

# Coincidence is God's Way of Remaining Anonymous



*Martha-Lee Bohn*

Hurricane Katrina. For most people, these words conjure images of desperation, flood waters, and incompetence. For thousands of others, however, Hurricane Katrina is a story of hope and Divine inspiration.

Within days of the storm, trucks loaded with chain saws, generators and water arrived from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. Churches became disaster recovery centers without the benefit of committees examining the problem and deciding what to do.

As Director of Youth Ministries at my local church, the teenagers, who were out of school for six weeks after “the Storm,” hung out with me at the church. We were there when volunteers started showing up with tools and supplies, offering help. We became “camp hosts” for the church, dispatching volunteers to help families “muck out” their homes.

Months after the storm, volunteers were sent to the home of an elderly couple. Debris piles were everywhere. Street signs were down, fabric hung from trees, empty neighborhoods. Their house was a mess with moldy furniture, wet sheetrock, and debris.

The couple had managed to clear a space in the kitchen and set up

a sleeping pallet in there. The volunteers went to work. They swept out the mess, cut the sheetrock, hauled trash, and jury-rigged the kitchen sink and counter.

When they were done, the old man said, “You have no idea what you have just done for us.” The volunteer team leader said, “You would have done it for me. God loves you. It is my blessing to be able to help you.”

The old man said, “You don’t understand. You are the first people to visit us since the storm. No one has checked on us. My wife and I had become so desperate that we’d made a pact to commit suicide tomorrow, and then you showed up.”

Stunned, the volunteer leader said, “I have a work order here. Someone must have spoken with you. We were sent here.” Looking at the work order, the old man said, “That’s not my house. That’s the house on the next street.” Yup. It’s clear. Someone sent them there. And God keeps sending volunteers to help.

As Outreach Coordinator for the Presbytery of Mississippi Disaster Recovery, I travel the country visiting churches that have sent mission teams to the Gulf Coast. I share stories of hope out of chaos and thank them for “loving their neighbor as themselves.”

However, if you had told me years ago that one day I would live in Mississippi and travel around to churches delivering sermons and studies, I would have laughed. Me?

“And further,” you tell me, “You will return to your home town a witness to God’s hope and presence in the chaos of hurricane recovery and in your own life.”

Please. You must be joking. I was raised Presbyterian in suburban New York. We’re supposed to be “God’s Frozen Chosen.” We don’t evangelize or talk about religion, much less “witness,” whatever that means. And Mississippi? Why would I ever want to live in Mississippi?

And then, a man asked me to marry him. We met at the First International Laughter Symposium in Orlando, Florida in May. I was there

presenting a film, “Praise Ha!” about the healing power of laughter. He was a retired Navy nurse who had been to Clown School and was an aspiring stand-up comedian.

During the question and answer period after the film, this man, wearing a chicken hat, stood up, and asked me to marry him. At lunch he told me he was serious and presented me with a ring, an onion ring.

He “courted” me long-distance with letters, flowers and care packages. In spite of my mother’s concern that he was Jack the Ripper, I agreed to travel with him to festivals and stand-up comedy clubs that summer. Not only didn’t we kill each other, we fell in love. By October, we were engaged.

Moving to south Mississippi, I discovered the third coast of the United States, a whole new world. Firmly in the “Bible Belt,” the best way to find community in Mississippi is through church, so I sought out a Presbyterian one. We became regulars at worship and church suppers and hung out with the teenage youth group.

A year later, Matt and I were married at my home church in New York. When we went in for the final kiss, he pulled a clown nose out of his pocket and we were presented as clown and wife! Meeting Matt, taking a leap of faith, falling in love, getting married - it was an exciting whirlwind. I was floating on happiness. It was like a fairy tale.

The fairy tale abruptly ended on my wedding night when my new husband, unexpectedly, tragically, suffered a massive heart attack and died. He was dead before the ambulance even arrived. Twelve hours from bride to widow. It was surreal. “Oh God!” I thought. “How could you do this to me? What happened?!”

What happened? I walked through the valley of the shadow of death and was cared for. God sent angels. Family and friends were glimmers of light in the darkness. Everyone at the wedding walked through it with me. My sisters helped me return to Mississippi. Friends flew in and stayed with me.

That winter and spring, I waded through probate of Matt's Will and worked on "one big thing a day." Sometimes, that big thing was to take a shower or to fix a meal. Wednesday suppers and Sunday worship became my social outings of the week.

By summer I could make it through a week without crying. I spent July and August with family and friends and dared to think about a new future. Coming to terms with the fact that people die, I still wondered aloud, "Why Mississippi? What am I going to do in Mississippi?"

The church asked me to serve as Interim Director of Youth Ministries beginning Labor Day weekend. I agreed and prepared to head south from Seattle. Before I even started packing the car, Hurricane Katrina roared into the Gulf of Mexico. I watched in horror, recognizing places on the Weather Channel!

The first email I received about my house came from a neighbor's cousin saying that my house was "still standing." Driving home from Seattle I kept checking my email and trying to reach anyone by phone. A second email with a first-hand account from my neighbor said, "There is water still coming out of your house." When a church friend sent a text message, "Come home. We'll help you." I realized that Mississippi was now home.

After months of wrestling with grief and arguing with God, Hurricane Katrina turned out to be something of a blessing to me. I found truth in a Bible passage from Romans 5:3-5, "*...we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.*"

Thousands of people were suffering. I could no longer allow myself the "luxury" of wallowing in self-pity when I have unique skills and abilities to offer in the midst of chaos. I realized that I didn't die when my husband did. I found my purpose. I decided that God brought me to Mississippi for a reason, and I'd better get to work.

With that decision everything changed. Family and friends saw a

young widow facing one more impossible tragedy. I saw a calling, a homework assignment from God.

Mother Theresa once said, “God only gives us as much as we can handle. I just wish He didn’t have so much confidence in me.” Well, He does have a great deal of confidence in all of us, and with the help of angels disguised as ordinary humans, we can all live in that confidence.

**Believe in miracles and be willing to receive the gifts that are offered.**

When a volunteer asked me one Sunday night, “What should I do with the hundred pair of shoes I have in the car?” I didn’t know what to say. Overwhelmed with a long list of things to do, I said nothing, hoping he was pulling my leg. When he repeated it, saying that they were brand new children’s shoes, I knew he was serious.

I called a church member who is an elementary school teacher and told her about the shoes. She responded, “Oh my God, Martha-Lee. You are an answer to prayers. I’ve been sitting here praying for shoes!”

Working at a low-income elementary school, she manages the “clothing closet” donations for the kids. On Friday, a barefoot boy had come to her asking for shoes. She had no shoes, but she promised him she’d have a pair for him on Monday. It was Sunday night, and she had no shoes for him. I told her to please stop praying!

Consider when something feels like an unexpected burden, it may just be that God is using you to answer someone’s prayers! Choose to believe that coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.



*Originally a New Yorker, **Martha-Lee Bohn** moved to Mississippi in 2003 after she met a man, fell in love, and got married. Her Gulfport home flooded like thousands of others along the Gulf Coast. Bohn works with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance in the wake of the 2005 Hurricane season. Four years since Katrina, volunteers continue to help families who have lost hope. For more information or to offer help, contact Mississippi InterFaith Disaster Task Force [www.msidf.org](http://www.msidf.org).*