

Words to Live By

By Patricia Herchuk Sheehy

What Matters Most

We watched in horror, my husband and I—and mostly in silence—as Hurricane Katrina slammed against the lives and livelihoods of thousands of people along the Gulf Coast. Like the rest of the world, our hearts were drawn in particular to New Orleans, so complete was its devastation, so tragic were the stories of people seeking refuge.

It was impossible to fathom the idea of throwing a few precious belongings into a car (if you were lucky enough to have a car and luckier still to have a full tank of gas) and heading away from the place you call home. When luck and gas ran out, most of those belongings were tossed to the side of the road as desperate, hungry people tried hiking their way out of town. Shelter. Safety. Survival. Those were the essential things now. Staying together, that's what mattered most.

After three days of non-stop CNN, I turned to my husband and asked, "What if it was us? What would you take?"

"You." Jim's answer was swift, honest, direct. "Just you," he repeated.

I'm embarrassed to say that when I asked the question I was thinking in terms of flashlights, water and money. Of social security numbers and cell phones and the flash drive that holds all of my important computer documents. I was thinking of survival and starting over, of what I might need to begin again.

And so was he.

Jim's answer called me back to the news clip, shown over and over again in those early days of Katrina—one man's unabashed pain becoming a symbol of death and devastation. You remember him—days of stubble on his thin black face, tears pooled in his

reddened, sleep-deprived eyes, his voice trembling, barely understandable, as he tried to articulate his loss. *She just slipped away. I was holding her hand and she slipped away from me, in the water. It's all gone...*

As his wife's hand slid from his grasp, the current pulled them apart; he watched as she was swallowed up by the rising waters. He'd evacuated his home with the one thing that mattered most—his wife. And now she was gone.

Similar stories flooded our hearts after the tsunami in Indonesia and, since Katrina, in the aftershock of other natural disasters from Hurricane Rita to the mudslides that turned Guatemala City into "a mass gravesite" or the earthquake in Pakistan that claimed the lives of over 30,000 people. In the face of disaster, very few people lament the destruction of stuff. Flashlights and flash drives have no bearing on the deepest part of who we are. Relationships however—loved ones, lost and found, or gone forever—that's the stuff a life is made of. That's what we celebrate; that's what we grieve.

I have to admit, Jim startled me with his answer. "Seriously," I countered, "if we had an hour to pack up and get out, what would we take?" Our survival skills ticked off the obvious—money, water, portable food, a change

of clothes. Sentimental pieces of jewelry, maybe, and a few photos... we looked around our well-appointed home and couldn't name anything else.

Instead of packing things, we'd use our time to call family members and devise a plan for finding one another once we'd all scattered to safety. We'd close the door on our hard-earned stuff and make our way together, hand in hand, through unknown waters.

Like most people, I wonder sometimes if I make a difference in this world. I wonder if I matter, if I would be missed. I don't wonder any more. I see the truth in my husband's eyes; I hear it in his one-word answer. You. A single word that speaks volumes about love, compassion and caring, an answer that understands what really matters.

My heart goes out to all those who have lost the person they'd hoped to walk through life with, the "you" that made them feel connected and alive. I pray they're able to find a way to start over again, to rediscover new beginnings filled with faith and hope and a sense of belonging in a world that has given them challenges beyond all words. **M**



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