



Ten Years Ago - A Remembrance



Photo of 20th Avenue and 2nd Street, Gulfport, after hurricane Katrina. The author's apartment was on the second floor of the large house indicated in the top picture. Photos courtesy of author.



It was hot—very hot—on Saturday, August 27, 2005. While sitting in a wicker rocker sipping iced coffee and enjoying the cool of my balcony, I observed over two-thousand people moving steadily along Gulfport's picturesque 2nd Street. Along the way, homeowners had set up cooling stations comprised of frozen bottles of water and garden hoses spraying a fine mist of cool water. People ran. People walked. They laughed. They perspired. Everyone was out to have a good time for a good cause—the American Heart Association.

As I sat admiring the runner's determination, a dear friend from church dropped by and ask me to babysit his three-year-old son while he continued the run. I agreed. As little Weston and I built castles out of empty Cheerio boxes, the hot morning passed. Once his father had completed his run, he returned, out of breath and sporting a man-sized thirst. He guzzled down an icy glass of water and then asked a question—a question that would change my life forever. "What are you going to do for the storm. Leave? Or stay?" And then came my never-to-be-forgotten reply, "What storm?"

Like many life-long Coastal residents, Katrina took me by surprise. The 2005 Hurricane Season had been the most active in recorded history, with a record twenty-eight tropical and subtropical storms. Eight strengthened into major hurricanes. Four became Category 4 hurricanes

and a record four reached Category 5! All that summer, Coastal residents had watched storms form and gain strength, only to dissipate or journey elsewhere. We were spared time and time again. Perhaps many Coastal residents felt we would be spared completely because we'd experienced the horrors and destruction of another iconic storm—Camille. We were wrong.

Once my friends left, I rushed to the television and turned to WLOX. The weather report was indeed bad. Mike Reader, chief meteorologist at the time, was warning of the impending storm. At that point I lunged into "hurricane mode." Having lived through Camille and other hurricanes, I knew what had to be done. I filled the bathtubs with water and covered my antique furniture in thick carpenter's plastic, taping everything down with masking tape. Down came the paintings from the walls and under the dining table they went. They were kept company by my china, crystal, and silver. The dining room chandelier was swathed in heavy canvas. I taped my windows (we old-timers did so even after this "protection" had been debunked). All through the night I got things in order.

The next day, Sunday, August 28th, I decided what I needed to take with me to my mother's house, where she and I would ride out the storm. My computer, some clothes and toiletries, important papers, along with my Bible were the few things that I took. In my haste I forgot to pack my daily devotional book, *Open Windows*. It was safe though, under the plastic that covered the breakfast room dining table. I looked around my cozy old apartment remembering the happy times with friends and family that had taken place there. My antique wall clock struck 12:30 pm. I locked the front door and said, "Lord, it's in your hands. If it survives, so be it. If

not...well...it's only stuff."

Riding east along Beach Boulevard towards Mom's house, I could not help but notice two things: the gorgeous old homes and the rising water. Yikes! I thought. The water's already lapping at the seawall. I remember thinking how lovely the old homes looked, like old friends that I'd known all my life. I remember the moss swaying fitfully in the majestic old oaks, their lush leaves like a leafy-green crown. Little did I know what was in store for them and my family.

When I arrived at Mom's house, she too was in "hurricane mode," as I knew she would be. We had weathered Camille in the hallway of that same house. It was not near water and was not damaged in that storm. I kissed mom, told her that we were in for a really big blow and that we'd best batten down the hatches. She laughed and said, "I watched *All About Eve* the other night..." To which I responded, "Yes, Bette, it's gonna be a bumpy night." Little did we know just how bumpy that night and the following day would be.

My family never evacuated for storms; Katrina was no exception. We'd learned after Camille that once a storm passes, getting back to the Coast was a major problem. We would stay for this one, even though my dear father had passed away. Sitting in front of our television, Mom and I heard the ominous, updated weather report. As the day wore on, the azure-blue sky dissolved into a smear of trembling, grey-black clouds. The moaning wind danced a slow samba. And then the rain began, a syrupy drizzle at first. But later in the evening, it sounded like rocks hitting the roof.

One of Mike Reader's last reports, received before the power went off, informed us that Katrina would make landfall sometime on the morning of Monday, August 29th. "Folks, she's gonna be with us for about eight or nine hours! She gonna bring with her wind gusts of 130mph, and a wall of water twenty-five to thirty feet high in places! And she's gonna leave a whole lot of destruction!" Mom looked at me. I looked at her. We prayed that God would protect us during the dark night and the frightening uncertainty of the following day.

"Walking atop piles of debris—the ruined and tattered treasures of people's lives—I suddenly fell. The piercing morning sunlight had blinded me. As I stood, brushing filth and blood off my knees, my eyes readjusted to the bright light. It was then I saw it, my apartment! The roof was gone, but the house had survived."

For those of you who have never experienced a hurricane, it's difficult to describe in words what living through one is like. Words like horrific, terrifying, and awe-inspiring come to mind, but still fall short. Around 10:00 AM, at the height of the storm, I thought I'd made a mistake by not evacuating. It was then my dear mother asked, "An-

thony, what's another seven-letter word for dictionary?" I looked at her in amazement as she calmly worked a crossword puzzle in the boiling, gray light of that horrifying day. I muttered an answer, and it was at that point that my worries and cares vanished. Mom was not worried, so why should I be?

Late that afternoon, I ventured out. The steamy heat smothered everything it touched. I waved to neighbors. We were thankful we'd experienced no major damage. Roof shingles covered people's yards, along with downed tree limbs and debris blown in by the storm. But we'd survived! Then the radio reports began: The Coast had experienced cataclysmic destruction; many lives had been lost; many people were missing.

I knew I had to get back to my apartment as soon as possible. Any damage would have to be fixed as best I could. And there might be looters—parasitic bottom feeders who descend on destroyed homes like the vicious Harpies of Greek mythology. My homeward odyssey began Tuesday, once the sky was aflame with light. What would normally have been a ten-minute drive along Beach Boulevard turned into a three-hour journey. It was hampered by debris-laden back streets, downed power lines, and distraught drivers. Dazed people walked those back streets trying to find their homes or what was left of them. Tears welled up in my eyes; so much destruction; so much chaos; so many sad people. What would I find when I got home?

Sections of Gulfport's West Railroad Street had been partially cleared; I slowly inched my way along it. I could



About the Author

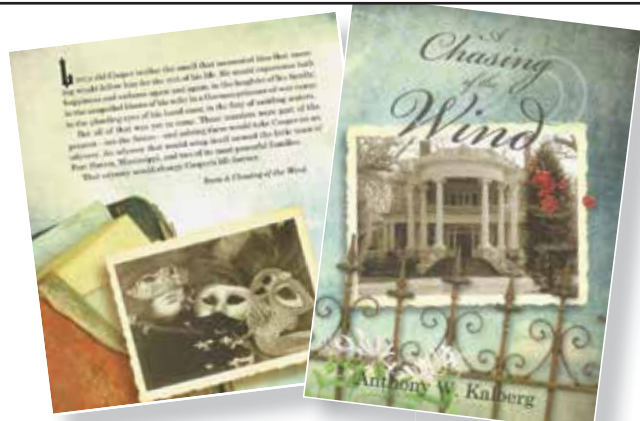
Anthony W. Kalberg was born and reared on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and has a background in the arts and stage performance.

A Gulfport resident, he had front-row seats for Hurricanes Betsy, Camille, and Katrina and survived them all. Those life-changing storms have had a major impact on both his writing and his life. *A Chasing of the Wind* is his first novel.

If you enjoy Kal's Kaleidoscope, you might enjoy his first novel, *A Chasing of the Wind*, which was released in October, 2014.

You can read the Prologue at his website, www.anthonyskalberg.com.

Book can be purchased at the Gulfport Galleria, the Southern Bound Book Store or directly from the author via his website.



see parts of 2nd Street south of the railroad tracks, but where were the quaint homes that had once dotted the quintessential old street? At the 18th Street railroad crossing, I parked my car, fearing a punctured tire. Seeing the apocalyptic destruction that surrounded me, I could not imagine what I might find at home.

As I neared my apartment, great oaks obscured my line of sight. Their once leafy-green crowns were now nothing more than dull-brown halos. Walking atop piles of debris—the ruined and tattered treasures of people’s lives—I suddenly fell. The piercing morning sunlight had blinded me. As I stood, brushing filth and blood off my knees, my eyes readjusted to the bright light. It was then I saw it, my apartment! The roof was gone, but the house had survived.

I carefully ran to it. I dashed up the stairs that had miraculously survived. I thrust the key into the lock, turned it, and the door creaked opened. I was home! But I was not alone. The smell of mold immediately attacked my senses. I knew I had work to do if I was to salvage my clothes and possessions.

As my old wall clock struck the hour, I hurriedly check everything. And everything was just as I had left it. Even though the tin roof was gone, the thick, one-hundred-year-old ceiling plaster had acted like a sponge, soaking up the storm’s torrential rain.

As I walked into the breakfast room, I saw the *Open Windows* devotion book under the carpenter’s plastic. “Wonder what the August 29th devotion was?”, I thought. Picking up the book, I then spied the passage from the Book of Matthew: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.”

In the days and weeks that followed, and the enormity of what had happened during Katrina’s lengthy visit sunk in, I remembered that verse as I surveyed street after street of total destruction. But during that time I witnessed something that transcended all the ruin and rot that surrounded me: the ability of humans to rise above adversity and survive.

I witnessed total strangers hugging each other and crying together in the

streets. I saw people set up outdoor kitchens to feed storm-weary residents. Children played around debris piles with broken toys and happy laughter. And more than once I heard someone say, “We’re down! But we aren’t out!”

Ten years since, most of the grand old homes that once dotted the coastline are but sepia-toned memories. Gone, too, are most of the Coast’s famous landmarks. Katrina destroyed so much of our history, but she couldn’t destroy us—the people who call the Mississippi Gulf Coast home. Always have! Always will!

Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless you and keep a song in your heart.

Kal



Anthony Wayne Kalberg

Come visit me at

www.anthonikalberg.com

