

Supporting The People of Pearlington

It is important when we, as volunteers, are working in Pearlington that we support and attempt to understand the circumstances of their culture and the nature of their loss. There are two elements in this process; two functions that we can serve, in addition to what else we are doing in this recovery. Both are standard, in my opinion, to all work performed outside our own communities, here and in other parts of the world:

Cultural Appropriateness:

When we work in situations outside our normal environment, it is critical that we understand and accept that it is not our right to make judgements, nor to engage local residents in subjects that are controversial and of which we may have a differing opinion. That is not what we came to Pearlington to do. We are on **their** turf and must respect their right to local customs, beliefs, even their prejudices. That is not to say we have to agree with them, but engaging them in those kinds of conflicts creates a barrier to serving them. Find the common areas upon which we can all agree. Listen and observe; we did not grow up there and “taking them on” is a diversion from our tasks, despite invitations to do so.

North Americans are infamous in other parts of the world for failing to do their homework, culturally. Not everyone wants to, nor can, live as we do. It is self-centered to assume they should. Mississippi has a cultural history that is not shared by many other parts of the world - not even other parts of America. They are entitled to do things the way they do and to think what they choose to think. It is not our mission to challenge that, especially when there is so much other work to be done. It is called **unconditional love** and it is what our Creator calls us to offer.

Once, during the war in Bosnia, I discovered a hospital filled with millions of dollars worth of donated North American dialysis and other medical equipment. It sat rusting in a hallway as children died for the want of it. The donors never checked to see if they could even be plugged in. They couldn't - electrical outlets and current work differently in eastern Europe. There were no chemicals or reagents for the machines and certainly nowhere to buy them nor money to buy them with. This travesty was based on an unconscious belief that **everywhere** in the world is exactly the same as Boston, or Toronto or L.A.

It isn't.

Do your homework. Read about the culture in which you are entering. We all have different heritages, backgrounds, family and regional histories and, in the least, we need to quietly observe and respect the culture in which we find ourselves, until we feel confident that we are in rapport with that culture. It is unreasonable to expect that in coming to a “foreign” place, the local people should get into rapport with **us**.

The wages of arguing and proving yourself “right” is a brick wall between you and the very people you came to help and who desperately need your help. Don't be drawn in. Smile and say something like: “That's an interesting perspective” and then please get on with the tasks at hand. **That** is your lasting contribution and one which will survive all other considerations.

In our hearts, people all over the world want the very same things as we do, for themselves and for their children. They just want to be safe, happy and loved. Look deeper than their personalities for their spirits and celebrate that, rather than merely noticing their differences and shortcomings.

Fortunately for all of us, God does.

Supporting Pearlington Emotionally:

Trauma of this magnitude does some funny things to people, consciously and unconsciously.

As **Laurie Spaschak**, Volunteer and Resource Manager in Pearlington has observed: *“It is almost storm season again and folks have still not finished rebuilding, the FEMA and insurance money is all gone, help seems to be taking too long.... Many of these folks are at the end of their patience and are apprehensive of the coming storms. Please be open to listening and be understanding if someone seems irritable or over-sensitive. Don't take it personally. This is a very difficult time for them.”*

In the aftermath of trauma, we all develop coping mechanisms and often become “more” of who we were before the event. Some people pitch right in and show leadership. Some are resourceful and energetic, believing it better to get busy and productive, than to sit and ponder what cannot be changed. Some drink more, smoke and consume more drugs and act out their anger in various ways.

Intrusive anger is most often the consequence of repressed feelings. One cannot imagine, unless experienced personally, what it must feel like to lose everything in a single moment. Our North American attachment to “things” in our lives is very prevalent in our culture. We all experience it to one degree or the other. Losing it all is a terrible blow and leaves people feeling violated, isolated, scared, lonely and confused. Choices can be made that are not necessarily reflective of the ones we might make in our **best** places and sometimes these choices seem to make our lives even harder than before.

The aftermath of Katrina may be defined more by what **didn't** happen, than what **did**. The people of Pearlington have been made promises that weren't kept and have been ignored in some ways, merely because they live in a small, unincorporated town - with no real tax base - surrounded by a NASA exclusion zone and not even listed on the official state visitors' map. Yet, these are their lives and they value them just as anyone else values theirs.

- ▶ **Listen - don't counsel.** Unless you've been where they've been, you can't truly comprehend. They don't need you to. They just want a sympathetic and validating ear; that it's perfectly alright that they feel the way they feel and that so would anyone else in their situation.
- ▶ **Be patient.** This isn't just happening to **all** of them, it's happening to **each** of them. They each have a story and many need to tell it. Let them show you their lives. Offer a hug or a handshake - let them decide if they are ready and able to accept this form of support. **Never** hug or otherwise touch a child without the child's permission. I usually say: “Are you giving hugs today?” Comfort **them** - despite how hard this is for us, we didn't come to the Coast to impose our own fears and grief on Pearlington. Use the resources within your group to manage your own feelings and save yourself - during the daytime when you are “on duty” - to be available emotionally to others who need you in the community. Please refer to **“Going Home after Service in Pearlington”** (posted to the Pearlington blog) for tips on how to manage yourself and your group's emotions, while serving the people of Pearlington.
- ▶ **Don't take things personally.** People are struggling. They don't mean to hurt you with a careless word or their frustrations at the situation itself. Have broad shoulders. The situation is dire for many and they just need what they need. **Politely** divert the tension by refocusing on the task you came to do, with something like: “Well, thanks for chatting. I better get at that sheet rock.”
- ▶ **Remember:** It is a privilege to serve Pearlington and one that will change your life. Make the most of the experience - and theirs - by being culturally appropriate and supportive of their struggle.