

Missing September

By Michael Groetsch

There was no September. Just as she washed away many of our homes, memories and dreams, she also swept away the thirty days that followed her fury. It's as if we were in a time warp. Perhaps it is best that we suppressed the period immediately following Hurricane Katrina's frenzied visit in 2005. Perhaps it is our way of forgetting the most traumatic event of our lives.

If you were one of the lucky ones, you fled before her relentless assault. If you were one of the less fortunate that stayed behind, you were caught within the worst disaster in American history. While many of us returned to rebuild our ravaged communities, many chose to stay away. Irrespective of your personal choice, there was no September.

For days following the storm, I found myself frozen in a hotel in West Monroe, Louisiana, watching the national news focusing its eye on the window of hell. The sights of a grief stricken mother holding her limp baby, the blanket-wrapped body sitting in the wheelchair near the side door of the New Orleans Convention Center and the starving dogs stranded on the porch of a Ninth Ward home were too much to bear. Although I consciously chose to watch the apocalyptic scene, my subconscious mind has stored away these horrific memories as nothing but a rapid series of fading bleeps on a radar screen.

I cannot tell you the day that I returned home. I cannot even tell you the week. In the same manner that years blend into decades, the trauma that I felt merged days into weeks that made

time indistinguishable. I didn't look at my September calendar. I don't recall if I had missed important appointments. Even if I had, I am certain that no one was there.

There is no circle in our lives that was not touched by the rage of Katrina. In most cases, our circles became ovals or squares. For some, they were eliminated altogether. Many neighbors returned to find that they no longer had neighborhoods. Many employees returned to find that they no longer had jobs. Close friends relocated to far away places where it is has become very difficult to keep in touch with soul mates. Family members separated in search of new lives in far away places. Many of our aging population simply died from immense grief and the stress of trauma. The pain of losing our homes was one thing. The pain of losing our circles is yet another.

I walked the streets of Bay St. Louis only weeks after Katrina. I tried to comprehend the utter loss of the tiny coastal community that came to be known as ground zero. The family who placed a jack-o-lantern on a table near a tent outside their makeshift tent silently touched my heart. I cried when I heard a child ask her young mother if Santa Claus would still come to their home. The structure had been reduced to rubble. But as I slept near the beach in a friend's storm damaged cottage, the soft, cool winds of October reminded me the holidays that brought families and friends together would soon be upon us.

We must accept the past and endure the present if we are to embrace the future. Although we lost that September, there have been many new Octobers. Children still walk door to door dressed as princesses and super heroes. The leaves on trees that remain still change color as a reminder that it is fall. There have also been new Novembers. Families still sit together and share

Thanksgiving dinners that define their faith, hope, and love for one another. And of course, there are still Decembers. Homes and neighborhoods that survived Katrina are once again decorated with bright lights and red ribbons that reflect the joy of Christmas. Families and friends now celebrate the seasons with new circles and have reassembled some of the old.

We count our lives in years but measure them in seasons. The seasons that bring us flowers in spring, the vacations of summer, the colors of fall, and white landscapes of winter. As I held my baby grandchild recently and heard my deceased mother speak to me in a tiny tear that rolled down her face, the need for us to embrace our futures became clear. If we are to achieve the oneness of life that we strive for in our brief stay on earth, we must do it now. If not for us, we must do it for our children and grandchildren. There will always be Novembers. There will always be Decembers. There will always be a future.