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Make This Thanksgiving a Day to Heal

By Daphne Larkin



Members of the library's fall memoir writing class that was canceled due to Hurricane Helene gathered to discuss the stories they want to write in the spring with instructor Daphne Larkin (center, holding book).

Thanksgiving this year will feel different. As we mop up from Hurricane Helene and put our lives back in order, many of us still feel overwhelmed, rattled and unsettled. After all, not so long ago we experienced life-threatening disruptions, including days without access to power, water, food, gas, cash, phone, internet, WiFi, and loved ones.

With our lives and community traumatized by the hurricane's thrashing, no wonder it remains on our minds. Even now, weeks later, everywhere I go I hear people telling their hurricane stories – at the drug store, grocery store, gas station, bank, library, and at community, church and social events. It feels like a great communal unburdening is underway, a healing which you can continue at your Thanksgiving dinner table. But there's a small catch. To get a healing megadose, studies have shown you have to write your story and then read it to others. In this way, you, your family and friends process your story together and the healing is complete.

The concept of healing from a traumatic event by writing about it was documented in the late Eighties by James Pennebaker, a social psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin. In studies Pennebaker conducted, he found writing a story that expresses your feelings about an event can be restorative. This is because as you make sense of what happened, you transform from the victim to something much more powerful – the narrator.

At our Thanksgiving table this year, I'm going to tell the story of my great grandparents' Thanksgiving in 1904 after a hurricane tore through the Florida's Ten Thousand Islands where they'd homesteaded. Based on my grandmother's childhood diary recalling her family's life on Fakahatchee Island, my story will take us right to their Thanksgiving table.

I see my eight-year-old grandmother, her five siblings and their parents joyfully embracing the end of their four-year stay living off the land and the sea. Their table is laden with wild turkey, duck or quail, fresh snapper and sheep's head, oysters collected that morning, wild butter beans, cabbage palmettos and the island's plentiful bananas. While they had no power, no indoor plumbing, and no easy or quick contact with the outside world, this enterprising young family, with six more children to come in the next few years, had everything because they had each other. And my grandmother had something else. She had a story of her family's great adventure in the Ten Thousand Islands that she would live to tell all of her life.

Which takes us back to Hurricane Helene. While the hurricane brought devastation, it also left us with a deeply imprinted experience. In his book "Divine Tempest: The Hurricane as a Psychic Phenomenon," Jungian analyst David E. Schoen writes that hurricanes are "mysterious, dangerous, fascinating, exciting, frightening, unpredictable, awesome, powerful, special, fun, deathly destructive and uncontrollable." Perhaps for all of these reasons Hurricane Helene gave us stories to remember this Thanksgiving. Stories you may live to tell all of your life, too. Here are some suggestions to get you started on your story.

TELL WHAT HAPPENED

This is your story, so tell where you were, what you saw, what you experienced. Did a tree fall on your house? Was your driveway blocked by fallen debris? Did you run out of food, water, gas, power? Did family, friends or neighbors come to the rescue? Did you rescue them? How?

EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS

To reap the healing benefit of writing your story, you must express how you felt throughout the storm as well as afterward. Were you worried about family members you couldn't reach or who couldn't reach you? Was it scary? Were you afraid? How did you cope? Was cleaning up the mess afterward anxiety-producing?

EMBRACE THE DRAMA

Some of the best tales are about when things go wrong, when everyone adapts – or not. There can be some humor in dysfunction and mishap. Don't be afraid to embellish your story. Chose big verbs and adjectives!

PACE YOUR STORY

Give your story a clear beginning, middle and end. This was happening (beginning), something got in the way (middle/the hurricane), and all got resolved (end). Or, as William Shakespeare noted in the title of his 1623 play, "All's Well That Ends Well."

KEEP IT SHORT

Your goal is to promote healing while keeping your family interested in your tale. So, write no more than 500-750 words. That's about two-to-three double-spaced typed pages in 12-point Times New Roman.

This Thanksgiving, our willingness to put into words what happened to us, our family and our friends during Hurricane Helene and to be grateful for what we have, can change our days, even our lives. So, as we continue to rebuild, reflect, and reconnect, why not make this Thanksgiving dinner a healing one with your Hurricane Helene story for Thanksgiving Day?