

Opinion

Are We Psychotic to Live on Longboat Key?

Forget Howard Stern – Hurricanes are the absolute King of All Media. The Berlin Wall crashing, the fall of Saddam, the burning Twin Towers would all have a tough time competing with a category-five storm barreling through the Caribbean.

Storm facts and information are dripped almost intravenously into viewers until normally compatible couples have dramatically different reactions. How many times does one person on the couch say, “Well I think it’s gonna miss us.”

Then their spouse looks at them like they just dropped a baby on the floor.

“Are you crazy? I have a bad feeling about Ivan.”

And so it goes.

Oppositional Disorder

One woman delivering mail before the storm told a TV camera she was scared to not evacuate, but her husband wants to stay in their trailer. She said she was frightened but was going to “stand by her man.” When my wife saw that clip, she suddenly turned into Betty Friedan. “What kind of woman in today’s world feels compelled to listen to such a stupid husband?” She said matter-of-factly.

It sounds corny, but I realized then that I better listen closely to my wife’s hurricane fears. And then, like most men, I tried to act confident and cool as if I had a plan. I started taking action, all the while panicking inside that I had no clue what the hell would really happen. My wife likes to play it conservatively safe, and talk about flying the family somewhere innocent, such as Vermont. I like to play it liberally “safe enough.” I’m one of those boaters who brings a life jacket, but never puts it on.

My wife says I suffer from oppositional disorder. That means I like to feel any evacuation is a self-made decision, not imposed by the government or authority. In other words, I don’t mind evacuating; just don’t send a sheriff around to cajole me.

For something as powerful, awe inspiring and dramatic as a hurricane, it sure provokes the least sexy of all emotions – fear mixed with confusion mixed with the pending need to make all kinds of decisions.

But now that Ivan is past, as I fall asleep I still see satellite images rotating like so many evil pinwheels in the Atlantic. I see my wife staring at the weather channel as if in a morphine-induced coma, lifting her head occasionally to say something such as, “Its eye wall is strengthening.”

By Stephen Reid
Editor and Publisher

In a sense, hurricanes become such dominant events that the storms claim lives long before they hit shore – metaphorically that is.

Charley didn’t cast his spell so effectively. But by the time Frances and Ivan came along, people had started new rituals such as clicking on all the charts and probabilities of the NOAA Website. Once the NOAA Website is discovered, everyone scoffs at the amateurish Double Doppler and WFLA’s Channel 8 Viper features.

Instant High Priest

Here’s another phenomenon – the meteorologist as instant high priest during hurricane season. As any sociologist will ascribe – fear helps you rule. And the meteorologists don’t specialize in playing down their profession. They sound grave and grim as they shake their heads and offer somber guidance. Their status is instantly elevated from forecasting afternoon showers to suddenly reporting on life, death and devastation.

And what of those rookie reporters whose job is to stand at the edge of the beach and shout spastically into a mic as gawkers and tiny waves flit about in the background. One guy on WWSB Channel 7 actually was yelling and diving into the breeze. He had me fooled until he said the winds were gusting up to 20 mph and I noticed a family with umbrellas and cameras in the background.

Then there is the irony of cancellations. Manatee County did not cancel school on Monday despite the track of Ivan. So my 5-year-old daughter went off to school, yet the Longboat Key Town Commission meeting and budget hearing was cancelled. My daughter asked, “Why do I have to go to school and the grownups don’t have to work?”

I said, “Longboat Key is an island and everyone is being cautious.” She looked at me and said, “No fair – they just get to sit home, eat ice cream and watch the New York Hankees.”

And can you imagine the effect the fear and anxiety has on children? My same daughter asked if after our house blows away are we going to live on our boat. I quickly pictured my 23-foot Mako nesting my wife and four children.

Chainsaw Alley

Home Depot last week looked like shopping in Poland in 1980 as residents formed huge lines to buy two products. Except it wasn’t vodka and bread, it was plywood and generators. Waves of buyers, like darting minnows, swarmed employees as they unloaded the sole truckload of generators that came in that week. Others stood on line like they were buying tickets to a Broadway show in Times Square – except they were merely waiting to buy their ration of plywood.

And notice how the lexicon of language rapidly morphs as a hurricane approaches. First the meteorologists, like so many pesky outer bands, start dropping words such as “eye-wall,” “sheer,” a “rain event,” and that generalized expression, “to hunker down.”

This was the first year I heard everyone, including Town Manager Bruce St. Denis, refer to the hurricanes as wind or rain “events”. “Frances will be mainly a rain event for Longboat Key,” said St. Denis. For me, all three hurricanes were mainly “television events.”

So while we have to be careful – it is always smart to be vigilant and get off barrier islands when sizable storms approach – there is another danger lurking beyond the hurricane. All the fear and hysteria can incapacitate, make us numb to the fact that as danger in society goes up, we proportionally hand power and control to the authorities, to people who make our decisions for us. It’s a lot like our War on Terrorism.

But in the end, living on Longboat Key represents humanity. Few animals would build a nest in a vulnerable island that faces flooding every year. And why do we do it? For that oldest and most irrational of all emotions – we love the place.

Longboat’s Seven Samurai

Should Town Commission meetings be televised as Commissioner John Redgrave and former Commissioner Al Green suggest? Would it be a logical technological evolution of the Town Hall concept? Would more Longboaters get involved? Do commissioners relish the idea of being nighttime television celebrities and personalities? Will they start playing to the camera like so many Meteorologists before a storm or will they go about their duties like seven noble Samurai? I’d like to know.

LongboatLetters

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Paradise Will Survive

Dear Commissioner Joan Webster:

My name is David McKinnon. I am currently a film student in Glasgow, Scotland. Having visited the state of Florida many times, and been fortunate enough to have visited Longboat Key twice, both myself and my family would like to express our thoughts to everyone in your area at this time in recovering from the recent hurricanes.

I will never forget driving down Cortez Road when I was 16 with my parents and sister, and laying my eyes for the very first time on Longboat Key. I fell in love with it immediately, and soon realized that the warmth of the local people ran parallel with the warmth of the Florida weather. It is my ambition one day to live in Longboat Key, and hopefully play my part in your community. Whenever we have a gloomy, rainy day in Scotland (which is 90% of the time), I imagine the golden beaches and relaxed nature of your wonderful town.

May I wish you all the best in these difficult times. I am sure that your community has the strength of will to cope.

David McKinnon
Glasgow, Scotland

Thanks for the Warning

Dear Bruce, Susan & Staff:

Thanks so much for the press releases over the weekend. I started sending regular e-mails to our owners during Hurricane Charley and continued during Hurricane Frances. It gives them some peace of mind when they are so far away. Your press releases were very helpful in keeping the owners informed and also for helping me determine what to do with our very valuable employees.

After receiving your update at 7:30 Saturday night, I told the employees who were on-site to leave and cancelled our concierge who were scheduled to work Sunday. Our security guard was scheduled to work overnight at Regent Place, so he ended up staying and protecting L’Ambiance! We let him use our guest bedroom in Building One to sleep and rest up before he came back on duty Sunday afternoon. See, those guest bedrooms really are a benefit!

Again, thank you Bruce, Susan and everyone else who participated in keeping us informed. You guys are all terrific!

Robelle Pursifull
Manager of L’Ambiance
at Longboat Key Club Association