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Reflective Essay: Living Through a Natural Disaster

I remember being at my apartment window the night the hurricane struck, watching palm trees bending like fragile straws and learning that nature had the ability to exert some sort of force that I had never read about. The outside air roared like an engine, and each wave rattled the glass so violently that I asked myself if it was going to shatter. During this moment, the world appeared so huge and terrifyingly close. Not only did I have to face my vulnerability due to that hurricane, but it also changed my views on resilience, responsibility, and my involvement as a newly trained emergency medical technician (EMT).

At the time the storm started earlier that afternoon, I was about to go to work in the evening at the emergency department where I worked half-time as an EMT. At 6 p.m., the officials of the city had an evacuation order for our coastal district, which many people, including my old neighbor, Mrs. Jeffords, would not grant. When the sky became dark, the center of the hurricane passed over our town, flooding our streets, knocking out the power, and tearing the shingles off the roofs. I still recall the odor of wet wood and mud creeping into the house as water leaked under our doors. The panicked knocking on my apartment wall by Mrs. Jeffords interrupted the hysterical roar of the wind, and when I opened my door, I saw her weep, “Why is my ceiling leaking? I do not understand what to do”. That was a time of divided feelings for me as I felt afraid and at the same time obliged. I went to her with towels, a flashlight, and my basic medical kit, and assisted her into the safest room of her apartment, the hallway, where we waited out the storm, while the debris crashed against the apartment building over and over. The adrenaline made my hands tremble, and every minute seemed long and drawn out. Still, it was the burden of responsibility of taking care of a person that held me together better than I thought.

The problems right after the storm passed were made excruciatingly evident. The flooding in our neighborhood was nearly three feet, and it stranded occupants of the lower-level apartments and caused electrical problems everywhere. Even being an EMT, who is supposed to remain calm, it was hard to accept the carnage: vehicles drowned in water like outlived toys, tree branches on the street, and the metallic smell of shattered electric cables in the damp air. I was also aware that we were mostly unprepared, many of us, including myself, for the psychological burden of such an occurrence. I was frustrated to the point of being in awe that crucial infrastructure had broken down so fast and left helpless locals with no means of communication, no health care, or safe homes. Not only was the hurricane a revelation of vulnerabilities in our environment and systems, but it was also the internal conflict between personal safety and professional responsibility.

Looking back on those hours in the storm, I can now understand how the experience changed my ideas of what it is like to serve others. My perception of my job as an EMT prior to the hurricane was largely skill-based and procedure-based, i.e., how to stabilize a fracture, what to check, and how to transport a patient in a proper way. However, the lesson that night taught me was that being resilient is more emotional than physical, and preparedness is more than just having supplies, but a matter of mental adaptability, understanding, and acting even when one is afraid. I continued to contemplate how disasters do not discriminate; they tear away certainty to all people, including first responders and the very people they serve. The storm pushed me to discover the universal fact that, in most cases, control is an illusion and that support of community is the pillar to survival during a crisis. Over the following months, I also grew more conscious of the relationships that I had been forming with people in my life and how trust and connection can be what saves one during times of disaster. Though it was a frightening

hurricane, it was a turning point in my perception of my work and the interconnectedness of our lives.

To conclude, my experience of living through the hurricane not only pushed my limits but also reformed my perception of the idea of resilience and my responsibility as an EMT. The incident demonstrated the instability of our environment, the need to be ready and supportive, and enhanced my understanding of how people tend to help each other in a quiet manner during crises. In the end, the hurricane helped me to understand that natural disasters can destroy buildings, but also rebuild them. The experience of that night has strengthened my resolve to serve other people in a competent and compassionate way since I know that when the world gets unpredictable, human relationships are some of the strongest stabilizing elements we possess.