Opinion
EarthBeat



Red-striped sweater, between railroad tracks and the banks of Swannanoa River, near Biltmore Village, Dec. 11, 2024 (Darlene O'Dell)

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Asheville, N.C. — December 24, 2024

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On the banks of the Swannanoa River, dust twirls in the cold wind like snow in a Christmas special. Even so, I'm hesitant to leave my parked car, knowing that this air in the wake of Hurricane Helene is filled with bacteria and industrial products like isopropyltoluene and trimethylbenzene.

This holiday season arrives in Asheville three months since the devastating storm Helene hit the Southeast. Here in western North Carolina, we experienced massive flooding, intense winds and more than 1,000 mudslides. Helene's fury resulted in at least 225 deaths, with nearly half occurring in North Carolina, and 43 of those fatalities in Buncombe County, which includes Asheville.

The Swannanoa River runs from the eastern part of the county west into Biltmore Village where it flows into the French Broad, one of the oldest rivers in the world. Flooding from Helene devastated the village.



Debris in Swannanoa River, Biltmore Village, Dec. 11, 2024 (Darlene O'Dell)

The storm made landfall in Florida Sept. 26 as a Category 4 storm and moved quickly through Georgia, Tennessee and the Carolinas, crossing the Asheville area on Sept. 27.

During those first few days following the storm, my neighbors and I gathered outside, not entirely aware of the extent of regional damage but hoping one of us had somehow found answers to basic questions: Where were the power trucks? Is every highway out of town closed?

We were all, though, without power, water and cell service. The grocery stores and gas stations were dark, or gutted. Every few minutes, we could hear the piercing sirens from emergency vehicles, but between those alarms an incongruous and uneasy silence hovered in the air.




Restaurant interior, next to Swannanoa River, Biltmore Village, Dec. 11, 2024 (Darlene O'Dell)

Three months have passed, and the Christmas season is here. I am wondering what it means to celebrate in a time of tragedy, at a time when so many have lost so much.



Volkswagen and art, on banks of Swannanoa River, near Biltmore Village, Dec. 13, 2024 (Darlene O'Dell)

I recently drove up on two overturned railroad tanks beside the Swannanoa. I had been distracted by the demands of the day, and, out of habit, had taken a road I traveled daily before the storm, forgetting in the moment that the road was closed where the bridge had washed out.



Railroad tankers and debris, corner of Swannanoa River Road and Caribou Road, Dec. 6, 2024 (Darlene O'Dell)

Driving down the hill for the first time since the storm, I saw the concrete barriers placed at the bridge. The tankers lay to my right, but also surrounding me were mounds of debris, shredded pieces of plastic covering trees on the riverbank, piles of uncoiled wire weaving in and out of snapped two-by-fours. It was a broken and twisted landscape, yet disturbingly empty where buildings had once stood.

Over the next few days, I visited the Swannanoa in places where it was accessible. What I realize now is that, yes, upturned railroad cars, tractor trailers that remain half buried in the river, and skeleton-like buildings are all shocking examples of the storm's fury, but also shattering are the smaller reminders of individuals who suffered the storm — their clothing, their toys, the doors they once opened to their homes.



Plaid scarf, on banks of Swannanoa River, near Biltmore Village, Dec. 13, 2024 (Darlene O'Dell)

How do we live with a sense of hope and peace when the mind is trapped in a state of disbelief? When a world lying in solemn stillness carries grim significance?




Yellow truck on banks of Swannanoa River, Swannanoa River Road, approximately 3 miles east of Biltmore Village, Dec. 13, 2024 (Darlene O'Dell)

When people who have lost homes, businesses, and a sense of safety are heard making statements like, "I was one of the lucky ones"? What does Christmas say to us in these times? What does it say to those who lost loved ones?

Maybe some years we must allow others to hold the joy of the season, even as they embrace those attempting to conceal expressions of unrelenting shock.



Child's toy race car, on banks of Swannanoa River, Biltmore Village, Dec. 11, 2024 (Darlene O'Dell)

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