

Going Home after Service in Pearlington

There is an old African myth about a beast that lives out there in the jungle, a giant beast with two tails. This animal is so enormous and so unusual that if you were ever so fortunate as to see it, it would explode your notion of what was possible in a beast and forever change your perspective of the world. If you served in Pearlington, or in any other area of the world in which war, catastrophic disaster or widespread trauma has occurred, you have - most assuredly - “seen the Elephant.”

For many who return home after service in the Gulf coast area, they report that they struggle with trying to reintegrate back into the society, their culture, from which they came. You may feel angry with a world that seems to have forgotten the terrible event that was Hurricane Katrina. Many of your friends seem oblivious and only have a passing interest in the true depth of your feelings and experience, still caught up in what now seems like very usual and mundane things that no longer hold your interest as being important.

James returned to his job, only to find his co-workers’ complaints and “whining” about little things meaningless and maddening, in light of what he had just witnessed in Pearlington. Young Cathy invited her very best friend over to share her journey with her and was enraged when her friend spent an hour complaining about the terrible manicure she’d had the week Cathy was away. Daniel spent three weeks in Pearlington trying to salvage building materials from lost homes and turning them into new rebuilds. When he returned to his job in new home construction, he found himself getting bitter and cynical when clients would complain loudly about the slightest imperfections in the drywall or the carpentry.

This reaction is usual and you have to be careful of the level of expectations you have of the people in your life to whom you are returning. They did **NOT** “See the Elephant” and they have, in fairness, no frame of reference in which to understand what you have seen, heard and felt on the coast. And while it’s true that the whole world could use a wake up call by a few weeks in Pearlington, most of North America has insulated itself from the realities of how so many others struggle just to feed their families every day.

But, **you** don’t have to forget. There are many things you can do to hold onto the new perspective your sweat and open heart gained by having the courage to come to the coast in service to total strangers:

- ❑ Ensure that your sponsoring organization plans a reunion of all the team members frequently; these **are** the people with whom you shared a common peril and these are the people who will always understand exactly how you feel. My recommendation has always been one week, one month, three months, six months and one year (minimum) after your return.
- ❑ Take turns facilitating the reunion. Allow everyone to share their experiences since returning home and then support each other in seeking some understanding of your new emotional and mental awareness.
- ❑ I suggest a tool such as the Native Talking Stick Circle, at which a symbol (carved stick, feather or polished stone) is placed in the center of the circle and any participant may walk to it, take it in their hands, return to their seat and begin speaking. Place no limitations on what that person may say or how long they may talk - allow them to speak **their** truth fully, without rebuttal, comment or interruption by anyone else in the group, whose only job is to listen respectfully to the one holding the Talking Stick. When that person is finished, the stick is returned to the center and someone else may voluntarily choose to go next. Have no expectation that everyone should speak; there is much learning and processing that occurs listening to others, as well.
- ❑ Allow people their emotions. Often, comforting people who are emotional or crying only serves to silence them and deprive them of the right to feel exactly what it is they’re feeling. It may make you uncomfortable to witness it, but that is not a bad thing either.
- ❑ Make sure that when you are finished regrouping that you plan a fun activity and leave the gathering on a positive note. Not many have your courage and you may take a great deal of pride in that. Find a way to turn your strong feelings into action. Express them through writing or drawing, painting or sculpting - whatever you can do to get them out of you, make them real and don’t be surprised if it turns out to be

some of the best work you have ever done. Now is the time to write your government leaders, lobby for change, make positive changes and choices in your own life. Create your own web log (blog) and ask for a link to be installed to this one. Take some meaningful social action to help the people of Pearlington and elsewhere, right there in your own community. Address groups and share your story; raise funds for building materials. If you are unsure as to the wisest and safest way for them to be used in Pearlington, contact **Canada Jon** and he will guide you.

Get yourself a stuffed or ceramic Elephant and put it close to mind. Always remember the good you did and the fine and generous people of Pearlington. Cry frequently and honestly if you need to - especially you men! - and when you tell the story of Pearlington, try to tell of one person, one family. It's hard for people who have not been here to get their heads around the **whole** story.

Stay in touch with the people you served while here. They would love to hear from you, but remember, it is not their job to comfort **you**. Be positive and affirming of their daily struggle and allow this experience to be a catalyst for growth, change and maturity in your own life.

If there is one common effect that "foreign" service has on people, it is the recognition that perhaps you received more from the experience than you gave. **It's true**. That is the nature of service and it is why our Creator calls us to perform it. There is a Cosmic Irony in this and all the people of the world could experience it if they so chose, and the world would be transformed. How many children around the world must die of starvation, before we learn to share? How many hurricanes and tornadoes must devastate the land before we cease making judgements about where people call home and accept that home is where their hearts thrive. How many people must lose everything before we accept our responsibility - that is, our **ability to respond** - and acknowledge that North America has an unparalleled ability to respond, more so than any societies in the history of the world.

We have so much. If we cannot help ourselves, what good are all the advantages of our lives?

Three cheers for volunteers! If you return to the coast in the future, you will do so knowing that you are breaking your own heart on purpose. You are putting yourself out there in a deeply meaningful way. Never grow callous or oblivious by doing it too often or too much. You have to look after yourself and your own family, as well. But, do it often enough to remind yourself that you are alive, that your presence here does indeed make a difference and that, at long last, you are **ALIVE!**

Written by "**Canada Jon**" **White**

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