

The Preciousness of Life

My wife Kelli and I have very little evidence to disprove the notion that we are two of the luckiest people in the world. My wife and I (and our four Golden Retriever pups) are alive and well. My wife and I just lost our home in Waveland, Mississippi, to Hurricane Katrina.

This past March, we left Houston and moved into our "new" old home in Waveland, a small, idyllic town of about 7,000 people on the southwestern coast of Mississippi. Kelli's family had owned a small vacation house in Waveland since the mid-1970s, and she had spent many a summer there, swimming, sailing, and sunbathing in the warm, pleasant waters of the Gulf of Mexico. She had long dreamed of one day moving there and setting up her family and business in this friendly town.

My wife had introduced me to Waveland shortly after we began courting. I was somewhat reluctant. I liked Waveland a lot, but after graduating from Texas Chiropractic College in 1998, starting a second career at the tender age of 39, I felt that Houston, where I already knew people, would be a better market for me to establish my practice. Six years later, and the time seemed right to make a move, but where to?

We considered moving out West, we considered the Carolinas, Arkansas, and Louisiana - Kelli is from Baton Rouge, so that was a strong contender. But something about Waveland kept pulling at us.

Kelli underwent surgery in December 2004; to aid her recovery, we took a driving vacation around the western United States, visiting friends and seeing some of our nation's greatest natural wonders. But something about Waveland still kept pulling at us.

We had just sold our home, and were in the process of closing my practice in Houston. In February of this year, our realtor in the Waveland area, Helen, e-mailed us with a list of house prospects. We went to see them. None of them quite worked for us. Almost as an afterthought, Kelli and I drove down a little street and saw a "For Sale" sign on a white brick house that caught our attention. It was far from the prettiest house on the street, but it called out to us. The house was less than a 1/2 mile from the beach, was surrounded by tall pines and magnolias, and, according to our new neighbors, had weathered Hurricane Camille in 1969. You gotta love a house that could survive Camille. Well, we walked inside, fell in love with it, and closed on the purchase in March.

It took us a while to get moved in, because Kelli was still working in Houston, and I was still making house calls to a few of my elderly patients. I would usually have to schedule an hour per visit, because after they got their adjustment, they would invite me to sit down for a cup of hot tea and some fresh-baked zucchini-nut bread. And they would not take "No" for an answer. I will never understand why more doctors do not make house calls.

For the next few months, we were busy attending seminars and workshops, and oh, yes, developing our burgeoning folk music personas. After my 20-plus years of writing songs, Kelli persuaded me to record some of them, and I persuaded her to start singing with me. We were never at home. But something about Waveland kept pulling at us.

In July, we went to Maui to participate in a 30-day intensive training with our friends, Dr. Mick and

Nicole MacKenzie. Mick is fond of asking the question, "If you had a week left to live, and you knew it, what would you do?" For the last two weeks of the training, I kept looking forward to returning to our little "Hurricane Defier," brushing up on my music, and starting a business in Waveland.

Mick visited us there once and joked that there was rarely ever enough surf to justify calling the town "Waveland," but it was our little paradise. We returned from Maui on August 16, and I truly felt like I was coming home.

On Monday, August 29, 2005, at about 9:00 a.m., Hurricane Katrina slammed into Waveland's white beach with 130-plus mph winds and upwards of a 30-foot-high tidal surge. And the little hamlet of Waveland, Mississippi earned her name.

Kelli had returned to Houston the Tuesday before for a weekend workshop with the MacKenzies. I had stayed behind in Waveland to continue unpacking moving boxes. Since we bought the house in March, we had only spent about three weeks in our "new" house. I was in heaven.

"What's this about?" I asked myself one evening as I noticed an announcement on the Internet about a hurricane crossing the southern tip of Florida. For the next few days, I watched as Katrina defied all the meteorologists' predictions. "She will turn to the north very soon," they promised.

But the turn was slow in coming, and when it finally began, the northern Gulf Coast's fate was sealed. For a short time, I considered riding her out. I had lived through numerous hurricanes along the Gulf Coast, from the Rio Grande Valley of Texas to Corpus Christi and Houston. How bad could it be? Then she began to strengthen, and rapidly. Soon, she was the equivalent of a Force Three Tornado ... 200 miles wide! I decided to leave.

For the next two days, I boarded up our windows with plywood and stacked our still-unpacked moving boxes up off the floor. I used every inch of counter space and tabletops to get our things high enough to be safe from a 2-3-foot flood. After all, Camille only brought about 3 feet of water into the house. No storm could be worse than that. Well, Katrina was no storm, she was a monster. Our house was on high ground in Waveland - a good 10 feet above sea level - which meant that the tidal surge was probably a good 10 feet above our rooftop.

On Sunday afternoon, the day before Katrina hit, I packed our four pups and what few personal belongings I could into our van, and evacuated north to my sister-in-law's house in Memphis, Tennessee, where I stayed for the next three days, glued to the television, afraid to move for fear of missing a shot of our new hometown. Finally, on Thursday, I headed down to Houston, filling up on \$3-a-gallon gas, looking forward to hugging my wife.

I write this from my parents' house just outside of Houston. The rescue workers are only just now getting into Waveland, four days after the storm hit. I saw a video today, shot by a TV station helicopter crew, some of the first pictures of Waveland to come out. And it appears to be total destruction. Of all the communities hit, Waveland was just to the east side of Katrina's eye, and Katrina stared her down. I could not see any piece of a standing building. And we have yet to hear from our realtor/friend Helen and her husband, Tony, two of the nicest people we've ever had the pleasure of knowing. We are praying they are safe. I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank CNN reporter, Anderson Cooper, for getting into Waveland and vowing to come back and report, because, in his words, "No one is hearing about this town." I look forward someday to personally thanking Mr. Cooper for his compassionate reporting.

We left behind our wedding photos, most of our clothes, my adjusting tables, my diagnostic equipment, my wife's antique furniture, our artwork, our recently recorded CDs, much of our PA

equipment, our vinyl record collection, and boxes of my chiropractic books and notes. I was able to save most of our musical instruments, my patient records, our dogs, and some of my hand tools.

I left behind my beautifully framed chiropractic diploma and license, which my wife gave me as a graduation gift. And my wife's electric piano. I managed to get our winter coats. I left behind my golf clubs and my new fishing pole. I remembered to take a book of my songs.

In those last few hours of packing, I was almost beside myself trying to decide what to take, and what to leave. Waveland finally told me it was time to leave. And so I joined the lines of evacuees heading north into a new life.

As I said at the start, we have little proof that we are not two of the luckiest people alive, because we are alive. And if you are reading this, you are, too. Watching the events of this past week unfold, we now have a new perspective on the preciousness of this gift we all share, especially when we catch ourselves starting to complain or whine about some trivial discomfort of daily life. We are striving to keep ourselves in the present moment, because truly, it is all there is.

I will always love Waveland for the simple lessons she taught me: Enjoy every moment to the best of your ability; Let the people who are important to you know that you love them - this includes your family, friends and patients; And figure out what you want and go after it. None of us knows whether we don't have a week left to live. That makes this life too precious to spend more than a few moments in regret or dissatisfaction. If you had a week left to live, and you knew it, what would you do? I am working on complaining a little less and appreciating a little more. And I am putting on a fundraising concert to benefit the town of Waveland. How about you?

Paul Seitz, DC

Waveland, Mississippi

About the Author:

A 1998 graduate of Texas Chiropractic College, Dr. Seitz is licensed in Louisiana and Texas. Before moving to Waveland, Dr. Seitz maintained a private practice in Houston, Texas (1998-2005). He also is a musician, writer, and speaker, and a coach/trainer with MacKenzie International Consulting, assisting people to rediscover the magic and wonder in their seemingly ordinary lives. He is currently writing a book with Dr. Mick MacKenzie on this very subject.

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