

How I Spent My Summer Vacation Claudia Crawford, MFT

Vacation: “.....**va·ca·tion**  (vā-kā' shən, və-)

n.

1. A period of time devoted to pleasure, rest, or relaxation, especially one with pay granted to an employee.

2. leisure time away from work; devoted to rest or pleasure [syn: holiday]

3.

a. A holiday.

b. A fixed period of holidays, especially one during which a school, court, or business suspends activities.

4. *Archaic* The act or an instance of vacating.

intr.v. **va·ca·tioned**, **va·ca·tion·ing**, **va·ca·tions**

To take or spend a vacation.

[Middle English *vacacioun*, from Old French *vacation*, from Latin *vacātiō*, *vacātiōn-*, *freedom from occupation*, from *vacātus*, past participle of *vacāre*, *to be empty, at leisure*; see *eu-* in Indo-European roots.]

Over the past six years, I had completed (yet another) Masters degree, completed 3000 supervised internship hours, studied for and passed respectively a written and oral state licensing exam (all while working full time) —and then, I stopped smoking, had major back surgery, and changed jobs.

A bit unbelievably, at last, I embarked on a “vacation”, this one particularly unique as it was an extraordinary gift from two especially dear and extremely generous friends—to join them on their yearly trek to Cancun, where they and two other couples had been traveling over a number of years. This year between the three couples and their respective guests, we were a group of ten.

I met them on a Saturday in Cancun. The sun drenched me in warmth, massaged my skin and slowly the tiredness from these last years began to stretch readying to melt away. I read, dared the waves to get me as I allowed the turquoise green water to wash over me, dozed, fading in and out of reality, and in the evening felt alive and social. And so it was for two days.

On the third day, the chatter about a hurricane Wilma seemed to rise above the crashing of the ocean’s waves onto the sand. By all reports, she was not strong and would pass east of us. The chatter’s echo faded in the distant retreating tide, but not the deep angst aroused in me by the intensity of chatter. When we awoke on Wednesday, Wilma had grown from nothing significant to a category 5 hurricane—now on a direct course for the Yucatan, specifically for Cancun, for us.

It was early and I went to Inquire about boats out to the Isle de Mujeres —a journey I’d so looked forward to. I’m used to being “in country” and not too used to being a tourist,

isolated among other tourists. The day trip was to take me out of Cancun's hotel zone to real Mexico. But the winds had already begun to blow and the water was very choppy, with high swells. Sure enough, all boats were cancelled. I turned away, everything looked normal, but it wasn't normal. I felt aimless, as if I were walking in circles.

Denial began to set in. Hard to really grasp what you don't know. Something shifted in my tummy, a tightness pushed against the walls of my stomach, which unknown to me then, was to last for the next 9 days. I thought about other extraordinary life experiences I'd had, like knowing war was coming, waiting for it to arrive, waiting for it to pass. Still, I could not grasp what a hurricane really meant---and no one else seemed to be particularly concerned.

I hopped a bus taking myself way downtown to markets, far as I could get from the "zone" and from the crescendo of collective tension. Wonderful stalls, beautiful crafts and silver work. Delicious people--competent, proud, and welcoming. After roaming, buying, stopping for a beer, I headed back. I arrived to the smashing sound of boards being hammered onto the huge picture size restaurant windows. Now, the ocean's waves were beating the sand, pulling it back, wave and sand receding into the now black gray sea.

Evening came and we went to dinner, all ten of us, pushing our bodies forward against the wind as we walked. There, too, windows were being boarded. People were eating at many tables, seemingly oblivious to the sound of wind above the hammers. For me, time and place seemed to stall. I felt my insides sloshing about. This was not just hearing about or talking about, others somewhere far away in a situation. Suddenly, my fight or flight receptors were alive and unsure which way to move. This was not histrionic drama, this was real and I was vulnerable, I was in harm's way.

There were no plans, there was no central point of communication. Groups of people went about their night of socializing, drinking, just a bit more than usual perhaps, and then to bed—"see you in the morning." What would morning be like I wondered? I dozed on and off but at 2:30 am I awoke and began packing my suitcase. I felt like I was preparing, part of making a plan—for what, I didn't know. But packing kept me busy, packing allowed me to pretend I had some control.

Funnily, I have little memory of Thursday. Lots of intense wind, the palms bending so far their fronds touched close to the ground, and rain, blowing rain, made solid into little needles pelting my skin. All the time, the rumbling angst within, walked with me from one place to another, one conversation to another. At one point, we were told by those "in charge", that we would not be evacuated but would remain in our hotel—"built to withstand a category five hurricane, with its own generator system so that even with the loss of power, we would have electricity and all that comes with it." They described exactly where we were to place ourselves, in the bathroom-dressing area, with the door to the bedroom shut. They told us to fill our bathtubs full as a source of water. They sent up staff with towels to line the floor along the sliding glass doors. In retrospect,

there were no plans for supplying drinking water or minimal food reserves. No preparation for the loss of power--light, electricity, food? Ah yes, "there was a generator, so not to worry."

The waiting began. Wilma was said to be arriving around 1 -2 am. We were eating leftovers at the villa of one of our "gang." The harsh bell of the phone suddenly intruded through the roar of the wind. "Plans are changed, you are being evacuated to a shelter immediately, bring one blanket and a small bag and be downstairs in 10 minutes." It was about 6:30 p.m. Thursday night. Suddenly we were in perpetual motion, smooth dancers balancing dishes to sink, items put away and each party off to his room to gather blanket and shoulder bag—to meet downstairs. My body moved. It grabbed a blanket and my carry-on ready to go from my middle of the night packing. I was thinking I should be considering things I was not, but my mind would not think past the thought. Only my body moved.

We were on the first bus. It moved forward, but also sideways as the wind rushed beneath and through us. Hard to see anything in the dark through the blanket of rain that dropped sideways rather than downward like most rain I'd ever seen.

After about half an hour, I stepped down and off. In front of me was a low, round, solid white stucco structure. We dashed through the pelting rain into this rotunda, now a shelter. It was a large hall, the height of two stories, stucco with 3 arches crossing at the center of the ceiling, a stage filling one area. Written in huge black letters on the wall behind the stage was "Bienvendios Sindicato de Taxistatas." It seems I was in the hall of the union of taxi drivers.

Instinctively, our gang of ten headed for the stage. Immediately we marked off our spots, laying down blankets. Tim and I set ours just on the floor at the foot of the stage, the others on the stage just above us. I looked about and the image of people arriving at a concentration camp filtered through me. I shuttered and shook it off. But that was the sensation. We were being herded, taken without choice, with nothing we needed—water, food—totally dependent on the malevolence of others—if they could defy nature anyway. My gaze moved upward and there encircling the entire shelter, except for directly over the stage, was a ring of large windows!!!! And this was supposed to be a shelter for a hurricane. No preparations had been made.

People were pouring in as bus after bus arrived—hundreds of us-- young honeymoon couples, parents with young children, couples, old and young, groups of guys ready to party, pairs of women traveling together, and other single women? I am not sure, I didn't meet them if they were there. And then in the middle of the swish of bodies settling, blankets being shaken, children crying, calls from one side of the hall to another, all went dark. The overhead fans stopped. There was a collective gasp and then silence. Suddenly the 90 degree heat settled heavily upon us. Unable to see through the black, other senses kicked in. The winds howled, the rain beat down, a musty, mildew smell filled my nostrils. I had no idea where I was, who was "in charge"

and there was nowhere to go. In a nano second, I was head to head, side to side, toe to toe, snore to snore, cough to cough-- among about 250 immediately intimate friends. My soul shivered -- I was utterly alone in the world.

I lay down on my blanket---the cement was cold. I tried not to hear all the movement around me, I tried to breath and let my bones soften into the irregular bumps of blanket on concrete. I dozed off and on, conversing in between with myself, trying to use the skills I preach and teach---let images and thoughts move right through, don't try to block them for they'll keep seeping in, desperate for their moment on screen---so, watch the screen, as a film on the back of your eye lids, let it move from where it enters stage left, and follow it as it drifts off stage right. The images were of people floating on house tops in New Orleans, and then of the rankness and conflict within the superdome. The sounds were the whaling of a child not able to find her parent. The smell was as a man described, rummaging around in dank, contaminated water along Lake Poncharitan. I was flooded with the reality that in disasters real people died real deaths, or watched in horror as another died, carried away by rushing currents or because they were injured and no help came. Suddenly, the film shifted and I was watching images of water filling our union of taxi drivers, growing higher and higher, people rising with the water until there was no space between the water and the ceiling. I watched this film, desperately taking deeper and deeper breaths, trying to allow the intense angst to flow up and out. I must have fallen asleep, in sleep and then out of sleep, never knowing how many minutes had passed. Locating my little red light, during an out of sleep moment, I ventured on a journey that took me over and around hundreds of bodies, to the ladies' room. Six toilets, five working so far---if you used the bucket of water to flush. I wondered back, a different route, hoping to encounter fewer obstacles. As I lowered my body, I talked to the butterflies who seemingly were having a celebration in their new found cave. I had to acknowledge whatever I was feeling, I told myself and simultaneously, I had to keep my feet, heels and all of me on the ground. I drifted again into sleep.

Morning was defined not by light but by movement. People up and about walking, talking. I awoke, not knowing how much time had passed, listening for a quieting of the outside world, the one from which we were hiding. The wind howled, the rain pounded---but surely, since "they" had said the height of the Wilma's wrath would touch down upon us between midnight and 3 am, the worst must be over---we would be back in our hotel by afternoon or evening.

And then began what was to continued over the next five days. The ebb and flow of hope and despair. An announcement by the hotel manager---the storm had slowed down, Wilma's wrath would not reach us until late afternoon--we would definitely be here another night. As if cued in by the conductor, a human vocal swish of unbelieving was released as held breaths gave way to gasping for air.

Cell phones by now were dying, one by one, as people hastily tried to call the travel agent or family one more time to postpone by another day their reservation back. It seemed so reasonable, to make a reservation. Slowly the rings silenced as did the all

too loud voices propelled by anxiety commanding someone to do something. People meandered, as if by moving about they might encounter information. At 6 pm again the manager, apologizing for new news-- Wilma's strength was still always away. Now she was expected to land between 11pm and 3am. Instructions were given for what to do if the windows blew. The plan was logical, but utterly impractical. There would be a "food"--a two by two piece of banana bread with a dab of cream cheese. My tongue touched it sensuously, it was better than the best chocolate mousse.

The air was weighted with the excess of CO2 filling the empty spaces between molecules of anxiety—anxiety multiplied about 300 times. The doors were locked, tape appeared from somewhere and X'd them. But the real dilemma remained the ring of large windows, out of reach of tape or board. The wind now was blowing through every hole and non-air tight windows and doors-- and water was finding its way through and under wherever to the floor. On the stage, paint buckled as the rain brashly found all routes imaginable so as to visit us inside. The ceiling leaked and bodies danced from here to there believing they might elude the tenacious stream of droplets.

As 10 pm neared, the cacophony of sound went silent. Once in a while a child's cry would break the human quiet, challenging nature's crescendo of wind and rain. No one breathed, it seemed. After a few hours of waiting for all hell to break loose, trying to grasp what to do when it did, it seemed that perhaps the most terrible wasn't going to happen. For just a second, we let down our guard. And as if on cue, came the crash--swirling glass and water screaming to the ground. A window had blown. There was a collective scream, then silence, gliding into utter stillness, waiting, and waiting and waiting for the next one. I lay, tightening my body against the hardness under me. The New Orleans movie started up again, this time in 3-dimension. I must have dozed. When my eyes next opened, there was the faint light of dawn, the rush of the winds still sang all around and the pounding rain was strong on top of the pounding inside heads of many going through caffeine withdrawal. Maybe today, we'd get out. Wilma must be passing now, of course, right?

Instead we moved into routines that would mark still three days more. Announcements, Wilma is stalled right over us, Wilma remains stalled-over us, maybe there will be food, there is food-a piece of liverwurst between a piece of bread. Maybe we'll get more water. For breakfast there is a box of frosted cornflakes with Tiggy the Tiger in his orange splendor. Bits here and there. I notice I had little appetite. Anxiety seemed to fill me up.

On Saturday, I should have, according to plan, been homeward bound after a wonderful week of sun and adventure. I could feel myself on my bed at home with Sierra Amira my kitty. I could feel her breath on my skin. I could feel her eyes burrowing into mine, both of us exposed. That was where I was supposed to be, but I was not, and whether or when I might be had absolutely no definition, and therefore did not exist. It was the not knowing, having "no something" to pin my next step on—this unsettled the most rational, grounded, mature parts of me. It permeated the entire time. No one in charge, no one telling us what to do or what would happen, or when. And, in fact, I had no idea

where we were geographically, or what the conditions were out there, or what would be safe or not, or realistic or not, to try, to try in order to regain some control, to take charge and be responsible for my self. I had no control over anything. So, I worked to fix on the reality and in that find a semblance of control over myself. I talked to people, I supported them as they wobbled, I separated myself when I needed space so as to not catch others' anxiety.

That was what I noticed most of all. How contagious anxiety can be because of what people do with their anxiety. They project either what they want to be, or their catastrophic fears----and, then speak them as truth. "We are in a much better place than those who went to the school." Or, "It will pass by morning and we shall be back in the hotel by afternoon, I know." Or, "I got hold of my travel agent. He said I'm on a flight on Saturday and he knows the airport will be open then." Or, "The windows, look at those windows, we're in the worst shelter. There is no way to escape the glass when it falls, and they will all blow you know, with these winds there is no way they won't." Or, "he doesn't know what he's talking about—we need to make decisions. Who wants to come with me and go back to the hotel and see if we would be better off there?" Each time such absolute truths are spoken, what others have not done, or what they are afraid of, or what they are thinking but trying to manage, gets tapped and erupts into his or her own anxiety, which then gets projected out, in words spoken as truth. Anxiety, I discovered, is a most contagious dis-ease.

I watched very carefully what I said. I caught myself once saying that John had told me my reservation was changed and I'd get out. I wanted to believe him. A voice whispered, "it doesn't make sense with what is happening here," but I needed to feel certain so I said something certain, even though it wasn't certain at all—in fact I was to find out later, it was all a lie perpetuated by the airlines in the States because no one wanted to admit they too had no control, not one iota of control over getting us out.

Thursday turned to Friday which turned to Saturday which turned to Sunday. Nurses had been organized to help ailing individuals. A few very scared people as their insulin ran out, others on seriously needed medications who also had finished their supply. On Saturday night the rains slowed as did the winds, although not enough to significantly lower the constant battering of the brain—or to feel safe. But that wonderful manager, wonderful now because he was saying what people wanted to hear---stood amongst us and announced that we would be going back to the hotel the next morning—Sunday. That night I fell asleep, in spite of the wetness seeping into my blanket, to the song of the squishhhhhh ing squeegees as lovely hotel personnel pushed water toward the doors trying to lessen the wetness in which we were all standing, lying, sitting.

Sunday, the rain stopped. We all ventured outside. Nothing was standing—not trees, not the sign on the gas station, not windows in houses or doors on stores. Huge palm trees lay on their sides, blocking the road. All lines were down, electric, telephone. There was no power anywhere. The haunting scene of Jason Robarts wondering after the nuclear explosion flashed on my movie screen. My friend went across the street and a woman asked her if she wanted coffee-----a few minutes later she came back

with a few cups of coffee made by these lovely women who had small gas burners and had not yet run out of gas. Their homes were standing, windows blown out, metal twisted dangling in the wind, but they were fine, they were intrigued and concerned about us, us behind the gate in the hall of the union of taxi drivers.

The ornery energy of days past, blaming comments of husband to wife about why they had come on this vacation, nasty words of embarrassment at children, scared and needing soothing, debate over whether or not to sue the hotel because they had lied about the hurricane and how long we would be in the shelter---- morphed into laughter, gathering things, squeezing out blankets making plans for departure. Suddenly the women who refused to use buckets to flush the toilet were asking advise on how to do it—we had by then only one toilet into which anyone would bravely go. Screaming children were engaged in readying and forgot to cry. Their parents, no longer embarrassed but hopeful, urging them on and even laughing with them.

And then there he was again, the manager, saying what no one's ears could absorb, what we each tried not to hear---that we would not be leaving the shelter today. The roads were impassable, no one knew the condition of the hotel, and on he went, the sound of his voice drifted away as I tried to grasp what he was really saying. Then he announced some possible alternative plans like bussing us four hours south to Merida and waiting there until we could get back—but he had just finished saying the truck with food supplies that was to have arrived the previous night, still had not been able to get through ---and it was traveling the road from Merida to us. Suddenly I began to wonder if anyone in fact knew anything at all. A black shroud descended and in the hush of shock I could feel the mental exercise of the collective masses resetting the time, resetting their view, resetting once again their reality. Some could not. They became belligerent, rude, insulting, intrusive on others, and finally a group stormed out saying they were walking to the hotel. They were returned a bit later by soldiers.

We did leave on Monday afternoon. Our hotel we were told, was fine, water logged but intact. After unloading the truck from Merida, we returned to the hotel with a huge bag of food--spam, tuna, crackers, fritos, and more spam. The bus ride back took about an hour---street lamps with their cement base were lying flung across two lane roads. Skeleton buildings, one story houses, multi-storied office buildings, large stores, small markets, stood hollow and empty. All ground was carpeted in couches, chairs, curtains, pillow, pens, books, all sucked out of these skeletons as their glass windows blew.

As the bus pulled up to the hotel, I was aware of my shorts and t-shirt, looking and feeling like cardboard after five days on me. At first, I felt myself quiet within. We were back. And for about an hour, we experienced a sense of security and relief. Certainly, being back was better. But, the ocean had met the lagoon, and although it had receded, everything was contaminated including the swimming pool. There was no beach—it had disappeared. Waves crashed against the foundation of the hotel. After cleaning my room of all water, which took about an hour, I moved upstairs with my friends—my room was needed for refugees from other hotels and also hotel personnel who could not get to their homes. Our room was 160 steps from the lobby—and the pool—our source for

water to flush the toilet. Slowly, I began to realize the security was fragile, for the infrastructure still was non-existent. There was no food other than in our plastic bags, and water was scarce. The stories of generators were stories, as something did not function between two that needed to connect and the others had been in the basement and were flooded. So, with candles, our bag of food, and water John carried up, we settled in to our new shelter. We ate some left over things that had been in the freezer--like smoked salmon. Oh, were we living high--smoked salmon and tequila.

We awoke assuming there would be information and planes ready to take us all out. A generator outside, a small one, was used to charge cell phones. You signed up for a slot and could charge for 30 minutes. A call to our travel agent confirmed yet a new reservation for me. Falling for the projection, I went off to the informational meeting at 11 am. Suddenly, surrounded by the rising wave of music, singing various versions of projected truth, the butterflies were let loose to again to fly without restraint in my tummy. Hundreds of people moving about, in circles as no one knew anything and everyone was speaking as if they knew everything, exactly. And so the contagious dis-ease of anxiety continued to spread and re-infect over and over again.

It went for three more days. Except for the British. Their representative, the first full day back, camped out in our lobby and by afternoon, they were on a military plane brought in by the British government. We had had no word from our government, not even an acknowledgment of a problem or of the fact that there were 20,000+ Americans stranded in Cancun. And hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, who had lost everything—their homes, their businesses, their jobs.

I couldn't stop and lie down and read and enjoy the sun. I had to be diligent, trying to find out what, where, who, when. And nobody knew what, where, who or when. I wondered, showing up for each informational meeting, leaving without any information. The connection with voices at home provided an anchor. Then isolation was penetrated for minutes as my friend's voice took notes, agreed to make calls, and cheered me on. Yet, once the line was broken, so was the short moment of feeling again in control.

And then, at about 12:30 am on Thursday morning, I was awakened out of short lived deep sleep by banging on the door. I jumped awake, terrified, not sure where I was, the echo of the bangs resonating inside my body. With no security, Gloria yelled not to open the door. As all three of us gathered, we discovered one of our gang at the door. He had walked in terrible dark and wind to tell us that an announcement had been made about airlines, where passengers should go, at what time. He and I were to go to the same place, and be there by 5 am. My friends, to another location later that day. Tim and I agreed we would go right away. I knew if we waited until 5 am, we would never make it on the plane, for thousands would be trying to get out. Sure enough we arrived, number 39 and 40, and an hour later, about 2:30 am, there were at least a thousand people behind us.

My bag had been packed since that night before we were evacuated so I was ready. My friends and I set up communication systems so we could know where each other was,

and off I went into the dark, down 160 steps to a taxi and the La Salle school—somewhere some place downtown. Trust again ---that the taxi driver really knew where it was, that he was really taking us there. Not speaking the language exaggerated the sense of isolation. I would hear voices and words, but to me they were sounds. Like music my ear took in the song, but not the meaning.

Five hours later, still standing in our spots, the airlines personnel arrived, and we began a long process of proving we had arrived on that airline, being herded again, this time onto buses, sitting for a few hours on the bus, waiting for our plane, the one that would land empty and fill with us, to arrive. The airport was closed---so everything was set up especially to deal with us, and ultimately we were to be taken straight to the plane.

It arrived, albeit four hours later than expected—we never quite understood how an empty plane could be late---but it arrived, I boarded with about 250 others and finally, we lifted into the air---I guess, for I had fallen deeply asleep as soon as I was seated on the plane. I awoke sometime later, and looking around, I knew this adventure was over—and barring any unexpected life happenings, I was on my way back into life, into that façade of doing each day, believing I am in control. It is a fragile line, between being in charge and having no say at all.