

Hurricanes are Better Than Christmas

"Hurricanes are better than Christmas," I said to a co-worker last Thursday. She shook her head at me in slightly shocked disbelief. But it is true. Hurricane Charley was headed our way, and people were giddy with excitement about the big storm. We all kept checking weather.com for slightly contradictory reasons; to manage our fears and to titillate ourselves about the scary storm. The fact that Charley was supposed to come right through Alachua County made it even more exciting. In my lifetime, Gainesville has never sustained significant damage because of a hurricane. We were past due for one. Hurricane Charley was going to fly over the houses of all the good little girls and boys of Hogtown.

"Here comes Hurricane. Here comes Hurricane. Right down hurricane lane."

I prefer hurricane to holiday shopping. On Thursday and Friday, Walmart and Publix were thronged with excited shoppers. But people actually were buying things they needed instead of frantically grabbing one of those gizmos tailor made to help people quickly cross names off their holiday shopping list. Gizmos that no one ever wants to receive as a present. I didn't need to get much, not because I am the sort of person who prepares for these sorts of things. I live next door to my father who makes being a pack rat into a high art form. I thought it might be prudent to get some spare batteries and a few other things. By early Thursday afternoon, Walmart was already cleared out of batteries.

"Attention Hurricane Shoppers, stock up on glow sticks, batteries, water, ice and all your hurricane needs right now. If you don't, you'll sorry."

It is the special preparations to house and home that make the hurricane season so magical, nailing plywood over French doors, pulling the lawn furniture into the house, turning the temperature of the fridge to the coldest possible setting. At my house preparations were a bit more complicated. I mentioned that my father is a pack rat. He's the sort of pack rat that has spare sinks, piles of scrap lumber and various large pieces of metal that might be useful some day but meanwhile lay in semi neat heaps around the yards of the houses. I called him from work on Thursday to gently chide him about the dangers of his junkyard suddenly taking flight. He responded, "You wanted me to get rid of it didn't you." He spent the better part of Thursday and Friday rigging up ways to keep his junk from becoming airborne.

"Spare sinks sailing through an open window. Fierce winds ripping off your roof"

By Friday afternoon, my sister, who has the Dish, was bored by all the hurricane specials, which were the only things showing on TV. She was in the path of the storm but her attitude was stoical maybe even blasé. She had heard Hurricane Charley was headed her way a few too many times. "If your roof is going to get ripped off, your roof is going to get ripped off. There ain't much you do about it." I don't watch TV so, despite semi regular weather.com checks, I didn't get bored by the storm. I could enjoy the fierce mystery of the hurricane.

Hurricanes are awesome, not in the over used slang sense of the word, but in profound, deep, disturbing ways. We use the word "awesome" for all sorts of things that are not. "That tv show was awesome." Friends of mine in their seventies remember a time when the word awesome was not used lightly. Ironically, surfer dudes, the first to use awesome as a common exclamation, frequently commune with the ocean, which is awesome in the true sense of the word.

Hurricanes are a reminder of terrible, arbitrary power beyond human control, beyond supplication. Hurricanes don't check the list twice. "Sheila hasn't been so good this year, so I'll blow her house down." It doesn't matter if we are naughty or nice. We can try to mitigate the effects. We can buy supplies, board up our windows, not keep piles of junk in our yards, seek shelter, pray, hold our breaths and kiss our asses goodbye, but none of it will change the course of a hurricane. Our preparations may mean nothing. Charley ripped the roof off a building sheltering a thousand people. They are lucky to be alive.

Hurricane Charley decided not to visit the boys and girls of Gainesville. But lots of people in Florida got huge loads of coal in their stockings. 16 or so people lost their lives. Many lower income seniors lost their homes. Charley smashed trailer parks to pieces. Elderly people are running out of critical medications. Some counties will have to completely rebuild their power grids. It is almost a week later, and some people still don't have power. Their food is rotting. They aren't use to living in Florida without air conditioning and refrigeration. They are suffering, not because of their sins, but because they happened to be in the way of a fierce storm.

Charley left goodies in other peoples' stockings. A woman told me that her son and a friend drove 600 hundred pounds of ice down to South Florida. Visions of dollar signs danced in their eyes. He and his friend charged a little more than \$3 a bag, which was less than other hurricane entrepreneurs. The boys made a modest profit after subtracting the cost of the ice (less than .90 a bag in Alachua County) and gasoline to get down there. People paid, despite the fact that price gouging is illegal during a state of emergency. They paid, and they were grateful.

I am profoundly grateful that I didn't have to contend with sinks flying through the air at 90 miles an hour, and I would be more than a little annoyed by the people trying to make a buck off my suffering. This may seem horribly insensitive in the face of the destruction Charley caused, but I was a little disappointed that Gainesville didn't see any of the fierce wind and rain. It was calm here.

Despite that, I was reminded how small, insignificant even, I am in relation to major meteorological events. I cannot change the weather. Our collective actions are changing the climate, and many scientists believe that more severe weather, including increased hurricane activity, is a consequence of global warming. But there were hurricanes before global warming. Even if we were to all suddenly change our fuel burning ways, we couldn't stop the stirring of winds and oceans that give birth to awesome storms.

I think this hurricane season has done more to bring families together and remind them

of what is important than our washed out, commercialized holiday season ever could. But Hurricane Charley didn't care if we stayed alienated and focused on the trivialities of our lives. I have no tidy wrap up. Charley was a fearsome storm, and Gainesville is lucky its path changed.