

Reflections of "The Flood": Will the Rain Never End?

J Eastham

Citation

J Eastham. *Reflections of "The Flood": Will the Rain Never End?*. The Internet Journal of Healthcare Administration. 2001 Volume 2 Number 1.

Abstract

Figure 1



"Oh What A Night It Was. It Really Was." Lyrics from a song of many years gone by. Lyrics which some how stayed buried in the back of my mind waiting to be summoned out to help me begin to describe my thoughts of "The Flood."

Tuesday evening, I wonder if the rains will ever end. Tuesday night, I drive through alarmingly high water. I feel uncomfortable, but manage to drive to a "high spot" and

wait for the water to recede. I arrive home around midnight.

Thursday morning, the water is back. I spend thirty minutes on a freeway entrance ramp. I pull to the side of the road to let the traffic burden ease and the water recede. Six hours later, I arrive at work. That afternoon, I get Mother discharged from the hospital and safely tucked away in a picturesque assisting living facility on the banks of Brays Bayou. If only Daddy could join her.

Friday night, I'm surprised that my travel time home is only one hour.

It's been a long week.

A Night to Remember

My Friday night of rest is abruptly interrupted by a 1:00 a.m. telephone call telling me the menacing rains are back and flooding the Texas Medical Center. All power is lost at my hospital and soon we call an internal disaster code. I spend the rest of the morning on the telephone. A feeling of helplessness haunts me, knowing that I am physically cut off from what is now the Island of the Texas Medical Center. The floodwaters have completely surrounded our world famous place of healing.

Shortly after daybreak, Life Flight helicopter comes to the rescue, as it has done everyday for the last twenty-five years. This time, its mission is simply to deliver me safely to my hospital.

Figure 2



On the flight in, two worries consume my thoughts. First, my mother's safety. The overflowing Brays Bayou is trying hard to carry the water away from my hospital, and also away from the one story home where I deposited my mother less than two days ago. Several calls to the staff keep me reassured through the night. My other worry is about the nine laboratory technologists, whom I have been told are stranded in the now-submerged hospital basement.

What I found was a night to remember.

Mother is okay. Some forward thinking engineers had provided a very large retention pond in front of her new home, which served its purpose bravely and dutifully. The floodwaters stopped several feet from her front door.

The nine lab technologists are okay. I asked them over and over "are you sure everyone is out?" "Yes, we are sure." I choke back tears at the thought of what could have happened.

Muddy, murky, unwanted water has invaded our place of healing. Our place of trust and caring and love. A place where miracles occur daily.

Oh, how I wanted to capture it all in time with the camera and extra film I had carefully packed. Can't stop for that! We are a hospital in crisis. Every patient, every worker and every volunteer is looking for leadership. Every second counts. Today, time is not our friend.

Time to Take Action

"James is on his way in."

"Hold steady until he gets here."

"He'll let us know what he wants to do."

I'm reminded of a quote from Robert Kennedy, "To know, to feel, the burden of responsibility."

I quickly climb the stairs to reassure a nurse who is captive to a darkened, inoperative elevator. My reassurance seems superficial, as she is much calmer than I know I would be in the same circumstances. Then I proceed to our new patient tower which I had left only a few hours earlier when she stood majestically and gracefully as she has for the past two years. This morning she stands violated in 32 feet of water. The situation is severe. And it's getting worse, not better.

What are our choices? I'm advised to begin transferring patients as soon as possible. Time to take action:

LET'S TRANSFER. -Transfer is a word carefully chosen over the harsher term "evacuate" which could evoke excitement or panic, a condition to be carefully avoided.

Heroes - Every One of Them!

You should have seen them. In my 30 years of hospital management, which has included its share of excitement and crises, I have never seen so many people busily helping so many people. And in such an orderly, responsible and caring manner. Surely God's hand was at work!

The plan was simple: Get all the patients out of the hospital in a safe and orderly manner. Discharge home all we can. Transfer the rest to another hospital with appropriate nursing and physician care.

You should have seen them. Doctors, nurses, therapists, secretaries, managers, family members, neighbors, former employees. All for one. One for all. No one needed to be told to do his or her job. Or how to do it. Follow the plan and do what you would normally do. Or do what you think is best in this situation. Permission to do one's job wasn't needed. Clear and frequent communication was a must.

And follow the plan they did! Stretcher after stretcher flowed out of the hospital. Armbands were checked and doubled-checked and checked again.

Careful on the stairs. We mustn't fall. Or even stumble. And no one did.

Twice I climb the five flights of stairs to check on Daddy. He is quiet. Resting peacefully. He seems barely conscious. Seeing him like this for the past two weeks, I wonder if he will ever move or speak again. On my third trip up the stairs I discover Daddy has been carried down the stairs and on to

safety. I say a silent prayer.

Meanwhile, the workers carry on. I see many of the same faces that I see each day. I have often called these people "everyday heroes." I watch them saving lives, as they do every day. Today the circumstances differ. Today I see these people as "extraordinary heroes." They work on and on tirelessly. Endlessly. Caring for our patients. Patients who need us. Patients who trust us.

Heroes-every one of them.

We're Back

The rain stopped and the sun resumed its rightful place, joyously shining as though nothing happened. Our patients have been successfully transferred. No one hurt. No one injured. And no one stumbled in the stairs.

The cleanup starts. Commercial water pumps churn on for

four straight days. It's much worse than we thought. Our healing place, our sanctuary, is violated. Brought to her knees.

How will we recover?

Will we ever recover?

But our heroes work on. They never let up. On and on they work. Against all odds. Thirty-eight days later our healing place is once again standing tall. Tall and proud. "WE'RE BACK!", we shout.

New patients come in. Patients who need us. Patients who trust us. Our healing place is back and so are our heroes, working on as they normally do.

I pause and think back. "Oh what a night it was. It really was."

References

Author Information

James E. Eastham

CEO, Administration Memorial Hermann Hospital , Memorial Hermann Healthcare System