

## Digging out from the storm

Rich Heffern | Feb. 2, 2011 Eco Catholic

Digging out is what we do after a major storm, and that's what I did this morning in urban Kansas City, Mo. after a colossal storm that at one point was bringing a blizzard to Oklahoma City at the same time it was flinging snow in far eastern Illinois. The entire state of Missouri has been declared a disaster area.

A trucker, one of the "knights of the road," reported that he couldn't even find the highway he was traversing it was so obliterated by drifting snow yesterday. He crashed and spent the day contemplating weather from the truck cab.

I was on the phone frequently during the storm with my brother and his wife who live in rural southern Missouri. They were particularly vulnerable because their house sits in the midst of a mature grove of native short-leaf pine which tower 60 to 70 feet right over their roof. Ice was falling which built up on the pine needles adding tons of weight to these already top-heavy, shallow-rooted mammoths. Being rural dwellers, they had no high-speed internet so I sat in front of my computer with the current radar on the screen conveying to them the position of the approaching snow line which would end the ice and rescue their house from destruction. They need that house -- the nearest neighbor is a mile away through impassable terrain and there's no calling 911 or a rural volunteer fire department. No one will come in the midst of a monster storm.

So often storms, when they come these days, are "monsters" -- whether they are hurricanes, snow onslaughts, droughts, thunderstorms or rain events. We get extremes too often. Ask anyone in Queensland, Australia, right now,

I helped my brother and his family build their house in the 1970s. We had no idea then that the location would be threatened time and again by over-energized storms. Ice deluges have hit them three or four times in the last six years.

In Springfield, Mo. the daily paper declared yesterday's storm the worst since 1912. Just a few years ago they had the worst ice storm in a hundred years, paralyzing the city for a week and leaving people without power for over two weeks. My brother helped with the "digging out." He saw live power lines downed and lurking malevolently in the streets with enough ice coating the wire to render the whole assembly as thick around as a Coke can.

In Louisiana, I interviewed a Cajun fisher in early summer last year when I was covering the Deepwater Horizon oil spill for NCR. He recounted his experience of enduring Hurricane Gustav, one of the worst hurricanes in U. S. history, as it passed through his little town. We felt the winds from Gustav all the way up in Kansas City, 500 miles away. What was it like to be in the midst of it, I asked him.

"When we felt the winds start to rip the planks and nailing up off the roof, it put a lot of things in perspective, I guarantee," he said, "reminding you what's really important -- family, friends, God, community, a sturdy roof, being able to locate the family cat."

I'm reading James Hansen's new book *Storms of My Grandchildren*. Hansen is the nation's leading climate scientist. So far his book gives me the opportunity to listen to a scientist who is sick of silence and compromise offer up the fruits of four-plus decades of inquiry and ingenuity about the course of the debate on climate change and about the actions that have been taken so far. I'll review the book here on the blog when I finish it.

The book's title is a reminder that this important debate is really about the future, what kind of world our children and grandchildren will inherit from us -- how much of the rest of this century will be spent 'digging out.'

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