

# UNDERCOVER SHAMAN

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My call of duty with the Red Cross following  
Hurricane Katrina

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## Part One: The call of Katrina

*'You are authorized to travel,' said the voice on my answering machine, and so began my days as a volunteer with the Red Cross in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.*

On Monday, August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast, the levees in New Orleans broke, and unforgettable mayhem ensued. Like so many, I was desperate to help.

As the gods would have it, the magnitude of the storm created a huge need, and there was a call through my credentialing organization that the Red Cross would waive its usual requirements if we mental health folks who were licensed would complete their application process and be willing to give a minimum of two weeks of time.

I feverishly completed my application over the Labor Day weekend, was able to



finally connect and fax the papers late Tuesday night. Forty-eight hours later I received a response.

Thursday night I came home to listen to a telephone message that said, "You are authorized to travel" and informed me I would be deployed to area 871. I was to call an 800-number to make travel arrangements; I was to call another 800-number at 3 p.m. the next day for a conference call. I was to leave immediately. The whole message seemed like a rattling string of digits; it was brief, brisk,

formal, and military-like. I played it over and over again to make sure I had accurately heard all the information.

The Friday afternoon conference call is chaotic, and the fear of the unknown is palpable. We are told to bring several copies of our professional license along with ID. We are told we were going to hardship areas and, therefore, need to bring toilet paper, soap, towels, rain gear, sleeping bag, bug spray, flashlight, snacks, enough clothes to last for two weeks as well as be able to carry it all. We are warned about mosquitoes, snakes, and unpotable water. We are told not to count on cell phone service or electricity. It is recommended that shots like tetanus and the like be up to date.

I shut down my practice for three weeks and fly to Montgomery, Alabama on

Monday, September 12, two weeks to the day since Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast.

I arrive in Montgomery with many other volunteers from all over the country. We are all excited, a bit nervous, and anxious to receive our assignments. That evening we are placed in area motels that house Red Cross volunteers (several to a room) as well as families of Katrina evacuees. I find great morning communion at the motel as Red Cross workers get their coffee and cereal right along with displaced moms, dads, and kids. We are all in it together.

People call out to us from their cars at stoplights in front of the motels and ask, "Y'all from New Orleans?" They honk their horns, wave, and shout what sound like blessings of "we're with y'all." It feels like we are all connected to one another in a more tangible way these days. The web of light is alive and thrumming.

On Day One we are taken to headquarters, which serves as a main staging area. It is an old, empty, massive K-mart building, where the Red Cross has created assorted "desks," such as mental health, nursing, transportation, mass care, supplies, health, orientation, staff shelter, etc. The parking lot is filled with hundreds of rental trucks that are constantly being filled (day and night) and sent out to assorted distribution sites. I complete orientation, fill out more forms, hang out at the mental health desk with my colleagues, and learn the fine art of "hurry up and wait." We are all eager to be assigned.

Every time a contingent is sent out from HQ, everyone in the building stops what they are doing, stands, applauds, hoots, hollers, and whistles best wishes to the outgoing gang. It is a connecting and encouraging moment that I happily experienced as we, a group of mental health workers and nurses, board buses to travel Interstate 10 to our assignment in Gulfport, Mississippi.

The chatter on the bus stops as we roll past billboards stripped clean and hanging at asymmetrical angles; boats overturned or resting on land; and a boat, eye-level with the highway, wedged up in tree branches. We see bridges damaged, trees sheared and bent, and buildings mangled. Even Interstate 10 is missing some pieces of roadway and the four-lane highway, in places, becomes two lanes. Normal things are out of place; the scenery is incongruent. I am reminded of paintings by René Magritte.

We pull off the highway and travel on a winding road until we reach the Biloxi-Gulfport Red Cross field headquarters, an old lodge surrounded by swampy grasses, a myriad of rental trucks, and a ring of port-a-potties. We have arrived.

## Part Two: The uncensored Katrina Volunteer

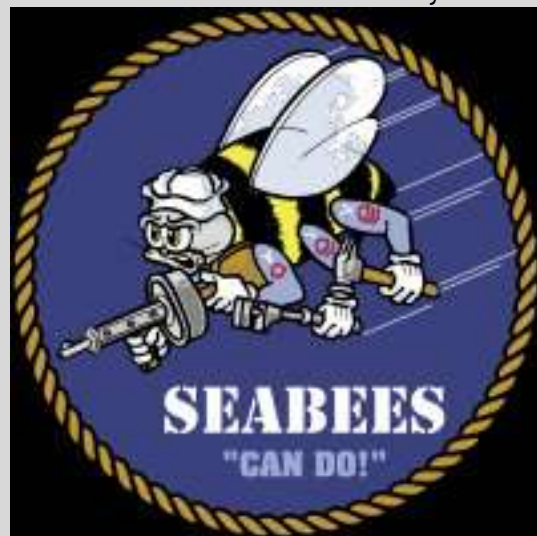
*The heat index outside is 112. Inside the shelter it is 10 degrees hotter. Volunteers willingly take off their glasses and clothes and directly hand them to evacuees; they empty their suitcases and open their wallets. They want to help in any possible way.*

It is 8 a.m. at HQ, and the mental health desk briefings are called to order in the parking lot. We shield our faces from the sun and swat away the bugs as we await our daily directives. My first assignment is sector 17, a neighborhood in Gulfport that has street after street of rubble, branches, tarps, twisted wreckage amidst still-standing houses. Power has been out for days, the weather is very hot and humid. Life is not normal: Schools are not open, many businesses are closed, the area hospital just re-opened. Curfews are in effect.

The local shelter has just been closed and we, my partner for the day and I, have a box truck filled with assorted supplies. We comb the neighborhoods distributing goods from the back of the truck and talking to people. We meet families that emerge out of rubble, happy to have diapers and any available food stuffs. We are flagged down by a disaster rescue squad boss looking for MREs (military meals ready to eat, complete with heating unit that is activated by a bit of water) for his 50 disaster workers who are running short of food and had been subsisting on Ramen noodles. We are resourceful and able to put our hands on a case that we happily deliver to the rescue squad.

At Day Two's briefing, there is a call for two volunteers to work the staff shelter at the Navy Seabee base. It is an intense situation that has turned sour. I raise my hand and it becomes my new home for the duration.

The Seabee Base is an enormous four-bay hangar that normally houses tanks and massive construction equipment. (The Seabees are the construction arm of the Navy.) Vehicles travel up and down the main concourse. The Red Cross is in the second bay; there are 600-plus Red Cross workers housed here, with approximately 50 to 100 people departing and arriving daily. In adjoining bays, there are FEMA workers, Job Corps kids, Nevada One Medical, U.S. Forestry Service, Scientologists wearing yellow "volunteer spiritual minister" T-shirts and offering free nightly massages, plus Marines, firefighters, and Native American smoke jumpers who are later deployed to Texas and California.



The main concourse of this hangar is spotted with white coolers filled with water, Gatorade, and ice. It is very, very hot in Mississippi. Evacuees stand in unshaded lines for countless hours, sometimes over countless days, for Red Cross or FEMA to complete paperwork so they can receive money. Daily, evacuees, nurses, and mental health workers in the lines keel over from heat exhaustion and dehydration, as do volunteers loading trucks, working the warehouses, and the like.

One day the heat index outside is 112. Inside the shelter it is 10 degrees hotter. There is concern about bacteria and illness, so FEMA installs a kind of air conditioning that blows some air into the entire facility and lowers the temps to 85ish. FEMA also brings in showers in trailers. There are outdoor wash stations, port-a-potties, and food catered by Braggs, the big name with fire crews.

My first 24 hours at the Seabee Base I visit two ER's, ride in a police car, and spend time with the head of security at the Navy base. Later, I escort an unstable volunteer back to her home on the East Coast, a trip that takes 24 hours. It is Day Three before I actually put my head down on my cot. There are nights of high drama, including young volunteers with drugs and alcohol, which are verboten in our quarters.

When the lights go out at 10 p.m., the darkness is punctuated by blue or orange flares anchored to the floor to denote aisles, outlining uneven flooring, and attached to the massive fans brought in to help circulate air. People are up and down all night long, going to the port-a-potties, unable to sleep, disturbed by noise, heat, and close quarters. There is constant movement in the dark. Even if your eyes are closed there are shadows walking across your lids. The flares and emergency lighting give the place an otherworld reality.

If you step outside, the area is brightly lit with enormous pole lights. There is the whir of the compressors. It feels like you have just stepped onto a soundstage for a "M\*A\*S\*H" episode with the tented tables and chairs that serve as a mess hall. There are those who cannot sleep. The air is filled with nervous energy, fatigue, and homesickness. Every night after lights out, I do "walkabouts" and connect with the insomniacs and wanderers.

I rarely leave the base. I am busy talking to people. There are volunteers who can't get out of their cots, some who drink and drug, some with night terrors, some who don't sleep, some who are unraveling. Many are men looking for redemption; they are shattered and broken. I help defuse and debrief; I help manage frustrations with the system. I offer solace and a safe haven.

There are a multitude of stories. Volunteers willing take off their glasses and clothes and directly hand them to evacuees; they empty their suitcases and open their wallets. They want to help in any possible way.

\* There are two women who drive a box truck with supplies. They meet 7-year-old Daniel on his red bicycle. Daniel leads the women through the depths of the bayou to many forgotten houses that need supplies, that last of which is his, where there are 15 people under one small roof.

\* Two volunteers are sent to an area called Diamondhead, where there were large homes on the water, some with individual hangars and runways. Almost everything was wiped out. They are directed to George's house, still standing and housing seven of his neighbors, one of whom George saw floating by in the storm; he threw her a rope that he had tied to a cooler, and saved her life. They needed food.

\* Todd and his partner encounter a woman and her daughter, who is wearing a filthy dress, says her shoes "have washed away," and sing-songs that the upcoming Monday is her birthday. The fellows pool their money and go to Wal-Mart at 8 a.m. (You have to go early or the shelves would be empty.) They buy an outfit, shoes, doll, and birthday cake. They return to the girl's yard, as that's what is left, and bedeck the birthday girl with her goodies. The girl is delighted; her mother sobs. Todd calls his wife that night and relates the day. Todd realizes that Monday was his wife's birthday as well and he had forgotten; Todd apologizes, and his wife tells him that he has given her the best birthday ever.

The days and nights are full; the days blur and melt into another. The work is a blessing. And it's not over. Now it is time to receive my shamanic assignments.

## Part Three: Undercover shaman post-Katrina

*The decomposing death smell is potent and more pungent; it's as if the sea breezes refused to dilute the reality of what had happened.*

The high heat, little sleep, constant awareness, the commingled energies of 600-plus disaster workers in a tight space, and the complete unusualness of this experience shift my perceptual reality. The hours melt and the days merge; I am in a prolonged trance state.

This altered state allows me to slip into my other identity as shaman. A shaman denotes someone who moves into a trance state and works with Spirit to find answers, create healing, or be an agent for change, all for the highest good. Shamanism is a divinely connected work that is predicated on intention and alignment with spiritual allies; it uses the imaginal realms to journey, understand energy dynamics, and reinstate balance. There are many ways to be shamanic, but all roads lead to wholeness.

In my case, it was the land and what the land held that called for my attention. The land holds memories, energies, and unfinished business. The closer we went to the coast line, the closer we were to areas where the air smells of death. It is the unforgettable stench of decomposing bodies. The scent stays with me, haunts me into remembering what has transpired on the land.

There are two points of geography that called to me and, later, followed me home: One was the downtown Biloxi-Gulfport casino area, sitting on the coast and secured by the National Guard with armed, manned posts at every intersection point. There are double columns of concertina wire that parallel the railroad tracks and the coast line. These enormous coils of wire keep intruders from entering the decimated areas.

Casinos have been shoved off their foundations. Street blocks are skewered into a mountain of giant pick-up sticks. The once-bustling metropolitan area is non-existent; it is merely rubble. It looks as if a bomb has exploded. There is no sound, no noise, everything is dead quiet. I witness the destruction, breathe in the death, and, silently, say prayers for the deceased.

Days later, we, my mental health colleague and I, are traveling on I-10 headed towards New Orleans; we intentionally pull off the Interstate at the Waveland exit. The main road into town is punctuated by seemingly abandoned cars. Actually, these cars once held families who had attempted to flee the force and onslaught of Katrina; cars that now serve as burial sites. As we drive into the town, the decomposing death



smell is potent and more pungent; it's as if the sea breezes refused to dilute the reality of what had happened.

There is the deadly quiet and the total destruction. There are foundation slabs, the remaining testimony to a once-standing house. Mattress pads are wrapped around tree limbs. There is the odd teddy bear bearing witness to what was once a family home. There are boards propped against trees and partial structures with boldly spray-painted red symbols by FEMA that indicate the dead found in the remains and status of the house. There is one lot, amidst slab, trees, and wreckage, where there is a black spray-painted piece of plywood, propped up facing that street that reads: "The Smith House --Bayberry Street -- We are ok." I cry when I read their sign.

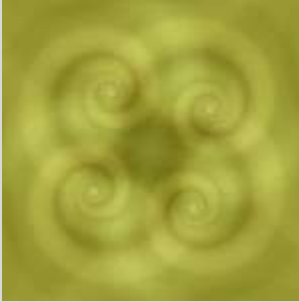
We drive through a neighborhood of once lovely homes, nestled by trees and situated in a scoop of coastline. Everything has been reduced to pieces of rubble; everything is twisted, broken, shattered, upside down, out of place, and out of context. There are no people. What once was, is no longer standing. It is like a Stephen King movie: surreal, grotesque, and eerie.

We drive onto a roadway that intersects beach and waterfront homes. There is a young man, looking more like a boy than man, sitting on an aluminum folding chair with a rifle, presumably loaded, across his lap and a sign lettered in orange that says "Beware, Keep Out." An orange-painted skull and crossbones accentuate his message.

Other than the young man guarding what was once a stately home amidst moss-draped trees and the National Guard clearing debris from the far end of the beach, I am alone. At my request, my colleague has dropped me off. I walk to a point on the deserted beach. I intend to do a ritual for the dead. I move into an altered state as my arms immediately lift up in invocation. I call in everyone who has died on the entire multi-state stretch of coastline. I call for any soul who is lost, in trouble, traumatized, or can't find the light. I say "Rest in peace, Rest in peace, Rest in peace" again and again, until I feel empty.

The force of this energy is such that I am knocked off my feet. I am told to repeat my actions. I do so again. I stand strong, raise my arms, and continue to say my litany of "Rest in peace" to all the souls. I say it over and over and over again, until, once more, I am knocked off my feet. I am told I am finished, but I was only finished for the day. There was more to come.

## Part Four: I talk to dead people



*Let's just say the disaster relief experience for a shaman is a bit different. A small parade of deceased Katrina victims walked across my path looking for assistance.*

I am a shaman, someone who works in tandem with Spirit towards an intended end, such as healing and insight. The work is accessed by a trance state and involves the use of the imaginal realms as well as an understanding of energy dynamics. Shaman is a broad term that covers many subspecialties, if you will; one of which is that of a “psychopomp.” A psychopomp is one who assists lost souls, often recently departed, towards the light. I serve as a psychopomp and act as a guide for lost souls and escort them across the bridge of this earthly dimension into the next world.

Here is my story:

Oftentimes, it begins with the pull chains on my bedside lamp. They start clacking together in the middle of the night. I have learned that this is a sign that someone wants my attention. So, it began for me.

It started on All Hallows' Eve, the evening of celebration of Samhain, the Celtic feast of the dead, which is the precursor to the Christian All Souls' Day and All Hallows' Day on November 1. In many cultures, this is considered a time between the seasons, a liminal time when the veil is thinnest between the living and the dead. So, it was for me, this daughter of the Celtic Isles.

I had returned home in an altered state, irrevocably changed. My internal settings had been stretched. My energy field was open. Over the days of thinned veils and sanctified times, a small parade of persons who were in need of shamanic assistance to help them cross over, presented themselves to me.



They were all lost souls who found me on the Waveland beach and needed assistance in finding the light. Here is who came to me, in the order they appeared:

\* There is Katie, a 5-year-old from Waveland, who is looking for her parents, especially her mom. Katie needs a guide. This is a *vertical* move. I take Katie up — up, up, up in a column of light and we come to an opening above, a portal, if you will, and from there we see the hand of her mom reaching for Katie. They connect and up

Katie goes.

\* Paul is a young man from the Louisiana coast, who is looking for his brother, Dave. I facilitate a *horizontal* connection as their hands grasp one another, and Paul moves on with his brother.

\* Dan was gambling in Biloxi-Gulfport when the storm hit. He is a middle-aged, married man who is terribly upset because he wasn't able to say good-bye to his wife, Vera and their three adult children, Danny, Bobby, and Ronnie. I facilitate a meeting in the inner realms wherein Dan says his heartfelt goodbyes to each of his family members.

\* Darryl is very fidgety and frightened; he is from the New Orleans area. His anxiety is palpable; he is afraid no one will be there for him. I call for one of the baskets they used for rescue in New Orleans. He gets calmer as we move in the basket towards an opening. Darryl finds his uncle and aunt, and his grandmother and grandfather waiting for him. He is able to move on now that he has found a connection. His relatives pull him into the next realm.

\* Joseph is a huge, huge man with rolls of flesh that make his head look smaller than it actually is. Joseph was in some sort of care facility in the New Orleans area, where he drowned. He is a tender, sweet man. I make several suggestions, but Joseph still thinks of himself as a person of huge bulk and feels he is forever stuck. Joseph finally accepts the idea of a flying carpet. We begin to travel. He wants to connect with his mother, Annette. We see her waving to us with a lace handkerchief. Joseph makes the connection with his mother and is able to make the transition into the light on his first attempt.

\* Clint, the farmer, is from the Louisiana coast. He is very upset about his cows that died in the storm; he feels responsible for them. I facilitate a goodbye for Clint to his cows and Clint is able to go forward.



Each of these soul transitions was full of emotion as the souls moved from grief, fear, and confusion into the light. Reminiscent of the song, "Amazing Grace," they were no longer lost; they had been found and were able to move forward.

Those days of psychopomp work were an honor and, indeed, filled with grace. I was blessed to be a part of their respective soul journeys as well as to be of service on the higher planes.

And so it was.

## End Note

My Red Cross service during Hurricane Katrina was life-changing for me. I thought I knew the world, but, of course, this experience opened my heart in ways that I had never imagined. Not only was my third eye expanded, my heart was, too.

I came home with parasites as well as my own version of PTSD. I would wake up at night thinking I was still sleeping in the equipment bays of the Seabee Base. I would see the various runways of light and hear the industrial fans. Happily, those nocturnal experiences lasted for a short time.

My family told me I was different; my clients told me I was different. And I was – in ways that I still cannot articulate.

One of my clients who had served in the military called me and said, “Tell me how it was.” And I told him that I would never forget the smell – the smell of decomposing bodies. It is permanently encoded in my brain. He knew that smell, too. It was an unexpected take-away from my experience.

I continued some therapeutic conversations with a few people; one in particular was the police officer, who called me shortly after I returned home to tell me of an experience at a gas station in the Biloxi-Gulfport area. When he pulled in to the station he saw a mom with her kids in a beat-up van. The mom was screaming for help; she was hysterical. People around her were frozen with fear. No one wanted to make a move as a wire, presumably live, had fallen on the roof of her car. The police officer saw this and immediately bolted out of his car. He found an implement and climbed atop the woman’s car roof and safely dislodged the wire. People called him a hero. For him, it was salvation. He did something good and right.

Doing something good and right certainly makes you hum all over. It is the best of feel-good feelings. We are the ones who become blessed.

When I came home, I formally joined the Red Cross and have had the great benefit to be of service with the disaster mental health team on other deployments. It is a huge honor to bear witness and connect at an intimate level with my fellow human beings during such primal times.

It’s funny how something so awful and devastating can open you up in profound ways. This makes me think of a verse from Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem,” which was shared with me recently by a friend during Hurricane Sandy. It’s the perfect ending to this piece.

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There's a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.

## About the Author

Adele Ryan McDowell, Ph.D., is a psychologist and writer who came to her current place in life through the frequent and not-so-subtle prodding of the gods. She likes looking at life through the big view finder and is a perpetual student who believes in the power of an open heart, and a good laugh.

Dr. McDowell is a psychotherapist with more than 30 years' experience; a teacher of meditation, intuition development, and psychospiritual issues; an international workshop facilitator; and energy healer. Adele was the director of outpatient treatment at Liberation Clinic, a substance abuse clinic in Stamford, CT. She was founder/director of The Greenheart Center, a holistic, psychotherapeutic, and psycho-educational center in Stamford, Connecticut; creator of Faithwalk™, A Psychospiritual Approach to Transformation; and founder/director of the Institute for the Study of Symbolic and Shamanic Energies.

Adele's work focuses on helping clients find hope and balance in the face of crisis, trauma, and grief. She has worked with suicide, domestic violence, and sexual assault crisis hotlines, survivors of Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, the Joplin Tornado, clients struggling with addiction as well as those moving through profound life changes such as grief and health challenges. Adele's work integrates psychology with spirituality to help clients move through crises and restore balance by accessing core soul issues and to discover, and find comfort in, their authentic selves.

Adele is the author of the Amazon best-selling *Balancing Act: Reflections, Meditations, and Coping Strategies for Today's Fast-Paced Whirl*. Adele is a contributing author to the best-selling Shift Awareness anthologies, *2012: Creating Your Own Shift* and *The Sacred Shift: Co-creating Your Future in a New Renaissance* as well as *Love and Oneness*, an Abundance in Manifesting anthology. Adele's next book is *Making Peace with Suicide*.

Adele -- a Texan by birth, upbringing, and pioneering spirit -- lives in Connecticut where you will often find her driving along the highways and byways, singing loudly in her car.

You can learn more about Adele, her writing, and her thinking at [www.adeleryanmcdowell.com](http://www.adeleryanmcdowell.com).

These essays were originally published on  
UPI's religionandspirituality.com  
as part of my column, "wavelength."

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