A WALKING DISASTER
A Walking Disaster

What Surviving Katrina and Cancer Taught Me About Faith and Resilience

Jamie Aten, PhD

Templeton Press
With all of my love to my wife Kelly
and daughters Colleen, Chloe, and Carlee.

I am so grateful and thankful
for each of you.
Contents

Preface ix

CHAPTER 1: Evacuation Impossible: My Body Was Ground Zero 3

CHAPTER 2: Don’t Be an SUV: When Helpers Make It Worse 19

CHAPTER 3: Sheltering in Place: Seeking Refuge in God 29

CHAPTER 4: Crisis Communication 101: Honoring Your Whole Story 41

CHAPTER 5: The President Visits Ground Zero: Why We Need Community 51


CHAPTER 7: FEMA X Codes: Grappling with Ambiguous Loss 75

CHAPTER 8: Katrina Mardi Gras Trailers: Establishing New Rhythms 87
CONTENTS

CHAPTER 9: Allowing the Waves to Wash Over You: Dealing with Pain 99

CHAPTER 10: Keys to a Home Destroyed: Distinguishing between Optimism and Hope 109

CHAPTER 11: A Year of Drought: When Resilience Isn’t Enough 119

CHAPTER 12: When God Sends a Helicopter: Understanding Spiritual Surrender 131

CHAPTER 13: After the Storm Passes: Finding Your New Normal 141

CHAPTER 14: An Epidemic of Fear: Facing Our Mortality 153

CHAPTER 15: Flooded by Comparison: Coming to Terms with Survivor Guilt 165

CHAPTER 16: Surviving Survivorship: Living with Fortitude 181

Postscript 197

Acknowledgments 199

Notes 203

Recommended Reading 207
Quinting to keep swirling sand out of my eyes, I stepped out of the batter’s box. Proudly sporting a red jersey that boasted the logo of our rural Little League sponsor, Riker State Farm, I took a practice swing while imagining sending the ball over the back fence. Glancing toward the bleachers, I saw parents huddled, chatting in small groups.

Their concerned faces told me something was wrong.

The evening had begun like any other warm June evening, but out of nowhere the winds had picked up and the sky had turned black, glowing with a strange greenish haze.

When adult volunteers flagged us to return to the dugout, I glanced over my shoulder to see the coaches huddled with umpires around the pitcher’s mound. As I reached my own parents among all the family members waiting to receive their players, I heard the ump yell, “Game called due to weather,” waving his arms toward the parking lot for everyone to leave the ballpark. Car doors were already
slamming shut as fans without children playing quickly packed up and headed for safety.

The suddenness of the emergency exit was frightening.

The moment my family walked in the front door of our gray split-level home, among the southeastern Illinois cornfields in the town of Oblong, my parents hustled my younger brother, Travis, and me down to the basement. Passing through the living room, my mom grabbed some baseball cards to distract my brother and me from the looming storm. In the basement, my parents flipped over the navy couch where we’d play video games and instructed my brother and me to crawl under it.

We’d been in the basement for about five minutes when the phone rang, and my father picked it up. Hearing the howling winds getting louder, I looked up from reading Ken Griffey Jr.’s stats on the back of the Upper Deck baseball card in my hands to see my father’s brow furrow and the corners of his mouth turn downward.

Hanging up the phone, he announced, “Aunt Kathy called to say a tornado had been sighted just two miles north of here.”

We were staying burrowed down in our makeshift bunker.

A few minutes later, the lights cut out. Clicking on the flashlight my dad kept beside his workbench, we listened to a transistor radio, waiting for word that the storm had passed.

Eventually, through a slim window facing our backyard, we saw the sky begin to lighten. My dad ventured out first
and spotted a tornado in the woods just a mile from our house. Although he could see objects flying through the air at its base, he heard only silence. After watching the tornado ascend toward and then beyond the clouds, he allowed us all to venture outside.

Curious, we all jumped in our old black Dodge truck, lined up four across on the hot, sticky, tan vinyl bench seat, and headed toward the area where the tornado had touched down. Peering outside, wishing the truck had air conditioning, my brother and I could see that the twister's trail of destruction, destroying some things and missing others, had been entirely arbitrary.

Although our family, our home, and our land had been unscathed, we later learned that parts of the nearby town of Newton had been leveled by the two-hundred-mile-per-hour twister. In fact, in the subdivision where my aunt Kathy’s brother lived, a dress—a flimsy cotton dress—had sliced right through a wooden door by sheer force of the wind. From Newton, the twister traveled toward us, later touching down in Oblong.

In the wake of that local disaster, I internalized the idea that when disaster came, I could hunker down, weather the storm, and throw open the storm doors to a sunny sky, resuming the same life that had been interrupted.

Years later, after completing a PhD in counseling psychology; marrying my wife, Kelly; and welcoming our first daughter, Colleen, my family moved to southern Mississippi. We unloaded our boxes just six days prior to Hurricane Katrina’s arrival.
My family and I were some of the lucky ones, fleeing before the worst happened and returning to find our own home mostly intact. But as I traveled back to splintered trees and leveled houses, I was gripped by the way survivors continued to live in the wake of Katrina, especially in terms of their spiritual resources. I threw myself into researching the ways that religion and spirituality served, and in some cases did not serve, survivors of disasters. Over the next five years, I’d go on to research, train, and assist in the aftermath of numerous regional disasters and started consulting on some international projects. Later I took an endowed chair in clinical psychology at Wheaton College, and by the beginning of my second semester, I’d founded the country’s first faith-based academic disaster research center: the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College.

All of this shaped disaster into something I studied and responded to rather than something I experienced. Outside of my research, my life felt like it was finally falling into place. Adding Chloe and Carlee, my wife and I were now the parents of three redheaded, unique, flourishing girls. Kelly was getting ready to pursue a graduate degree in nurse midwifery while working for a local midwifery practice. And I was doing what I loved vocationally, building the institute and expanding its capacity to conduct research and programs to help congregations and communities prepare and care for people in a disaster-filled world.

But disaster didn’t stay within the confines of my research. The summer before beginning my third aca-
demic year, the stomach pain began. When I visited my primary care doctor, he referred me to a specialist who dismissed my concern and sent me home to take some fiber, instructing me to come back if the symptoms worsened. The symptoms did diminish for a period, but a year later the pain resurfaced, and I began experiencing a sharp discomfort in my pelvis and recurring shooting pain in my legs. I returned to my doctor, who immediately ordered several tests.

What I thought was going to be a fairly routine office visit to the doctor and minor health issue turned out to ultimately be a diagnosis of Stage IV colon cancer. At the age of thirty-five, life as I knew it came to a screeching halt.


When I was forcefully inaugurated into the cancer club, of which no one wants to be a member, I ceased to be the researcher collecting data, nodding pastorally with a clipboard in hand, or providing outreach trainings. Suddenly I was at ground zero as the unwelcome storm blew up the life I’d been living, like the crushing tornado that had ripped through Newton.
And that’s where my story begins.

I invite you to share my journey with the hope that you might discover what I did. Though I never would have chosen it, what I learned along the journey that threatened my life ultimately reshaped my soul.
A Walking Disaster
Evacuation Impossible

My Body Was Ground Zero

For weeks, I’d been experiencing sharp pains that shot down my legs. I thought maybe I had a pinched nerve in my back. The pain wasn’t going away, and I started to experience discomfort in my pelvic area and often felt sick to my stomach. I was hoping to get some resolution about what was wrong.

The doctor who’d performed a colonoscopy earlier in the week had assured me, right before I was knocked out for the procedure, that the chances of cancer in someone of my age and health were less than 1 percent. Because I was a young guy without any previous health issues, those odds sounded about right to me. We’d isolate the problem, treat it, and I’d be able to get back up to full speed, personally and professionally.

Married ten years, I was the thirty-five-year-old father of three young girls. It was the end of my second year on the faculty of Wheaton College, and I was energetic about heading the school’s new Humanitarian Disaster Institute I founded. My wife, Kelly, was about to begin working
toward her master’s degree in nurse midwifery, and life in
the Aten household was moving along at full throttle. My
fatigue and pain, unwelcome intruders, would soon be in
our rearview mirror.

Yet as I began to emerge from the fog of the anesthesia
following my procedure, I heard the doctor who’d just per-
formed my colonoscopy informing Kelly that he’d found
cancer.

“Cancer?” I interrupted, only to fall back into
unconsciousness.

Again and again I would fall back under the spell of the
anesthesia, momentarily, only to reawaken and interrupt
the doctor trying to finish breaking the bad news to Kelly.
Seven times in a row I startled awake, not remembering
what I had just heard, and ask, “Cancer?” Though I only
have a memory of hearing “cancer” once, Kelly shared the
absurd routine with me later.

Even if I’d been more lucid, the drug-induced routine
was a telling expression of my mental state. I felt like Bill
Murray in the movie Groundhog Day, reliving the same day
ad nauseam, had it been a horror flick. Whether groggy
or sharp-witted, I simply did not have a category for the
information I was receiving. Hadn’t the wildly unlikely
odds the doctor had shared meant that I’d be fine? Rare,
unfortunate disaster befell other people, not me. And yet,
in that moment, my plans for my life went out the window.

Yes, I was a goal-oriented Type-A person who’d carefully
mapped out the future I saw for myself. But imagining a
future in which we are not afflicted by disaster or crises isn’t

CHAPTER 1