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Julie Fay



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For Lack of a Fax: Co-Authoring Disaster in North Carolina and the Gulf Coast

Julie FAY*

The events in the wake of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast of the U.S.—the appalling ineptitude and insensitivity of the federal agencies whose payrolls taxpayers fund to help U.S. residents during times of disaster—come as no surprise to those of us in eastern North Carolina who lived through a similar, though much smaller, event in September 1999. As we anxiously watched the satellite images of a hurricane the size of Texas approach us, we were assured by the Red Cross, the National Guard and FEMA that they were prepared to come in and help once the storm had passed. The huge storm came through, did a significant amount of wind and water damage, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. For a few hours.

Then, because Floyd was the fourth hurricane to slam our area in a month's time, every body of water, every tiny branch or creek and backyard ditch began to fill, and the water rose and rose and rose and rose. It reached more than 20 feet above flood level in numerous counties in the eastern part of the state. The unexpected waters came so fast that people were swimming out of their bedroom windows in the middle of the night, or were clutching to rooftops, treetops, the tops of barns, hoping to be rescued by helicopters. Towns such as Princeville, a community founded by freed slaves in the 19th century, were all but wiped off the map. Thousands were left homeless, owning only the clothes on their backs. Hundreds of businesses and 53 human lives were lost. Countless livestock perished. The scale of damage we suffered compared to that currently being assessed in the Gulf Coast was much smaller—the largest city in our area has a population of 50,000—but the nightmarish scenarios we read about and see images of on TV are frighteningly familiar.

The water stayed up for several weeks. Our university campus was partially underwater. As in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, refugees from the storm initially received a great deal of media attention. President Bill Clinton flew into the community and assured everyone that FEMA, SBA (Small Business Administration) and others would get us put back together. But that attention disappeared long before the tragedy was over for those in the community. It has been six years since those events, and many here have not, nor will they ever, recover what they lost.

In spring 2000, six months after the flood, the North Carolina Humanities Council asked me to lead writing workshops with flood victims as a way of helping

* East Carolina University.

people come to terms with the emotions and events that they had lived through, and were continuing to live through.

Our goal in the writing workshops was to record and witness these extraordinary days, to remember, to understand ourselves as well as our definition of community better and to learn something from the events. We began the initial workshops with each participant telling his or her story of the hurricane, and the days that followed. For as long as it took, we went around the table, introduced ourselves, and said where we were the night of the storm and what had happened in the days and weeks that followed.

These were highly emotional introductions, with many people tearing up or weeping as they told their stories. After we had heard each person's story, we began to write. Few of the people were well educated; some were even illiterate. Later we would send in a folklorist with a tape recorder to interview those who could not write. I suggested that people write without stopping to think too much about what they wrote, to simply let their ideas flow onto the page, to not revise or worry about spelling or grammar. I also handed out a list of questions, which we read out loud and asked participants to circle questions they'd be interested in exploring in writing.

Sharon Abuarab was one workshop participant and later became one of several people to co-edit our collection of flood writings: *Watching TV Off the Back of a Fire Truck: Voices from the Flood of Hurricane Floyd*. In her introductory essay of our book, she describes some of the early workshops:

During these sometimes emotionally overwhelming evenings, many former strangers became friends. A kinship of sorts was found as we wrote, then read, our stories. We shared laughter and more than a few tears. We questioned our faith and were reminded of the tremendous strength of the human spirit, of our community. We complained and commiserated, relieving much of the pent up frustration we had lived with since the flood. Our wounds were very raw and, no matter how much we had tried to get on with our lives, for some of us the anger was too fresh.

Another writer from the state, African American poet Phillip Shabazz, was sent by the Humanities Council to do workshops aimed at attracting the African American community. In this part of the South, though racial segregation has long been against the law, it still exists *de facto*. Sharon Abuarab summed up that community's response:

For African Americans, there were fewer resources and less help. There was anger at the difficulty of responding to the crisis because of the convoluted bureaucracy; anger at feeling humbled and needing to wait in line for toilet tissue as if you always had been in need of social services. And now, it's as if the whole state has forgotten the flood ever occurred, as people still live in trailers. What happened to all the rhetoric about rebuilding the East?

Two years later, a group of affected individuals from the community formed with the goal of publishing the writings that had been gathered by residents of the area. We noted then, though, that the Hispanic community, which is a significant component of the Eastern North Carolina population, had fallen through the cracks with the initial project. At the time of the flood, a local county commissioner had said that Latinos should "go back to Mexico" if they wanted aid. In our continuing project, and with the help of a large grant from the North Carolina Humanities Council, we sought out the Hispanic community.

Ana Cowo was the editor of the bilingual section of the book that includes interviews with Hispanic members of the community. In her introduction, she wrote:

Right after the flood, we saw images of people affected. We saw Princeville destroyed and the African American community affected, but we saw and heard very little of the Hispanic Community in the Eastern Carolina area. Back then I didn't care, mainly because I was not exposed to the diversity in the society. Now, two years later, my feelings are different.

As I got involved with the Hispanic community through church, my job with the Migrant Education Program with Pitt County Schools, and through my work with other non-profit organizations, I got exposed to the reality of hurricane Floyd and the struggles of the Hispanic Community before, during and after. Since my involvement with the Hispanic community, I've realized the obvious—that as long as there's no one to tell the story (especially in English), it never happened...

Antonio Ponce, who at the time of the flood was the manager of El Ranchito Mexican Restaurant on 10th Street in Greenville, made appointments to meet with the three families whose stories are included in this section. Antonio made it clear that he would not be a part of the actual interviews; but inevitably his name came up in all three interviews as someone who had volunteered during the time of need so we have to thank him. We met at Tienda Acapulco on Dickinson Avenue one evening and drove to Farmville to interview Norma R and her mother Victoria. When we got there, people were gathered for a birthday celebration. Many of them I knew from St. Gabriel's Church. Norma and Victoria told their stories which were very moving although some details were unclear after the time that had passed. We were in the living room with a party outside, and everything seemed normal. However, we were listening to the stories of a family that suffered a lot during Floyd. It was almost unbelievable to notice that everything had gone back to being normal.

Ida Boddie is an African American woman who, at the time of the flood, lived near Rocky Mount. She participated in one of three writing workshops led by Philip Shabazz and articulated the frustration many felt over the complicated and confusing paperwork that needed to be done in order to qualify for federal or state financial aid. She wrote:

What is the criteria? I, Ida Boddie, am very angry with my country for the pain and stress that our flood victims is going through. I am not a direct flood victim, however I am an indirect victim. Because I work hard trying to help them who are indirect victims. During the flood there were so many homeless people, and there are still a lot of homeless people today—eleven months after the flood. It grieves my heart to see

the evidence when they've worked so hard to make a comfortable home for themselves and they are without a home. Most of all, I'm angry with America because this is a rich country that sends money and aid to other countries but won't give proper aid to the taxpayers that made this country so rich and powerful, especially the black people who worked two hundred years without pay. I also would like to know: What is the criteria? There was eight hundred million dollars for the flood victims. However, the state is threatening to send back six hundred million because the people don't reach the criteria. What is the criteria?

Shirley Myrick another participant in the Rocky Mount workshops, wrote:

I got burdens on me that I never had before. I got burdened since the flood. I been under so much financial difficulty, I got burdens trying to keep a roof over my head. I'd like to get back to where I was. According to where I was, I got burdened. My sickness is worse. I'm not able to buy food like I was before. I got burdened. My medication is too expensive for me. I lost my clothes. People gave me clothes—most of them too small, don't fit. I got burdens. If I could just get help. If I could just lift some of these burdens off of me, I wouldn't have so much stress.

One of the most dramatic narratives to come out of the Rocky Mount workshops was that of Mae Ricks.

Around three a.m. September the seventeenth, 1999, two huge logs were filing across the river, prevented me from reaching my friend's house who had promised to help me with my generator. Suddenly I looked back and turning my truck around I saw a huge flood of water coming towards me. Then I attempted to back up, but suddenly the flow of water overcame the truck and drowned the motor out. I was so scared and frightened. I was paralyzed with fear. I could not move the truck. I got out and attempted to walk out of the water. The water was too strong. I almost fell down. My flashlight fell out of my pocket and it went down, down, down. That frightened me, so I went back to the truck and sat back down and started praying and singing and repeating every Bible verse that I remembered. The fear began to diminish as I remained in the car for about two hours before anybody came. I started to shiver. I thought about death. But something told me to clap my hands and pat my feet and to shout around. I felt better. The water continued to rise until it came up to my throat. I doubted then that I would live. I knew that I would die. And being a nurse I knew how I would die—that the water would be in my mouth and that my lungs would be overcome. I just kept saying, "Lord, don't let me struggle." And I had given up everything and everybody. A voice came in my right ear. It said, "Open your eyes." When I did I saw a small truck near the beginning of the water. I attempted to wipe the window [turned on the windshield wipers] to let whoever was in the truck—let the driver know that I was alive. The truck turned around and it went out of sight. Again I closed my eyes and returned to my prayers. For Jesus just separated me from all material things, as I surrendered myself to the Lord. Then again, a voice came in my ear—my right ear—and it said, "Open your eyes. Open your eyes." I opened my eyes, and it was difficult this time because the water was near my mouth. And I saw the rescue squad truck already racing up and with the police car with blue lights behind

entering the water. I was so happy. I knew God had not planned to take me home that night. So the driver came up to me—to my car—and said, "It's the lady. We have to lift her out." And all of a sudden I sprang up high from the water, and said, "I can get out of here. Open this door." And they came over and opened the door. They said, "Don't take anything out." I had my briefcase with all my personal belongings on the back of this truck. I pulled it out, and I walked over to the fire truck—the rescue squad truck—and I got on the back. They said, "You have to sit down." I said, "I don't have to sit down. I'm just too happy to sit down. Let me hold on." And I held on to the truck and I was taken to the firehouse to wait for someone to take me home.

A 14 year old white girl from the rural community of Belvoir (pronounced locally as "bell-ver") where we held workshops in the Volunteer Fire Department headquarters, wrote of her experiences:

I learned more about the people around me during the flood than I ever have before. You don't realize how much you have in common with people you thought were so different until something like this happens to you. During this time I was volunteering down at the North Pitt High School at their shelter and I met some of the most amazing people. There were people there who had lost everything, people who didn't know their family was all safe or even alive because the waters had parted them and they still were always smiling and ready to greet you. They were so grateful for everything that they did have they didn't worry about what they lost and that was just amazing to me. My biggest problem during the flood was did I pack enough clothes? and these people didn't even have any clothes except the ones they were wearing. I believe the person who amazed me the most and really sticks out in my head is a young lady who hadn't eaten for several days. She walked into the shelter and handed me her small baby. The [only] word in English she could say was "food," and she repeated it over and over. I felt so overwhelmed. Here is this lady I don't even know handing me her little baby and trusting that I will take care of her.

Pat James, as the wife of a county commissioner, considered herself one of the "leaders" in her small community and wrote of her experiences in the shelter they helped out in while the flood waters were up. Her account addresses the social strata of the small community.

Monday night. I was really tired. I had been at the Gum Swamp Fellowship Hall over twenty-four hours. Most of the firemen and sheriffs were talking quietly or had gone to sleep. Gene and I took a room to sleep in. I had gotten to bed—on the floor and after a bit I had just about fallen asleep. I heard a loud noise—men talking, laughing. It seemed they were having a really good time. I understood how men tell stories when they are together and I was glad if they could have fun. But then I detected what I thought was a woman's voice. Could there be women there? Why were they there? Had the men brought in women? I finally decided since I represented the Gum Swamp Church I should investigate.

When I went in I found several drenched men and women. I failed to mention it had been raining very hard. The newcomers were a group of people called Animal Rescue. They were cold, wet, and hungry. I quickly got the coffee making and we still had food on the table that had been brought earlier by the Red Cross. They were so

appreciative. After they were fed, we began looking for some dry clothes for them. We had some bags of clothes that had been left for flood victims. Luckily most of the clothes were a big size. Men and women got dry clothes and changed. Men looked funny in women's pants and shirts. Women had clothes on—mismatched and too big. But they were dry. As they drank coffee and warmed up, I found they were from several places in the U.S. One lady was from California, a man from West Virginia, a lady from Black Jack (Pitt County), a man from Chapel Hill, a man from Morehead City, a man who lived on my road four houses away but whom I had never seen until then. I don't remember where the others came from. They had been out that night rescuing animals when the rain had caused them to abandon the mission. They had left their boats and were under the corn house shelter when our firemen had found them and brought them to the Fellowship Hall. They were so thankful to find good, shelter and warmth.

The people of the Belvoir community have always been pretty much divided by what church they attended. This caused the Blacks to be isolated from the whites and each group was then divided by what church they attended. Then all those people who attend Belvoir School or Wellcome or North Pitt are in a group. Then there are those who attend private school. This causes another division in the community. No blacks in the fire dept at the present time even though there have been some. They moved away.

For a while we were together, the flood victims. As more neighbors began to hear of the food and supplies, they came to get some. Then they started coming back to offer help. Some people came and worked all day. There was a very cooperative spirit as men, women, and children worked together. After the bridges and roads were opened, the distribution center closed. The majority of the Belvoir area people had so much to do with the clean up that there was little time to help others. Again the community reverted back to the church groups helping others in their church to recover from the flood.

My friend Katherine Blackburn, whose house I describe at the opening of this essay, wrote the first draft of the following poem in a workshop we held at Pitt Community College in Greenville, North Carolina.

World Order

—All my life
now begins
with dis or un.
Even half of
the tin roof
over the martin
house is dislocated;
blown away,
I think, by Bertha
in 1998.
My family
is dislocated...
broken bones
all over the family

cemetery.
Dispossessed without
anything, but only
temporarily
dispossessed.
Expecting our
rise to the next
level of
unbelievable slowness,
in the aftermath
of Hurricane Floyd
and the flood
of the century.

If you could
imagine a recipe,
buy all the
ingredients, mix,
level, sift, add,
pour and wait
for this special
cake to bake for
two years, you
might begin to
imagine what
I'm talking
about.
You have to
attend the cake.
Problems arise
that you must
deal with.
You have no
time; the cake
steals all
your time.
After a few
weeks you
begin to care
less about your
cake. And
still you imagine its
perfection. Its
new wholeness,
what you want.
Why should the
simple recipe
take you high
take you low
take your life?

If you imagine
the cake on
a crystal
pedestal
you are
too late.
For the anthropologists
have been digging
around your
kitchen door
and found you
mummified
wearing an apron;
wielding only
a wooden spoon.

A year after our flood, in December 2000, I followed the Pamlico/Tar River north from my house. I stopped in Belvoir and met my friends Katharine, author of the poem above and Sharon Aburarab, whom I'd first met at one of the first writing workshops and who has since become a close friend and co-editor. That pre-Christmas morning, we went to Katharine's house. I remembered the Christmas Eve my husband and I had spent there, watching Katherine meticulously hang expensive, feathered decorations on her tree. The house was Victorian style, large, and had once been full of tasteful antiques and original artwork. Now it was a ruin. The pink flamingoes that once jokingly stood next to the pool house were now "free range" in the swampy woods. We walked around and Katharine showed us where her favorite flowerbeds had been, her potted schefflera. We took pictures of ourselves on the wide wrap-around porch. Later the three of us went up to the Belvoir Crossroads and ate a "breakfast" of collard greens and barbeque. At the end of the morning I left my friends and continued north for a luncheon date, first going through Princeville, an African American town founded by freed slaves in the 19th century.

A new Princeville existed where the old Princeville once had sat. There were the familiar FEMA mobile homes alongside Highway 258, with laundry hanging out and people sitting in white plastic chairs in the dirt. The same people used to sit on solid wood plank or concrete porches in chairs, upholstered armchairs, funky fifties metal ones, on couches. The porch talk, I imagined, was still alive, just moved. Neighbors, though displaced, still sat and watched the comings and goings of other neighbors, like the chorus in a Greek play, like Zora Neale Hurston's porch sitters outside Joe Clark's store in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. But in Princeville, no matter what direction you looked in, you saw the water line—whether it was marked by the trash hanging like garlands in the high branches of trees or by the dark brown muck-drawn line just beneath the roofs. Many houses stood empty, their windows open sores, with orange X's sprayed painted on front doors to condemn them.

When I crossed over the Tar River into Tarboro, I couldn't tell where the flood had been, though I knew the waters had reached the stores on Main Street. Everything was cleaned up. I knew somewhere in this town the schools were still

temporarily lodged in trailers, but on the main drag you wouldn't have known what had happened 15 months earlier. I continued west to Rocky Mount, following the directions I'd been given, and drove to a wealthy neighborhood where I was welcomed inside a house that boasted two fully decorated ten-foot Christmas trees—one in the foyer and the other in the formal livingroom--and oil portraits of the family dogs. The house sat majestically over a small stream. You'd never have known the satiny wood flooring I was standing on had been covered by water filled with chemicals, gasoline, and the contents of septic tanks.

My hostess was a well-intentioned and generous woman who was organizing a community writing project for flood victims in her area. She invited me to lunch at her exclusively white country club where we were served chicken salad by a Black woman my hostess called by her first name. "Miz T" is what the waitress called my hostess. I felt set back in time. My hostess spoke to the issue of racial divide in the community: "It just seems to me that if we could come together *then*, during the flood, then we can keep that solidarity going *now*. We can't even bring the Black and white preachers together as one in this town." This good woman and most residents, Black and white, have lived as close neighbors for years without having been members of a shared community.

The North Carolina Humanities Council, located in the urban, upscale, developed center of the state wanted to help its poor cousin to the east recover from the disaster. One of the lighthouses in this dark period, the council was in our communities wanting to help soon after the disaster, like FEMA, the Red Cross and the others. But people sitting in offices far from here theorizing about how to help the communities contributed to the pain and suffering of the very people they wanted to help.

In April 2003, the book was ready to go to press. Book launches were scheduled in three of the communities the writing had come from. The volunteer firemen in Belvoir were set to open the firehouse doors, grill some hotdogs, and give away out copies of our modest collection of writings. We hoped the flood victims who wrote the book would see it as a phase of their reconstruction. Many contributors were looking forward to seeing something good that came of the disaster, something that would continue to help them put the events behind them.

On the day before the presses were set to roll, an administrator from the Humanities Council said that he wanted to "tweak" the book just a little bit more. He noted, and he was right, that there was scholarly material to be extracted from this collection of writings. We were assured the book would be in our hands by September 2003 in time for the anniversary of the flood. I called the firemen and cancelled the launch and cancelled two other book launches set up at community colleges. After five years of work on the project, I withdrew from the project, frustrated and disappointed that flood victims' needs, again, were being ignored.

Last year, in April in 2004, we were again told the book would be published and distributed, this time for the fifth anniversary of the events it described. It was not published. Finally, this past summer, in July 2005, the book was printed, nearly six years after the event. Today, a couple thousand books are boxed in a warehouse waiting to be distributed to the people it was intended to help. The Humanities

Council poured much good will and a great deal of money into the project and for that everyone is grateful. But I'm reminded of the trailer loads of water sitting outside of New Orleans while people died of thirst waiting for the government to give the green light for its delivery. What began as benevolent action meant to help people heal and come to terms with disaster, wound up, for many, adding more pain and suffering to the original event. It seems to me that many of the allegedly benevolent agencies are concerned first with the preservation of their own jobs and bureaucratic structures that house them. While they keep their own organizations afloat, the smaller structures of individual communities are left to rot in polluted waters. When asked why critical medical supplies could not be airlifted into the New Orleans airport during the critical days following the medical evacuations to that site, a FEMA administrator said "We were waiting for the doctors to fax us the proper forms." Among the drenched, the dying and the dead, no one could locate a fax machine.