

Traveling Companion: Paths Crossed

Fr. Michael Tracey

Hurricane Katrina is never too far from my mind. I still see the sights and smells in my mind's eye. During some of my more pensive moods, especially during my early morning bike rides, she visits me frequently. The stillness and absence of homes along the beach where I ride, become a constant companion on my journeys.

There are still moments of nostalgia; throwbacks to pre-Katrina times and a hankering for more "normal" times and lives. Yet, probing a little deeper into my psyche, I am a changed person with more refined tastes and values; opinions and expectations; desires and accomplishments. Now, the intangibles play a more prominent role. Now, the measuring rod is different and harder to calculate its true measurements.

Deeper realities; lessons learned; values honed; wisdom gained now seem to be the guiding light that directs us through an uncertain, yet, opportune time. This reality became evident to me recently when visitors surprised us by dropping into our office trailer.

Dick and Bonnie had joined our rescue efforts in October 2005 and stayed for over a month. Natives of Cape Cod, they were on their way to the West Coast via Texas. They rolled into town with their huge R.V., jeep and their roof-mounted canoe. They parked on the slab that remained after the fall of our rectory. They became a fixture around the parish. They did everything and anything that needed to be done to help with the clean-up. During their sojourn with us, they made friends easily; shared stories and treated us to home cooked meals in their spacious R.V. Early one morning in mid-November, they pulled out and set off into the land of the setting sun.

On Wednesday afternoon, almost two years later, they surprised us with a visit as they headed to winterize in Florida. We talked for a long time and shared stories of what happened to each of us since the hurricane. Familiar names slipped from ready lips as we caught up on a time lapse of two years. We updated them on progress as well as volunteers they had met and worked with during the first visit. We took them on a tour to view progress around our facilities and they were impressed by the transformation of our church. Their final memory of it when they left the first time was a broken, battered, naked and sad building. Now it was transformed to its former glory.

Amid all the sharing, they paused to ask a question rarely asked these days: "How are you doing?"

As Dick and Bonnie left in their same jeep for Florida, I reflected again on the encounter. I began to realize that Katrina did have some fringe benefits if we cared to look a little deeper. Most of the fringe benefits revolved around volunteers like Dick and Bonnie. Thousands of them came from all over the country and continue to come to help. Many of them have returned again and again at their own expense to work, love and listen. Their presence reaffirms our faith in humanity and the goodness of people. Anonymous people became friends; persons we would never have met otherwise, rebuilt part of our lives. The unknown folks became part of our extended family. A whole network of relationships was woven into a fabric of care, concern, giftedness and commitment.

We will continue to experience our Katrina syndrome for a long time. There will be moments of panic, questioning, disillusionment and even despair that will raise their ugly heads frequently. Still, the guiding lights and shining stars of the myriads of volunteers, who came and continue to come, become the tonic that bolsters our emotional immune systems and helps heal our multi-faceted scars. Thank God for volunteers!