

An aerial photograph showing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in Gulfport, Mississippi. The image captures a dense residential area where many houses have been severely damaged or completely destroyed. Debris is scattered across the landscape, and the remaining structures appear as dark, irregular shapes against the lighter, debris-strewn ground. The overall scene conveys a sense of widespread destruction and loss.

A Humanist in a Hurricane

Destroyed houses in Gulfport, Mississippi
Photo by Mark Wolfe, FEMA

STEVE SCHLICHT

ON AUGUST 29, 2005, at about 5:00 a.m. I awoke from a restless sleep and checked the Internet for the latest location of “the storm.” In just a few hours Katrina had grown to something beyond anything I had ever seen in my many years of living through prior hurricanes along the Mississippi Gulf coast. Worse yet, there was no potential for this hurricane to lose much strength or track away from the community of my childhood, Gulfport, Mississippi.

I stared, mesmerized in the early morning solitude, at the radar image which was repeatedly displaying the map motion of this powerful force spinning toward us. Over and over again the image flickered, leaving no doubt where this huge storm took aim. And it occurred to me that, as I sat there on the ground *in* Biloxi, Mississippi, looking at information brought to me from the calm safety of a weather satellite above the fray, I was also looking *at* Biloxi going under Hurricane Katrina’s ravaging blades.

After a few moments of this contemplation I found myself trying in futility to imagine Katrina projecting away from a direct hit in Mississippi. But each time I tried to impose some more hopeful track, rationality would intervene and make me realize that something perhaps never experienced was bearing down on us. Clearly, there was nothing more anyone could do. So I just hoped that the past few days of preparation would be enough.

At that moment, however, I was becoming more and more skeptical. My wife approached me quietly and said we should make some coffee, bacon, and biscuits while we still had power. Her calm suggestion seemed so reasonable and routine that I really welcomed the distraction. So I turned off the computer, unplugged the power strip, and went into the kitchen with her. After all, the sudden bursts of wind coursing around our home were a good indication that watching a computer monitor was no longer a necessary source of information on where Katrina was located.

As the food cooked I walked over to the back door with my coffee and watched as the strong wooden fence around the yard began to shudder back and forth. Daylight was breaking and our three children began to stir from the sofa mattresses we had set up on the floor of our family room. I turned to smile at them and gave them each a hug as they got up. Then, as that last normal moment left us, the power went out and the shuddering fence came splintering apart.

My wife rapidly moved our children from the kitchen and into the “safe room” located in the inner hallway bathroom away from the windows and outer doors. This little room had already been prepared with stuffed animals, their favorite blankets and pillows, and food supplies. She whispered words of encouragement and comfort to them as they settled in. Still, I thought to myself as I checked my watch, it wasn’t

even 7:00 a.m. and the eye wall wasn't forecast to arrive until later that afternoon.

Glancing at the pieces of fence skimming west-bound across the yard with dread, however, I hastily put on my Gulfport Police Department uniform and prepared to call my captain. He had last directed me to make phone contact with him for further instructions depending upon conditions at the 8:00 a.m. shift change.

Normally he would answer his cell phone directly. But I got his voicemail. That wasn't good. After I left a brief message and hung up, the same question began to play itself again in my head: how could the hurricane be here already?

I switched on my police radio and heard the blaring sound of the emergency alert transmission indicating an officer needs immediate assistance. It was coming from a fellow detective sergeant of my division. He was reporting he was stranded in an inoperable vehicle while rescuing some others trapped in floodwaters. Dispatch was trying to direct backup to him. I looked again out of my back door window and watched siding, fascia, and wood flying by. There was no way I could ever hope to help him. At the rate of destruction I was witnessing, I'd be fortunate not to have to send an emergency alert myself.

Suddenly a piece of my own house began pounding on the dining room window, having been bent away and left swinging in the gusts. I chanced a run outside to pry the piece loose in order to keep it from shattering the glass. Three steps into the wind and I was almost lifted off my feet. I stopped to regain my footing as I leaned into the wind and was able to pull the strip of aluminum from the house. It flew from my hands as I made my way back inside.

I was toweling off from what would be a purposeless attempt to protect our home when we all heard it and then felt it. A roof came crashing across the backyard and my neighbor's new addition exploded in a field of debris that ripped into what was once the bedroom of my four-year-old son. The eastside wall of colorfully painted dinosaurs was breached and the frame was becoming exposed as the constant winds and rain tore apart the sheetrock.

It was only 8:30 a.m.

Water soon began to pour through and out of the power sockets and light fixtures. Even the fire alarms attached to the ceilings began to be ringed in water. It was time to leave and go with the last plan offered, yet

hardly seriously considered, until that moment.

My wife and I herded our children toward the front door and I looked across at my neighbor's compact brick home. He and his wife were already in their doorway looking back at us, their earlier offering of protection now so very important. After some quick instructions we moved our kids onto the front porch which, being on the north side of our home, wasn't as exposed to the powerful gusts of wind. I ran to my unmarked police vehicle and opened the doors as my family piled in. Driving across the short distance to their house would ordinarily be silly to consider but there was no way to make it on foot in the current chaos of wind and debris. Even the sturdy police car was buffeted around as I backed out and drove them to a more hopeful shelter.

The police radio was still full of emergency calls as we made it into our friend's protective home. We couldn't thank them enough for their care and concern for us. Looking back toward our house as the door was secured behind me I noticed that our chimney had been torn from the west side wall and was lying across an area where our side gate once stood. I reflexively tried to call my captain again and didn't even get his voicemail. All infrastructure was crumbling away and we were returning to our natural foundation.

The next few hours were spent within the full force of this powerful event that was fast becoming a tragedy of historic proportions, and we took each moment as it came.

Later assessments of the coastal damage showed that our neighborhood actually fared pretty well considering the utter destruction further south. Being situated on the higher level of Zone C kept us just above the destructive storm flood surge and, though the wind and rain did significant damage to the structure of our home, we at least had a basic structure left. In sum, though I didn't really know it at the time, we were the lucky ones.

AS SOON AS THE WORST OF KATRINA had passed I made my way to the new command post, located in a commandeered alternative school north of Interstate 10 in Gulfport, and found quite a bit of the city police command and control in triage and hemorrhaging badly. Making my way through the rush of officers and administrators busy with mission directives and informational assessments, I found the familiar faces of my detective squad. One of my lieutenants

was already busy processing two captured looters. As soon as the words, “What needs to be done?” were out of my mouth I was tasked with securing the police operations building located about three blocks from the beach, determining its post-storm capabilities and establishing a new criminal investigative division to process more crime scenes and arrests that were sure to come. Personnel assessments and the necessary legal documents were organized and the justice system was resuscitated in short order. Rooms were cleaned and repaired as best as could be at that time while computers and printers were cobbled together with whatever was found still in working order. The generator hummed to life and the Gulfport Police Department Criminal Investigative Division was back online.

The first night on the newly scheduled twelve-hour shifts was troubling and surreal. Many of our citizens perished in the storm surge and their remains had to be located and recovered. Some of them were obviously caught unaware by the severity of what had arrived. Some had been those same voices last heard by our own emergency dispatchers and I tried, with no avail, to avoid pondering their last moments. It was so sad and despairing and, being a crime scene investigator, it was frustrating to know that I had nothing other than a weather event without intent on which to place blame.

It didn’t take long for me to realize that the only way to bring hope from such carnage would be to follow the Humanist ideals I had studied, accepted, and lived prior to this devastating storm. With others I would participate in bringing comfort, protection, and care right here and right now to those living in need.

Meanwhile, it became apparent that other members of our community completely failed the test of their own humanity and chose to try to victimize an already ravaged town. They soon came to know that such a thing wouldn’t be so easy to do; we officers all stood our ground even with depleted resources, mobility, and communications.

When I had a brief opportunity I headed back in to my damaged neighborhood and made quick arrangements to send my wife and children to stay with family in Illinois. The Gulf Coast was simply gone and the chaos, decay, and disease that come with human and social decomposition was imminent. There was no way I would ever put them at such a risk. So I escorted them north out of the city for an as yet undetermined amount of time.

The subsequent days were spent working the streets and handling whatever new and unexplored circumstances arose. There was no “plan” to turn to for guidance in this incomparable disaster and we set the precedents at every turn. I can look back now and say in all honesty that I am extremely proud of my family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers for their diligence and right action.



Det. Sgt. Steve Schlicht on patrol in the aftermath of Katrina, Gulfport, Mississippi.
Photo by Det. Duane Merrill.

ON THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 4, at the end of a tiring night of service, I found myself in the operations building watching the only television channel we were able to receive at the time. At the end of a segment on religious faith along the coast, broadcast by Mike Von Fremd from a gutted out church about a block away from me, co-host Bill Weir made the claim that there are “no atheists in foxholes or hurricane zones.” After hearing such an uninformed and rather tiresome adage once again emerge in the midst of a human tragedy, I walked the short distance across the rubble and made my concerns known to the ABC staff there and left my card with a female member of the crew, stating my request for consideration, retraction, and apology from Mr. Weir. I also had a short discussion with a photographer regarding my Humanist views as a member of the American Humanist Association and the fact that, even without a belief in a supernatural deity, I hold to a strong moral and ethical philosophy that is derived from human need and

interest as tested by experience—even under dire and despairing circumstances. The people assured me they would make Weir aware of my concerns. When power and Internet services were later restored I would even make a concerted effort to take part in an online e-mail campaign to seek amends for the misinformed statement. It would be to his credit that, two weeks later, Bill Weir would issue a sincere correction regarding his erroneous statement about atheists.

In what little off time I had, I worked with Humanist friends to begin supporting a grassroots emergency aid disbursement of resources and supplies to the most devastated areas of need, bypassing the red tape found elsewhere. We would deliver what we could to those who had no way of getting to distribution centers.

Moreover, very early on, many atheists and Humanists contributed to the aid and recovery effort for our coastal community. A Humanist couple from Alabama contacted me and made the trip into Gulfport with a trailer heaped with essential cleaning supplies purchased by money donated by other caring atheists and Humanists. In the coming days I would continue to make online contact with individual atheist friends as well as groups such as the Atheist Community of Austin, the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, the Internet Infidels of the Secular Web, the Humanist Society of Scotland, American Atheists, and the American Humanist Association. These good people were so encouraging and very much appreciated during this turbulent time. We can't thank them enough for their care and concern for us.

Of course the story doesn't end here and, as I write this personal chronicle of events, it has only been a month since Katrina slammed ashore. There is still much to do. But our strong participatory Humanism will get us there. I'm convinced of this because it has been tested by experience and expressed so compassionately in real human terms. Though Hurricane Katrina was a force of nature rarely seen, humanity is an even more powerful force of nature when led by unconditional love and care in the midst of devastation and horror—and we will endure for the greater good. Where there is breath, there is always hope. ☐

Steve Schlicht is a fifteen-year law enforcement veteran working as a detective sergeant in the city of Gulfport, Mississippi. He is part of a small group of Humanists from within the affected areas who are bringing comfort to those traumatized by the recent hurricanes.

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