

Loss of Identity in Disaster: How Do You Say Goodbye to Home?

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TOPIC. *Hurricane Katrina was a disaster that affected the lives of many people from the Gulf Coast area. The hurricane affected their emotional and physical health, and devastated their financial and material status.*

PURPOSE. *This article relates the lived experience of a Hurricane Katrina New Orleans evacuee who relocated to Texas permanently.*

CONCLUSION. *The people who resided in these communities lost not only their homes but their culture and day-to-day life. One's culture and identity are developed and learned over time and cannot be easily replaced. A person may adopt another culture or identity, but the original self (much like the city of New Orleans) has been shattered and torn.*

Search terms: *Hurricane Katrina, loss of identity and culture, relocation*

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It feels as though my skin has been ripped off and I am exposed, just dangling there, lost amidst a group of people. I do not know as I search for my place, my new skin. I fervently try to sew together ripped shards of the old me, hoping they will hold. To my dismay they never do and so I continue my search for my new skin.

Hurricane Katrina forced the evacuation and eventual uprooting of many individuals who fled the area and relocated to another part of the country. I was part of this exodus and am now living in San Antonio, Texas, rather than New Orleans, my home of 28 years. When I left my home in September 2005, I left my culture, loved ones, and a sense of knowing who I am in relationship to my surroundings. According to Eisenbruch (1990), in a crisis situation where an entire culture is wiped out due to a natural disaster, an individual may experience a loss of identity and begin a grieving process for the loss. The individual is then faced with the continuing challenge to develop a new identity. This does not just apply to individuals, because entire communities can be regarded as a single entity experiencing collective grief for the loss of its shared identity (Eisenbruch). This makes it more difficult to find yourself anew when your family and friends are also experiencing loss of identity, self, and home.

According to Erikson (1968), the term *identity crisis* was first used to describe a group in the Mount Zion Veteran's Rehabilitation Clinic during World War II. It was theorized that the patients were not shell-shocked, neither were they malingerers, but they had lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity because of the war. This disturbance has been seen continuously in other young individuals who are at war within themselves, in confused rebels and in destructive delinquents who war on their society. Erikson (1968) defines identity crisis as "designating a necessary turning point, a crucial

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moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (p. 16). Therefore, an identity crisis may not always be seen as a terminal crisis, but as a growth point for individuals who were affected by Hurricane Katrina. Golafshani (2002) sees the loss of identity more as a transformation or metamorphosis that is dynamic. This point of view makes it possible for the person to grieve the older identity and culture and move towards the new in a smoother transition instead of a sharp turn. The individual does not have to give up the old ways of a previous culture, but may adapt their former habits to their new environment. This new-found combination serves as a source of healing in dealing with the loss of the previous identity. Understanding these theoretical concepts has aided in my recovery and movement toward finding myself in San Antonio as a nursing student, daughter, sister, and friend. Let me tell you my story.

The Initial Hurricane Threat

It was a typical day on August 27, 2005, during the first week of nursing school when we first learned there would be a hurricane. Hurricane warnings were a part of our lives and posed no real threat to us. The immediate threat for me was my fear that I may never live through pharmacology. That night on the way home I heard on the news that residents were asked to evacuate the area. I was excited! School was going to close! I was saved from the fear of pharmacology for one more day. Once I arrived home and turned on the TV, I saw Katrina's strength and the potential destruction of the hurricane. It was growing steadily, heading right toward my home.

My father had decided it would be best for my mother and me to just go downtown to the Fairmont Hotel until the hurricane passed. It is a New Orleans tradition to go downtown to a hotel because the hotels are high up and the parking garages give you a place to keep your car from being flooded. I was anxious about separating from my brother and pregnant sister-

in-law who were already on their way to Lafayette. The radio broadcasts of the evacuation routes were followed by discouraging traffic reports. Multiple times my mother and I thought of changing plans and going to Lafayette with other family members. However, we had waited too long to make a different decision and now the roads were congested and it was time to head downtown to the Fairmont Hotel. Soon the police would be going down each street to make sure we were not in our homes.

In an emergency it is difficult to really foresee the outcome and to envision the situation as dire as it is. When packing, I just included the essentials I would need for the next couple of days. I grabbed my textbooks, my dog—a tiny yorkie—some clothes (mostly sweats), and my computer. That was it. I did not grab photographs or irreplaceable things that are meaningful to me. I left everything at my apartment. Everything. I figured I would be right back. As we drove toward the hotel, we were only one of two cars going the opposite way of all the traffic. I think that is when it hit me that something was very wrong. The radio reports were estimating Katrina at a category 4 hurricane. I didn't comprehend what that meant. I lived in New Orleans all my life but was not around for Hurricane Betsy (the legendary hurricane that hit New Orleans in 1965). I have only been through practice evacuations, and each time a hurricane came they would say "we just missed the big one." I was just desensitized to the word *hurricane*. Repeatedly we had put up boards, sandbags, and the closest thing we had come to a hurricane was a hurricane party.

It is strange what you talk about when you think you are not going to make it out alive. As I lay on the floor of the Fairmont Hotel I recounted every funny thing that has ever happened to me. I sat around with my best friends, Mom, and two other good guy friends who were also staying there with their families. The upper levels of the hotel grew hot not long after the air conditioning and electricity went out. We went downstairs to the lobby and gazed out the front doors of the Fairmont in wonder, watching debris fly by. The doors

were barricaded from the public and we were not allowed to leave. The elevator was broken and the air conditioner still didn't work. There was no water and the toilets didn't flush. Drinking water was running out and the food was gone. In order to use the bathroom we passed back and forth the glow stick given to us by the hotel. They were like gold. I was lucky and found a flashlight in the bathroom. I still have it as a memoir of my trip. I watched in horror as one of the nicest hotels in town turned to a breeding ground for chaos.

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Leaving New Orleans

It was now Tuesday, August 30, the hurricane was over but the breaking of the levees caused water to trickle into downtown. We were alarmed when we realized the water was no longer trickling, but pouring in. Were we going to stay and wait for help or were we going to leave? A decision had to be made but no one had answers. Things were really getting out of control. People were leaving the hotel and going into the street and looting businesses. Filled with fear, I tried to run up the nine flights of stairs to my room to get my mother's suitcases. As I did people were coming down. The stairs were narrow and filled with people gasping for air and hauling luggage. I thought I would never make it up to the top. I was scared, tired, hungry, thirsty, weak, and felt stuck in a neverending fight. I just lost it and I gave up hope. I could not go another step. I stood there on the third floor stairwell on the second step with five more flights to go and let everyone push and prod me. I was soaked with tears and sweat. We were cattle in a panicked stampede. There was no rhyme or reason as we were just moving, and I was going against the current.

Eventually I regained my strength and I kept going to the ninth floor. The stairwell had been lit, but the expanse of the hallway was pitch black. I took a deep breath and continued. I passed shadows of people as I ventured down the hall. I passed doors that were open and I saw sunlight. Through one window I watched helicopters evacuating people off the top of Tulane Hospital. This was real. This was very real and I was scared. Ninety percent of the guests were hotel workers' families. I was a single person on the ninth floor. Not that it should matter, but I am a woman and was the minority in a chaotic situation. I had surpassed fear and reached a mental state I cannot explain. I finally reached my room. The heat on the ninth floor was unbearable. I was up there a total of 10 minutes the first trip and I was dripping sweat. I grabbed my mom's luggage and started back down. When I arrived at the lobby everyone had decided it was too dangerous to stay any longer. The hotel was making us leave. They tried to tell us that the Superdome was our best bet. We had no choice but to take a chance; if the car stalled we could be trapped.

My mom, Emily, our dog, and I waded through the waist-high water to the garage across the street. There was looting in the retail stores all around the Fairmont. People carried garbage bags full of new clothing and sported brand new sweats as they waded through water. On the second trip back to the car I looked down in the water and saw feces brush past my hip. I will never forget it. I drove my friend's car out of the garage into the flooded streets. It was one of the most stressful moments of my life. Mom and Emily both screamed at me to drive faster so the car wouldn't stall, but as I did, waves covered people so they got mad and came toward the car. It was frightening. As we drove down streets the panic filled me more. I was so scared I did not recognize where I was. I could not tell where the streets were going. Law enforcement officials wore black vests and held machine guns as we approached the lower waters near the warehouse district. As we came to the Morial Convention Center people headed toward higher ground.

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I was just relieved to get out of the water. Please God let this be the end of the water. We decided to drive to Houston. Unfortunately, we could not tell any family members where we were or what our plan was because our mobile phones had no reception. For the first few miles there was a feeling of elation because we had made it out. We were beyond tired. My feet tingled and I couldn't feel the pedals but I continued to drive. My Mom was in the back seat sleeping as Emily and I sat in the front seat just dazed and in shock. People passed us and they looked the same; that tired, blank expression gripped the faces of those who shared the experience for weeks afterward. I instantly knew who else had seen what I'd seen. They were reflections of me.

After the first mile, things slowed down. There was heavy traffic and many cars on the side of the road. Every gas station we saw had no gas and people were desperate. I turned on the radio to hear what was going on. I had been secluded in the hotel for several days and had no idea what had been happening outside. I had no idea how wide the chaos had spread. I couldn't believe it. I remember I just kept driving and looking for gas. All elation was gone and I felt guilty for leaving all those people back in the hotel. Those were some of the people who went to the convention center and that could have been me. I felt very guilty. The first stop we made was an hour outside New Orleans. There were seven cars ahead of us and we waited 45 minutes to get gas. When the phone came on, I called my dad at the hospital in Metairie. Thankfully, he had rented a house in Lafayette and instructed us to drive there where we would be safe. We were to stay there until further notice. After the hurricane and flooding

of the city, there were thousands of people who were homeless. I was one of them.

We met my brother and sister-in-law at a gas station and lived in Lafayette for a week. During this time I contacted the Louisiana Student Nurses Association Web site that directed me to another site posting schools that were accepting students from the New Orleans area. On the Web site I saw a posting from the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio (UTHSCSA) for transfer students. I contacted the school and they faxed me an application. I immediately filled it out in the middle of Kinko's and faxed it back.

With all the stress from the events of the past days and moving, I was not paying attention to the pain I was having. I started having severe right lower quadrant pain and Mom rushed me to the hospital. I was diagnosed with appendicitis and had an appendectomy a few days after arriving in Lafayette. While I was in the hospital I was waiting to hear if I was accepted at UTHSCSA. Two days after surgery, I was accepted, and Dad picked me up for the drive to San Antonio. This time I knew where I was going. I was excited but scared. Lafayette was just a temporary stopping place and I was in a sort of limbo. Now with the move to San Antonio and UTHSCSA in the beginning of September, there was potential permanency. There awaited a new home, a new beginning and closure to the old life. I started nursing school again. I didn't fear pharmacology quite like I did a few weeks ago. I know I'll live through it.

Six Months Later

How do you say goodbye to a home? I still do not know. It has been almost 6 months since the hurricane hit New Orleans and I continue to feel like I am walking in a body other than my own. I wonder when I am going to wake up and realize that I am actually in another place, San Antonio, and another time. Don't get me wrong; I love it here. I just feels like my former life in another world is still carrying on without me. I miss my family and I miss the familiarity of things.

I miss the smell of the morning I knew so well in New Orleans. I miss the sounds that woke me each morning. I miss the food I grew up on. I miss the familiar faces, the architecture that speaks like no other; I miss the history of my city. I even miss what I hated. I miss the traffic of the French Quarter on a Saturday night. I miss the chaos of a Saturday afternoon parade. I miss the Audubon Zoo. I miss my friends. I do not know where everyone is and in a way I do not want to. I feel like I have lost so much.

Most of all I miss home. What makes me the saddest is the change. Things are different and I do not recognize what I am seeing. The memories cloud my feelings. You begin to see the pain, misery, and depression of the people. The new scene sinks in and replaces all the good memories. I feel I am slowly forgetting the city I love and was home to me. I am beginning to remember the city I come home to over Christmas where homes are in ruins, neighbors are eerily quiet, and there is no life. There are no birds. The homes are scarred with the paint from the writing of rescue workers showing whether bodies were recovered or not. As hard as you try the paint does not completely come off. Paint doesn't disguise a painful memory.

I don't really miss my things per se. I miss what used to be. I sit now in my little apartment with my rented furniture and I think of the things that I used to have. I feel like I have lost my identity. It is not fair to say our things identify us, but I think in a way they do. I miss pictures and notes I had kept forever. How do you replace those things? Am I supposed to just close my eyes and remember the faces in the pictures or the words that were once written? It is hard to say goodbye to my home. It is even harder to say goodbye to me. I don't want to lose myself.

My experience is best explained by Deeny and McFetridge (2005) in their article, "The impact of disaster on culture, self, and identity: Increased awareness by health care professionals is needed."

Self, identity, and culture are intertwined in how individuals feel about themselves and how they feel

about living in a particular social context. The natural or human-initiated disaster has potential to seriously disrupt the life and social networks of individuals, groups, and communities. It is reasonable, therefore, to suggest that a disaster may result in changes related to self, identity, and culture (p. 433).

Munoz (1980) describes how individuals experience anxiety (i.e., Chinese refugees) over the thought of contamination of the new values of the society. She goes on to note that without a form of support, anxiety leads to intense guilt, withdrawal, social isolation, and depression. Munoz theorizes that there are parallels between a *catastrophic loss* and *atypical grief*. She compares how excessive clinging to the original culture and inability to form new attachments is similar to the mummification and over-idealization of the deceased spouse seen in atypical grief.

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Implications for Practice

In conclusion, it is important to recognize that a temporary or permanent loss of culture can create an identity crisis for an individual. Atypical grief can be seen in these situations and adoption of a new culture and identity can be seen as a dynamic growth process. When mental health professionals are working with this population it is important to acknowledge the grief, confusion, feelings of dissociation, and depersonalization. Empathy and understanding go a long way when listening to someone tell their story who hardly has the words to articulate feelings never before experienced. Your life can change in a day or even in a moment. It takes

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time to come out of the shock and begin to process the horror of what happened to you so suddenly and in such a short span of time. I believe that crisis can promote growth and new levels of consciousness. I trust that I will heal and will eventually not only find myself anew, but feel comfortable with where I have landed. As a future nurse, I now have something real to bring to my patients experiencing sudden and traumatic loss. I have my experience, my growth, and most of all I have myself.

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