



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Knowing the Storm

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All storms are not the same. A light summer rain is not a category five hurricane. You must learn, in your context, to identify those storms that can be refreshing, and even enjoyable, and those storms that are life threatening and require you to batten down the hatches or evacuate.

My Uncle Frank was a loving and unconventional man. He stood about 6'4" tall. He had a medium build. He was bald on the top of his head with a hair-ring around the sides. He wore a size 15 shoe and an extra-large hat. Uncle Frank was light-hearted and laughed often. He and my parents had grown up together in Cleveland, Tennessee. The Meridiths, the Bullocks, and the Westfields had known each other for many generations. By the time my brother and I were born, Uncle Frank and Aunt Emma, with their four children, lived in Philadelphia - near our family. My father treated Uncle Frank with the respect given an older brother.

Our families were family to each other.

Uncle Frank worked for a company that would buy out the local amusement park for its employees the Sunday of each Memorial Day weekend. Frank would accept the five tickets given each employee, then barter, negotiate, and acquire twenty or thirty more tickets so he could host a grand picnic for the extended family. My birthday is May 28; we would celebrate at the amusement park. Every year Uncle Frank would tell me the picnic was for my birthday. I

loved Uncle Frank and Uncle Frank loved me.

Uncle Frank would reserve a pavilion in the picnic section of the park just for his guests. The annual event felt like a family reunion. Upon arrival at the pavilion, each family would claim two or three picnic tables and set-up their spot. Each family brought food and beverages, more than enough to share. The picnic was a grand feast with all-day rides, card playing (spades, bid whist, pinochle), lots of laughter, and being together. It was a day of excitement and fun.

I have fond recollections of all my amusement park picnics, but there was one that was the most remarkable.

It was a sunny Sunday. Our family arrived at the park about 10am. We parked in the parking lot, then hauled our food and picnic supplies from the parking lot to the reserved pavilion. After greeting everyone, my brother, father, and I left my mom to set up our picnic tables. We went to ride the rides promising to return in two hours for lunch. We started with a ride on the Wild Mouse--the wooden roller coaster. Then the bumper cars, Ferris wheel and then the teacups. It happened when we were in line for a second ride on the roller coaster.

Without warning--the wind whipped up with prolonged gusts. The sky darkened. It began to drizzle. The drizzle turned to downpour. My dad told us we needed to go back to the pavilion. My brother complained because he wanted to ride, even if it was raining. Dad grabbed my hand, told my brother to move quickly and pointed in the direction of the pavilion. With a pout, my brother trotted ahead of us. The downpour increased. As we jogged, it seemed as if everyone in the park was running - looking for shelter from the storm. It was pandemonium.

By the time dad, brother and I got near to the pavilion the rain was teeming from the skies. The thick rain made it difficult to see. The winds were erratic. My mother was standing at the edge of the pavilion watching for us and, no doubt, praying. When Mom saw us at a distance, she began to call my father's name and wave her arms. Dad picked me up, grabbed my brother by the hand and jetted to my mother. Everyone in the pavilion was packing up. My mom dried us off with an extra tablecloth and paper towels. As if out of nowhere, Uncle Frank ran into the pavilion and hollered, "Don't leave!" Hearing Frank's voice, people paused. Everything but the rain and the wind stopped to listen. Frank said, "Don't go! The storm is not going to last long. Don't go!" Several families ignored him - packed quickly and launched out into the mean weather headed back to the parking lot to drive home. Uncle Frank came over to my parents and repeated, "The storm will not last long. We are safer here than on the road." My parents hesitated. They did not know what to do. Uncle Frank collapsed a card table, leaned it against a pavilion wall and instructed me and my brother to go under. We did. Frank covered the table with a tablecloth and made sure there were no exposed edges to be caught by the wind. Uncle Frank instructed us, "Stay there until we call you out!"

The storm lasted another thirty or forty minutes. They were long and frightening minutes. Then, as abruptly as the storm had started--it stopped.

With the stillness, my brother and I peeked out from behind the table. My father said, "Come

on out, it's over." We crawled out and I looked around the pavilion. The only folks who had stayed were Uncle Frank, Aunt Emma, their four kids, our family, the Conway Family, and the Simmons Family. Anything uncovered in the pavilion was soggy or drenched, but no one was hurt.

As if by magic, the thick black clouds continued to part, and the blue sky returned. The sun shone bright, again. The winds were gone. Together we cleaned up the pavilion and reestablished our picnic. Families had left covered dishes, coolers, and lawn chairs. Dad and Frank organized items they would return in coming days. My mom and Aunt Emma took inventory of the food and reset one large table of food and a beverage station for everyone. Mercifully, my birthday cake was unharmed. In about thirty minutes we heard the amusement park rides restarting.

And here's the best part--for the rest of the day there were no lines for any rides!

Since most of the people in the park had fled during the storm, those of us who had braved the storm were now free to ride any ride without having to wait in line.

That day, I rode the roller coaster twenty-seven times!

That day I rode every ride in West Point Park!

That day was one of the best ever!

Years later, I asked Uncle Frank how he knew we should stay at the pavilion during the storm. He said, "All storms aren't the same. Even bad storms aren't the same kind of bad. That storm came up so fast and unexpectedly, I knew it was going to move through just as quickly. I also knew driving in that kind of weather would have been more dangerous than hunkering down in that pavilion." With a wry smile, Uncle Frank continued, "And, it was your birthday - we had not cut the cake!"

Friends, storms in our careers are like this. Ask yourself, which storms are simply part of the ecology of faculty life, and which storms are potentially life threatening or cataclysmic? Negotiating the processes of hire, tenure, renewed contract and promotion is distinctly different from navigating in an institution that is restructuring or has filed for financial exigency. Learning to advise students, lead faculty committees, and find a suitable publisher can be challenging, but all are elements of the academic landscape. How do you come to know what is usual and what is dangerous? We all need an Uncle Frank who can tell us if we should hunker down or run!

Thank you, Uncle Frank.

<https://wabash.center/2024/01/knowning-the-storm/>

