this tumultuous year, this song applies most aptly.

His Eye On The Sparrow

lyricist Civilia D. Martin and composer Charles H. Gabriel

Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come,
Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heaven and home,
When Jesus is my portion? My constant friend is He:
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

Refrain:

*I sing because I'm happy,
I sing because I'm free,
For His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me.*

“Let not your heart be troubled,” His tender word I hear,
And resting on His goodness, I lose my doubts and fears;
Though by the path He leadeth, but one step I may see;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

Refrain

Whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds arise,
When songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies,
I draw the closer to Him, from care He sets me free;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

Preface

Hurricane Gustav has replaced Hurricanes Hilda and Betsy as the most traumatic storm event in my life. For my wife, Kathleen, this has become the most significant storm event in her life next to marrying me.

An event of this magnitude cannot be forgotten. It cannot be ignored. It must be embraced.

In my case, I learned much from this experience. Gustav has educated me. I didn't want to attend this class, but I had no choice. It was as if God said, "Tom, you may not want to get this education, but you're going to get it no matter what. I'll pay the tuition."

It is said often that God only gives you what you can handle. There were times when I thought this was a bunch of nonsense. I learned something about that adage. He doesn't just give only that which you can handle. He also gives you people who will help you handle it as well. He challenges us to not only manage the situation, but to seek and accept those persons who can assist us with a grateful and loving heart, a sense of humor, and a deeper appreciation of what it is that matters in this precious life He has given us.

I didn't always do that during this time. I am still learning.

It has been difficult to work through the issues which emerged in our lives because of Gustav. Through it all, we have had wonderful family, friends, neighbors, and strangers help us. We are grateful for their kindness and generosity.

These stories are snap shots of special memories from the past year. I still haven't processed everything that has happened.

The first part of this compilation is written in chronological order. It will give you an idea of what was happening in our lives just before and for a couple of weeks after Hurricane Gustav.

The second group of stories is the Miscellaneous Funnies; thoughts, events, and ideas I had during this ordeal.

Some of the special people we encountered and our interactions with them you'll find in the last section.

The restoration of our house is a whole story in itself. I'm not sure I want to write that one.

So enjoy. I hope you will smile.

The Chronology

Monday, September 1, 2008, the United States celebrated Labor Day 2008 without a hitch. Families and friends gathered for barbecues on their day off. The fun for most people was like many Labor Days in the past.

Baton Rouge missed out on the fun and celebrations. Gustav, an expected, but unwelcome visitor, blew into the Capital City. Almost forty-three years had passed since his older sister, Betsy, visited Baton Rouge. While she was a nasty piece of work, her little brother shook and shattered the lives of hundreds of thousands in the Baton Rouge area as she never did.

By Monday evening of Labor Day, most of the United States enjoyed fireworks, listened to concerts of patriotic music, and said good-bye to summer 2008. Baton Rouge and the surrounding communities lay in an eerie darkness and quiet and dreaded the sunrise of September 2nd.

Labor Day night in Baton Rouge found people recounting what had happened to them during the storm. They told their stories by candle, lantern or flashlight. In the flickering glow of emergency illumination Baton Rougeans began writing the history of Gustav.

Every hurricane that hits a population center generates thousands of tales. These anecdotes range from heartbreaking stories of death and destruction to heartwarming narratives of generosity and kindness. Some will bring tears of sadness to your eyes. Some will have you laughing until you cry.

I have a few stories to share. Here they are.

Thursday, August 28, 2008

Aunt Dixie

The Thursday before Hurricane Gustav our family buried my dad's oldest sibling, Dixie Sylvest Moss. She had lived 102 years and had experienced many joys and much tragedy. Her tragedy: she lost her daughter, son-in-law, and grandchild in a horrendous automobile accident. She lived her life past that point with dignity and honor, grace and generosity, humor and a deep abiding faith in her Heavenly Father. Her pain never diminished her giving spirit. I was most honored to be a pall bearer.

One of her ways in the world was to philosophically observe and endure small and large annoyances, inconveniences, worries, troubles, strife, and problems. Among her favorite challenges to anyone complaining about an uncomfortable situation was "In all of eternity, what does it matter?"

I would think of Aunt Dixie's challenge often in the days, weeks, and months to come.

Saturday, August 30, 2008

Appalachian State vs. LSU

We spent Wednesday and Thursday preparing for Hurricane Gustav. We gathered the supplies and made ready for the possibility that the hurricane would come into our area.

By Friday, we felt we had done all that we could do and we could, for a brief time, turn our thoughts to the beginning of the LSU Football Season. Because Gustav was churning in the Gulf of Mexico and southeast Louisiana was well within the “Cone of Uncertainty”, the Appalachian State-LSU game was moved to a 10 a.m. start. For night game people like ourselves, we were as disappointed as most in the stadium. We had not anticipated “Breakfast with the Mountaineers”. We certainly understood the need to get the game out of the way. Fans needed to get home quickly with the prospect of the authorities calling for contra-flows on major highways in the area.



We were very proud of the fans for leaving the game as quickly as they did. Everyone heeded the warnings, picked up their tailgate parties, and hit the roads for home. I recall walking back to the car how deserted the parking lots seemed.



A strange feeling came over me that afternoon. As I witnessed the parking lot emptying and saw the somberness on the victorious fans' faces, I sensed something ominous in the scene. This was not the Labor Day weekend to which we had looked forward. This was something mighty different. What did this harbinger mean? Was it an omen about Gustav? Or was it a portent for 2008 LSU Football fortunes?

Sunday, August 31, 2008

Mom and Dad Evacuate to Baton Rouge

Baton Rouge lies 90 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico. This distance generally has helped Baton Rouge avoid serious threats from moderately sized hurricanes. With no real threat from storm surges, Baton Rouge's concern is the amount of rainfall a storm may bring and associated tornados, gusts, and straight line winds. Rarely has the area experienced sustained hurricane force winds. The 90 miles of land between Baton Rouge and the Gulf usually diminishes storms' winds and gusts.

This experience and these truths have tended to make Baton Rouge an evacuation destination for folks who live south of the city in low lying communities. When a hurricane's remnants strike Baton Rouge we have experienced local flooding and short-term power outages. This means that Baton Rouge for the most part can be up and running within a day or two with goods and services available to everyone in the area.

My parents, siblings, and their families live in areas south of Baton Rouge. Their experiences with past storms, including Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, have taught them to be well prepared for the prospect of having no electricity for weeks. Some have evacuation plans that create purposeful adventures for them. My brother Paul and his family do an "evacvacation". Others prepare to hunker down and shelter in place with their resources. Of course, our home on Brookshire Avenue in Big BR is always available to our families should a need arise.

In this instance, my parents decided it might be best to spend the duration of Gustav with us on Brookshire. Even though my parents are relatively healthy for their ages, they do have certain infirmities, medication needs, and limited mobility. I was honored and eager to have them stay with us. They had taken care of us so many times in the past. Here was a storm and I could return the favor.

We were also happy to house my sister, Catherine, her daughter, Caroline, and her mother-in-law, Mrs. Schaff. Sunday evening found our home occupied by seven members of our family ready to watch the passing of Gustav.

Our logic seemed sound. We felt certain that if Baton Rouge lost electricity, we would not be without power for very long, only days instead of weeks.

Monday, September 1, 2008

Gustav Arrives

Early Monday morning Gustav moved on shore. I got up early, made coffee, and drew a cartoon to send to my TigerToons e mail list. The cartoon I drew depicted me in a LSU purple poncho crouching down against the winds and rains with the captions “Hunkered Down” and “Enduring Gustav”. Little did I know this was my last Tigertoon for the football season. Some people said I had a premonition of what would happen and depicted it in the cartoon. Frankly, all I expressed was what millions of people in Louisiana were doing.



A photo out side of our front door at 8:27 AM, 9-01-08.

Monday, September 1, 2008

Moving Caroline

About noon on Monday, Gustav pounded Baton Rouge with all he had. Sustained winds of 45-plus miles per hour and vicious gusts accompanied his torrential downpours. It became apparent to us all on Brookshire that this storm had more to it than we had first anticipated. To this point, we still had electricity and could watch the Weather Channel and local news broadcasts to discover what was happening to us.

Around this time, we heard a fairly loud noise. I peeked out of the kitchen window and saw a very large limb from our water oak lying across the sidewalk. The water oak had frequently dropped limbs, branches and stems throughout our 15 years on Brookshire. However, this limb was by far the largest I had ever seen fall from the tree. Given that the tree sits only a few feet from the southeast corner of the house, I became concerned that if the storm did not pass more quickly, the tree and our roof might be in jeopardy.

The room at the southeast corner of our house originally had been a dining room. This is the room our niece, Caroline, had commandeered and settled into for the duration. She was happy as a clam sitting on a blowup mattress with her iPod, laptop and books. The fallen limb changed all of that. I entered her comfortable domain and sharply told her to gather her things and move out of the room immediately. Without complaint and a little in shock, she relocated her camp to the Den.

I don't know what possessed me. It wasn't a premonition. It was simply a judicious decision.

Monday, September 1, 2008

In the Attic

A lull in the storm came about 1:30 PM. The winds relented and the rain became a drizzle. We could see through the windows individual shingles lying about the yard and patio area. We decided to survey the damage to the roof. We found a large swath of shingles and felt paper had been blown away from the roof directly over the Den. The sheathing was exposed. This caused me concern because with additional rains our Den's ceiling would be threatened.

The good homeowner that I am prompted me to survey the area damaged from the inside, namely the attic. I went into the attic and could see the sky through a small gap in the sheathing. Water had begun to soak the area beneath the gap. I certainly couldn't do a complete repair to the damage at this point in the storm. I could at least minimize the threat from future rain.

Following a brief discussion about the wisdom of doing any repairs at this point in the storm, I decided to attempt some repairs. I gathered some tools and materials and went back to the attic. It was now about 2:30 PM and the storm was quiet.

I got into place to begin my repairs with plastic sheeting, twine and a large container to collect the water. I worked at it for a number of minutes and was just about done when Gustav's fury literally fell upon us.



I reached above my head to position the plastic sheeting and twine to give the water a path to the container below. I adjusted the plastic one last time. Just then, the roof's sheathing moved away from my hands. The remaining shingles fluttered away. A beastly roar surrounded me. A crushing noise and snapping sound filled my ears.

I turned around to the noise as Kathleen asked frantically, "Tom, are you all right?"

I stared down into the foyer and living room, my view obscured by splinters of rafters and joists, slabs of roof and pink insulation, branches and leaves. Very shocked and confused I answered, "Yes, I'm okay." (The time was 2:37 PM, 9-1-08)

Monday, September 1, 2008

Immediate Aftermath

The repairs I had been making seemed unnecessary given the new circumstances. I'm not even sure what went through my brain. I met Kathleen at the bottom of the attic ladder and was consumed with finding out if everyone was okay. Thankfully, no one was near where the tree fell.

We went to the kitchen next to the area where the bulk of the lower tree had fallen. I opened the door to the room. The old chandelier greeted me, lights still on, dangling just below eye level. The rafters and joists lay in a tangle and wires swayed with clumps of pink fiberglass. The damage left me awestruck. The room from which we had entertained so often was unrecognizable. I turned off the light and thought how funny that was. Then I closed the door and made my first emergency decision.

My first priority was clear, we had to get everyone out of the house and to a safer location. It took a few minutes to grab those things we thought we needed. Then our neighbors across the street, Grady and Linda Martin, took our family into their home.

Once we knew everyone was settled and safe, Kathleen and I went back into our house to survey the damage and get an idea of our next steps.

Monday, September 1, 2008

Saving China and Computers

The rain and wind picked up in the time we got our family across the street and the moment we returned to our home. It was clear that we no longer had a home. We had a house, a destroyed house. We had to save those things of our life that we could safely remove.

Naturally, I went to the room where my artwork and computers were. Just as naturally, Kathleen went to the dining room where we stored our China and crystal. Given the damage to the dining room versus the office, Kathleen took the most dangerous area to clear. I wasn't pleased and told her so. She suggested I go to the office and do what I intended and not watch her in the dining room. She was Hell-bent on saving the China and crystal. I was not able to stop her.

We moved fairly quickly. We carried what we could to the far end of the house filling the bedrooms with our salvage. Our haphazard efforts resulted in odds and ends covering floors and beds. Our closets were packed to the ceiling. Working in the rain, Kathleen saved everything from the China cabinet.

I was not nearly as successful. Disconnecting computers as the ceiling sagged with rain-drenched insulation and drywall from the ceiling is not easy. Power cords were everywhere. USB and firewire cords that I ripped from their moorings lay in a spaghetti pile. Peripherals like printers, hard drives, scanners, and card readers were unceremoniously placed under beds, on shelves and where ever there was a free space.

It took us thirty minutes to hastily remove the salvageable contents of our rooms. In the days ahead, more work was required. For the time being we felt we had done all we could do.

The following day Kathleen's family stopped by the house to look at the damage. Somewhere in the conversation someone said, "Kathleen saved China." Our niece, Rebecca, took on a very confused look at that comment. "She saved China? How did she save China?" She thought we meant China, the country.

Monday, September 1, 2008

Filing a Claim

Grady and Linda Martin's home was damaged by a tree also. A tree had blown over and laid itself on their roof. When Kathleen and I returned to the Martins at about 4 p.m., Linda was on the phone. Grady said she was talking to State Farm to file their claim. I got Linda's attention and then placed my claim. I felt good about getting a claim into State Farm so fast and while the electricity and phones still worked.

Monday, September 1, 2008

"It was a tornado"

The winds and rain subsided as the afternoon wore on. There came a point when neighbors began to emerge from their homes to take a look at what Gustav had done to the neighborhood. Most homes had branches and limbs in the yards. Some had large trees laying on their roofs. Some trees had crushed cars. The obvious winner in terms of damage magnitude was our home. I wish I had lost.

Looking about the immediate area it was interesting that many trees were completely unaffected by the storm. However, in the distance we noticed many trees had their upper limbs snapped completely off. As we looked about it appeared there was a line of trees with similar damage. Right across the street a couple of trees completely toppled over. Our tree appeared to have been the end of whatever it was that had happened.

A teenaged son of one of our neighbors visited with us later. He had been in his yard picking up scattered debris when the storm had quieted down. He said he heard trees snapping and looked down the street. He saw a funnel cloud dip down out of the sky and lift our tree straight off the ground and drop it on our house. He said, "It was a tornado."

Monday, September 1, 2008

Champagne in the Streets

Neighbors gathered and visited with each other talking about the storm. Kathleen and I were still somewhat in shock and mighty tired from our rushing about trying to determine what to do. When we could do no more, I visited with our next door neighbors, David and Vicki Pitchford, and discussed next steps. Kathleen had a different approach to the situation. She borrowed a neighbor's tumbler and processed what had happened to us with a little bubbly, salvaged champagne.

I had a little fun at her expense commenting that this event was the first time many of our neighbors had ever seen her. "Baby, they are going to get the wrong idea about you. They're going to think you're a lush."

Monday, September 1, 2008

Next Steps

I desperately searched for my next steps. I simply did not have a specific plan for this unique event in our lives. We're not born knowing what to do. However, I came across many who appeared to have been born with the knowledge. After hearing so many varied approaches from so many varied people I remain convinced no one inherits a gene for next steps.

I had general ideas about insurance requirements but little familiarity with contracting with someone to remove the tree and fix the roof. I was in no position to gather three bids from contractors. I had no way to check out appropriate references as I would have under "normal" circumstances. I tried to use what the claims representative gave me as broad guidelines for proceeding: be safe, take those steps to protect the property promptly, and be reasonable. That sounded reasonable.

As you might suspect, the contractors began to emerge and tour neighborhoods looking for opportunities. The chances to make money lay all about the area. The need to remove the tree and protect the property had to be balanced against the need protect ourselves from unscrupulous contractors. My first few meetings with contractors left me wary. But I had a tree in my house. It had to go before anything else could be done.

In this disaster it appeared that my education, knowledge and experience was woefully inadequate. I also knew I couldn't beat up on myself too much. And almost as important, I couldn't let my imagination get the better of me. I tried very hard to focus on that which was immediately before me. The future was a hazy blur. The present was all too real. The key first step was to gather information and sift through it to discern what was useful and what was a distraction. That was a tough order to fill.

Monday, September 1, 2008

Mitigation

Mitigation became one of those words dropped by almost everyone I came across during the height of our crisis. Mitigation is defined as the action of reducing the severity, seriousness, or painfulness of something. Boy! Did we need some mitigation in the worst way?

With a large tree in our house we obviously didn't have a way to cover the 1800 square foot hole to keep the rain out. We had to watch the rain fall into the house. Mitigation, what a word. I was more into "Fix It."

Monday, September 1, 2008

Prepositions

When one reports a claim about tree damage to one's home it is important to use the most accurate preposition that you can. For instance, to say, "A tree fell on our house," has a very different meaning than, "a tree fell through our house," or "A tree fell in our house."

A tree falling on your house could mean anything. The picture the other person conjures up in their head may bear no resemblance to what happened. They may see a small tree leaning against your house, especially if they happen to be claims people. In our case, the tree had fallen through walls of brick, drywall, joists, rafters and studs. I didn't think to say it that way. I simply had said the tree fell in the house.

Think about it. This could have meant we had a small potted tree in our house and it fell over. Of course, that was hardly the case.

I would recommend arming one's self with as many prepositions that are necessary to draw the proper picture in a claim adjuster's mind. The adjusters on the other end of the phone can't see the damage to your home. These are the fellows who will dispatch field adjusters to your home based on priority in serious disasters. If they don't get an accurate picture, they will act accordingly. It became clear to me that I should have said, "My house is a pile of rumble." Prepositions be damned.

Tuesday, September 2, 2008

The Cigarettes

I had planned to begin my "quit smoking" strategy the week of Labor Day. Well, I was taken off schedule. With the issues before me the last thing I needed was to begin withdrawal symptoms while grappling with the house. However, my good intentions to quit left me with only a handful of cigarettes by the time the storm left.

Neighbors passed by every few minutes it seemed to offer help or food and even if they could get us something at the store. Ronnie Sperlock, one neighbor, pulled up and asked if there was anything at all he could get for us when he went to the store. Frankly, we had been helped so much I couldn't think of a thing.

Kathleen was thinking more clearly. She said to Ronnie, "Sure, Ronnie. Get this man some cigarettes! Pleeeeeeeeeeeease!"

Tuesday, September 2, 2008

Magical Vegetables

Where once we had thought our house to be a safe haven from the hurricane, we now found our home to be a dangerous place. Rafters and roofing material dangled precariously from who knew where. Electrical wiring emerged from soggy insulation and swayed as the winds blew. We had no way of knowing the structural soundness of our home. We could not know what threats to our safety remained. And we still had family members with us for which we were responsible.

Mom and Dad, my sister, her daughter, and mother-in-law were still with us. They had no where to go. We did not know what their homes in Gramercy had experienced. We had precious little information from any of our family members outside of Baton Rouge. I wanted to keep my family safe and get them to situations that were better than that in

which we found ourselves. I also needed to concentrate on what was to be done about our home. I could not do this when I needed to also worry about sleeping arrangements, medical needs, and food.

I found an interesting dynamic when I took in others who needed to escape from harm's way. It was not clear what my role was to be. I began as a host, trying to make everyone comfortable. Obviously, it is not the same as throwing a party, but I fell into that role at first. It seemed natural enough. However, that role dramatically shifted with the tree falling. I am not sure what the name is for the new role I assumed. Someone should look into that.

Thoughts ricocheted off my mind's walls. The stress was nearly overpowering. I wanted to calm down and clear my head. I frantically sought ways to have fewer important things to worry about. I felt guilty thinking I needed to move my family out so that I could contend with the house. I didn't know how to encourage them to find safer places to go. I needed their support, but they seemed as shocked as I. They didn't know what to do either.

By early Tuesday afternoon all of us were in a daze. Each of us was fairly quiet. It was as if we needed to climb into ourselves and process what had happened and what we were supposed to do next. We listened carefully to the radio to glean any information that was pertinent to ourselves. As informative as the radio broadcasts were, not much we heard was useful to us. We wanted to know if Gramercy was okay. We wanted to know if it was safe for Mom and Dad to go home. Mom definitely wanted to be in her own home. She made that clear frequently. I wanted her to be in her own home. I didn't make that point as clearly. I wanted all of them to leave. I selfishly wanted to have them off my hands so I could deal with my house.

We had enough food for a number of days. Food really wasn't a problem. Hot food was a problem. I had turned off the natural gas soon after the event and could not turn it back on. Our neighbors, Pat and Kay Hughes, solved our hot food problem. They stopped by our carport with a delivery of wonderful hot vegetables and a little turkey with gravy. We were so thankful. It was a very bright spot in the middle of our malaise. It took us a few minutes to organize ourselves, but eventually we dove into the hot delights.

An amazing thing happened after we had had our fill of the vegetables. While I sat on the carport thinking about what to do, my sister Catherine came out of the house and announced she was going home. She said she had talked to her husband and that they had electricity and no damage in Gramercy. Catherine hurried up her daughter and mother-in-law and before I knew it they were saying good-bye. At about the same time, Dad had decided he and Mom could go to Port Allen and stay for a while with my niece and her family. Within minutes their plans changed and they decided they could go back to Gramercy. What seemed like a moment, my home had been emptied of my charges. The only sound was the radio. Kathleen and I found ourselves alone for the first time since Sunday evening.

I looked at the vegetables questioningly. I wondered what kind of magical vegetables the neighbors had brought us. They were magical.

Later that afternoon, Kathleen's family came by the house. I had hardly recovered from my family being there and then not being there. Now I had Kathleen's family surveying the damage and commenting on our predicament.

I looked at those vegetables. I wondered. As Kathleen's family finished their tour I asked them, "Would y'all like the rest of the vegetables? We have eaten our fill and this shouldn't go to waste." They agreed. They took the vegetables. They left.

I often think about those vegetables. They were magical.

Later, we visited with Pat and Kay Hughes and I told them the story. We had a good laugh. Later in the week I asked them if they had some kind of food that would bring an adjuster to our home. They said they would try to whip up something.

Wednesday, September 3, 2008

Tree Removal

What does it take to remove a tree from your home? That's not a question I had often asked myself. I don't recall ever thinking I would ask that question in my life. Once faced with the question how in the world was I going to answer it.

Lo and behold, tree removal folks were everywhere. It's as if they had fallen out of the trees, slapped a magnetic sign to their trucks, and began cruising the neighborhood after the storm's wind had barely subsided.

In our case, we had come across a fellow who had the resources and contacts to help us remove the tree. This guy was living in his aunt's home a few blocks away from us. He showed up Tuesday afternoon at our driveway and asked if we needed any help. We did not know the guy, but he made a very good first impression upon me. His concern for our welfare was the first thing on his mind as far as I could tell. We talked a bit and he said he could come back Wednesday morning to remove the tree and maybe help us get after fixing our house.

I didn't know what was happening in other parts of Baton Rouge, much less our neighborhood. I didn't know where I stood or how our situation compared to others. I had to take some things on faith and trust somebody and this fellow seemed very sincere. On gut instinct alone I felt I could go with this guy. I was desperate. I needed help.

I made it clear that I would need his license and insurance for him to start. He assured me that he could produce what was necessary to fulfill my request. He surveyed the damage and noticed some other damage to the roof that he recommended we patch up

or mitigate immediately. I said go for it and before the sun set that day, we had roofing felt over areas where shingles had flown away. Just seeing something happen was a boost to our spirits.

Early Wednesday morning a crew of about ten showed up and began taking the water oak down to size. It was your basic limb and branch removal. It wasn't until only the trunk was exposed that the excitement began. The crew brought out a 5-ton crane truck, hooked the trunk up, and tried to extract the tree with minimal damage to the house. After numerous attempts, it was clear a larger truck was needed. Imagine that. The fellows suggested that the tree was much more cumbersome and heavier than they had ever expected. The supervisor said he needed another crane truck, a much larger one.

We were concerned about whether the crew could get another crane. With all the damage we were hearing about throughout Baton Rouge, I figured the availability of equipment was diminishing with each hour. Even if the crew could lease a crane it wasn't clear that they would be able to get the crane to the property. Between communications having deteriorated so badly and the limited ability to get around Baton Rouge, getting to Brookshire was not certain.

On the misty Thursday morning, the crew was back and they brought with them a 10 ton crane. The crew had grown in size. They were determined to remove the tree this day. Some of the guys worked chain saws that were clearly meant for forestry work. In a few hours, they had whittled the trunk into five or six large chunks. One by one these massive hunks of wood were lifted from our home and placed on the servitude. My goodness, these things were big. They were heavy. They sunk into the clay soil a good six inches. That is heavy.



Over the two days I learned that the guys who were working the project were from Bogalusa, home of the Lumberjacks. These guys had worked Hurricane Katrina in their area and had quite a bit of experience. I'll have to admit, they were good. The crane operator was very good. He would take his time and analyze the shape of the loads, estimate how they might swing after they had been dislodged, and carefully adjusted his approach to avoid causing more damage.

By Thursday afternoon, the tree was gone and we could see what had happened to the house and its rooms. There was still roofing material, drywall, insulation, and splintered studs preventing us from assessing the total damage. Even through the debris, we could see we had tremendous damage. In addition, the house was very exposed to the elements. Everything in the immediate area of the damage and much of the adjacent areas were completely soaked. With more rain, we would experience even more damage.

With the tree gone another set of workers scrambled over the roof and began covering the 1800 square foot hole with heavy-duty tarpaulins. Within three hours the hole was covered. At least the rain would not continue to damage our home and its contents.

We had no idea at the time, but our mitigation efforts were among the first in Baton Rouge. Many neighbors stopped by the house and asked how we had gotten the house protected so fast. Many needed work themselves or knew someone who did. I confidently suggested they speak with our contractor. Many did. I hadn't intended to be an advertisement for tree removal and mitigation services, but that's what seemed to happen.

Wednesday, September 3, 2008

“Be Safe, Be Reasonable and Mitigate as Best You Can”

I had spoken with the State Farm Claims office a couple of times during the tree removal process. I heard their mantra and absorbed it. I was not sure I would be reimbursed for the work done. I didn't know if the costs were reasonable. I did feel I had done what was necessary and followed the claims office's directions. I figured if a battle arose, I was well within what my insurance policy demanded of me and could justify my actions by at least saying, “I plead temporary insanity.”

Thursday, September 4, 2008

Corn Starch

One of the fellows who worked with the tree removal crew developed a problem working in the rain while wearing jeans. It was a bit embarrassing for him. It was bit humorous for me. He began chafing in his crotch, perhaps described best as diaper rash. One of the supervisors approached me and asked if I had some corn starch. I thought that was an odd request. I really didn't expect a survey about the contents of my pantry. The

supervisor explained the problem and I found a box of corn starch for him. The guy went into our utility restroom and applied what he needed. The supervisor thanked me and offered the box of corn starch back to me. I said, "That's quite okay. He can keep it. I think State Farm will reimburse me."



Thursday, September 4, 2008

Dead Bird

Once some of the debris and tree material was removed, we were able to look at the actual damage to the exterior of our house. We surveyed the front of the house and came upon a disheartening sight. A sparrow had found a perch on our shutter and tried to ride out the storm there.

When the tree fell, the front edge of the roof was shattered and the soffit was dislodged. The soffit fell flat against the house as if on a hinge and crushed the bird.



As sad as that was, we were struck by the destructive forces we had experienced. I realized how fortunate, or maybe blessed, I had been to avoid injury in the attic. Here we found one of God's little creatures had not survived. I recalled the passage about "God's eye on the sparrow" from Matthew 10 when Jesus observed:

29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. 30 And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

I had experienced this first hand. I had been humbled. I was to be humbled more.

Thursday, September 4, 2008

Kevin and Chantelle Williams

Kevin Williams from Angie, Louisiana was the licensed tree removal contractor that arranged for the removal of our tree. His crews were very efficient and seemed to work nonstop. On the Thursday when the last big bits of the tree were to be removed Kevin's wife, Chantelle, brought lunch for the crew. I thought that was wonderful.



I visited with Kevin when there was a break in the action. He told me that his wife and he had lost their 13 year-old daughter during Hurricane Katrina in a car accident while evacuating to Mississippi. He said Chantelle was a pharmacist and had lost her business during the storm also.

After our brief conversation, the tree removal crews finished their work and left. I looked at the hole in my house. I saw an inconvenience. In Kevin and Chantelle I saw disaster. I had numerous instances where my problems were made miniscule in comparison. I had numerous instances where everything was put into sharp perspective. Kevin and Chantelle were just the first.

Thursday, September 4, 2008

POD

One of our responsibilities as insurance policyholders was to mitigate damage to personal property. This lofty expectation simply means protect the stuff you can safely. We certainly didn't have enough room in the rest of the house to store items from our four terribly damaged rooms. We needed storage space.



Kathleen had decided to get a POD, one of the storage units that gets delivered to your house and can be picked up for storage at another site. We really didn't expect to get a POD given the chaos and confusion we had heard about throughout Baton Rouge. Somehow, Kathleen got through to the office of PODs in Baton Rouge and surprisingly they said they could deliver a POD to us by Thursday evening.

Thursday came and by 7:30 PM we had a new room sitting in our driveway. These things are big, but when I first looked at it, I didn't see how it was possible to load everything I intended into the thing. Having a POD so soon after the hurricane was really amazing. FEMA hadn't even gotten blue tarpaulins into Baton Rouge by that time.

Friday, September 5, 2008

Good Neighbor Poem

We were presented with an invoice for the tree removal and our frustration with State Farm's procedures began. We faxed the invoice to State Farm Claims as we had been directed. That's when we discovered that the claims office didn't actually receive the fax they told us to send them. The fax was really sent to an imaging center. The imaging center then processed the fax and did whatever mysterious magic they had to do to put it into a format that could be added to our "computer" file. That, we were told, could take anywhere from two to four days. Only then would someone in the claims office review the invoice and decide whether it was proper and could be paid under our policy.

We also learned that when we called the claims office we ended up talking to different people every bloody time. That meant we needed to repeat our stories and requests as many times as there were different people on the other end of the phone. If the cell phone signal became weak and we were disconnected we had to start all over again. Oh, joy!

After having dealt with the claims office numerous times by the end of the week I was about to pull my hair out. I was also pressing them to find out when an adjuster would be sent to us. Their standard response was that the office was creating a disaster team

and they would be set up in the Baton Rouge area in the coming days. Those coming days never seemed to come.

After the activities of the week I was tired. I tried to relax just a little. In my dazed condition I felt creative. I wrote a poem about the Good Neighbor people. I share it with you here.

Good Neighbor Poem

by Tom Sylvest, Jr.
September 2008

There's a tree in my house
But that ain't bad
My carport's soaked
But that ain't sad
All my fine neighbors
Brought us that and this
And of all my good neighbors
State Farm missed the list

They send me my bill
I pay 'em on time
Don't make stupid claims
As a client I'm fine
But when weather strikes us
And lays our house low
State Farm Claims says
"My goodness! Oh! No!"

They say, "Please be safe
And then mitigate"
As soon as I do
They tell me to wait
Tree removal costs
A pretty penny or two
"We might reimburse"
That answer won't do

Claims is patient and kind
While I stand in the rain
They're soothing and calm
Appreciate my pain
They sit in an office
And handle the phone
Understand my plight

But I'm on my own

The winds die down
And the rain goes away
Contractors are finished
But I cannot pay
And so I call claims
They're not authorized
But they have a claim number
That brings tears to my eyes

Adjusters will come
In a day maybe two
Once they're established
They'll come to see you
They must be assigned
And get organized
Your premiums at work
In your disrupted lives

When you call back
They give you a name
A number and code
You begin to feel sane
Adjusters are busy
Claims out the wazoo
But disasters are like that
Policies come due

I don't expect much
Just an adjuster's face
A person who cares
And looks at my place
A someone who's there
To look at my shack
If not, at the least
Who will call me back

I suppose that I'm harsh
Stress does that to men
I thought myself strong
But I'm at my rope's end
My contract is clear
On what I must do
Mister Adjuster
I'm waiting for you

Due diligence done
Mitigation complete
With the stress I'm surprised
I'm still on my feet
All my sweet neighbors
Deserve a hug and a kiss
But State Farm Insurance
Missed my Good Neighbor List

Sunday, September 7, 2008

Karen and Bill Profita and the United Way

Kathleen's childhood friend, Karen Profita, had been named the new Chief Executive Officer of The Capital Region United Way. We were very happy for her and knew her well enough to know that she would do a wonderful job.

She was slated to begin her new position on Monday, September 8, 2008. This happened to be exactly a week following Hurricane Gustav's visit to the Baton Rouge area. I can't imagine stepping into that particular position with so many demands made of the agencies the United Way supports. Karen was exactly the person to face such a challenge.

Karen's husband, Bill Profita, had been our afternoon drive radio host for WJBO, 1150 AM. Bill's talent is unquestioned. He has a way of taking a topic and looking at it from all angles while entertaining his audience at the same time.

Karen joined Bill on the air at WJBO during the days of the initial recovery from Hurricane Gustav. They offered information about services people desperately needed, provided a forum for people with questions and answers, and generally gave comfort too many. For Kathleen and me, Karen and Bill's voices on the radio were very welcomed.

For a number of days following the storm we were much too busy to give Karen and Bill a phone call. They didn't know about our situation. We were busy. They were busy. I finally took a break from my efforts and gave Bill a call with my cell phone. I let him know our situation and he was obviously shocked. I encouraged him to continue his work keeping people informed, but asked that if he and Karen could find a moment during the weekend that Kathleen and I could use a visit from them.

They stopped by Sunday afternoon, September 7. They came bearing gifts, a bottle of Jack Daniels and an ice chest of beer. We were well supplied with the basics and this addition to our cache was a wonderful gesture. We visited for a couple of hours on the carport. It was a very welcomed break in the action.

It wasn't lost on me that Karen was to begin her new responsibilities with United Way the next day. I wondered aloud to her and Bill if this was the type of service we could expect from United Way with her in charge, alcohol deliveries during times of emergency.

Sunday, September 7, 2008

“We’re Not in the National News”

Speaking of the radio...

How many times did I hear someone on the radio say, “We’re not getting any national news coverage?” For some reason many people felt we deserved more news stories about Hurricane Gustav and what he did to Baton Rouge. Many of these people were very upset. Perhaps those people were right.

From my perspective, very few people died or were injured. The vast majority of what I had heard happened was more in the nature of property damage and infrastructure problems. I was thankful we didn't have bodies floating in the street. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of downed trees and busted roofs didn't impress me enough to demand national news coverage. I was happy to be alive.

Strong, Resilient People (without Electricity)

Politicians and bureaucrats tickle me. During the days following Gustav the government officials and emergency response folks took to the radio to give reports on what was happening, offer information on how to get help, and generally tried to sound like they were in complete control of the situation. In my opinion, they did a fairly good job. I was proud of their response.

They also frequently said, “Louisianians are a strong, resilient people. They'll bounce back from this disaster.”

When these guys got off the radio the radio hosts would go back to the phones to field questions from the general public. While many people shared stories about their situation, just as many called to complain and whine, moan and groan, and generally pitch a fit and vent their spleens. Most of the complaints were about the lack of electricity. People just couldn't understand why the people across the street had electricity and they didn't. That ticked them off. And there was no consoling them.

Strong, resilient people are strong and resilient only when they have electricity.

Tuesday, September 9, 2008

Insurance Agent Visits

We struggled with understanding what State Farm Insurance's procedures were. We did not understand when we were to expect a visit from an adjuster. After numerous phone calls to their claims office we were very frustrated. We were living on the carport for the most part and had precious few resources at hand to take care of ourselves and our property. I spent much time imagining what it had been like for those who couldn't go home following previous storms. We were lucky to be able to deal with our home. However, we needed information and help. State Farm sells themselves as the "Good Neighbor" people. Our good neighbors appeared to be in Dallas, Texas and Jacksonville, Florida. They were not around the corner.

Once we called our agent, Brian Meaux, we found someone who could help us negotiate the maze of the adjusting process. He couldn't do much else, but it was helpful to have someone to whom to talk and who could follow through on some of our requests.

Brian came to our house and took a look at our damage. He declared that we certainly had a severity one claim, whatever that meant. He advised us to move out as quickly as we could. He said that the adjuster teams were assembling and would canvas the area soon. He even offered to write us an agent draft if we didn't hear from the adjuster by Monday of the next week.

Brian was and continued to be a valuable resource to us. On the other hand, the State Farm Claims process was never a valuable resource through this situation. Good neighbors my aching butt.

Wednesday, September 10, 2008

Celebrating Our Twentieth

September 10, 2008, was our twentieth wedding anniversary. We celebrated it mostly working around the house and recovering on our carport. By the evening we had come to a halt and settled into our patio chairs. Just another evening on the carport, but a little more special. We were obviously disappointed about not being able to do something special for ourselves. We smiled at each other about how our twentieth would at the very least be memorable.



As the neighborhood darkened, our dear neighbors Ouida and David Tettleton came by to visit. They were unaware that this evening was our twentieth anniversary. We were delighted to have their company. We began sharing stories about how we met, how we got back together after many years, and how a hurricane named Florence visited Baton Rouge on the day of our wedding, twenty years ago this day.

Yep! Hurricane Florence was our first hurricane together. She blew into town early in the morning of Saturday, September 10, 1988, our wedding day. We knew of her approach a couple of days before and our planning was taken a bit off track. We didn't know how severe she would be, but it appeared she wouldn't strengthen as she headed for us. Even so, she diverted the attentions of the Catholic priest we had asked to marry us. Etienne Leblanc was a very old friend of mine and at the time he was the pastor of Holy Cross Catholic Church in Morgan City, Louisiana. His church was home to Holy Cross High School. The high school's facilities were designated as an emergency shelter and Etienne was preoccupied with arrangements in Morgan City for Florence. I surely understood, but was disappointed.

Matt Lorraine, another priest and friend, was available to fill the breach. He had participated in our marriage preparation obligations and was delighted to get us hitched.

Among the humorous incidences surrounding Florence and our wedding was our reception. We had plans to use the LSU Faculty Club. Since this day was an open date on the LSU Football Schedule we could use the Faculty Club. (It was also a very good day to get married. Open dates always are.) I mentioned to my future mother-in-law that if we had to cancel the wedding because of the storm we could open the facility to evacuees and donate the reception's food. She didn't find me amusing.

A few people were unable to make it to our wedding. That was disappointing. We had quite a turn out all the same. We were very happy to share our day with everyone. By the time we had tied the knot and turned to go up the aisle, the noon bells of St. Joseph's Cathedral pealed. The doors were opened and the sun of a beautiful late Summer's day greeted the new Mr. and Mrs. Tom Sylvest, Jr. Florence had passed.

Hurricanes have weaved themselves into the story of our lives. I hoped you enjoyed that little story. I think Ouida and Dave did.

Wednesday, September 10, 2008

Tom on LPB

Earlier this Wednesday, Shawna Stafford, host of LPB's "Louisiana: The State We're In," came by our home and interviewed me for their Friday evening show. This was a special experience for me. I had suggested that they should rename the show for this particular week, "Louisiana: The State of SHOCK We're In."

Wednesday, September 10, 2008

Pod Evacuation

We were very worried about Hurricane Ike churning in the Gulf of Mexico. Many of our neighbors stopped by our house and asked what we planned to do to if the storm came our way. We certainly couldn't leave because our house was wide open. Had we left our house I was sure that unauthorized shoppers would look upon our property as an opportunity to improve their lives with our stuff.

Knowing we really couldn't leave I developed the following explanation of our plans. I told people that we intended to climb into our POD if the storm approached. We would take our cell phones, a charger to charge them, some Jack Daniels and an ice chest of beer. We would then call the PODs people and have them pick up the POD and put us in their climate controlled warehouse. We would sit out the rest of hurricane season there and call for the PODs people to bring us back after November 30, the end of the season.

I would guess some of them thought of me as quite the smart aleck.

Friday, September 12, 2008

Hurricane Ike

Hurricane Ike arrived in the area early the morning of Friday, September 12, 2008. He passed south of us and gave us a glancing blow. We didn't get the full brunt of his viciousness. Even so, we didn't really need to see this fellow.

Our house wasn't sealed and still had gaping holes here and there. Any breeze at all whipped through the openings, swirled about, and sought any hole through which to exit. When the velocity of the breeze increased to the level of 'wind', the air pushed against hanging joists and rafters making them swing. Electrical lines and insulation swayed to and fro. The 1800 square feet of tarpaulin flapped like unsecured sails on a ghost ship. The resulting noises were eerie. To see bits and pieces of your home moving this way and that was unnerving.

Ike wasn't satisfied with only huffing and puffing. He brought bands of rain, lots of rain. If that wasn't enough, he took a couple of deep breaths and pushed the winds up to the level of 'gusts'. Ike's gusts and buckets of water pounded us pretty well by 6:30 that morning and didn't let up until midmorning.

We did have a tarpaulin over the vast hole in our house. It just took one episode of gusts to rip the covering from its moorings and leave the inside of our house exposed to



Ike's fury and wetness. Kathleen had awakened me with concerns about the tarp. I took a look and felt deflated. Our protection was blowing in the wind (I used to like that song). I nailed the tarp to the shutters of the house and anchored it more securely by nailing it down to the heavy debris that was scattered in our front yard.

Ike wasn't devastating to us. We were about as damaged as we could get by the time he showed up. He just wasn't what we needed in our state of exhaustion and confusion.

Friday, September 12, 2008

Jerry's Visit



Jerry Moll, a very dear friend of many years, came by to visit us soon after Ike had subsided. Jerry lives in New Orleans and was our guest following Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. His house was near the lakefront and sustained much damage. His family had been dispersed throughout the South; his wife in Shreveport, a son in Georgia, and his youngest in Dallas, Texas. It was good to see him. I suppose he wanted to see his accommodations should another hurricane visit New Orleans. It would be a while before our evacuation center would be available again.

Friday, September 12, 2008

Roofblu

After Jerry Moll left and Kathleen went to work, I was left alone at the house. I worked a little around the house and took many breaks that day because I was completely exhausted. During one of my breaks I heard an announcement about the Roofblu program. I decided to call them because I needed another application of tarpaulins over the roof. My tarpaulins were badly damaged.

On a lark, I called the number offered. Someone with Roofblu answered the phone and began asking questions to determine what I needed and how they might help. She asked me, "How large is the hole in your roof?"

I answered, "I'm not certain, but it appears we had at least an 1800 square foot hole because that was the amount of tarp we had before Ike."

Her reply gave me a grin. She said in a somewhat surprised tone, "Oh, but Mr. Sylvest, your hole is too big."

I'm not certain I have ever had someone say that to me before.

Saturday, September 13, 2008

Adjuster's Surprise

The State Farm adjuster assigned to our claim was Lon Pitre. We had spoken with him a couple of times and arranged for him to meet us at the house on Friday, the day of Ike. He had to cancel that appointment. He said the wind advisories would prevent him from surveying the damage and it would not be safe. We fully understood. Where we were wasn't safe. He rescheduled for the afternoon of the next day.

Lon arrived mid-afternoon. I saw his car cruise the street trying to locate our house. I knew it was him because he had one of those magnetic signs attached to his door identifying him. I was a little amused because the nature of the damage hid our house number. I had no intention of running into the street to flag him down. It had been a full twelve days since the storm and he was just arriving. On that point, I was not amused.

He parked his car across the street and I watched him get out with his clipboard in hand. He looked over at our house, looked down at his clipboard, looked back up at our house and looked back to his clipboard. The expression on his face could only be described as bemusement. He walked towards our carport where I had been watching his reaction.

We introduced ourselves and he immediately said that he had no idea that the damage to our home was that bad. He said he would have been to our house much sooner had he known. He said that it was clear someone misunderstood how much damage had occurred. Before he began his survey of the damage, he said he had the authority to give us \$1,000.00 immediately to help us make other living arrangements.

He declared, "This house is uninhabitable. You should not be living here."

I think we knew that. Yes. I'm sure we knew that.

He completed his survey and told us he could not do a complete report because there was still too much debris that kept him from seeing all the damage. He suggested that he would prepare a report to give us enough initial funds to get work underway to remove debris, reconstruct the frame and get a roof to protect the interior. He made it clear we would probably need a couple more visits from adjusters to complete the claim.

Adjusters are amusing. I believe he thought it would be a cinch to get a motel room or apartment with his generous \$1,000.00. He had no clue that emergency workers, evacuees and volunteers had consumed most of the rooms in the Baton Rouge area. I'm certain adjusters from many companies were living in hotel rooms, also. Besides, who was going to guard the contents of our house.

I was getting very anxious. As much as I had wanted to see an adjuster, LSU was playing North Texas State that night. I had a little over an hour to prepare for the game.

Saturday, September 13, 2008

Doug and Mona Falcon

I decided I was in no condition to go to the LSU game that evening. I was filled with adrenaline and bone tired. We gave our tickets away and Kathleen brought me to our friend's home. Doug and Mona Falcon are noted for their LSU game gatherings at their home. I loaded up an ice chest with all the beer I had and Kathleen rid herself of me for a few hours.

When we got to Doug and Mona's we found that they were without electricity and their cable TV was out. Hurricane Ike had visited their neighborhood and dislodged hanging branches from Hurricane Gustav throughout the area. Some of these branches found power and cable lines. With minutes before the start of the game we thought we would be relegated to huddling around a radio to listen to the game. Just seconds before kickoff the lights flickered on and the television came to life. Glory be!

We had a wonderful evening visiting and enjoying the game. It was the first home game Kathleen and I had missed in our twenty years of marriage. But that night was wonderful for me, to be among friends. I appreciate them enduring my craziness. It was the first time I had been away from our damaged home for any length of time. I will always be grateful for their hospitality.

Monday, September 15, 2008

Waiting and Working

We were beginning to reach a new state of normal. Our lives had been so disrupted and our routines so shattered that it was difficult to cope. Our new state of normal found Kathleen going to her work. My new state of normal was loading the POD, cleaning the yard, waiting for contractors, making phone calls, and waiting for phone calls. I was developing relationships with State Farm Claims, Chase Home Finance, the Post Office, the Department of Public Works, Regions Bank, Insurance Loss Inspectors, Cox Cable, Entergy, the Utilities Payment Processing Center, and folks just dropping by to talk. I mostly waited for others to do something before I could move forward. While I waited, I worked around the house. I waited and worked. I lost 35 pounds.

Tuesday, September 16, 2008

Brent Donnelly

Many neighbors had visited us in the days following the storm. I sat on the carport most mornings to rest or make phone calls. Now and then someone walking through the neighborhood would see me and stop for a moment to ask how we were, ask what we would do, or offer some help of some kind. This particular morning a young man came to the carport while I was on the phone. I ended my conversation and he introduced himself.

“Hello. I’m a neighbor. My name is Brent Donnelly and I am a home inspector. I wanted to offer you my services for free. Perhaps I can help you get started with reconstructing your home and guide you through the process.”

“Wow! What a generous offer,” I thought. We visited a bit and I discovered he lived only two blocks down the street. I told him I was very touched by his offer and grateful for his concern. I told him I would also consider his offer once I knew where I stood for I had just received the adjuster’s report and hadn’t digested it.

We spoke some more and I could tell he was troubled in some way. I asked him if he was okay and he said, “My 18 year-old daughter was killed on Interstate 10 between Baton Rouge and New Orleans this past Friday. A wind gust from Hurricane Ike drove her car off the road. I just feel I need to help you to honor her memory.”

I was speechless. In many ways I still am. Here was this man in the throes of one of the most horrible experiences a parent can face and he was offering me his help. What was there to say?

I told him I was so sorry and I couldn’t begin to imagine what he was going through. I said, “Before you help me, please take care of yourself and your family. Your offer is generous. I wish I could help you. Please take time for yourself. My issues can certainly wait.”

He thanked me, but pressed the issue of him helping me. I made it clear I could not accept his help until he attended to his own needs.

He said, “I know you’re right. I have to bury my daughter Friday.”

Once again an angel appeared to help me see my problems in the proper perspective. This time his name was Brent Donnelly.

Wednesday, September 17, 2008

The Move

While I spent my days loading the Pod and trying to understand what we were to do, we knew we had to find some place to live. The insurance adjuster had made it clear that we needed to move and they would help us with the additional living expenses.

Kathleen took on the task of finding us temporary living quarters. Bill and Karen Profita had suggested we contact our mutual friend, Carmie Berry, a real estate agent. Carmie's son-in-law happened to have had a house he and his wife just prepared to put on the market. They were willing to let us lease the house for six months. This was a stroke of luck. We were going to have spacial accommodations for ourselves and our stuff.

We arranged to have David Moving Company box up our belongings and move us to the new digs. Their crew was very helpful and did a great job of getting everything to the temporary house. While they worked at getting our stuff moved under Kathleen's direction, I worked at the our damaged house filling the POD and removing carpet. I didn't get to see the temporary house until well after dark.

I was tired. I was dirty. I looked forward to my first hot shower in a couple of weeks. I looked forward to a restful night in a clean bed with air conditioning. Kathleen gave me the directions to the temporary house and I journeyed to my new dormitory. I was most impressed. The home was relatively new and had about 2000 square feet. Of course, when I arrived boxes of clothes, dishes, furniture, and sundries filled the floor space. The interior looked like the inside of a large moving van. I figured we could live with that for six months or less.

Kathleen had had our bed set up. That was a priority. She told me to get my shower and while I cleaned up she would put the bedding on the bed. I disrobed and turned on the shower. All I could get was very cold water or scalding hot water. There appeared to be no in between. I couldn't adjust the faucet to get a decent temperature.

Just about the time I was fashioning new curse words for the shower, Kathleen came to the bathroom and said that the boxes with the bedding were full of ants. I hurried with her into the garage where she had moved the boxes and indeed ants were crawling out of both boxes of bedding. I hurriedly picked out sheets and pillow cases and handed them to Kathleen.

She said, "What am I going to do with them?"

"Put them in the washer. Ants don't like to be washed," I suggested with about as much frustration in my voice as I could muster in my exhausted state.

While Kathleen contended with the invasion of ants, I returned to the shower to decipher the faucet. I simply couldn't find an acceptable temperature. I settled on a cold shower. I had become accustomed to those.

After my shower I waited with Kathleen for the bedding to dry. I recall saying something like, "All we need is just one more thing." She said, "Don't say that."

We finally made the bed and being too tired to eat, I settled into bed to fall asleep. That's when we heard "beep". The "beep" went off every few minutes. We couldn't determine where it was coming from, but it was very loud. All I could think was "what now?"

The battery of the smoke detector outside of the bedroom was in its death throes. The smoke detector was on the ceiling, a full twelve to fourteen feet from the floor. I needed a ladder and a nine volt to shut the bloody thing up. I had neither. As tired as I was I decided I could live with the "beep, beep, beep", for one night.

I didn't want to like the temporary house. I was determined not to like it and not to become too comfortable as a way to motivate me to get my own home fixed. This was a good start.

The name of the street where we now lived was Cross Gate. I renamed it "Hell's Gate".

Friday, September 19, 2008

WAFB

Matt Williams, co-anchor of the Morning Show on WAFB, Channel 9 in Baton Rouge, had interviewed me the days before LSU played in the BCS Championship game in January of 2008. We had discussed my TigerToons, my thoughts on the game, and how I drew cartoons about Tiger Football. It was a great experience and I enjoyed the honor. Matt and I also became friends.

He became aware of our situation and wanted to interview me at their studios about what happened during Hurricane Gustav, how we planned to deal with our house, and what it would mean for TigerToons.

I appreciated his interest and declared I would be back to cartoons in time and hopefully, back in my house sooner. It was an enjoyable experience. I had never been on live television before and I was fascinated. However, I really didn't plan on publicity because a tree fell through my house.

Friday, September 19, 2008

Red Cross Visit

I watched the replay of my interview an hour later at my in-law's home. After I commented on how good I looked on TV, I headed back to my damaged home to deal with reality.

About 9:30 that morning the Red Cross appeared at my carport. Marilyn and Carolyn, volunteers from North Carolina and Minnesota respectively, paid me a visit to find out how they might help us. One of the first things they asked me was whether FEMA had been of any help.

I laughed and said, “Ladies, I pay my mortgage. I pay my insurance. I pay my taxes. What would make you think that FEMA would ever help me?” I then continued to tell them about my experience with Roofblu and how they told me my hole was too big.

They asked if there was anything they could do. I gave them two ways they could help. First, they could help me remove the debris from my yard and rake up the leaves. They told me they couldn’t do that.

I then suggested they could have moved out of their hotel rooms earlier so that we would have had a place to live soon after the storm. I explained I was joking and that I really thought there might be others in the neighborhood who could really use their help more.

They were very pleasant and concerned. I appreciated their visit. I encouraged them in their work. I told them Baton Rouge was grateful for their presence.



Tuesday, September 23, 2008

Red Cross Visit Again

Less than a week passed and Marilyn returned to my carport with another Red Cross volunteer. She didn't remember me. I showed her the picture I had taken of her from her last visit. The lights went on.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Sylvest. I do remember you," Marilyn exclaimed. "You're the cartoonist."

I introduce them to my dad, Tom, Sr., and we had a good laugh about them coming to help the heck out of me again. I asked them if they had changed their minds about raking my yard. Marilyn said they hadn't changed their minds. They just forgot that they had already visited me.

I wished them the best and sent them on their merry way.

Thursday, September 25, 2008

Adjuster's Report

Lon Pitre, the State Farm adjuster, delivered his report to us this day. I had never seen an adjuster's report before. It was clear that it was thoroughly unclear. The terminology the insurance company used was not terminology I had stumbled upon before.

I have an MBA degree and a degree in economics and psychology. I am an expert in Organizational Development and Strategic Planning. I have been a banker and have worked in mortgage banking and construction lending. I have quite a store of knowledge about accounting, business communications, management, geometry, algebra, calculus, project management, economics, finance, and human behavior. I know my way around computers and numerous computer programs from word processing and spreadsheets to vector and bitmap graphics. None of this prepared me for the adjuster's report. My awarenesses, familiarities, knowledges, experiences, and authorities were woefully inadequate for the adjuster's report.

The twenty-six page report was filled with descriptions of work to be done, unit costs, unit measures, room dimensions, actual costs, replacement costs, depreciation assessments, diagrams, listings of rooms, and estimates of every variety. Lon began explaining what the report said. It became clear to me that if he read each line item, explained what each meant, and answered my questions line by line that archeologists would find our bones amongst the rubble thousands of years from that day.

I truly didn't see the point, but I was very afraid I would miss something. I let him continue, but the process became so ponderous and tedious I had to stop him. He was very thorough, but I just couldn't take it anymore. I told him I would review the report and call him with my questions or arrange another meeting. He said that would be fine. I was in no mood to continue. After wanting to see this fellow so badly I had to smile because I wanted him to leave me alone.

Friday, October 3, 2008

R&R Pensacola Beach

September 2008 will go down as the most stressful month Kathleen and I have ever experienced. If another one tops it in the future I will become a candidate for the back ward of a mental hospital.

By the time we reached the second weekend of October, we had done all that we could do. The adjuster had been to the damaged home. The contractor was planning how to attack the roof. We had temporary quarters in which to live and store our stuff. We had enough information to begin thinking seriously about how we wanted our house to be restored. We needed to get away.

We contacted friends at Pensacola Beach, Pete and Colette Zimmerman, and they offered to let us stay in their condominium for four days. We accepted their offer and headed to the beach for a quick rest.

I had told one of my friends, Al Campbell of South Carolina, what our plans were just in case he would be around to visit with us when we got to the beach. He said, "That's great, Tom. You guys need some serious R and R."

Of course he meant "rest and relaxation". When I heard him say that, I had to chuckle to myself. Throughout the adjuster's report we found among the descriptions of damage and restoration the abbreviation "R&R". In the report this meant Remove and Replace and applied to damaged items such as stud walls, baseboards, shelving, and other items.

I responded to my friend, "I really wasn't seeking R&R to tell you the truth. We're trying to get away from it."

"Whatever," he said.

Tuesday, October 7, 2008

Dad to Hospital

My father, Tom, Sr., contracted some sort of viral infection. In the middle of my turmoil I wasn't prepared for Dad to be ill. It did permit me to leave the house and spend time with him, but it really wasn't quality time. It was hard for me to watch him in such pain. In his quieter moments I wrote notes about my ideas for the house and lists of things to do. Spending a night in the hospital without much else to do generated some mighty odd ideas and a lengthy list of things to do.

Dad recovered just fine. He has taken such good care of me and my brothers and sisters that I would give anything to help him.

Thursday, October 9, 2008

House Restoration Begins

While we relaxed on Pensacola Beach we discussed how we would restore our home. I sketched plans and Kathleen reviewed library books about construction. Our imaginations were in gear.

We were to learn that we knew little. In the months to come, we gained knowledge we had hoped we would never need. We found ourselves on a battlefield with the insurance company, the mortgage company, contractors, inspectors, and a myriad of others. The process was not easy. The process was slow.

The stories emerging from the months that followed are tedious. For now it is enough to say we would not wish this experience on anyone.

I have become an authority on the process from an owner's viewpoint. I feel compelled to share these experiences and offer my recommendations to anyone who faces these challenges. We have faced threats of liens on our property. We have dealt with unsatisfactory work on our home. We have met unscrupulous contractors, breaches of contract, and fraud. We have shopped until we dropped. We have interacted with the State Attorney General's Office, the Department of Public Works, the State Board of Contractors, and attorneys. I have come to know a few things where before I was totally ignorant.

We have also had the pleasure of meeting and working with many excellent people whose expertise, advice and personalities have been invaluable. I must list them here.

Pat Alexander, electrician, K&K Electrical

Thad Landaiche, Landaiche Cabinets

Richard Baca, Ricon, granite fabricators

Buddy Matherne, windows

Barrett Solis, Flooring Depot

Buddy Lee, brick mason

Mark Fridge, Coastal Waste Services, dumpsters

Paul Welborn, ABS, Heating and air conditioning

George Lassiter and Tom Gandy, Appliance Distributors of Louisiana

Tom and David Kleinpeter, Live Oak Custom Moulding, front entry door

Linda Higginbotham, State of Louisiana Attorney General's Office

Michelle Lemoine and Carl Bourque, State Board of Contractors

George Pierson, title attorney

Mike Taffaro, contract attorney

I am writing this on August 29, 2009, the fourth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. We have not had our home for nearly a year. When we do return home, it will be like moving

into a new house. We have made many changes and improved the floor plan. We are very excited about the prospect of moving home.

Miscellaneous Funnies

The Tree and the Wallpaper

When disaster strikes it is often helpful to find some bright spot. To wax philosophical about one's condition is not a sure fire way to relieve pain, but I gave it a shot anyway.

In my pain I sought some relief in telling people I had many benefits from the tree falling. First, the tree always bothered me. It was very big. It was very close to our house, a mere six feet away. So the tree about which I had always felt uneasy was no longer troubling me. The tree was gone.

In addition, there was wallpaper in the dining room I did not like. The wallpaper is gone.

Shelves in Den

Among the funnies in all the turmoil thrust upon us is the story of my shelves. We had an expanse of wall in our den that had been covered with mirrors. We were never completely happy about the mirrors, but learned to live with them. I viewed that wall as a wonderful place for built-in bookshelves. Over the years I pondered the possibility and explored the design and construction issues with my friend, Paul Caplinger. Paul has a workshop and is noted for his ability to turn a pile of wood into artwork.

Paul and I often discussed the shelves and drew designs on napkins over many years. In 2003, I finally got moving on the plan. Paul and I committed to creating the shelves. We moved at a snail's pace and eventually got the shelves up in June 2007.

I really loved my shelves. The shelves were a joke amongst Paul and my friends because of the amount of time it took us to get them up. So once we had the shelves, the joke became a thing of memory and the shelves became a source of pride.

The shelves became a casualty of Hurricane Gustav. They were attached to a wall that had been damaged and needed removal and replacement. The shelves were well built and attached to the walls. They could not survive the demolition. They could not be saved intact.

I had enjoyed them just over a year and now they would be gone. After years of fiddling around with the idea of shelves and a year or two of "when we get around to it", they disappeared from our lives.

They have become a joke again. I don't know how many times someone has asked, "Do you plan to have shelves?" I can only smile.

iPod vs Pod

The POD generated a few humorous moments. Among the funnier was when folk would say iPod instead of POD. It was a common mistake. I made it a number of times.

One conversation I had was hilarious. The person said, "What are you putting in your iPod?"

I replied, "Mostly Jimmy Buffett."

"Did you need an iPod that big for just Jimmy Buffett?" they asked.

"Oh, no. I like all kinds of music. I put as much of it in there as I can," I answered.

"Really. You needed an iPod that big?" they asked again.

"Well. I do have a lot of music," I said.

They looked at me kind of funny and looked over at the POD and I said, "Oh! You mean the POD. I put furniture and large boxes in the POD. They won't fit in my iPod."

Bring Me Ice and Beer

I spoke with many friends from around the country in the days following the storm. Many were shocked we had suffered such damage. All of them would ask if there was anything they could do at all.

A friend from Washington, DC was particularly insistent that he help me. I tried to tell him we were fine, but he persisted. I told him, "Well if you want to help that damn badly, buy a bag of ice and a 12-pack of beer and drive the 1100 miles to get it here by tomorrow. That's my most immediate need."

He laughed and realized there really wasn't much he could do from afar.

Over the months I have had the opportunity to respond to many people who have wanted to help. Some of them offered the sentiment sincerely, but in truth, they really couldn't have helped us much. I always offered that they could help me personally by buying ice and beer and coming to my house to drink it with me.

I certainly needed help, but to select a specific thing for someone to do was very difficult. In time I learned to be very specific about what I needed and allowed people to be generous. I really believe it helped people feel good about themselves when I gave them something to do. I worked hard at keeping a list of little things people could help me with. That worked fine.

There were those out there on the other end of the phone from companies and groups with which I had to deal. They often asked about helping me. I often just told them I would appreciate a bag of ice, a case of beer and someone to share it with. That always ended conversations with a giggle. Conversations most often should end with a giggle.

Debris Piles and Removal

Baton Rouge is a town of trees. So many old neighborhoods are beautifully shaded enclaves and gloriously green havens. Hurricane Gustav disturbed these idyllic settings. When hurricanes meet trees, trees most often lose. Baton Rougeans, in my opinion, were not prepared for what they were to see in the days following the storm.

Yards were cleaned. Chain saws buzzed. Damaged trees and perfectly healthy trees were removed. Piles of debris grew relentlessly. These ubiquitous debris piles lining the roads of Baton Rouge gave many people a tremendous point of stress. These piles were hardly attractive. They needed to be removed and the time to remove them was much longer than many had anticipated. Many people had never seen anything like it.

When the debris piles were removed the contractors used heavy equipment that left gouges, ruts and depressions in previously well-manicured lawns. The grass had not seen the light of day for many days. The grass was dead.

I was amused by the reactions of some people. I had a tree through my home, a hole in my house, and debris strewn about my yard. I had problems. Debris piles in my yard were of little concern to me.

Some folk with minimal damage collected tree branches, limbs and trunks and laid them on the side of the road near the edge of their properties. Once their piles were removed these areas were certainly unsightly. In my experience these areas only needed a little attention and tended to return to their previous condition fairly quickly. Yet some people were thoroughly outdone with the look of their yards. I often heard “Why weren’t the work crews more careful?” or “Someone’s got to fix that?”

I mused that these impatient homeowners were contestants for “Servitude of the Month” honors.

Hurricane Preparations

Hurricane preparations always include batteries, a radio, three days of water, canned goods, an evacuation plan, a fully charged cell phone, a full tank of gas in the car, cash, baby pictures, jewelry and LSU Football tickets in a safe place, and a variety of other items of lesser importance.

We learned that it is equally important to do or have a few of other things. When a hurricane enters the Gulf of Mexico and landfall is about three to four days away it is vital to take the following additional steps.

Dye hair- If you are a person that desperately clings to a youthful appearance, then you must dye your hair before you have no hot water or electricity with which to see in a mirror.

Shave areas you prefer to have smooth- If you don't want to wear long pants through the heat that follows hurricanes or you tend to have a five o'clock shadow within two days of shaving, then it would be best to shave at least ten hours before landfall. Again, if you can't see and don't have hot water your shaving experience will be less than pleasurable.

Buy tarps- Relying on FEMA, the state, the National Guard, or someone else to provide you with blue tarpaulins should you need to protect your property is not a good idea. I would also recommend you buy green tarps. Though a little more expensive, they are tougher and last longer. They are much better than unscrupulous roofers and buy you time.

Two pairs of shoes- Your shoes may get wet and it is important to have an extra pair you can keep dry. Believe me. Your feet will never forget you. You may wish to spend a little more for very good work shoes.

Sturdy garden gloves- If you think you'll be moving debris, gloves are essential. I would recommend leather gloves with cotton-linings. You won't develop blisters as quickly.

“Is there anything else we could help you with?”

I noticed something when I approached the end of an encounter on the telephone with nearly every customer service associate. Regardless of whether they were helpful in resolving my issues they invariably would ask, “Is there anything else I can help you with today, Mr. Sylvest?” I was so tired of hearing that question.

I decided to have a little fun knowing that I would probably be asked that question at the end of any conversation. I developed answers that I hoped would give a grin to whomever was on the other end of the phone. Here are a few.

“Well, let's see. You weren't helpful with the first issue, so what would give me any confidence that you could help with another.”

“As a matter of fact, I need someone to rake my backyard and trim the hedges. When can I expect you?”

“I don't think you can help me, but perhaps I could help you.”

“We know someone who had three trees through their house”

An interesting phenomenon happens once people found out you had had a tree destroy your house. It seems some of them are not satisfied with hearing the story unless they can compare your plight with someone else's troubles. I found that amusing. After hearing stories like “my aunt's neighbor's brother's niece had three trees through her house”, I was bewildered. I wasn't sure what the purpose of telling me these stories was.

Were people trying to tell me I wasn't alone? It was clear I wasn't the only one with a problem.

Were they suggesting my issues weren't as traumatic as others? I knew we weren't as bad off as many victims.

Perhaps they were trying to make us feel better. Well, they failed miserably.

Then it hit me. We had been in a competition and they were just letting us know we hadn't won. In my twisted way I began to respond to these stories in that way. The conversations went something like this.

“Oh, Tom! I heard you had a tree fall through your house. I'm so sorry,” they would begin.

“Yeah! It was something, but we're working through it,” I'd respond.

“You know, my aunt's neighbor's brother's niece had three trees through her house,” they would explain.

I would say, “Jeez! That's awful. I didn't know we were competing. I suppose she wins the grand prize. Where will she put her trophy?”

Building Character

A few people told me that what I was going through was a “character-building exercise”. If that is true, I have more character than I can possibly use. Perhaps I could sell the bulk of it on an internet auction site. I really can't use all the character I have. I stink with character.

FIMA

An emergency is a serious, unexpected, and often dangerous situation requiring immediate attention. Most emergencies do not last very long.

An inconvenience is a trouble or difficulty caused to one's personal requirements or comfort. It's a different animal when compared to an emergency. Inconveniences can last much longer than emergencies.

In our situation, the emergency was handled fairly well. Though we didn't know exactly what to do, we appeared to do the right things anyway. Our emergency passed rather quickly. In the wake of the emergency we had the less honorable series of inconveniences.

Now and then someone would ask how FEMA had helped us. I decided that FEMA couldn't help us because we didn't qualify for some reason or another. I suggested what we really needed and what most people needed after the storm was FIMA, the Federal Inconvenience Management Agency.

After some thought about that I knew I was wrong. We didn't need another stinking agency. Bureaucracy tends to be inconvenient just by its nature.

Stress

I am certain I have never experienced such a high level of stress for such a prolonged period as I have over the past months. I knew I was in the midst of it and thankfully I had some knowledge and expertise to cope with it. I pulled out my human behavior materials and found the information about stress, its causes, its nature, and strategies to deal effectively with it. I am so happy I had these resources.

This is not the forum to explore stress. However, there is one piece from my notes that helped me keep things in perspective. Karl Krum, a friend and colleague, is a clinical psychologist with whom I had worked. He had presented a lecture to one of our client groups about stress. The notes I have describe his Five Characteristics of an Event(s) that influence the level of stress someone might experience. I used this and other information to help me understand and cope.

Here's the Five Characteristics:

1. Condition of the Person- How am I feeling physically and emotionally while this event is occurring?
2. Number of Events- How many events are happening?
3. Importance or Significance of Event- How important is this event and how much value do I perceive this event to have?
4. Degree of Control or Participation in the Event- How much control or participation do I have in this event?
5. Competence of Person to Manage the Event- How prepared am I and what abilities do I have to handle this event?

I used these characteristics to define the events surrounding me, challenge my perceptions of how I viewed the events, and evaluate my ability to cope. This was

helpful to me in that I learned to focus on the things I could handle, seek advice or expertise when needed, and monitor my physical and emotional capacity. This also drove me to learn more about each facet of the event such as insurance, finances, permits, contracting, design, and other issues I would come across.

Perhaps one day I'll expand on this. For now it is enough to say that stress and handling stress is critical to being effective.

Hurricane Song

Some of you may know I had written a song called the Hurricane Song. Here's the story of how this came about.

A friend of mine from New Orleans is a New Orleans-style pianist and songwriter. His name is Wally Blake. The weekend before Hurricane Katrina, my wife, Kathleen, had a nurses' convention in New Orleans. On Saturday of that weekend, Wally and I had planned to get together for drinks. By the time we got in touch with each other, he had decided he needed to get his party barge out of the water at Lafitte, LA because Hurricane Katrina was threatening. We spent the afternoon getting his barge out of the water and getting it back to his house in Algiers. To thank me for helping him, he and his girlfriend took me to eat at a little restaurant near Algiers Point across the river from downtown New Orleans.

My photo of New Orleans from Algiers Point, Saturday, August 27, 2009



While we waited for our food, we overheard many conversations about what people planned to do about the hurricane. They asked where each other were going. They asked whether they would stay and face the hurricane at home. Wally, his girlfriend, and I talked about writing some lyrics based on the conversations we heard. Wally and I have since had a tough time staying in touch. His work puts him on cruises around the world, so it is difficult to keep contact.

Since that weekend, I have played around with some lyrics and a tune given the experience of Katrina. Following Hurricane Gustav and our experience with the tree through our home, I expanded the song while sitting on my carport waiting for adjusters and help from others. I got the song into my brother Patrick's hands and let him and my nephew Nicholas do their magic writing up the instrumentals to the song. Patrick then got the instrumental recording to me so that I could practice the lyrics with the music. A few weeks later, Patrick brought his recording gear to Baton Rouge and we recorded the vocals for the song. Then Patrick and friends, and I imagine Patrick's son Matthew, fiddled with the song and produced it into a more finished version.

If you wish to listen to the song, it's on Youtube (**Hurricane Song by Tom Sylvest, Jr.** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tG1oBsGsiti>). Here are the lyrics to the song:

HURRICANE SONG

Refrain:

*Where yo mom and dem goin' when the big blow comes
Where yo mom and dem goin' if it comes this way
What's it take to make dem run
What they gonna do bout this hurricane*

*If the levee breaks, it starts to flood
Waters rise do you evacuate
House falls apart in da windy gusts
What they gonna do bout this hurricane*

*Will they leave by car, head for higher ground
Contraflow on the interstate
Buy batteries 'n hunker down
What they gonna do bout this hurricane*

Refrain:

*Where yo mom and dem goin' when the big blow comes
Where yo mom and dem goin' if it comes this way
What's it take to make dem run
What they gonna do bout this hurricane*

*Audrey, Hilda, Betsy came
Camille, Lili, deadly names
Katrina, Rita, Gustav, Ike,
Ain't no hurricane yo' momma like*

So yo' mom and dem ready, made their groceries
Plenty of water for at least three days
Saved baby pictures, said rosaries
Are they ready for this hurricane

Refrain:

*Where yo mom and dem goin' when the big blow comes
Where yo mom and dem goin' if it comes this way
What's it take to make dem run
What they gonna do bout this hurricane
What you gonna do bout this hurricane
What will we do bout this hurricane*

People

Deaf Basketball Woman

One morning I took a break from loading the POD. While I was on the phone, a very tall young black woman drove down our street on a bicycle. She noticed me sitting in my chair and stopped at the end of our driveway. She pointed to the damaged corner of our house and then placed her hands over her eyes. I wasn't sure what she was doing and it appeared she wasn't going away. I ended my conversation and stood to introduce myself as she approached. It was then I realized she was a deaf-mute. She gestured that she couldn't hear or speak.

She tried to speak and growled out, "I'm so sorry."

I told her, and gestured, "We're okay. Thank you."

In our efforts to communicate I discovered she was a member of a deaf women's basketball team that played exhibition games. She was canvassing the area asking for donations. She had a small cloth bag with a zipper that was open and I could see cash in the bag.

I couldn't understand her next attempt to communicate until she tried to hand me the bag. She was offering me her money. She was willing to give me help. I was stunned.

I said, "Oh no baby. We're okay. We're okay. Please keep your money." I reached into my wallet and stuffed a five dollar bill into her bag. She tried to reject it and give it back to me, but I wouldn't let her.

She then reached out with her long arms and hugged me to herself, patting me on the back, and trying to say, "God bless you."

We broke apart and she tentatively walked back to her bike, looking over her shoulder and blowing me kisses.

I haven't seen her again.

Cathy Clay of USPS

Our mail was some screwed up. I had put it on hold for us to pick up later for a period of time. I then had our mail forwarded to our temporary address. During this transition we were trying to receive checks from State Farm to pay for the work that had been done and the expenses of moving to the temporary house. We had no idea where our mail was going or how fast we would get it. As a result, our finances were being challenged.

After our visit with the adjuster, we were expecting a check for tens of thousands of dollars so that we could begin rebuilding our home and continuing with our lives. State Farm said they had mailed check and I had to figure out just where it was to go. Was it going to be held? Was it going to be forwarded? Was it coming to the damaged house? I simply didn't know.

I monitored the mail as best I could and tried to determine the date it would arrive. I called the Post Office and stumbled upon Cathy Clay. I explained the situation and she fully understood my distress. She offered to search through the mail at her depot and look through the bins of mail being held and the mail to be forwarded. She told me she would call me when she had finished and I could pick up anything that she had found.

Early that afternoon she called. She said that she thought she had what I was looking for and that I could get it at my convenience. I zipped over to her office immediately. She came to the door and she handed me a stack of mail. On top of the pile was the nondescript envelope that I knew contained the all-important check from the insurance company.

I told her, "You cannot begin to know how important this is. You have gone beyond the call of duty. I thank you so very much."

"I am happy I could help you," she said.

"Cathy, let me get your whole name. I am going to send this story to Smiley Anders at the newspaper and have him include you in his column under the Special People Department. I'll let you know when you'll appear in the paper."

She said, "That's not necessary, Mr. Sylvest. I can't afford to have newspaper delivery anyway."

I told her, "I promise you. I'll buy three papers that day. I'll get two for you. One for your family. One for yourself. You have done me a great service."

"Well, okay." That's all she said.

On December 1, 2008, the article appeared and I fulfilled my promise.

I am not certain what her job title is, but I would promote her to Postal Saint.

Thank-you note

Tom Sylvest Jr. thanks Cathy Clay of the Postal Service for “bending over backwards to help me find an important insurance check in a pile of mail slated for forwarding.”

The forwarding was necessary because Tom’s home had been destroyed by Hurricane Gustav.

“Since we desperately needed the money to pay our contractor, we were very worried about getting it.

“Cathy Clay is just one employee in the massive Postal Service, but she is the epitome of ‘service’ and I want her recognized.”

Jimmy Galladora

Unexpectedly finding old friends during an ordeal is a salve to the soul. One of the requirements to receive a disbursement from our mortgage company escrow account was to have certain affidavits and legal documents notarized. Near our temporary home is a supermarket that has a notary public stationed in the store. Once I had my documents arranged I went to the store to have them notarized. The gentleman who was to notarize the documents examined them and looked up at me and said, “Tom Sylvest. Tom Sylvest. Do you remember me?”

I looked at him a little puzzled and then it hit me. “Jimmy Galladora! My goodness. How are you doing?”

Jimmy is a very old friend of mine I knew from nearly thirty years ago. I hadn’t seen him in all those years, but we had some wonderful memories.

For me, that was some special. Without a tree in my house and the subsequent requirements to return home I would probably have never stumbled upon my old buddy.

Gig Costelloe- Constant Stress Syndrome

William “Gig” Costelloe is a friend and colleague who experienced the trauma of Hurricane Katrina. His stories of that time are interesting. Gig is an Industrial-Organizational Psychologist and we have worked together in years past. Since Gig had experienced a similar event I just knew he had some insights and thoughts that might help me through my issues.

Gig had spoken with another friend and colleague during his trials. David Lange had provided the view that what Gig was experiencing at the time was not Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. He suggested that victims of recent hurricanes experienced something more on the order of Constant Stress Syndrome.

When Gig told me that, I certainly had to agree.

Heavenly Distractions

My dad made a point of coming to visit me one day each week. His visits became more important to me following the storm. I was trapped. I had to stay near the telephone or have a cell phone with me always. I also was very lonely with my thoughts, worries, and concerns. I needed a sounding board and I needed someone who wouldn't judge me too harshly. Dad filled that role for me and I'll forever be grateful.

During one of his visits he said that he hoped he wasn't getting in the way. He recognized how busy and tired I was and thought that maybe he was disturbing my efforts to make progress.

“Oh, Dad. That could never be the case. In fact you're a ‘Heavenly Distraction’. I need ‘Heavenly Distractions’ more than ever. You take mind off of my troubles or let me express my problems. I need that so badly.”

Thank you, Dad.

I have had other Heavenly Distractions and I am certain you know who you are. I encourage everyone to find their Heavenly Distractions and cling to them.

Neighbors

I cannot think of the words to thank my neighbors for their kindnesses. They brought us food, ice, drinks, heating supplies, coffee, and every imaginable item. They helped cut our grass, they charged our cell phones, they faxed information for us, and helped us with the most mundane.

Most of all, they brought themselves. They gave of themselves by simply comforting us with their presence. They would not allow us to feel alone.

When the neighborhood didn't have electricity for days, we tended to see neighbors out and about. The only noise in the neighbor was the hum of generators some folks had. I worried that when the electricity was restored that the hum of the generators would be replaced by the hum of air conditioners. I was sad to think that our neighbors might disappear in to the cool of their homes and I would not see them as often. And that's what happened. It was time for them to move on with their lives and time for us to focus on our house.

I will always remember those days that September when the neighbors mixed and milled. I miss those days. I miss my neighborhood. I treasure my neighbors.

I kept a list of the neighbors we got to know and the things they did for us. I reproduce that list here to honor them at the risk of missing someone.

Beef Lewis
Gary and Leslie Maus
Vicki, David and Erin Pitchford
Sue and Buddy Price
Pat and Kay Hughes
Grady and Linda Martin
Dori Schaffer
Ronnie Sherlock
Jerry Hammond
Mrs. Powell
Dave McLaughlin
Ted and Molly Landaiche
Kerry and Mary Foil
Mr. and Mrs. Wilcox
Pam and Roy Esteven
Terry Arikol
Donna James
Billy Foulks
George Kleinpeter
Phil and Pat Arena

Epilogue

One day we will look back on this time. It is to be hoped that what we have learned and experienced will make us better people. More patient. More understanding. More compassionate. More forgiving. More loving.

It has been a painful time. It has been a joyful time.

I thank you for your thoughts and prayers during this time.

God Bless.

And remember...

“His eye is on the sparrow!”