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Lessons from Sandy's storm zone: We are victims and victimizers

Jamie Manson | Nov. 8, 2012 Grace on the Margins

Superstorm Sandy hit just about four years to the day that I moved to Long Beach, a barrier island off the south shore of Long Island. And I have tried to spend every day knowing that it was purely by permission of Mother Nature that I have been able to live there.

People were probably not meant to inhabit the barrier islands. A hurricane is natural. Setting up condos and houses so close to ocean is not.

My apartment building, like the dozens of others than run along Long Beach's two-mile boardwalk, has stood for decades through several hurricanes and many nor'easters and powerful coastal storms. So I have always felt safe there, even though the deeper recesses of my heart believed none of us should be there. This stunning stretch of the shoreline, with its fine, white sand, probably should have remained untouched.

I moved there because I needed a respite from the six-day workweeks and 12-hour workdays running a direct service program to New York City's street homeless.

I moved there because for the price of a small studio in a somewhat desirable neighborhood on the top floor of a six-story walk-up in Manhattan, I could get a one-bedroom apartment overlooking the ocean that had an elevator and a parking spot.

I moved there because it became increasingly difficult for me to experience the presence of God inside the walls of churches. And though I encountered the broken, suffering face of God in those I served in our program, sometimes my spirit also sought out the peaceful, awe-inspiring God who emerges through nature.

The ocean gave me a sense of eternity. Its magnitude reminded me of my finiteness, the ebb and flow of the waves was like the breathing of Being itself. It was the only presence that seemed capable of stilling my otherwise restless heart and mind.

In the days leading up to Sandy, it was clear to me that this storm was no hype: It was unprecedented, destructive and potentially life-threatening. My partner and I packed our bags the night before the storm was to arrive, hoping we wouldn't have to flee but facing the reality that we may not have a choice. These are the terms one agrees to in exchange for being surrounded by so much beauty.

We were under mandatory evacuation, but many of our neighbors decided to stay.

I understood why. Emotionally, it's hard to leave your home behind, not knowing if you will see it intact again. Part of you would rather go down with the ship.

Then there is the adventurous element of the human spirit that wants to witness firsthand what Mother Nature can do, to tell your family and Facebook friends how bravely you weathered it all.

And then there is this strange sense of premature survivor's guilt that makes you hesitant about leaving your

neighbors behind -- neighbors who, whether intentionally or subconsciously, make you feel less intrepid than they are.

As I looked out the window at 7:30 a.m. Monday and noticed that the ocean was already reaching below the boardwalk, I knew we had to evacuate. Sandy was still hundreds of miles off the coast, and we still had two astronomical high tides and a predicted 20-foot storm surge ahead of us.

There was no way this ocean wouldn't crash into the streets by nightfall, destroying the cars and homes in its path. We couldn't afford to lose our car, and if we tried to move it off the island, the police would never let us over the bridge to get back home and batten down the hatches.

As I watched the ocean creep up the shore, I thought of Mitt Romney, of all people. My mind was replaying a clip of a comment he made when he accepted his nomination at the Republican National Convention:

> "President Obama promised to slow the rise of the oceans and to heal the planet. My promise is to help you and your family."

Romney's flippancy made my skin crawl the first time I'd heard his attempt at humor. Now, watching the seas rise outside my window, the arrogance of his words filled me with fear about a possible future of continued environmental destruction.

Back in July, NASA reported [1] that the thawing of Greenland's ice sheet accelerated from 40 percent to an alarming 97 percent over the course of just four days. This coincided with an ice chunk "twice the size of Manhattan" breaking off of a glacier in the northern part of the country. All of this occurred while North America experienced a record-shattering heat wave.

Reading this, I realized I might not be spending my golden years in my apartment. Some scientists estimate that over the last two decades, the global sea level has risen [2] by an average of 3.3 millimeters a year. In my lifetime, Long Beach and its neighboring barrier islands would be under constant threat of being washed over by the ocean.

Two days after the storm, I was able to return to Long Beach after proving my residence to the troopers at the bridge. Sandy had been true to her name. Like most of the city, our building, parking lot and surrounding streets were buried in three feet of sand that once constituted the dunes, the shoreline and the ocean floor. We were left without electricity, water, sewer, sanitation, cellphone or U.S. mail service.

During press conferences with elected officials in the wake of the storm, I heard a senator say Sandy "hit us with a 2-by-4" and a Red Cross executive call Sandy "vicious." But I couldn't help thinking of the brutality we have shown to our planet, the one great sustainer of our earthly life.

Our pollution has made the oceans warm and killed coral reefs at an alarming pace. Our greed and carelessness have led us to treat the ocean like our personal dumping ground. As we continue to clean up debris left from the storm, a "garbage patch [3]" the size of Texas is floating between Hawaii and California.

The day after Sandy, Gov. Andrew Cuomo asserted we are having the "storm of the century" every two years now. Unlike most politicians, he had the courage to admit that climate change is likely to blame. He suggested creating a sea wall to prevent future disasters. Such a project would cost billions [4]. We would build a citadel as if we were declaring war with the sea.

Would our elected officials ever be able to convince the electorate and their colleagues that such money would be better invested in protecting our fragile ecosystem, investing in renewable and clean energy, creating cutting-

edge recycling and composting programs, and raising public awareness of the effects of global warming?

For the first time this year, Long Beach put out recycling bins next to the garbage bins placed on the beach during the peak summer months. The bins were stationed only along a small stretch of the shore and were so poorly labeled it was easy to confuse them with the garbage pails. On an average two-mile walk, I was still picking up dozens of plastic bottles, food containers, utensils and bags littering the sand.

It is no small irony that, as a result of the storm and the demands it has made of sanitation workers, curbside recycling has been suspended in Long Beach as well as all of New York City for the time being.

Recovery from the storm has been exacerbated also by a gasoline shortage nearly rivaling the legendary crisis in the 1970s. Loss of power closed many stations, and staggering demand tapped out many of the stations with power. Watching cars idle on lines that stretched for miles is the most striking image of our radical dependence on fossil fuel I've ever witnessed.

The good news is that Sandy's aftermath has elicited as stunning amount of generosity, not only in donations of money and goods, but in armies of volunteers who have come to care for those who were harmed. My hope is that we might be equally inspired to offer the same level of compassion to our fragile oceans and ecosystems.

Yes, Sandy was a storm of great destructive power. But I try to remember that nature gives us beauty, peace and healing far more often than it does damaging winds and tidal surges. We are more often victimizers of nature than victims.

Most folks move to coastal towns and barrier islands to experience the kind of splendor and tranquility that only the sea and the shore can provide. When it comes to goodness and kindness, our earth gives and gives but seldom receives the same from us in return.

My prayer is that Sandy might teach us that we must care for nature in the same way that nature cares for us.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA).]

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