

The week before I left for New Orleans was stressful, full of details of packing, preparing my house to be left in the care of others, preparing my office to function without me, preparing to encounter the unknown, to live with a group of strangers in a place I had never been before. Had I made the right decision to go to New Orleans? Could I be of any use on a construction site? Was I packing the right clothing? What would it be like living in community with 21 other people? Would it be too hot there? Would there be a bathroom? I was worried about the things I was leaving unresolved – my dog's health issues – half completed projects at the office – housecleaning – yard-work. Oddly it was the yard-work that gave me the most stress. When on earth would I find time to rake my leaves? The yard was already knee-deep. It would be cold when I returned from my trip, and soon there would be snow on the ground. Should I hire someone to do it while I was away, or just wait 'til I got home? All of this, and especially those darned leaves nagged at my mind even as we headed to the airport on Saturday morning. I was stressed-out, and my world seemed out of control.

A few days later, a couple of us walked down Bienville Avenue on our way to the bathroom in the parsonage of Central Congregational Church. We encountered a woman in a blue bathrobe, sweeping leaves from the short patch of sidewalk outside of her home. We said hello to her and she to us, as she continued to sweep leaves. She didn't seem inclined to talk, so we continued on our way. That leaf sweeping stuck in my mind, and I briefly thought about the leaves in my own yard. There were leaves all over the ground in that New Orleans neighborhood. It seemed futile to try to keep them from entering a 20 x 8 ft area. As soon as she swept a small section, the wind blew the leaves back. I wondered why she bothered. Later in the day on another bathroom trip, I met the lady again. She was once again sweeping leaves. This time, I was with Gwen, who managed to engage her in conversation. It was difficult to understand the woman. She was soft-spoken, and her accent was difficult to understand. And, she kept turning her head away as she spoke. She seemed uncomfortable about making eye contact; all the while, continuing to sweep those leaves. But Gwen is made of strong stuff, ☺ and little by little the woman opened up to tell us her story. Her name was Evelyn. She told us about her evacuation to the Convention Center – about spending days without knowing whether or not her family was alive. ...about her daughter and grandchildren living in a car atop a bridge, for days – without food or water. ...about her son-in-law housed in the Superdome, at one point forced to lie on the ground at gun-point. She went on to say that though she didn't like her current home, her

landlord is nice and she is grateful to have her family alive and with her. She talked with pride about her grandchildren, and how well they do in school. She told us that her daughter has recently gotten a job as a cashier. She talked about the neighborhood and drugs and how she told the minister to get the drugs out of the neighborhood. She told us that she has a lot of anger in her. Later on that day, a couple of us went back to give her a prayer shawl and some money for her grandchildren. She thanked us and told us how much it meant to have us come to talk to her. She asked that we pray for her and not forget her. Before we left she gave us her name and address and asked us to please write to her.

Since I've come home, I've begun thinking about leaves again – my leaves and now, Evelyn's leaves. I've also been thinking about worlds out of control – my world and now Evelyn's world. Evelyn's world went out of control on August 29, 2005. She is gradually getting things back to normal, or at least whatever "normal" is going to be from now on. She persistently and repeatedly sweeps leaves off of the sidewalk in front of 2309 Bienville Avenue. Maybe the leaf-sweeping is her attempt to gain control of something – at least one tiny piece - of her out-of-control life. Everywhere we went in New Orleans, we met people whose lives were turned upside down a little over two years ago. Every constant in their lives was kicked out from under them in a matter of a few days. They are oh, so gradually gathering themselves together, persistently sweeping leaves from their tightly cherished pieces of ground, and they are THANKFUL to BE there, and thankful for those who come to help them. I noticed that unlike many Northerners, they freely acknowledge that it is GOD who blesses them.

As for me and my world, the silly things that stressed me are still here. The dog still pees on the couch from time to time, office worries are still there and my yard is still knee-deep in leaves. But, Evelyn and her neighbors have taught me something about perspective. I see those beautiful people through new eyes and I'll admire them, their courage, their grit and their faith forever. I see my petty concerns through those same new eyes and I hope I can learn to put things into perspective.

Just this morning, I was reading Psalm 124, and certain verses leaped out at me: "If the Lord had not been on our side – let Israel say – if the Lord had not been on our side...the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us, the raging waters would have swept us away...We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare...Our help is in the name of the

Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.” Well, the flood certainly did sweep New Orleans away. Why do they still have faith? Why have their spirits not been broken? Some of them do have broken spirits, and we saw it in the eyes of those who sat on front steps and just stared out into the street. I wonder how many times over the last two years, they heard the word “no” before they just stopped trying. I suppose some of them will never return to their homes, or even to the city. So what sustains the faith of Evelyn, Josh, Brynna, Caroline, Jerry, Andreas? I think part of what sustains them is the knowledge that somewhere in Massachusetts, or Pennsylvania or Michigan, someone is knitting or quilting, or purchasing a gift card, or collecting books. Someone is making plane reservations, taking a week’s vacation, buying work gloves, arranging for child care, and deciding to forget about yard work for awhile.

I think it was Wednesday morning of our trip when I got up off of my air mattress at 5:30 and pointed myself in the direction of the coffee pot which I knew Susan had set up the night before (thank you Susan!!!!). The thought that rolled around in my mind in that moment was, “next time I do this, I’ll make sure to invest in some good work boots.” I did a mental double-take as I realized that I had just decided that I will do another mission trip. Up until then, I really hadn’t thought about a second trip. But as I explored my feelings, I thought, How can I not? I have a home, a job, family, a Church, and thank GOD, a yard full of leaves to rake, while out there are folks whose worlds are out of control. Yes, I’ll go back.

I should say also that part of the ease with which I made this decision had to do with the incredible group of people who made up our team. Jane, John, Mark, Sandy, Gwen, Lillie, Jeanne, Judy, Deb and Richard, I’ve known you long and loved you well, as the saying goes. But having lived and worked with you for our week in New Orleans, the affection I felt for you before has deepened into something new and grander. Randy, Paul, Dan, Bruce, Susan, Rich, Nette, Barbara, Nancy, Bill, Heidi and Shantia, you are now friends with whom I have shared an incredible experience. You started out as strangers, gradually becoming faces that I learned to match with names and personalities. In a very short time, you became my friends. The amazing thing is that this group of 23 faces, names and personalities came together and just clicked. I am proud to have been part of that group. It is an experience I will never forget, and I thank God for it.

Mary Mc.