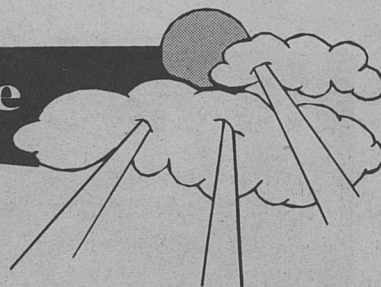


## The Spiritual Essence



By The Rev. Jane Dwinell

I spent the weekend of June 8-11 in Houston, Texas. You may recall that this was when tropical storm Allison unleashed her fury on the Houston area, drenching parts of the city with up to 35 inches of rain. The Houston meteorologist said that would be the equivalent of 28 feet of snow!

It was quite something, being dropped into a city in crisis. I had been invited to be the guest preacher for the Houston Interfaith Gay Pride Worship Service, to be held Sunday evening June 10. I arrived Friday afternoon, expecting to have an interesting weekend being escorted about

electricity. That meant no water, no phone, and no air conditioning. I dressed and found the emergency stairwell. It was pitch black. Several other folks were up by then, and a small group of us made our way down stairs in the darkness, stopping at each floor to prop open the door to the stairwell with whatever we could find. You know those decorative tables and flower arrangements that usually sit by hotel elevators? They made great doorstops.

Once in the lobby, I discovered chaos. People were crowded several deep at the front desk, and luggage was already starting

Mexico, and the city began to dry up. I found lodging at another hotel, and on Saturday night Steve and Bob took me out for great Chinese food at the one restaurant they found open – and that was after they had to deal with five inches of standing water in their living room. Sunday brought sunny skies, amazing humidity, and piles of broken tree limbs, trash, and abandoned cars as the water receded.

I had been asked to bring a message of hope from Vermont to Texas, and to share with them the story of last year's legislative session and the fight for the Civil Union law. And I

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by different members of the Houston gay community. Two wonderful women, Cynthia and Wendy, picked me up at the airport – then all hell broke loose.

When they returned to my hotel with another couple to take me out to dinner, the skies had opened up and everyone decided, for safety's sake, that we'd just stay at the hotel for our meal. Tucked away in an elegant restaurant with no windows enjoying Texas food and hospitality, we had no idea what was going on outside. By the time we finished, the streets were already starting to flood, and I hoped they would make it home OK.

The rain continued to pour unlike any storm I'd ever been in. I watched the fury from my 9th floor balcony, and finally settled down to sleep. At 1 a.m. I was woken up by the loud crash and flash of lightning and thunder, and then everything went dark. The electricity had gone off. Being the country girl that I am, I was unconcerned and went back to sleep.

When I got up Saturday morning, there still was no

to pile up. The basement was flooded, as was the lower level of the parking garage. The streets had several inches of standing water in them, but the rain had stopped. I overheard conversations – many of the guests were there for a conference and decided to go home, if they could find a route. All major highways in Houston were closed due to flooding.

Several times I made my way up and down those nine flights of stairs. Each time I was in the stairwell, people were being helped. I was amazed at the number of folks who carry flashlights with them! I helped a French-speaking woman as we went down in near-darkness. I counted steps for her, "un, deux, trois..." in my limited French. Even with the chaos, the incredibly humid heat, and people's concerns about their safety and well-being, everyone pitched in to help each other. We knew nothing about each other, and that didn't matter. We were humans together, and we had to work together to survive.

Eventually, Allison moved out into the Gulf of

did that. But it was the people of Houston who showed me much about hope as well, with their cheerful and hospitable nature even as their city was being destroyed, their hospitals knocked out of commission, and their homes wrecked by that life-giving substance – water.

Sometimes we, and our opponents, forget that we are all human, that death and tragedy, as well as love and joy, come to us all. I hope it does not take a major weather event for us to remember that. I hope that we can bow to each other and say, "Namaste" – the divine essence in me honors the divine essence in you. And, without destruction, "May justice roll down like water, and peace like an ever-flowing stream."

*The Rev. Jane Dwinell serves the First Universalist Parish, a Unitarian Universalist congregation, in Derby Line, VT. She lives with her partner, Sky, and their two children, Dana and Sayer, on the shores of beautiful Lake Memphremagog.*

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