

Counseling Today Online

CT Online - Finding Your Way – A mile in their shoes

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By Liz O'Donnell

It seems as though I have spent the last 30 years of my life accruing credentials in a vain and valiant attempt to prove myself. From whom I am seeking validation is, of course, the question I most frequently pose, albeit in the form of silent refrain. It is by virtue of its silence that the question begs no real answer; it is a mute witness without ability to either challenge or vindicate my claims.

Each new decade has brought the predictable test and, indeed, conquest, a hurdle to jump or sometimes even a precipice on which to cling. I had no doubt that life needs scaffolding and a framework from which to build a personal legacy, but I struggled to find the bare materials to fashion my start.

I (like much of the country) watched the disturbing images in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. And like the first words and pictures that I heard and saw on Sept. 11, 2001, the news reports triggered a deep response that surged through my body, bending the beliefs I had previously held. I had also experienced such internal despair while visiting a Palestinian refugee camp in Amman, Jordan; when the light went out on my sister's life; and when I shook while holding my son after the Mount Loma Prieta earthquake that hit San Francisco in 1989. Human beings flail most when they are rendered helpless.

How easy it is to criticize or to hold armchair assassinations. How much more difficult it is to move from my cozy seat of pontification and do something constructive. I said this to myself many times in the days following Hurricane Katrina, so much so that it began to lull me into a remarkable complacency and the nebulous conviction that because I meant well I was doing well.

I arrived at the local American Red Cross headquarters, housed in an old Kmart building in Montgomery, Ala., on Sunday, Sept. 11, 2005. My first fear to overcome had been agreeing to fly anywhere on that fateful anniversary. The second one was simply getting off the plane in Alabama. I couldn't imagine how I would fit in. A fish out of water hardly comes close.

I was ushered with my overstuffed luggage into a fenced-in outdoor enclosure that was littered with all the other bags of good intention. Orientation seemed to consist of the same question asked 19 different ways. Our orientation guide was both Canadian and patient. Maybe, I thought, that actually amounts to the same thing.

I had never before driven toward a disaster area. I could only begin to liken it to the times when I was a child and approached home, knowing that each step forward drew me closer to guaranteed despair and moved me further from salvation. I had signed on as a volunteer in the hurricane's aftermath to be productive, but I was still struggling to decide what I had to offer. "This is short-term, immediate crisis intervention," they had told me at headquarters. "I can do that," I thought. "My life has been short-term, immediate crisis intervention." However, the closer I got to Gulfport, Miss., the less sure I was of my ability to console, on any level, such overwhelming loss.

Almost an hour before we turned off the main thruway onto Highway 10, we began to see downed trees by the hundreds. They were indiscriminately felled, or so it seemed — twisted, bent and cracked at their core. Others, huge frames of reference for a landscape set on rolling hills, were completely uprooted, like baby teeth never meant to be permanent. The contents of people's houses spilled out onto front lawns. So many examples of the same thing followed that it had the protective effect of "normalizing" the abnormal. Is this what happens in war?

In Gulfport there were storefronts ripped apart and facades hanging limp like broken bones. Hand-painted signs warned looters to stay away, while boxes of donated clothes were scattered in parking lots, looking every bit like the chaos left by the storm. Every car I saw on the road was from somewhere else: Florida, New York, Michigan. Mississippi was becoming America's new heartland — the muscle where new blood would begin to flow.

Compared with the old Kmart building in Montgomery, Red Cross headquarters in Gulfport was much smaller. Most of the volunteers were

staying at the Seabees naval base, where 900 cots had been set up in an airport hanger. The close quarters made for more "familiarity" than I have ever had in my life. Still, this was nothing compared to the littered remains of people's lives that rested on the miles of now calm shoreline running from Pascagoula in the east to Waveland in the west.

On Wednesday, Sept. 14, I received an assignment for Ocean Springs. With Route 90 into town now closed because of storm damage, we took Highway 10 and drove down the main street into some of the worst damage. The roads were tattered, the houses beaten to matchsticks and the trees stripped bare by the seawater's assault. While catching my breath, I saw an elderly woman clinging to a walker and tottering toward the side of the curb. Her skin was shriveled and gray. Momentarily overcoming her drooping head and arched back, she looked up at us in our sweltering Red Cross vests and smiled. It was the least-earned smile I had ever received.

Instinct takes over when you see heartache etched on a stranger's face. Your arms extend from your body despite themselves and make random gestures of comfort, as much in an effort to assuage your own anguish as an attempt to ease someone else's pain. The woman was pointing to a document in the rubble that appeared torn and stained, but what remained exposed the remarkable script of a disciplined hand. Numbers and letters, columns and rows, chronicling the year 1969. "This was the bank ledger from my business," she said. "Can you pick that up for me? That's mine." She said it as though she was the document — the parched remnants of a history left to flutter in the breeze.

It is impossible to hold a mirror up to a ragged life and believe that saying "sorry" is either enough or dignified. An apology from an outsider smells of absurdity and arrogance. Still, I never heard or saw anything but gratitude from the hearts and spirits of the people we served. Service now truly seems like the most appropriate word — the ceremonial rite of one human to receive the sustenance and support of another while the scales of justice are so undeservedly ill-balanced.

Among those lining up at Red Cross centers, sometimes for as long as 22 hours in heat in excess of 95 degrees, were pregnant women, the elderly, diabetics, asthmatics, children who wept the tears of the forlorn and people too humiliated to speak about the state of affairs they found themselves in. Such conditions are inherently volatile, and the temperatures were as responsible for elevating the internal heat as any emotional short fuse. Working through the line in the early morning made for an indispensable form of human contact. We were not administering nuggets of mental health or simply triaging the critical; we were taking down our mask of compassionate volunteerism and touching our own souls to the fragile yet unbroken spirits of our neighbors.

I couldn't rely on counseling, therapy or crisis intervention skills. I took stock of the spirit of humankind, the unequivocal need for us all to feel both wanted and worthy, and the inalienable right for every individual to have his or her fundamental humanity respected. It isn't compassion we give as much as an extension of ourselves, a sort of merging of the boundary between where my fear of death begins and your right to life must be perpetuated. I am humbled to hear myself say that I earned and learned as much as I did. It hardly seems decent to admit such a gift on the backs of those so bereft. I want to make it clear that I rarely saw self-pity — tremendous sadness, yes, but hardly ever was a tear shed or the question "Why me?" posed. But more than that, I had my conceptions about so many things shattered and my belief about the resilience of human beings continually confirmed.

Sometimes I was floored by the stories and simple gestures. A giant of a man held me and wept for the brother he had lost. I found myself still, scared to breathe unless I shed my own tears, when I responded to the question "What does it say on your tattoo?"

"Courage," I said, and courage is what they had.

Yes, there were people in the wrong place at the wrong time, and Lord knows my instinct for impatience never left me on those days. But I also found islands within that had never before been reached. I looked for the first time in my life into the eyes of a young man in a military uniform and saw something far deeper than the potential to fight. I saw the sons and partners of the men and women I have known. Fathers and brothers and teenage boys who had fought to bring their bodies back whole from the cacophony in Iraq. These are America's foot soldiers, the men, women and children who fight to keep standing despite the heavy load that has been draped on their backs.

On my last day in Mississippi I met a little girl who proudly wore black platform shoes. She entered the clinic with all the elegance her 7-inch heels could muster, like a delicate bird on a pair of oversized stilts. Her feet were bare and her heels blistered from the leather that slid up and down her ankles as she walked. But she was proud of those shoes. They were getting her somewhere, taking her places, keeping her dry, making her tall. No bedraggled fairy shoes for her; she had business to conduct and tasks to accomplish. "I like these shoes" she said, "and they're mine." After all I had seen, who could argue with that?

It seems it took the giant steps of a little girl to stop me in my tracks, to give me pause and insist that I challenge the self-indulgence of cynicism. I am not liberated from the chains of dark humor that I love, but I will never again imagine that what I believe has even a small relationship with what I might still come to know.

Thank you, Mississippi. Thank you to those who have donated their time and money to the Red Cross and to other relief organizations trying to make a difference in Mississippi, Louisiana, Pakistan and other devastated parts of the world. Despite real and imagined failings, we cannot build anything from ground zero without someone being prepared to start lifting heavy things.

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