
Humility, Humanity and Humidity: A Unitarian Universalist's Weekend in Puerto Rico Following Hurricane Maria

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I recently visited Puerto Rico, representing the North Universalist Chapel Society. After the second hurricane hit Puerto Rico I witnessed, both through the media and through family and friends who live on the island, the devastation and crisis that subsequently unfolded, I felt helpless. My boyfriend who is of Puerto Rican descent, said he was going to go to PR to check on his family and their family home I realized that I too might be able to go and lend assistance where I could. Due to the extreme crisis early on we were not able to leave as soon as we wished, but made a plan to travel at the end of October.

The idea was just a short visit to see first hand what is going on, check on the family and make some repairs to the family home. I hoped to speak to local people and get a feel for what they are going through and maybe begin to understand how we as a church community and community-at-large, might begin to help in a way that is tangible.

I left out of JFK airport in the early hours of Thursday October 26th. While the flight had a number of people traveling to Puerto Rico, it was not full. I landed around 4pm in San Juan, Puerto Rico. From the air already signs of the devastation were apparent. I saw a cluster of homes near the ocean with roofs that were covered in blue tarp. The area looked very brown from the sky. Including the ocean.

I landed and as I exited the aircraft I could already feel the heat wash over me. I got my bags and met up with my boyfriends brother. He lives in the family home in a town called Humacao. A small town about 45 minutes to an hour east of San Juan. He also works for American Airlines in the airport at San Juan. One thing I know from what he has told us, is that American Airlines has treated their employees well through these storms. He was put up in the airport hotel during both big Hurricanes (Irma and Maria) and was able to stay in the hotel for a month following Maria. The company arranged generators, wet/dry vacuums and chainsaws for their employees and make sure they are getting regular cases of water and food.

A plot twist that I was not anticipating but was completely thrilled by was that I found out about a week before we left for Puerto Rico, that my dad, who lives in South Africa and is an Insurance Claims Adjuster, was being sent to Puerto Rico too to help assess the damage. He landed on the Wednesday into San Juan and we arrived on the Thursday. This trip aligning very closely to the one year anniversary of my moms death. I have not seen my dad in almost a year. I had travelled to South Africa to be with my family and to say goodbye to my mom last November. Upon landing, I went straight to the hotel my dad was staying at to see him. I were shocked to find that while he was staying in a 4-star hotel, the lobby had generator power but the rooms had nothing. No carpets, no electricity, no lights, no air conditioner, no fans, no hot water. Most of the time the elevator didn't work either so my dad had to walk the 8 floors to and from his room. And let me tell you - it was HOT!! Over 90 degrees with 98% humidity. To sleep in that heat is near impossible. The front desk assistant told me that the hotel was at 75% occupancy all of whom are relief workers.

Once I found my dad, we walked little around San Juan. I was struck already by the devastation everywhere. There is no electricity so the traffic lights are not working. There was a lot of traffic backed up. A lot of police cars, police directing traffic and a lot of accidents. Many

buildings boarded up, broken buildings, roofs dismantled, rubble everywhere. Palm trees stripped bare or broken. Did I mention it was hot?

We found a little restaurant open and enjoyed a good meal together. I had my first taste of Tostones (fried plantains) - Yum. We then dropped my dad off at his hotel and drove the hour to Humacao. Traffic was backed up, there seemed to be little understanding of the rules of the road and many, many potholes. Driving out of San Juan you could see it getting gradually darker as less and less places had electricity or generators. Then spans of darkness as far as the eye could see. A little patch of a couple lights here and there and we would guess if it was a little spot of electricity or a lucky few with generators. We welcomed the cool of the cars air conditioner.

At one point in the trip to Humacao I noticed that a number of cars had pulled over onto the emergency breakdown lane of the highway. I learned that this was a spot where people could get cell signal - so people just pulled over onto the side of the road to be able to communicate. I would come to see this everywhere we went and I also realized how precious those little pockets of communication space were. I too used those little spots to be able to check in and make sure my children were ok or to shoot off a quick text to wish them luck in the field hockey game I was missing or to make sure they were safe and had a good time at the school dance. One morning the regular spots where I could communicate was not working and I have not felt fear and frustration like that before. I realized that a time might come when I could not be in touch with my children, but when it happened I became so anxious and frustrated. I knew my children were safe and were with kind loving friends in a safe town... but it made me realize what the Puerto Rican families were dealing with not being able to communicate with their loved ones both during and after the storm hit.

One story I heard was of an Airport employee who told me that during the hurricane he was in the airport hotel. His girlfriend stayed at her house in Humacao to care for her animals. He received a text from her in the middle of the night saying that she couldn't bare the noise anymore and then communication went dead. He didn't hear from her again for 3 days. She is an athlete and after losing communication and being worried for her elderly father in San Juan, rode her bike through the storm ravaged roads for approximately 40 miles to make sure he was ok. Eventually on day 4 after the storm, they were able to be in touch and know each other was safe. I just can't imagine the stress of not knowing if your loved ones are safe or not and not being able to contact them or get to them. It is heartbreaking.

I finally arrived at the house in Humacao. Outside the house was still hot, but it was about 15 degrees cooler than it was inside. The house itself had not suffered too much damage but had been filled with about a foot of water, so much of the wooden pieces such as doors and cabinets are now ruined and molding. The air in the house is thick and hot. I began to just sweat profusely. My makeup running down my face. My boyfriend said that I had a look of shock on my face and just kept repeating "It is so hot" "it is so hot" "can we go outside?". Outside was cooler but also not particularly safe due to looters roaming the streets and also the bugs are terrible. Mosquitos and the majes are out in full force and their bites are excruciating. My legs and arms swelled from the bites and was incredibly itchy.

At the house, we were one of the lucky ones with a generator. This allowed for the refrigerator to run a few hours a day to keep water cool and a few other necessities and to run a small light and a fan in each of the bedrooms. There was running water although it was cold, which I didn't mind at all. The cold water a relief against the heat. Exhausted from the journey and heat, I actually managed to sleep pretty well!

On Friday I spent the day with my dad. He moved out of his hotel and into the house that his company is working out of. There is no electricity but a generator is running to keep the house

operating as best it can. No air conditioning but the bedrooms do have fans at least. While we are at the house, I am introduced to many loss adjusters from all over the world who have come to help out. These adjusters are referred to as "Catastrophe Adjusters". The last job many of them were on, including my dad, was in Australia earlier in the year after a cyclone ripped through an area near Brisbane. Upon meeting they briefly exchange pleasantries and discuss the various levels of discomfort each have had to endure, but it is in a nonchalant way with one of the guys following the conversation with "well that's why we are Catastrophe Adjusters" and they are off again talking business and complaining about the complexities of dealing with insurance companies.

I met many adjusters from all over the world, Argentina, Spain, Chile, Australia, UK, South Africa, Brazil and many more arriving daily. One gentleman I spoke too was dealing with the islands water supply. This included all the storm drains and dams and such. A huge job that sent him all over the island. Another adjuster was visibly frustrated at the run around he was getting from the insurance company he was dealing with - a claim that should easily be paid out to the client, but the insurance company giving the adjuster and the client the run around and creating unnecessary red tape.

While my dad is in Puerto Rico his focus will be on the medical community and in particular the dental practices. On Thursday, my dads first day of going out on claims, he had been frustrated as he was scheduled to go on 4 claims and all 4 claims were fruitless as no one was present to talk to him at each of the businesses. It was difficult for my dad to drive firstly as he is used to driving on the left hand side of the road, but then throw in the fact there are no traffic lights, there is lots of traffic jams and everything is in turmoil... he managed to get into 5 accidents in one day! Luckily nothing too terrible, but enough to rattle his nerves a little and cause some damage to the rental car. Needless to say, my nerves driving with him were rattled too and it reminded me of when my dad taught me to drive. I over revved the engine and he got so angry with me... I reminded him of this as he almost took out my door going through a narrow street.

On Friday I headed out with him on two claims. It was interesting to see on the door to the medical center all the notices from the doctors, handwritten giving emergency numbers or explaining that they are closed. One of the dentists explained his frustrations with the medical center not having electricity yet and feeling that this delay was all political. He said that in the center there were doctors performing surgeries and cancer patients getting chemo and now with no electricity - nothing was happening. He and his colleagues in the office building had written a letter to the government explaining their need to get electricity back. The next dentist we visited worked on children and people with special needs. The building they rented from had a generator that allowed them to work, but the power was sporadic and phone systems were not reliable. They also explained how water kept flowing out of the walls.

While driving I noticed that the mall parking lot was full. My boyfriend called me later to tell me he had gone to the Kmart to look for batteries and found that they had set up couches and chairs with fans and cell phone charging stations with two big tv screens playing movies for people to sit and relax and enjoy some cool air.

Back at the office house of my dads, I helped him set up his bed with fresh sheets and unpack his bag. I got to speaking to the lady who was coordinating the loss adjusters schedules. Her name is Stephanie, must be in her early 20's. Stephanie is one of the only Puerto Rican's that are on the loss adjusting team that my dad is working with. Stephanie is a student and her job was as a referee for soccer games, both in schools and in league soccer. After the Hurricane she didn't have a job anymore as there were no longer soccer games, so she had applied for this job and was finding it enjoyable, yet pretty demanding. Stephanie lives in San Juan on the third floor and top floor of an apartment building. She explained that during the storm the noise

and pressure was so intense she and her boyfriend hid in the closet. Water water was rushing in from the roof and reached their knees while they hid in the closet afraid for their lives.

On Saturday my dad had more work to do and reports to type out, so I stayed in Humacao with my boyfriend and his brother. They had rigged up box fans in the house to try to circulate the air and it seemed to help. We spent most of the morning on the roof, cleaning out the drains and getting rid of debris that was clogging things up. We removed the broken water logged air conditioning units and found a number of spots on the roof where flying debris had caused holes in the roofing that was leading to leaks inside. We worked on removing water from these holes and sealing them up.

Lunch time came and we took a drive to cool down and we found a little shack of a place that served beers and empanadas. There was some live music happening and the atmosphere was just fantastic. The people so happy to see one another, enjoy some good food and music while all around them was devastation. My boyfriends brother said "this is why I stay!" and I could see why. The true spirit of the people who had lost so much.

After lunch we drove south a little to see the area where the eye passed through - ground zero. It become apparent that no matter where you looked there was just damage and destruction everywhere. It actually hurts the eyes after a while. Its hard for the brain to keep processing the images it sees. We parked at a spot where there was a beach and watched a oil barge come in to shore. The oil is brought to run the electricity for the whole island. I walked along the beach that was filled with downed trees and debris and touched my toes into the warm water. I saw a washed up stuffed animal that must have once belonged to a child. My heart broke.

We needed to buy an extension cord to help with the box fan's that had been strategically placed around the house, but it was difficult find a store that was open and that sold extension cords. We finally found a shop that was boarded up, but with a small opening to enter. There was an armed guard at the door. Once you got to the door, you told the guard what you are looking for and then one of the store employees walked around the very dark store with a flash light and found your item. The store clerk brought us the cord and we said yes that is what we are looking for and then we were shuffled to the registers where two people were working by flashlight, hand writing each purchase down and using calculators to tally up the totals and change. You have to pay with cash, which is difficult because every ATM I found was not working. Luckily we had come prepared and had cash on hand to pay.

That evening we visited my boyfriends aunt. She warmed us up some coffee on her gas stove and we stood around outside in the road talking and watching the area kids riding their bikes as the sunset. We then went back and had dinner with my dad. After driving for about an hour looking for a restaurant that was open and didn't have a very long waiting line, we found a little spot that we could order from a limited handwritten menu. Food served on paper plates with plastic knives and forks. Even with limited resources, the food was amazing.

I flew out the next morning at 7am. Quiet honestly, happy to be returning to normal. Looking forward to the cool air and luxury of electricity, hot water, communications, rules of the road and of course to see my children. The flight leaving Puerto Rico was full.

I was hoping to leave Puerto Rico with a clear sense of how we as a community can help. This was not obvious to me. The need felt very overwhelming, so many things that need to be done and no clear way forward. We didn't see much in terms of clean up efforts or electrical restoration and this seems to be causing the people of Puerto Rico much frustration. The day to day waste land with nothing much changing. The people themselves are doing what they can; individuals cleaning up their houses, their beaches, slowly trying to put their lives together... but without electricity this makes it all that much more difficult.

I have made a connection with a fellow Unitarian Universalist in PR, her name is Fabiola Torres. Fabiola's father is from Puerto Rico and her mother is from Guatemala. She came to live with them and to attend university. Fabiola let me know that the UU of PR have now officially teamed up with an organization called Instituto Nueva Escuela (INE). INE is vetted by ConPRMetidos and have a longstanding reputation on the island. They train teachers in the Montessori method for public (low income) schools. Their goal is "Achieving peace in Puerto Rico school to school." Here is their website: <http://en-inepr.weebly.com/>. As restoring hope and peace to children is close to my heart, I am interested in learning more about this organization and look forward to sharing what I learn.