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Sandy invites us into solidarity with the world's poorest

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins
Hurricane Sandy

"It's like a war zone."

I've heard this statement many times as I've walked the storm-damaged streets around my home in the weeks after Superstorm Sandy made landfall. Every time I heard it, I would nod politely and say a silent prayer of gratitude that, in fact, it isn't a war zone.

I haven't been to a war zone, but I think have watched enough PBS and read enough of *The New York Times* to get a sense of the sufferings that characterizes one: widespread destruction and debris, a scarcity of water and food, a critical need for basic supplies and medical assistance, great numbers of displaced people or refugees.

It's a scenario that certainly seems to mirror my experience and, to a much more severe degree, the experiences of many of my neighbors.

For the first seven days after the storm, there was no power, water, gas, sewer, sanitation or U.S. mail service. Cell service, including text messaging and Internet, were unavailable. Long Beach, where I live, was truly an island unto itself. Crossing the bridge meant surrendering communication with anyone off the island.

Our bus depot was converted into a makeshift medical triage center; the baseball field became the site of a federally staffed emergency room. Since rail service was suspended indefinitely, our railroad waiting room became a warming station. Hundreds of port-a-potties lined the perimeter of the park and sit on street corners.

The town square, where we usually gather for a biweekly farmers market, became the National Guard's distribution center for water and prepackaged meals, and the ice rink now holds donated clothes and blankets.

Humvees filled with military policemen patrolled the streets for looters. Black Hawk military choppers flew low along the shore.

It felt like a war zone. But it wasn't. And I have tried to bear that in mind even as I watched tragedy, suffering and loss around me for the last four weeks.

Because, though there were fits of despair and hopelessness, in reality, most of us could be confident that things will get better eventually. For many of us, life could get back to near normal within a matter of weeks or months. For others, there is a heartbreaking cleanup and the arduous, long-term task of rebuilding.

For most storm victims, resources moved in within a few, very hard days: food, water, clothes, cadres of volunteers, buses to warm and well-stocked shelters, a vigilant police force, a stable government, supportive elected officials and, of course, a strong, communal spirit of generosity.

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And by Thanksgiving week, some businesses began to reopen, power was almost fully restored to the island, and debris, stranded cars and port-a-potties began to disappear. I could not help but acknowledge the fact that, though we were in crisis, we were also remarkably blessed.

The college professor who taught me Catholic social justice doctrine often reminded us that even the poorest person in the U.S. is rich by global poverty standards. Never had I seen that truth so clearly until after Sandy, when I realized that our post-storm conditions offered us a glimpse into the deprivation and destruction that hundreds of millions of the world's poor live with daily.

Yes, for 10 days we had no water, and even when the faucets began to flow again, the water was not potable for four days. But, according to the World Health Organization, more than 1 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water.

And while the port-a-potties were unsightly and unpleasant to use, the WHO also reports that 2.5 billion people -- that's more than a third of the world's population -- lack access to an adequate latrine.

Piles of debris still line the streets, but gradually, they are being carted off to transfer stations. According to the United Nations, almost one in six human beings live in slums, many of which resemble the heaps of debris that line our streets.

While tens of thousands of people in the tri-state area were displaced for weeks almost three years after the devastating earthquake that displaced 1 million Haitians, 370,000 people still live in tents in that country without electricity and with little protection against the violence that rages in these encampments.

Perhaps we must be grateful most of all that the suffering we have endured came from an act of nature and not at the hands of human violence.

During the peak of the storm the night of Oct. 29, we continually saw sudden bursts of light in the sky.

What we thought was lightning we later learned was the explosion of transformers that sat atop nearby power lines. As I have watched the scenes of missiles being launched over Israel and Gaza, I imagine how much more terrifying those streaks of light in the sky are for children and families who are huddled in shelters, fearing destruction and harm even more terrifying than what comes from winds and flood.

Every day in the news, there is another troubling story about the 2 million Syrians who have become refugees. The latest report from Save the Children warns that 200,000 Syrian children are at risk from freezing temperatures and a lack of adequate shelter, clothing and bedding. Here in Long Beach, there are so many clothing donations that those seeking to donate had to be turned away one week after the storm.

Many of us have experienced over the last month life the way so many human beings around the globe experience daily. Some folks were hit harder than others; some will be able to recover more quickly than others. But for most of us, the suffering, the deprivation, the displacement was or will be temporary.

I say all of this not to minimize the suffering of those in my community. The loss of home is a profound trauma, and days, if not weeks, without heat, water or sewer is more than enough hardship for any person. I write this with the hope that this experience might heighten our awareness of the suffering not only of our neighbors, but of the countless, unnamed women, men and children who suffer the effects of poverty and war throughout our world.

My partner's colleague at a homeless shelter in Staten Island suffered severe flooding in his basement. He has worked with the homeless population for almost two decades. Suddenly he found himself displaced, carrying two bags of his personal property to temporary shelters. Although he has served thousands of homeless clients, he told us it took this crisis for him to truly understand the experience of the clients he serves each day.

My hope is that as we continue to recover, we all will pause to take the long view and let this be an opportunity to expand our empathy for those who suffer daily in the circumstances in which we have found ourselves temporarily.

As we rebuild our homes and restore our lives, perhaps we will recognize this experience as an invitation into a deeper solidarity with those who may never have access to clean water, with the families who will be displaced for the better part of their lives, and with those innocent victims who truly live in war zones.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA).]

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