

Paula's Katrina

Sunday, August 28, 2005 At home

It's 5:30am. We spent an anxious night watching The Weather Channel. We packed our cooler and two days' worth of clothes yesterday. We've got the checkbooks and insurance papers (just in case), flashlights, batteries, our cell phones and laptops. We're good to go.

7:00am – We had planned to be on the road by 6:30, but Marian Martin (the executive director of Gulfside Assembly, located right on the coast) needed my husband to help her put the last two pieces of plywood on her windows and lock up and check the buildings.

It's a beautiful day on the coast. You'd never know there was a storm out in the gulf.

Finally, Mrs. Martin and her two dogs (Keisha and Lucky) are ready to go. We're going to Hattiesburg, about 90 miles north. The news reports say that even Hattiesburg will get tropical storm force winds and damage, but we have to go somewhere. Jackson is even further north and expected to get the wind as well, so it really doesn't matter how far you go. This storm is gonna be big . . . and bad.

12noon – We made it to Hattiesburg. We didn't have a reservation anywhere and were lucky to find a hotel with a room. We originally only had a room for one night, but when my husband was bringing up the last of our things he was met by a man who remembered that Ed was looking to extend our stay through Monday. This man was going further north, canceling his room reservation, and offered it to my husband. Serendipity. We now have a room for Sunday and Monday. We have supplies for several days. I am typing my weekly reflection paper for week 3 of my online class. It has to be posted by 10pm. Ed is watching a movie on WTBS, *Tap* with Gregory Hines. We'll just chill out and try to relax. Everything is normal. Everything will be okay.

Monday, August 29, 2005 Hattiesburg

11:00am – The electricity goes out. I didn't have a chance to call my mom again. The wind speed is more than 100 miles. Ed keeps looking out of the window watching the Burger King next to the hotel get ripped apart. I keep telling him to be careful. (He's driving me crazy doing that.) I start reading the book for this week's assignment. I get up to chapter three by nightfall. We have a windup radio, so we can keep track of what's going on. It's not good. Not good at all. We try to sleep around 8:00pm., but the couple in the room next to us is arguing. They've got children, they're anxious, scared, and on edge (as we all are). The wife is asking the husband "what are we gonna do, what do I tell the kids, we don't have enough money. . . ." The husband all but explodes. I feel like banging on the wall and telling them to just shut up. I somewhat sleepily ask my husband if he thought it would be okay if I went and threw my shoes at them. He said no and to go back to sleep. Sleep?! Yeah, okay. Whatever.

Tuesday, August 30, 2005

Life A.K.: After Katrina

It's a beautiful day. The calm after the storm, I guess. We have no cell phone service, and I'm about to go insane because I can't call my mom. I know she knows what we've already heard: New Orleans is under water, and the gulf coast has been obliterated.

The phones are out, the power is out, and we have to get out of the hotel. Some people left late last night after Katrina blew through. How they made it in the dark, with no traffic lights, I'll never know. Other folks left this morning. We were going to try to stay one more night, but there is no water. No water means no flushing, and no flushing means . . . well, you know what that means. We decide to try and find Marian. She's staying with a friend (Ora Franklin) who told us we could stay with her if we needed to. We decide to find a payphone and call Ora for directions to her house. No sooner do we enter the hallway (headed out to find a phone) when we see Marian at the opposite end of the hall. Serendipity. She has come looking for us just as we were coming to look for her. We go outside, meet Ora, decide to take her up on her offer, and follow her to her house. She has a battery powered tv **AND** cell phone service! Thank you God!

We stay at Ora's a short while. I ask her to try to reach my mom. She says she will, and she'll have a neighbor try as well. We go back to the hotel, load the car, and check out. It takes two trips because we are on the second floor.

By the time we get back to Ora's house, she's reached my mom!!! I feel better now. I tried to reach her using Ora's cell phone, but I can't get through. I'll try again later.

The early estimates are that we will have electricity here in Hattiesburg in 3, maybe 4 weeks. It's midmorning. We need some supplies. We're driving and find The Home Depot open. There's a line a mile long. We stop anyway. Ed, Ora, and I get in line.

Mrs. Martin sits on a bench. I started getting lightheaded after standing in the sun for nearly an hour. I sat with Marian for a while, 20 or 30 minutes perhaps. I go to get back in line, and immediately begin to feel like I am going to pass out, hyperventilate, or vomit. I really don't *feel* stressed, but my body obviously disagrees. I went back to where Mrs. Martin was sitting, sat down, put my head down, and forced myself to breathe.

Some three hours after arriving, we all leave Home Depot. We've got batteries, touch lights, and other stuff. I **FINALLY** talk to my mom!! I give her phone numbers for my instructor so she can tell him I'm alive, but unable to complete my work for this week. She starts crying. I have to cut the call short because I know if I start crying now I might not stop, ever. At least she knows we're okay. We eat, we plan the next day, and we try to sleep. We have a clean place to stay, food, water, ice, and our lives. But, do we still have a house?

Wednesday, August 31, 2005

Survival 101

It's 6:30am. I'm in line waiting to get a loaf of bread. It's not Rwanda, it's not Russia, it's Mississippi, USA. Welcome to my reality. I've had no sleep, I look like a cross between death warmed over and something the cat dragged in, but I'm alive. It takes four hours, but I get the bread and other supplies. I write a check. Ora is able to get a grill. We get back to her house, and realize we have cell phone service. We check our voice mails. We have calls from San Diego to the Bronx, Detroit to Dallas. We return a few then have to turn off our phones because we cannot charge them. Note: Add a car charger to the list for tomorrow's run. The news reports are

still skipping over Waveland and Bay St. Louis like we don't exist. They talk about New Orleans, and then go straight to Gulfport and Biloxi. Don't they realize that Waveland and Bay St. Louis got the eye of Katrina and were hit **FIRST!!!!** I am sooooo frustrated! People just don't get it. There are a dozen cities and towns that sustained damage **BEFORE** you even get to Gulfport! This storm went from one end of the Mississippi gulf coast to the other and from the coast to almost 200 miles **INLAND!** Where's a TV reporter when you need one? It's hot, I feel sick. I eat, I feel better.

Thursday, September 1, 2005

Survival 101 continued

It's 5:30am. This time the line is for Wal-Mart. I get a voicemail from one of my friends telling me to brace myself because he's seen on CNN that Waveland was basically blown off the map. I am momentarily dismayed, but I've no time to dwell on it. When you stand in line for bread, water, and panties, your priorities become crystal clear. We're allowed 2 loaves of bread, 2 bags of ice, and 2 cases of water. There is no limit on anything else. You wouldn't think we were nearly 100 miles north of the gulf coast. I can't even imagine what Biloxi looks like, and New Orleans? It only took three hours this time.

Ed and I make a few more calls, and the decision is made to go see about the house and Gulfside Assembly tomorrow.

Friday, September 2, 2005
truth

Back to Waveland ~ the moment of

It's 4:30, I think. This time the line is for gas. Ed and Ora go. I'm too tired. I haven't had a good night's sleep in a week. Yet, after Ed and Ora leave, I shower in the dark and brush my teeth by flashlight. I sit in the dark at the front door watching the sun rise. In a little while, we'll know if we still have a house. I spent part of the day yesterday doing a list for the insurance company. That nearly did me in because I kept thinking about all the things that cannot be replaced: my paternal grandmother's pure silver flatware, the pearls my parents gave me for my 21st birthday, the afghans my maternal grandmother knitted, our wedding album, and on and on and on. I can't take this.

Mrs. Martin has enough gas in her van to get down there and back. We have gas, but will need it for later. I keep trying to prepare myself for the worst. I'm trying to wrap my mind around seeing a slab and rubble where my home used to be, but it's not working.

I just don't feel like it's gone. Not in my heart. We had gotten word that there were some homes still standing, but the destruction was so widespread. Even if it was standing, we'd lost everything inside, right? I started the trip with that in mind.

I don't know what time we left. Time is suspended for me right now. After I see my home, I'll be able to deal with it, or so I tell myself. A tense nearly two hour ride later, we get to Waveland. Katrina's wrath is visible as soon as we enter Hancock county. Miles **before** we even get to Waveland, there are blown off roofs, and blown over trees. By the time we get to Kiln, Mississippi (childhood home of Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Farve), we see caved in roofs, cars overturned in

ditches, boats in trees and homes, trailers on top of cars, mud and silt all over the road. It's unimaginable.

We get to the intersection of Waveland Avenue and Highway 90. There are buildings still standing, some severely damaged. Continuing down Waveland Avenue, we turn left on Rue de la Salle. As we turn, Ed asks me if my heart is beating hard yet. I look at him unsure whether to kiss him or strangle him. I do neither. Rue de la Salle turns into Hogan Street a few blocks down. The bull dozer is out clearing the road. Can we get past it? Can we get through? Yes.

I have almost resigned myself to being okay as long as I am able to get a brick from the rubble. I'll be alright if I can just do that. I thought I was prepared for everything.

I wasn't prepared to see . . . **MY HOME STILL STANDING!!!!** Oh. My. God. There was not a shingle missing. Part of the back and side fences were gone, and the garage door was bent, but otherwise there was no exterior structural damage. Ed took the plywood off the front door. We tried to unlock it, but it had swelled shut. He noticed the water line and warned me that we had had at least four feet of water in the house. He said it would be muddy, and that it would smell (of salt and silt from the ocean). We would look for a few specific items and leave. We walked around to the deck, took the plywood off the back door, opened it with our key, and walked into our house.

There is no way for me to adequately describe what that moment was like. I am amazed at what we found. Although nearly all is gone, all is not lost. The water had moved my china cabinet a few feet, but the plug was still in the wall, and not one glass or plate was broken. The china coffee cups were on their sides in a row as if someone had gently placed them there. We found some of our important papers and jewelry. It's a start. After a few minutes, we gather up some things and returned to the van.

Our trip was far from over, though. We still had to go to the coast. We had to see what it **REALLY** looked like. We had to see if what we'd heard was true: Gulfside Assembly was completely destroyed. My Foundations of Ministry II classmates know that I am talking about the conference/retreat center I wrote about for our ethics project. Located directly on the coast, the 60 acre center was called the "Mecca on the Gulf." It is an historic landmark because it was one of the few places in Mississippi where black people could meet during the civil rights movement.

Before going to Gulfside, however, we drove around to check on various homes of people Marian knows, mainly employees of Gulfside. The destruction was everywhere. Eventually, we could put it off no longer. After weaving amongst downed trees, power lines, and wreckage, we headed down Coleman Avenue (downtown Waveland). We'd heard it had been totally destroyed, but you just can't believe it until you see it. Places I know, places I was just getting used to. It's all gone. There are no words. Between this and my beloved city and state of New Orleans, Louisiana, I am one divided soul. I am Louisiana born and bred. My heart is, was, and always will be in the South. It's almost more than I can take. Almost. I've got work to do here. I've got a home to repair. I've got a degree to get. Somehow, this is related to my calling. I know it. My home wasn't spared just so I could leave it. I've got a community, a city, and a state to rebuild. Like the old spiritual says, I "ain't got time to die".

Sunday, September 4, 2005

Back to Waveland, again

We've spent nearly a thousand dollars in 3 days. ATMs are still down, and you can't use a credit card in most places. It's pretty much cash or check. We've got some cash, but I've been writing checks on my account for the things we need. It's going to run out soon. Then what?

We're going back to see if we can find a few more things. We are taking water and supplies to our neighbors across the street. These two young boys rode out the storm in their attic. They watched our house so that the search and rescue team wouldn't break down our front door since we weren't there. It was the least we could do.

We cannot stay inside the house for long. The mold has set in, the walls are buckling, and the smell will take your breath away. We actually had 4 ½ feet of water in the house. (Ed measured.) We've had some success! We found more of our important papers, our wedding album, my paternal grandmother's silver, and three of my black angel figurines. I haven't checked to see where my fish are. I have been collecting fish figurines for a decade. I had them from across the country and other parts of the world. They were crystal, soapstone, marble and brass, tin, wood, and other materials. Many were given to me. I saw the curio that held them still standing. I have to look for them next time.

We drove around a little more this time. We are trying to get to a friend's house to take pictures of her home and car for the insurance company. In the hard light of day, the stark reality of Katrina's wrath becomes all too clear. Her home is still standing, albeit with a tree on the roof of it. The ones across the street from her are flat. Just flat. I've had enough. It's time to go. I'm tired, I'm hoarse, and I have a headache. We go back to Hattiesburg.

My sneakers are covered with mud. They are the only pair I have. I have to go to Wal-Mart, again. I wonder, for a split second, if it's okay for me to walk in with my dirty socks. I go inside without shoes in order to buy another pair. No one notices.

My hostess's neighbor across the street, Betty, has baked a turkey. She called to offer us some. I put in a load of laundry then walk over to her home. We chat for a moment.

I cut some turkey and leave. It's a hot day. I'm tired, but I've got food, and my life. That's more than most. I'm grateful. I eat. I rest. I can make it another day.

Paula's Katrina – Week 2

Monday, September 5, 2005

each day is a gift from God

It's Labor Day. Big deal. I've been laboring to survive every day. I can hardly believe it was only a week ago that hurricane Katrina whipped through southern Mississippi. I got up at 7:30 today. That's late, but I needed the sleep. We're going to get our pictures developed today. We used up 4 disposable cameras. Hopefully, Ed can download the photos from his digital camera so we can get them on the internet. His battery charger was on our kitchen counter. I searched on the internet, but every

place I checked was out of stock. We've tried to find one here, but most of the electronics stores are still closed. We'll have to buy another one soon.

I continue to sift through jewelry. So much is moldy, rusted, and broken. I found a few pieces of silver that are in good shape. I sit in Ms. Ora's driveway picking, soaking, and cleaning. A man walks up to me and asks how we're doing on food. I say ok. He tells me that Ebenezer Baptist Church is giving away fresh chicken. I say thank you and keep on cleaning. I found Ed's class ring (yay!), mine are gone (oh well). Another neighbor comes to tell us where trucks are giving away free food. She gives me directions. It goes in one ear and out the other. I thank her. I keep cleaning. Ms. Ora called to tell us that a co-worker of hers has a daughter with poison ivy and she needs to take a bath. She's coming over. I keep cleaning.

We decide to make our run for the day. Several restaurants have opened. The menus are limited, but they're functioning. We go to Applebee's. It's good to have some hot food, but I can't eat. It's hard not to feel guilty when so many have lost so much. I eat about half the food. On the flip side, if this keeps up I'll be 20 pounds lighter in no time. Maybe I'll call it the DSD – Disaster Survival Diet. From there it's on to Sam's Club (again). I buy a suitcase. It's ironic that I had over a dozen pieces of luggage, half a dozen storage bins and umpteen boxes of clothes, yet all I have now fits in one piece. No excess baggage here, folks. It's amazing what you can let go of when you no longer have it. I'm in no rush to buy clothes and shoes and things. Food is enough.

We're getting our pictures developed. We hope to have them online tonight. We can only get one channel on tv, so we don't know what the media is showing and telling. We want to give it to folks first hand. We want them to see what **we've** seen, know what **we** know. I understand that Bush is visiting Poplarville today. It's a short distance from here. That's all fine and good, but **WHEN** is he going to Waveland?

I need a few things from Wal-Mart. I get jewelry cleaner and silver polish. I hope I can save Meme's silver. I head to the check out line and spy a key chain on a corner rack.

It reads, "Each day is a gift from God." I grab it, show it to Ed. He nods his head in approval. I put it in my cart.

I'm starting to get tired. That happens quickly these days. It's not regular fatigue like after you've worked out hard, or done yard work, or something. It's kind of an all-over pressure, part heaviness, part numbness. I feel like I'm in a slow thaw. I think reality is beginning to set in. Mrs. Martin said yesterday that she'll probably need to be treated for post traumatic stress syndrome. I'm not surprised. She not only lost her personal home, but the buildings over which she presided. Her loss is multiplied in so many ways. Two of her sons are coming down with a friend. They are going to help her search for some of her belongings. Search and rescue. Search and salvage. These are the days of our lives.

Tuesday, September 6, 2005

counting losses

I sat on the floor cross legged in the dark thinking of what I no longer had. Art, books, music. Gone. The paintings Ed had done that were on the walls of our home

and his office, the unframed pieces from Africa, the stained glass pieces and jewelry. Gone.

Art books, textbooks, autographed copies of books, poetry collections from Robert Frost, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, and Nikki Giovanni. Gone. Bibles (I saved one.), books on psychology, astrology, time management, economics, and business. Romance, whodunits, science fiction. Gone. Hardcover, paperback, books on tape, and books on cd. Gone. New books, old books, and books I've read several times, books I've read only once. Gone. CDs and DVDs are somewhere, likely ruined. I had hundreds of CDs. No more Nina Simone, John Coltrane, Billie Holliday, or Shirley Horn. Classical works by Debussy, Handel, Bach, and Rachmaninoff. Jazz, gospel, soul, R&B, pop, Latin, and a little opera. Gone. Collections from Earth, Wind, and Fire, The Temptations, Prince, and every Luther Vandross record. Ed had albums. We had a turntable. So much gone, so much irreplaceable. This vacillation is wearing me down. On one hand, I'm glad to be alive and have a roof over my head, a place to sleep, and food to eat. On the other, I can't stop thinking about all that I've lost. I feel guilty for having an orange, having options (I can live anywhere, I don't have to rebuild, I can rebuild, sell, and move, etc.). Others are not as fortunate. I hear horror stories on tv and have to turn it off. So many need so much. Is this Survivor's Guilt? I realize intellectually that I have not lost everything. I didn't lose my life, or my faith. Just everything I own, some of which can not be replaced. Lord, I'm tired. My voice is worse, and I don't feel well. I shower in lukewarm water. I brush my teeth with Listerine because Hattiesburg is still on a Boil Water Notice. I have breakfast. I make a few calls.

We had corn and string beans and leftover turkey and chicken last night. It was a feast. The insurance adjuster is supposed to come take a look at our home. Finally, some progress. We have to register with FEMA this week. Maybe they can give me some cash or a check. Then maybe I can focus enough to get back to my schoolwork. I've missed a week already. My instructor is working with me and the other two students who are in Mississippi. We've got a few weeks to take care of our business, and then we'll rejoin the class, if possible.

We go back to Sam's Club. We need more disposable cameras and few things. We're walking down one corridor and pass by a little girl. She is sitting on a man's shoulders. She wants popsicles. Her mother says that there are already some in the freezer at home, the little girl responds, "But mommy, *they ain't no more good.*" I had to smile. Here was a child that was acting . . . like a child. Her words were yet another metaphor for many during life A.K. (After Katrina). There is so much that *ain't no more good*. Homes, cars, lives – both animal and human – *they ain't no more good*. I had purchased a copy of O Magazine a few weeks ago. I have no idea where it is now. One of the cover stories was titled, "What's next for you?" What's next indeed?!

We are supposed to be getting money in from the family. It hasn't arrived yet. When it does, it will be a godsend. We will never be able to repay them or Ms. Ora for helping us get through this.

I take more Tylenol, but there aren't enough pills to cure the pain I feel.

Wednesday, September 7, 2005 FEMA, are you there?

Today is dad's birthday. I miss him so much. I've been responding to emails. My heart isn't in it, but I'm trying to stay in touch. I registered online with FEMA. Who knows how long it will be before they respond, and we receive assistance. It's supposed to take 15-20 minutes. It actually took 2 tries, and about 45 minutes. It's unbelievable. FEMA must be hiding because I haven't seen nor heard from them either in Waveland or Hattiesburg. Where the **hell** is FEMA????!!!!

Mrs. Martin, two of her sons (Eric and Peter), and one of their friends (Apollo) are searching for belongings down at Gulfside Assembly today. We still haven't heard from our MetLife insurance adjuster as to when he'll be coming, and we don't have a clue as to when we'll be assigned an adjuster from Fidelity, the flood insurance company. Hurry up and wait. Since we stop getting cell phone service about 15 minutes after leaving Hattiesburg, we put off going back for another day. I'm secretly glad because I don't like going back. It's starting to get to me. I'm tired of this already, and there's such a long way to go. I'm tired of seeing the trash, the twisted metal, the brokenness, the desolation. I hate it all. I want my house back, I want my life back, and I want to feel secure again.

Thursday, September 8, 2005

I've no appetite, no money, and no insurance adjuster. Well, that's not totally true. I do still have money in my account and so does Ed. We've got our credit cards (which we just paid off), but it's all useless as long as the electronic and computer systems are down.

In the afternoon, we get a call that Oprah is broadcasting from Waveland. It's almost funny. I sent her an email about Gulfside and never received a response. Mrs. Martin had sent some information about Gulfside and received a polite letter declining whatever was being requested. Oprah never had a clue about Gulfside Assembly or Waveland, Mississippi before, but where is she today? In my adopted hometown. And where am I? Stuck 90 miles away waiting for someone to decide if my house gets bulldozed. I could just scream! Hey, I wanted Waveland to be put on the map, but not like this.

As I respond to emails and calls, I find myself annoyed because one of my so called close friends hasn't checked in with me yet. Two days after the hurricane, I asked my mom to call this person as well as a mutual friend. They left messages. It's now more than 10 days later and still no word. I start getting bent out of shape, then stop. I remember how folks have been removed from my life (often suddenly and without explanation) at different times, and how it didn't hurt like I thought it would. I figure that God often has a better idea of whom I need in my life than I do, and proceeds to take care of it. So, wherever she is, she can stay. I'll be just fine.

I don't feel 100% physically or mentally. I've got a bit of cabin fever. Mrs. Martin, Ms. Ora, Ed, and I go out to eat. It's good to be out, yet it feels strange. It doesn't feel like it used to. People look pensive, weighed down, and sad. The food is good. We try to keep the conversation light. We all manage to relax, just a tad, for just a moment. Tomorrow is another day.

Friday, September 9, 2005

Moving day

It's big, it's blue, and it's right behind us. We're on our way to Waveland. We've just crossed the Hancock county line, and we're being followed by a blue bus. We pass through an intersection. The bus is still there. We round a curve. The bus is still there. Okay, this bus HAS to be going to Waveland. I just know it. After we pass a distribution center, the bus passes us. As it's going by we see that it is from Fletcher Academy in Fletcher, North Carolina. A simple statement on the side of it reads: God's children bringing help to God's children. Yeah, they're definitely headed to Waveland.

One of the things I do is teach skin care with Mary Kay Cosmetics. I had just ordered more inventory. I have to file a claim to replace my product. If I'm out of product, I'm out of business. If I'm not in business, I'm not making money. If I'm not making money, I have no income. Without an income, bills don't get paid. My customers in other states probably think I am dead. Maybe I'll send out a flyer advertising an "I survived Katrina" sale. B.K. (Before Katrina), I was on target to meet several business goals. It's not impossible to accomplish what I planned, even now. The difference is that now I don't care. I take pictures of several thousand dollars of unusable product and supplies. I try to do it without falling down into waterlogged boxes, silt, and mold.

I don't even see my desktop computer. It's probably under the tv.

Not too long after we start cleaning out the house, our builder comes by. He tells us he has people in the area and will send some over to help us. Two young women and four young men help us get the furniture out. I recognize the crew leader as being the same woman who did the paint touch ups and cleaning in my house, **before** I moved in. How ironic. She cleaned my house so I could move in, and now she's cleaning it so I can move out. She told me that they had driven in from Atlanta this morning to start cleaning up. She said they might as well take a bulldozer to her home in Pass Christian (and by the way, it's pronounced Chris-tee-an, **not** Christian as in "Lord, I want to be a Christian"). Yet she's here, helping me clean up. My heart goes out to her. I wish there was something I could do. There's nothing I can do. We start moving my life out to the front yard.

I focus on getting the china and crystal out to the tarp in the front yard. One of the men tells me how beautiful the china cabinet is. It is beautiful. It is ruined. It has to go. The team works diligently with us for awhile. We get the furniture out of the living room, kitchen, and bedroom. It's piling up in the front yard. I can hardly stand looking at it, so I don't. The refrigerator will have to wait until next time. It's gonna smell like I don't know what, but it has to wait. I retrieve my fish collection. As soon as they begin to move the china cabinet, it falls apart. I have to turn away. I know it's a small thing in the grand scheme of it all, especially in comparison to the people in New Orleans, but it still hurts.

I stopped to chat with one of the young men helping us move things. He says that we have a really nice car. He asks if we drove it down from New York. I say no, we bought it here. I told him we once had a car in New York. He asks what kind. I say it was an MG. He said our Jag looks nice. I said yes, it is. It's a good car, and it's been quite a workhorse. One of the other young men says, "Ya'll sure lost a lot of stuff."

I nod my head saying yes, we did. Then the first young man says, "What kind of work person is you?" I must have had that "deer in the headlights" expression on my face for the 2 seconds it took for me to realize he was asking me what type of work I did. I don't think he noticed. My inner grammar teacher cringed. I overcame

my shock and answered his question. Note to self: consider taking an education course or two and teaching. I was already considering being a substitute teacher. Why not? At the same time I was thinking this, I also had to keep in mind that this young man had lost his home, just like I did. Syntax aside, we all are on the same playing field now.

We signed the contract for our home on our 15th wedding anniversary, March 24. They were to be finished with it by May 27. We flew down on the 21st, I think. I did at least three walk-thrus that week. I flicked light switches, turn on faucets, checked appliances, door locks and cabinets, turned on ceiling fans, and the day before we closed, watched a truck from Alabama deliver the grass for my yard. There were about four boys/young men laying the sod. (The same ones helping me cleanup no doubt) The picture on the postcard that we sent out to everyone with our change of address was taken on our front porch after the sod was down. It looks very different now. I could cry, but I don't. There'll be time to do it later on. Today's task is to salvage more items, rinse them, and pack them. Again, it would be funny, if it wasn't so tragic. I mean, we paid nine thousand eight hundred forty-two dollars and seventy-six cents to move from New York to Waveland. That's right, the move cost us nearly 10,000 dollars! We had some four hundred and eighty-seven "pieces" and more than sixty boxes. And yet, by 3:10pm, what's left fits in six small cardboard boxes. Ed remarks on how disheartening it is to see your life laid out on the front lawn, dirty, smelly, rotted, and broken. I agree. I feel the tears welling up, but I don't let them fall. I can't. Not now, not yet. Soon, but not today. Lord, help me to hold out until my change (or FEMA) comes.

Later in the afternoon, we find out that Dateline on NBC is going to mention Gulfside Assembly. **FINALLY!!!** The nation will know what I've been trying to tell people. This beautiful, historical landmark, often called the "mecca on the gulf" does exist, was destroyed, and has to be rebuilt. My little city has made the news in a positive way under negative circumstances. Thank you Jesus. Marian, Ora, Ed and I watch the show with mixed emotions. We know every place Stone Philips is talking about (just like we knew where Oprah was). I get irritated when people say that Waveland was nearly "wiped off the map." That burns me up. We have not been "obliterated". Yes, there is extensive damage in much of Waveland and Bay St. Louis, but people are there and homes are standing. Unlivable? Of course, but don't count us out. I'm sick of hearing how bad it is, **I KNOW** how bad it is. I don't sleep at night because of how bad it is. I am not in my home because of how bad it is. Nobody has to tell me that 90% of Waveland was destroyed, I've seen it! So let's stop talkin' about what *has* happened, and get on with *making* it happen - rebuilding Waveland and Gulfside Assembly for the next generation.

Saturday, September 10, 2005

Ed and I had not planned to go back to the house until Monday. We need to rest from the physical and mental labor it takes to clean up. We find out that the bishop and some folks from UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) and other organizations want to go see Gulfside and would like for Marian to join them. Since we all have ties to Gulfside, we're all going.

It's a difficult trip. It just doesn't get any easier to see the wreckage. We arrive at Gulfside. Everyone gets out of their vehicle and begins chatting quietly. I walk off to the side. I am so not feeling this. I am not in the mood for a photo op. I don't want

to be here. Ed is chatting with someone. I walk over and introduce myself by saying, "Hi, I'm Paula Milo-Moultrie, and I lost my house. How are you?" Ed gives me a quick "I can't believe you said that/how could you be so rude/have you lost your mind" look. I gave him a quick "I don't give a s--- " look. He pulled me to the side for a moment. We have a brief conversation, and I promise not to be rude to anyone else, today.

We're back at Ora's house by 4:30pm. We take a few moments to stretch and regroup. We need a few things for the next few days. We go to . . . you guessed it, Wal-Mart! The place is packed. Many shelves are empty. I see store associates trying to restock as fast as they can. I get a few more items with the hope of feeling more in control. I know it's an illusion, but it's one I so desperately need. It's the little things that make a big difference.

Sunday, September 11, 2005

It's been almost two weeks since Katrina came and ripped apart my life and hundreds of thousands of others' lives. It's also the four year anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks. None of us wanted to watch as it is all replayed. We watched three of Tyler Perry's plays, 2 on DVD, 1 on VHS. We needed to keep it light. There is so much heaviness.

My thoughts today are basically unprintable. Unprintable because I am a wild, varied, mix of emotional and physical states, including, but by no means limited to: fatigue, anger, frustration, resolve, passion (both sexual and in general), helplessness, longing, grief, forced happiness, silliness, edginess, pettiness, irritability, impatience, hopefulness, thankfulness, peace, grateful, aching weariness, automatic pilot, wishing I could take a bath, knowing nothing will ever be the same again, I can do this.

I washed off the three black angels I found. I couldn't get all the dirt off, but that's okay. An angel with tarnished wings is still an angel.

After the angels, I began to wash and polish Meme's (my paternal grandmother) fine silver flatware. While doing this, the words of an old song came to mind. I seem to be able to relate to most any spiritual these days. I sit on a bench on the front porch, swaying to the rhythm of the chorus

If I have my ticket Lord,
Can I ride?
If I have my ticket Lord,
Can I ride?
If I have my ticket Lord,
Can I ride?
Ride right up to heaven right now

The only verse I can remember goes something like

Through many dangers, tolls, and snares,
I have already come.
Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home.

If I have my ticket Lord,
Can I ride?

If I have my ticket Lord,
Can I ride?

If I have my ticket Lord,
Can I ride?

Ride right up to heaven right now

Paula's Katrina – The Next-To-Last Week

Monday, September 12, 2005

progress

We finally received a response from FEMA. I had filed for aid online last week. They approved an initial \$2,000 for emergency lodging, with other assistance pending, **and** deposited it into our account. We will soon get information in the mail from the SBA with additional loans or grants we may be eligible to receive. Hallelujah!

We purchased a post office box in Hattiesburg. We should start receiving the mail that has been held for us since Katrina hit. Our next steps are to find a storage facility and an apartment here. Ora said that it'll be like finding a needle in a haystack, but we're hopeful.

We are supposed to see our MetLife rep on Friday. We also got our new claim number and policy number from Fidelity. Hurray! We're turning the corner on this ride. All we need now is to be able to get through to the American Red Cross. Hey, ARC, can ya hear me now? As far as I am concerned, the ARC is MIA in MS. And what were all those concerts about last week? To raise money for charity? Yeah, right. All those celebrities jumping on the bandwagon. Everybody wants to sing about it. How about you get some food to families and some homes rebuilt and sing a song about it later? Makes me wanna holla! Marvin Gaye was ahead of his time with "What's goin' on?" What *is* going on, people?

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

memories

Ed faxed information to a Fidelity rep that is going to see about getting us some temporary aid. We will be assigned a rep to come look at the house.

I start considering my options for school. I emailed a rather long letter to my professor. I will follow up with him this week. As I sat typing the letter, I was of all the intellectual property I've lost: nearly every term paper from college onward (one that had info a graduate student was going to potentially use), every speech since the 1980s, all written in long hand, some typed b.c. (before computers), some done on pc. My computer, disks, and hard copies are all gone. Some original poetry (my own and some written for me), all my messages (sermons), plus scratch sheets of notes for future messages, emails, articles, stories – folders of materials, dictionaries, thesauruses, books of quotations, and reference books on different topics. I'll never have those things again. It must all be reestablished. I have to start all over. I feel like I have no past. I hate this. Why me? Why us? Why did we move to Waveland? We could have stayed in New York, or moved to Georgia and been

near Mom. Maybe we shouldn't go back. All these questions and no answers. What's the saying, "Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies." Sounds like Bush's motto.

Ed went through the wedding album. There was very little we could save. I'll ask Mom to contact the photographer. Maybe he still has a wedding photo or the negatives. God, the pictures we've lost. The wedding album, my sweet 16 party album, my 21st birthday, junior and senior proms, childhood photos, photo cards from past Christmases, school pictures, pictures of Ed's children and grandchildren, pictures from our past two cruises, our family, family reunions, grade school friends, college friends, coworkers, and colleagues, and dozens of pictures of us at holidays, on vacation, at social events, church, everything. Jesus! Ed's retirement memory book, containing letters and photos from teachers and students, family, friends, and coworkers, is no more. It's all gone, all lost.

Mom told me that her college roommate Willa and her husband Jem (who live in Ocean Springs) rode out the storm in their home. According to Willa, the storm battered their home for 14 hours. She said it sounded unlike anything you can imagine.

I continue to respond to emails. I feel a little better although I'm still not sleeping well. Then again, I don't expect to sleep well for a long time. I know how lucky we are. I just wish I could hurry up and get to the other side of this circumstance. I ask mom for the words of a quote to help me keep it in perspective. She tells it to me: I complained of having no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet. As bad as it is, it **could** be worse.

Wednesday, September 14, 2005

sweat and tears

The tears started today. Not a wailing, keening, screaming, snotty mess. No, they were mixed with sweat as I filled trash bag after trash bag with the remnants of my former life.

They began to fall when I found my granddad's funeral program. Joseph Leon Milo was buried February 1, 1984. I remember that day. We were living in Shreveport (LA) and had to drive to Baton Rouge (LA). He was laid to rest in a military cemetery in Port Hudson. I was okay until they began to play Taps. I cried then. I cried now. I put the program aside. Every time Ed put a ruined book in the trash, I cried. From the hymnal my dad gave me in 1989 when I graduated from college engraved with my initials – PVM, to the bible my pastor gave me for my birthday this February, it's on the trash heap. I put papers in the trash and dragged the bag outside. I sweat. Ed puts more books in the trash. I cried. I put clothes, mementos, and pieces of my bedroom set on the pile outside. I sweat.

I found two more bibles. One of which is particularly precious because it was the first one I ever picked out. I was somewhere around 10 years old. I had been somewhere with my dad, probably at annual conference, and we'd stopped at the Cokesbury tables to browse. I saw a book with pictures of women on it, different races and ages. I opened it and saw things I'd read before, but the words were more like what I spoke, not stilted and high English or something. It didn't have all those "THEEs" and "THOUs". I started reading and knew I wanted this book. I wasn't sure if he would get it, but I asked dad for it anyway. He looked at the book, looked at me, smiled, and bought it. It was the Good News Bible.

I lost my viola. I started taking piano lessons in elementary school, but soon found that I had a weak left hand. Or maybe, I just lost interest. (Sorry, Mom!) But when I picked up the viola in the fourth grade, all was right with the world. My left hand was no longer weak. I think being a musician makes me a better singer. Reading music and playing with a group trained my ears and eyes. I've been singing since age 5 or 6. My talent comes from both sides. Mom and Dad both sang. Mom still sings and plays piano. Dad had done some spoken word recordings, and often ended his sermons with a solo. Music is very important to me. I can't imagine my life without it. Would you believe that I actually met someone who didn't listen to the radio and claimed not to own any music? He must have been an alien. I don't know anybody who doesn't have a favorite song. If they say they don't, they are lying. Nugget #1 - I found a copy of my music library list on my laptop. I didn't realize I had a list of cds, but I'm glad I do. It'll come in handy when I rebuild it. Shamefully, I didn't take the time to catalogue my books. Ed minored in library science. He could have set up everything using the Dewey decimal system, the library of congress method, whatever. We were going to do it after we built shelves in the third bedroom. Woulda, coulda, shoulda, but didn't. It's too late now. It breaks my heart every time he throws away a book. Book after book after book ends up in a contractor (commercial) size garbage bag! I can't stand it. Boxes of books. I could kick myself for not organizing this. I have no one to blame except myself. We had a substantial library. It took years to build. I don't know if I'll build another one. I love to read, and yet I can't seem to open a book. I just don't feel like it. What's the point?

I know it is fatigue and grief that makes me feel this way, but I don't care. I don't want to read anything right now. Not a magazine, newspaper, novel, or milk carton. I am drawn to one thing, though: the daily devotional in The Upper Room. I may be reading it with half a mind (or half a heart), but I'm reading it. It's just the right length, and each vignette lets me look at someone else's life. It helps a little.

SUCCESS!!! The sweat and tears pay off. We find several of Ed's original paintings in good shape. We thought we'd lost them all. We find one bin of photos that seem to be untouched. I think I have a wedding photo or two in there. (Yes, I will take the time to put them in albums now) We find other photos, from Ed's office. Some were okay; others were just too far gone. We lean them up against the front of the house to dry.

We found two plaques - one presented to each of us in 1996 - for our work at Gulfside Assembly. We found one given to Ed by my Dad when Ed did a mission fair at my church (1989), and our degrees (college - me, graduate school - Ed). One of the first things we found on our first trip back a few weeks ago (has it been that long!) was the wristwatch the United Methodist Men of Fordham United Methodist Church gave to Ed shortly before we moved. It's not a Timex, but it sure acted like one because it "took a lickin' and kept on tickin'". The box it was in was soaked, but the watch was dry. Also, the pearl necklace and bracelet and the gold angel necklace that the choir gave me as parting gifts survived. I haven't found the earrings, but that's okay. I have more than enough.

I found my CDs! The first one I picked up had to be held away from me so the water could drain onto the floor. I wiped it off and decided to try it. We keep a portable radio/cd player in the car for the beach. I put the cd in, and lo and behold, it played perfectly! Hey, there's hope for those wet CDs yet. But how, exactly, do you wring out a CD?

We found an American Red Cross representative (on what used to be the parking lot of the Waveland Market) and asked what we should do about receiving assistance. He told us to keep calling. Try early in the morning or late at night, but keep calling. There is money available. Great, more delays. In other news, our other insurance adjuster called. He's coming Friday as well. We have two people to work with because there are two different companies involved. Nothing's ever simple when it comes to insurance, eh? MetLife covers the physical home and land (i.e. wind damage), and Fidelity National covers the flood damage. Unfortunately, many people in our area did not have flood insurance. They were told they didn't need it, which was true. We were told the same thing, but we got it anyway. Thank God!

Our neighbor across the street (whom we hadn't known prior to the storm) came over to chat. Rusty is an ex-cop who threatened a drifter and potential looter who chanced to come down our street the day after the storm. He told a cop friend (and us), that although he'd been in his house a long time, the people in the homes across the street had just moved in, and he wasn't going to let someone just walk in and take their stuff. He confronted the drifter (who threatened to stab Rusty's dog), and said he would fire the first round in the air as a warning, but the second one would be for real. Don't tell me that we aren't being protected! We knew that there was at least one sheriff living in the next block. Rusty told us a fireman lives next to him. This white man who doesn't know us from dirt (and proudly flies the confederate flag) stepped up to protect the homes on Hogan Street on sheer principle. We've got protection all around us. 'Course the pit bull he has in his yard should have been a clue that he was a man to be reckoned with. He offered us food, water, a clean bathroom in his RV and his home, and told us to let him know if we needed anything. By the way, this is the father of the two young men we took juice, paper towels and a few other things to on our second trip down. My, what strange bedfellows Katrina has fashioned in her wake.

There is a house you pass on the way to us. It's on Rue de la Salle, the street that becomes Hogan. We passed it on the way in and saw some words painted on wood in white in front of the house. I read them, commented to Ed on them, and quickly filed them away. I didn't want to think about them. When we pass by again on the way out,

I read the sign again, carefully. It says

Family of 6
4 Died – 2 survived
We lost our
Mom Dad & Brothers

Then on one window

2 Girls
Ok

Thursday, September 15, 2005

settling in Hattiesburg

Ms. Ora (By the way, for those who don't know, that's the "country formal" way to address folks. I'm Miz Paula. Whether you're married or single, 18 or 80, it's the same. Ed is . . . Mr. Ed, which I can't say with a straight face.) Anyway, as I was saying,

Ms. Ora's birthday is Saturday. I think everyone should send her birthday cards and thank her for being such a kind and generous woman. She doesn't want to celebrate

it. In fact, she found out some family members were planning a surprise party and told them to stop. I understand how she feels. She grieves Gulfside's loss, has family to be concerned about, and just doesn't much feel like celebrating. Her family has ties to Gulfside which span at least two generations. She has chaperoned the college tour and was just in Waveland for the dedication of the new building on August 12. Ed and I think she should do something. We already know of one thing she wants that we can give her. We may be homeless and jobless, but we're multi-talented. We've got skills! She has some spare bricks and wants a few planters around her back patio. Ed has already designed it on his mac. He's going to build it for her. The last thing he built was a sign at Gulfside Assembly that is still standing, so the planters will be a breeze. And besides, it's the least we can do for a woman who has allowed us to invade her space for these past three weeks, and not lost her mind. Maybe she'll go spend time with her family and friends. She needs to be in a loving circle just as much as we do.

As for our future home and life, many questions remain unanswered: how much will the insurance company **actually** give us, who's going to do the mold remediation, when can they start on it, how long will it take to repair it, how much will it cost, where are we going to stay for the next six months or so, what about the bills (there's only a sixty day deferment on the credit cards), what about school, the ministry, our businesses

Ed spends the morning cleaning tools and some things he salvaged. We haven't found the cameras yet, but he found the telescope and tripod. We will find more on Friday.

Friday, September 16, 2005

his, mine, and ours

I didn't sleep well. Ed was having a dream (not a good one either) and poked his elbow into my sternum so hard I had to push him to wake him up. He apologized and went back to sleep.

We left Hattiesburg early this morning. **Too** early, if you ask me. I'm not a morning person so this gettin' up early thing is 'bout to kill me!

We have our routine down pat. It's a "divide and conquer" strategy. We each take a room in the house, fill trash bags with smaller items, put larger items directly on the front lawn, look for specific items, rejoice when we find them, and shake our heads at all we have to discard.

Great News! We closed on the sale of our apartment in New York today. Our lawyer handled everything. We have a bit of money to work with as we look for an apartment in Hattiesburg. Also, the insurance adjuster from Fidelity came to take a look at our house and fill out his report. He stayed a good while. He measured, took digital pictures, went from room to room, and all the way around outside. We had to provide the make, model, and serial numbers on all appliances, sound equipment, computers and printers.

We had to open the fridge to get the information. I nearly threw up on my shoes when Ed opened one of the doors. I wrote quickly, and then dry heaved for a few moments. It was neatly loaded with food, and stocked pretty well with mostly fish. After three and a half weeks, you can imagine the smell. Think fermented vomit. I

finished filling out the paperwork sitting on my front porch, breathing deeply. I copied everything in my trusty notepad so we'd have a copy (and I wouldn't have to open that foul smelling fridge again). We contacted our builder to find out if we could get any helpers today. He sent us two young men who arrived around 12noon. They moved the range, washer, dryer, and refrigerator out to the junk pile that is my front yard.

As the young men take down every door in the house save for the front and back ones,

Ed and I take on the closets and master bathroom. I can't believe how bad my closet is.

I remark to Ed that it looks worse in daylight than with the flashlights. I wish I didn't have to put **EVERYTHING** in the trash, but I do. I am doing okay until I have to take my wedding gown and lay it on the piles and suitcases of ruined, waterlogged clothes. That gave me pause. I don't have any daughters to give it to, my stepdaughter (who is my age) will probably have her gown made, my goddaughter will probably want something very different if she gets married, one niece is already married and the other one isn't remotely close, but . . . to part with that gown - the gown my dad saw me in first because he was with me when I picked it out - "NO! I can't do it" my heart screams.

I lay it gently down, then turn and walk away, tears and sweat burning my eyes. How much more, Lord?

During the course of our salvage fest, which lasted from 8:40am to 3:40pm, the military came by three times. The first time a group came; Ed had just left to find the insurance adjuster who had called to say he was lost. One of the officers approached and asked if I needed anything, did I want ice, water, MREs (meals ready to eat). I said I'd take the MREs and some ice. They gave me 4 MREs and 3 bags of ice. Much more than we needed. He then asked if we'd had any problems with looters. I told him no. He asked if there was anything else I needed. I said no, and he left.

A few hours later, another group passes by. One officer approaches and asks if we need anything. I ask him whatcha got. He says water and candy bars. I ask what kind of candy. He says he has snicker's bars. My eyes light up and I run to the truck like a kid who's just seen the ice cream man. Snicker's bars, the original kind not that almond stuff, are my second favorite after Hershey bars (which I bought a case of at Sam's Club last week). Stress relief.

Still, later, yet another military group comes by. This time they're offering free tetanus shots. I told 'em I had a booster about 3 or 4 years ago. A nurse in fatigues gives me a thumbs up sign. I tell them that my husband hasn't had a booster in years. Ed is in the garage during this exchange. I tell him he should get the shot. He comes out front, fills out a piece of paper, and gets the shot. We chat a little bit with the paramedic who gave Ed his shot, and they move on down the block. The sky has clouded over. We start to wrap things up for the day. Where is the MetLife adjuster? He didn't come, nor did he call. Well, we told him we'd be here all day, and we were. Now, it's nearly 4pm, and we're tired. I pack up my buried treasure. Today it was toiletries, plus a few pieces of jewelry and accessories. We found the cameras and put them aside along with some other items. We're building quite a stash, and we haven't started on the kitchen yet. The water didn't reach the top cabinets. I can probably keep some glasses and plates. We won't be starting over with nothing. Less than we had, yes. But not zero.

So far I've been putting my thoughts down as just that, *my* thoughts. But there's not just a "me" in this situation. There's an "us" and a "we". There's his, mine, and ours. The "His" is Ed's grief, loss, and outlook. He has lost much, and it's not the first time. In 1979, Little Rock, Arkansas, Ed lost everything in a flood. He had only the clothes on his back and had to start over with nothing. He's been through all of this before and didn't think he'd be facing it again at 66 and retired. He was ready to volunteer time at Gulfside, create stained glass pieces and jewelry, paint pictures, open a gallery, and travel. Not lose *almost* everything, again. Or start over, again.

The "mine" is . . . well, you know about mine or part of it at least. It's what I've shared thus far, as well as my on going questions, concerns, and observations. I've had a set back, not a step back 'cause I'm still moving forward. While I've lost much, I do still have some dreams; obtaining a ThD from Emory University's Candler School of Theology, and co-authoring a book with my mom, just to name a few. I've also got more lessons to learn, more experiences to go through, and more not-so-smart things to do. I'm no more immune to stupidity than anyone else. I've done things I'm not proud of, things that would shock some folks, and things folks didn't even know I **could** do. And guess what? It's all between me and God. At the end of the day, we each have to live with the consequences of our own actions. I make no apologies for who I am, what I do, and where I am going. I'm on my journey, home.

My Lord, I'm on my journey,
My Lord, I'm on my journey,
My Lord, I'm on my journey,
On my journey home.

Last verse

I'm sometimes up and I'm sometimes down,
But I thank God I'm heaven bound,
And I'm sure no one can turn me round,
And I'm on my journey home.

The "ours" is our life as a couple. We've been married 15 years, but we first met in 1984. Many folks already know the story of our meeting and courtship. For those who don't, maybe I'll tell it later. There is one thing I will share. As I understand it, there were quite a few naysayers floating around when I first announced my engagement. They know who they are, but in case they have forgotten, I am talking about those family members, friends, and acquaintances who said or thought the following: "It'll never last", "What does he see in her (besides the obvious)", "Why is she marrying a man so much older", "She's only marrying him for his money", "I can't believe he's doing that/she's doing that", "There's too much of a difference in their ages", "How could Audrey and Howard let her do that", "She ought to be ashamed of herself/he ought to be ashamed of himself", and other assorted BS.

It strikes me as very interesting how **not one** person who felt this way dared say any of this to my face. I don't know if they thought I was too young, too naive, too stupid, or figured they would just sit back and watch my marriage fail. It has never ceased to amaze me as to how often people underestimate me. If I had a nickel for every time someone **assumed** that just because I smiled, nodded, and said little, I didn't have a clue as to what was going on, I'd be rich. Contrary to popular belief, however, while I was smiling and nodding and not talking, I was listening. It's what I do. It's my strength. How else would I know what was being said? I am (and

have always been) very aware of my environment. I absorb the vibes around me. I am just like a graceful oak tree: I merely bend. I do not break. When I was younger, I was really concerned about what other folks thought of me. Those who truly know me would tell you that I am a strong women as well as a woman of strength. That's why people tell me their secrets, cry on my shoulder, and ask for my advice. That's also why the older I get, the less I care about what anyone else thinks of me. It's been 21 years since I first met Ed. I've always been a curious sort so I'm wondering: Where are the naysayers now? Are they still together? Are they still talking and communicating with one another? Do they still have sex? Is it good, great, even phenomenal? Are they still sharing intimate moments? Do they still respect their partners? Or are they merely shells, just going through the motions. Inquiring minds want to know.

Let me be clear. I am not perfect, and neither is Ed. I'll be the first to admit that I have made mistakes in my marriage, and I'm probably gonna make some more. We've had our issues. We've had our trials, but I wouldn't change a thing, even what we're going through now. We've weathered storms before, and we will continue to weather the after effects of this storm, day by day. We've had more good times than bad. Has it been easy? Mostly. Mainly because Ed is so much more patient than I am. I'm the emotional, moody one. He's the cool, even tempered one. Thankfully, I have sense enough not to judge couples as "Unlikely to Succeed." I would suggest that others do the same. Please. I had some great marital roll models. If I screw this up, it won't be because I don't know what a good marriage is.

In any case, I have learned a few things about relationships. The two most important ones are: 1) Each relationship is as unique as the two people in it, and 2) Mind your own business. I need not elaborate much on these, because most, if not all of you who are reading this are adults and can figure it out the meaning of those statements. I will say this. What goes on behind the scenes, behind closed doors, or behind the curtain is generally none of your concern. If the relationship is working for the folks who are in it, let it be. In other words, if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. Keep your thoughts to yourself, and nasty actions, too. On the other hand, if you know or suspect that someone is in an abusive or unhealthy relationship, do what you can to help. But beware! Relationship intervention is similar to intervention with an alcoholic or drug addict. First, they've got to acknowledge there is a problem. Denial ain't just a river.

Since certain things (that Ed does) which annoyed me before Katrina, still annoy me now, I figure we're okay. The reverse is also true. Anyone who is or has been in a committed relationship knows that no one can work your nerves like your partner. You also know the work it takes to keep it going. And yes, it does take two. You can't be in a relationship by yourself (**for** yourself, perhaps, but not **by** yourself). You can love yourself, even be by yourself, but a relationship with someone or something involves interaction, connection, and . . . vulnerability. You've got to be willing to let someone inside your world. That's a tough thing to do after you've experienced pain and loss, but it's necessary. You also have to be willing to talk about the hard stuff as well as the small stuff.

Early on, Ed and I realized that we had much in common, including the same values, same likes and dislikes. Even with a 28 year difference, we liked many of the same things. It was a little scary. In our first conversation (a 3-hour dinner at an Italian

restaurant in Manhattan), we found out that we were both Pisces. Double the pleasure, double the fun. Double the moodiness.

Ed calls me his mirror image. It's true. We really do complete each other's sentences more often than not. I often really do know what he is going to say before or as soon as he breathes the first syllable. Psychic connection? Possibly. Knowing each other eerily well. Definitely. I don't know if we're old souls, twin souls, soul mates, or what. We respect each other, love each other, get on each other's nerves, and still like the way each other looks. Folks divorce over less. We will do our best for each other, and rebuild our lives. Where that takes us remains to be seen.

One of my favorite books is Linda Goodman's Love Signs. There are many who do not believe in astrology, think it's a bunch of poppycock, a tool of the devil, and so on and so forth. That's fine. There's a first amendment that says you can say or think what you like. I can respect a difference of opinion, but not a closed mind. Even if you feel that way, though, Love Signs is an interesting read. Published in 1977, the book reveals the most interesting things about every sun sign combination. My brother Adrian first showed me the book when I was 13 or 14 years old. I have looked up the combination for every boy or man that has crossed my path ever since. It's no substitute for faith and common sense, but it does shed light on all sorts of traits and potential patterns. There is a poem in Love Signs (p.31-32), that has stayed with me. Due to copyright laws, I am not supposed to reprint any part except by permission. I do believe Linda Goodman died in the late 1990s. Anyway, the poem is incredibly profound, at least for me. Entitled ***The Planets***, it talks about relationships and each planet. It begins

we've fought a long and bitter war
my Twin Soul and I

lost and lonely, fallen angels, exiled
from a misty, half-forgotten galaxy of stars

The last part reads

we bear . . .

the wounds and scars of furious battle
I and my Twin Soul

but now we walk in quiet peace
with all our scattered pieces whole
together, hand-in-hand...full serpent circle
back into the Pyramid-shaped rainbow
of tomorrow's brighter Eden

crowned by gentle Venus with the Victory of Love
that did not die
but has survived the night of selfish seeking
to wait for morning's soft forgiveness

and the dawn of understanding

To fully appreciate this, you have to read pages 12-30, or any chapter. I hope you do.

Saturday, September 17, 2005 **call, in question**

Prior to 8/29/05, I was struggling to identify my call. My call to ministry, that is. I have completed the MIP (Ministry Inquiry Process) with a mentor, a year of seminary work, and a battery of psychological tests. I had an appointment (interview) with a psychologist for September 16th, which I rescheduled due to Katrina. I was on my fourth rewrite of my call narrative, and just beginning to work on one set of questions that I have to provide written answers to in preparation for a meeting with the district board of ordained ministry, when my life was rudely interrupted.

Strangely enough, at some point in the past few weeks I stopped struggling. My daily efforts to stay alive and put one foot in front of the other have brought about a blessed quietness, stillness. What I am to do will be revealed to me soon enough. It may be a complete 360 degree turn to something else. Or, it may be to continue on my current path. I really don't know, but I don't worry about it any more.

I have none of the books, materials, or written work needed to complete the work. I hope my mentor still has copies. I'll email him later. I do still have one set of the questions I was to work on. In this paper, I am to discuss (explain, elaborate on) my understanding of: trinity, sin, repentance, reconciliation, atonement, grace, salvation, resurrection, eternal life, the sacraments, the authority of scripture, the kingdom of God, and the differences between local pastor, deacon, and elder. I had put off doing the writing because I wasn't sure if I wanted to continue. I had even emailed my mentor, sometime in July, to tell him that I would be unable meet with the board this fall.

I understand that my interview with the board will revolve around the formative Christian experiences of my life. So let me get this straight. For the better part of two hours, a panel of predominantly white men will ask me questions and assess whether this black woman qualifies as a candidate for ministry in the United Methodist Church. Somehow, it doesn't seem fair. My heretofore unresolved question has been whether I should become a deacon, an elder, or neither. An answer has just not been clear. I know I do not have to be ordained in order to be a counselor. However, I chose to attend seminary instead of getting a psychology degree because I didn't feel that was the path I should take. I want a counseling practice based in theology. My reason for doing the Ministry Inquiry Process in the first place was to find out what my options were in that respect. Yet, after all this time, there was still no clarity.

The way I see it is that if my life, now, today, is not a testament to my belief in repentance, reconciliation, atonement, grace, salvation, resurrection, eternal life, and the kingdom of God, I don't know what is. As for the other answers, they would be off the top of my head . . . Trinity? I understand it to be the "three in one" of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A circle that I am invited to enter into through prayer and seeking. Sin? Jesus died on a cross to pay for mine and everyone else's, for all time. The sacraments? The United Methodist Church has two: baptism and Holy Communion. Baptism is only done one time and is an outward and visible sign of one's commitment of his/her life to God. Holy Communion reminds us of the sacrifice that was made on our behalf and is an invitation to commune with the Holy

Spirit. The authority of scripture is the belief that scripture is the final authority in the both the denomination and one's individual life as a Christian. I'm fuzzy on the differences between local pastor **and** deacon and elder. I think it has to do with licensing, and that a local pastor isn't necessarily ordained. As for the differences between deacon and elder, here's what I understand. There are two orders in the United Methodist Church: elder and deacon. The elder path consists of word, service, sacrament, and order. The deacon path consists of word, service, and order. Deacons may assist in the distribution of sacraments, but may not administer them. The deacon path is not necessarily filled as a pastor, or assistant pastor. Deacons are teachers, **counselors** (my area of interest), administrators, program coordinators, and so forth. Elders are almost always local church pastors, and I don't want to be a local church pastor. (You'd think that would make it an easy decision, but it doesn't.) It is that way for a reason. If you can show (and tell) that you have been set apart, have experienced the word and presence of God, have acknowledged the meaning and importance of the sacraments in both your personal life and the corporate life of the people of God, and are committed to a life of service so that the kingdom of God reigns on earth, then you probably ought to be an elder. If I haven't been spared to preach the good news, and I'm not a qualified candidate because I cannot "clearly articulate" my call, then being an ordained elder is clearly not the path for me. And you know what? I can live with that, peacefully and confidently.

Lest you think I meant to be glib or disrespectful in my responses above, know that that is not the case. All I can say is that I am not concerned about making it "nice and pretty". These ain't pretty times. I don't even know if any of this makes any sense. My perspective has been massively altered since I last tackled any of this, so pardon me while I get a grip.

Over my head
I hear music in the air
Over my head
I hear music in the air
Over my head,
I hear music in the air
There must be a God somewhere

Sunday, September 18, 2005
got

the best you have is what you've already

I read the meditation for today in The Upper Room. The reading for the day is Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

I am assaulted by the layers of meaning this passage holds for me today. It is no accident that this passage came to me. The message is clear: No matter what time it is, God has a plan. Verses 9 and 10, especially 10 also speak to me

What gain have the workers from their toil?

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

"I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with."

Yes, I have seen the business that God has given to **ALL** of us to be busy with, and I trust you have seen it as well. The **business** is the rebuilding, reawakening, and renewal of the homes, lives, souls, and cities decimated by hurricane Katrina. What role will **you** play?

Ed had an errand to run. I went along for the ride. While I was waiting in the car, one of my favorite hymns came on the radio. I sang through the first verse, but the tears started coming and I had to stop. I am living proof of the song's truth. If you know it, sing it loudly, with great joy! If you don't know it, learn it! (I know I've been breaking copyright laws left and right, but please, please don't turn me in!)

**Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not;
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be.**

**Great is Thy faithfulness!
Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided;
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!**

**Summer and wind and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.**

**Great is Thy faithfulness!
Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided;
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!**

**Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!**

**Great is Thy faithfulness!
Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided;
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!**

Sincerely,

Paula Milo-Moultrie