

# **“Flooded with Hope” by Michele Frome**

**November 4, 2018**



## **Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

The last two weeks of September, I worked as a Disaster Spiritual Care volunteer for the American Red Cross following Hurricane Florence; Florence was the storm set tropical storm rainfall records in North and South Carolina, dumping 10 trillion gallons of water.

A little background: last year, with support from this congregation, I completed training in Clinical Pastoral Education and was approved for certification as a Clinical Chaplain. I signed up with the Red Cross hoping to get some more opportunity to practice what I'd learned. In September, the opportunity came.

I was based in Fayetteville, North Carolina, which was

headquarters for District 3 of this particular Red Cross operation, covering 9 counties. There were several hundred Red Cross workers in district 3, but only 5 of us assigned to Spiritual Care. Each day, I was paired up with one or two other people and assigned several Red Cross emergency shelters to travel to by car. Each day, I spent several hours talking with people who were staying in these shelters.

Who were these people? Before I was first sent out from Fayetteville, I was reminded that these were all people with limited income – these were the people who couldn't afford a hotel room. Some of them were there because the roads were closed and they couldn't get to their homes. Some of them were there because their homes were unlivable due to water or wind damage. And some of them were there because they didn't have a home before the hurricane.

What did I do? I approached individuals and ask them, "how are you" or "how are you holding up?" They would reply, "OK". I would say, "OK...really?" And then they would tell me the truth, they would tell me their stories.

These were people who knew hardships – before, during and after the hurricane. People told me about being rescued by helicopter, about being kicked out by family or friends with no place to go, about being separated from loved ones and pets.

But what really impressed me was this: overwhelmingly, these were people with Resilience—the capacity to bounce back from difficulties, to have a positive attitude. I heard it over and over and over; people would say, "I'm going to be OK," or "we're going to be all right," or "something will work out."

One man named Christopher agreed to let the Red Cross videotape his story. I'd like for you to hear him now:

*Well, I could tell you a little bit about my home. I just*

*painted it. Just remodeled it. Just got new furniture. And (long pause) its flooded. So (long pause) that's difficult. That's difficult to deal with. Just to wrap my mind around all that. That I'm gonna go home and see all that.*

*I really try not to think about it right now. It's painful. Especially when I just did all the work, I just made it home, you know. It felt like home. And it looked like home. Now I ain't got no home.*

*This has been a LEARNING experience for me. First time I been to the shelter. First time I ever had to evacuate...I'm gonna stay positive because... that's the only thing I can do. One day at a time. That's all I can say. That's all I'm gonna do. That's all I can do. What else can I do.*

In my training, I learned that my job as a chaplain is to help people get in touch with their own source of spiritual strength, not to offer them my own. Therefore, I tend not to bring up the topic of God or prayer unless the other person does first, or indicates somehow that it's part of their belief system. So I needed to ask myself:

Where does the hope of these people come from? I must tell you, I was really impressed – almost everyone I talked with said their hope came from God. (By the way, I didn't introduce myself as a chaplain and I didn't wear a badge that said "spiritual care" – I just told them my name.)

I was surprised. About half the people mentioned God on their own, without my asking. Now, I knew North Carolina was part of the "Bible Belt", but somehow that term always had a negative connotation for me. Now, I was observing how faith in a Christian God was providing hope and support to people who really needed it. People I talked with would say things like, "I trust God is going to take care of me somehow," or "all I can do is pray to God," or "I'm grateful to God that we're still alive."

For those that didn't mention God: they would tell me what happened to them, and then they would tell me how they were dealing with it. I almost always detected some strength of character that the person revealed to me: it might be patience, or courage, or perseverance, or devotion to their children. Then I would ask, "where does – your patience, or your courage, or your perseverance – come from?" Most of them answered without hesitation, "from God" or "from the Lord." (Sometimes, they would just point their finger up and lift their eyes toward heaven.) Well over 90 percent of the people I talked with identified God as the source of help and hope.

Once they mentioned God, I invited them to pray with me. In our prayers, first we praised God, then we thanked God for specific blessings this person had identified in their own life. Then we asked God for help. Occasionally, I would echo their hope for a specific outcome – like, may they be able to return to their home, or may he see his dog again soon. But usually, we prayed for what they needed to get through this rough time – patience to wait it out, comfort as they grieved what they had lost, guidance to know what to do next, strength for the steps that lay ahead. When we finished praying, we were both feeling hopeful.

The Reflection we are using at Seekers Church for the current liturgical season is the following quote from a story entitled, ["Show Up With Hope: Anne Lamott's Plan for Facing Adversity:"National Geographic Magazine, October 2018](#)

*Sometimes hope is a radical act, sometimes a quietly merciful response, sometimes a second wind, or just an increased awareness of goodness and beauty.*

This simple sentence suggests some of the ways that Hope might manifest itself. I'd like to give you some specific examples of Hope that I witnessed in my time in North Carolina.

Sometimes hope is a radical act. I met a homeless veteran

I'll call Joe. He told me about his experiences in and out of housing. He kept saying, "God's in charge, God will take care of me somehow." Later, I asked him, "where are you going from here?" He pointed toward a couple of cots near his and said, "wherever they go." It turns out that he had gotten to know this couple he had just met in the shelter, whose home had been destroyed. This couple didn't know where they were going to live, but they had already invited him to go with them – they had invited Joe to join their household.

Sometimes hope is a second wind: I talked with a middle-aged woman I'll call Dianne, who had been flooded out of her home for the second time. Two years prior, many of these same people went through Hurricane Matthew. Dianne told me that she almost died in her home as a result of Hurricane Matthew. Now, she was scared to death to go back again. We prayed, and she said she felt better. Two days later, I saw her again and she said, "Good news, I'm going home – keep praying for me!"

I also talked at length with an elderly woman I'll call Catherine. Catherine lived on a farm with her husband and their two unmarried, adult children. Their home was unlivable. She was distraught, struggling to regain her faith in God. She told me that her sister said they could come stay with her, but Catherine didn't see how the five of them could live in a one-bedroom trailer. Three days later, I saw her smiling as she was packing up her things – she told me they were going to stay with her sister.

Sometimes hope is a quietly merciful response: One woman told me about all the things going wrong for her in the shelter; eventually, she mentioned God, and I offered to pray with her. When I started praying, she began moaning and swaying and calling out to God; this went on for a long time. When she finished, I brought our prayer to an end. She relaxed, smiled at me, and in a rather matter of fact tone said, "Thanks. I feel better now."

Sometime hope is just an increased awareness of goodness and beauty: At one shelter in a gymnasium, I met a woman named Pat. When I asked her how she was, she said "I'm just fine, this is my home away from home." She insisted that I come with her to see just what her "home away from home" looked like. On the far side of the gymnasium, a row of cots was lined up against the bleachers. Behind Pat's cot, on one step of the bleachers, there was a beautifully-colored scarf with a vase of artificial flowers. On the step below, there were four or five framed pictures of her children and grandchildren. She had created for herself a reminder of goodness and beauty.

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On a slightly different note, I want to add some personal thoughts about Hope. When I first arrived in North Carolina, I got messages from folks back home asking, "how are you?? It looks really dangerous down there!!" I realized their concern came from what they were seeing in the news media. I assured them I was OK, and I realized the news media was focusing on the worst.

This hit home for me about a week into my stay. At one shelter, I met three families from Kelly, a rural settlement of about 500 people in Bladen County. On my second visit to that shelter, these same people all shared with me their good news: "our road is finally open, and we're going home today!" That evening, watching the local television news, I heard the newscaster say, "the flooding continues, and they're still evaluating people from Kelly." Huh?

Since returning from North Carolina, I've been acutely aware how much our news media focuses on trauma, crisis, and controversy – something bad happens, and we hear about it for days and days. My husband says it's because that's what sells advertising. He may be right. Whatever the motive, the impact is the same: the news media generates Fear, and Fear

drives out Hope.

In order to have more Hope, I've concluded that I must consume less news. I'm not going to put my head in the sand, and I'm not saying the news is false, but it's not the whole picture.

I invite you to test out my theory: After the elections are over, no matter how much news you read or listen to each day, try cutting it in half. Notice what it does to your own level of Fear and sense of Hope.

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I also encourage you to read the entire article that we have quoted in our Reflection, "Show Up for Hope: Anne Lamott's Plan for Facing Adversity," published in the October 2018 issue of National Geographic Magazine. In that story, Anne Lamott concludes:

"by showing up with hope to help others, I'm guaranteed that hope is present. Then my own hope increases. By creating hope for others, I end up awash in the stuff."

That's not exactly how it worked for me in North Carolina. Honestly, I didn't show up with much hope – I knew some of the realities, and I didn't have a lot of hope for long-term, flood-free solutions for the people I met. But I found their hope. And when we prayed to God, both of us did, in fact, end up flooded with hope.

Amen.