

GVSU Community Reading Project
***Five Days at Memorial* by Sheri Fink**
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Prologue

- 1) Reflect on your own memories of Hurricane Katrina. Share how you learned about certain events and any people you knew who were touched by the disaster.
- 2) Sheri Fink conducted over 500 interviews to construct this work of narrative journalism. What challenges must she have faced in order to craft this book? What dilemmas of her own do you think she wrestled with while researching and writing?
- 3) The prologue opens with the crux of the life or death issues doctors faced at Memorial Hospital. What questions does the prologue raise for you about Hurricane Katrina? Why do you think doctors like Dr. Pou were ultimately placed in the predicament to prematurely extinguish the lives of their patients? What would you have done given the circumstances? Note: We will engage this “Big Question” again after reading the book.
- 4) Hurricane Katrina raised many “big questions” for our country to engage. How did this storm require Americans to re-think issues of race, class and government? Note: We will engage this “Big Question” again after reading the book.

Chapters 1-3

Readers learn the history of Memorial Hospital. Key doctors are introduced as Hurricane Katrina bears down and finally strikes New Orleans.

- 1) How does learning about the history of “Baptist” shape your view of what happened during Hurricane Katrina?
- 2) What factors ensured that Memorial Hospital did not have the capacity to properly drain water during extreme weather?
- 3) Who was given exemptions from the mandatory evacuation? Why? What other orders given were significant? What “old knowledge” and customs were presented in the book as Hurricane Katrina drew closer?
- 4) Were you surprised to discover that Baptist was one of the last Southern hospitals to submit to integration in 1968? Why or why not?
- 5) We know that Dr. Pou will be a significant figure in this story. What about Fink’s description of her strikes you the most? What are her strengths and weaknesses?
- 6) What were the two major changes in the practice in medicine that took place over the four decades that Dr. Horace Baltz treated patients at Memorial? How would you characterize his perspective on elder care? What historical factors shaped American perspectives on these issues at this time?
- 7) Memorial sustained damage but remained functional on back up power as Hurricane Katrina passes through New Orleans. But, we know that other perils await the doctors and patients in the days to come. How do you feel after reading this part of the book?

Chapter 4

After appearing to dodge a bullet, Memorial prepares for a fifteen-foot storm surge. Rescue efforts and communications between several agencies result in frustration for doctors and nurses. Power loss hampers efforts and patients are triaged for evacuation.

- 1) As Memorial shifts from “assault mode” to “survival mode” we see snap shots of the chaos outside the hospital walls. Why is martial law instated?
- 2) Memorial is instructed to prepare for fifteen feet of water. What advance plans for this level of flooding were discussed after Hurricane Ivan? What conclusions were reached?
- 3) Fink gives us many images to help the reader feel just how terrifying it was to watch the sight of water advancing on the hospital. Which image resonates with you the most? Why? What other images would capture the magnitude of this scene? View the following link for storm surge footage:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Kou0HBpX4A>
- 4) Do you agree with Dr. Robert Wise’s statement, “There’s really no good way to test them [emergency plans] rigorously” (72)? Why or why not? How does the JCAHO decide on appropriate standards? Why were the plans made insufficient to handle Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath? How would you characterize Tenet’s initial response?
- 5) Discuss the decision to prioritize DNR patients last for evacuation and the unforeseeable problems that arose while attempting to bring patients to the rooftop. Why were the LifeCare patients left behind?
- 6) Do you have a sense of the level of danger rising in the city? What do you make of the rumors of violence? What role do you remember the media playing in this tragedy as events unfolded?

Chapter 5

Back up generators fail and exhaustion sets in for the nurses and doctors. DNR (do not resuscitate) patients are given last priority for evacuation. The history and ethics of triage medicine provide context for this decision.

- 1) Rescue efforts intensify when the generators fail, as nurses must ventilate patients by hand. The death count rises and so does the heat. What key decisions kept people alive in this chapter? Which decisions resulted in death?
- 2) Who was the man with the boats calling for rescue in the middle of the night? Why were pets brought to the hospital? How is the Cloverleaf an important part of this story?
- 3) When Mark LeBlanc enters the hospital to save his mother he is taken aback by the tone of resignation among the staff. Is he just viewing the situation from an outsider perspective, as someone who did not spend the past 48 hours lifting patients to the helipad for rescue, or does he have a point?
- 4) Did the priority system for evacuating patients fit within accepted triage practices? Why or why not? Is a utilitarian approach the best? If not, which approach do you think is superior? Discuss the difficulties inherent to practicing triage medicine. Which approach is best for Organ Sharing?

Chapter 6

Memorial's CEO closes the hospital to hurricane victims seeking medical help. Sick animals brought to the hospital for safety are euthanized because pets were not allowed on boats and helicopters. One doctor prescribes increased doses of medicine that hasten death in patients.

- 1) Analyze Karen Wynn's reflections on where her patients went once evacuated: "Somewhere, she thought, somebody out there has this organized, has this under control. She was sure" (153).
- 2) Why did the hospital decide to turn people in need away? Was race a factor in this decision? Why or why not?
- 3) Was it necessary to euthanize the pets left at the hospital? What alternatives existed given the chaos?
- 4) Dr. Cook's views in this chapter are sharply contrasted with nurse Kathy Green's. Is it possible to hold the view that Merle Lagasse is dying of cancer AND that she is somebody's mother? Why or why not?
- 5) Mark and Sandra evacuate Vera LeBlanc as many others wait. What factors continue to plague communications during this disaster?

Chapter 7

Family members of the seriously ill are forced to evacuate. The hospital operates in "emergency mode" and nurses are told not to give patients IV fluids or usual medicines. The open conversation about euthanasia comes out and some patients are injected with life hastening medicines. The last living patients leave the hospital.

- 1) Why were devoted daughters Angela McManus and Kathryn Nelson instructed to leave their gravely ill Mothers? Specifically, what was Angela told about her mother's pending evacuation?
- 2) Why did the SWAT team show up? Why did they leave? How does this brief scene help you understand the chaos in New Orleans? What did you make of the various reports about the shape of the city at this point?
- 3) How was the pharmacy operating? Why were some doctors suspending IV fluids and regular meds where others were maintaining basic care?
- 4) Why did the small group of doctors decide to meet? What decisions were made at this gathering? At the official gathering in the morning?
- 5) Finally, the open conversation about euthanasia comes out. What side does Dr. Deichmann take? Can you tell that Susan Mulderink thinks? Dr. Pou? Dr. Cook? What are your thoughts?
- 6) What tensions arise between caring for pets and caring for people? Do you think that somehow euthanizing pets made it easier for some of the medical staff to accept euthanizing patients? Later boats allowed the evacuation of pets, making the earlier deaths senseless.
- 7) How do the emails cited in this chapter help the reader understand perspectives from outside the hospital?
- 8) How are you feeling as the last of the patients who will leave Memorial alive load onto the helicopters?

Pause

Before reading the second half of the book, reflect on the differing perspectives given in Part One. Considering the entire situation, which of the following would have done the most good? Better disaster planning for hospital staff, significant equipment improvements, more government assistance, or other investments? If you could only fund ONE big idea before the next hurricane season, what would it be? Why?

Chapter 8 – Part One (231-271)

Readers gain a wider view of New Orleans following the hurricane and investigations begin as allegations of wrongdoing surface. Legal maneuvering unfolds on all sides and the media begins their own inquiries into the high death count at Memorial.

- 1) The second half of the book “The Reckoning” opens with snippets of differing perspectives from those outside of Memorial hospital. How do you feel while reading these snapshot accounts? Which ones resonate the most for you? Why?
- 2) How did the final count of patient deaths at Memorial Hospital compare to other health care facilities?
- 3) What would Tenet have to show to demonstrate no wrongdoing with regard to patient deaths?
- 4) Discuss the other accusations arriving to the attorney general’s office. Specifically, discuss the details of St. Rita’s nursing home and compare the situation with Memorial.
- 5) How were families informed about the deaths of their loved ones by Tenet? What happened to the patients evacuated by Tenet busses and helicopters?
- 6) Discuss how Dr. Pou’s “defense camp” unfolded and what she must have felt during the initial part of the inquiry.
- 7) Discuss the significance of the initial interviews in this case conducted with Mendez and Robichaux. What did Special Agent Virginia Rider learn about the case on the search within Memorial?
- 8) What do the investigators learn from family members of the deceased? From the autopsy? Why is midazolam so important to this case? Morphine?
- 9) Discuss Butch Schafer’s mantra, “Don’t. Get. Emotionally. Involved” (265), taking into consideration his personal situation.
- 10) Dr. Bryant King’s perspective is very strong and he shares it freely with many people. How damaging do you think his testimony will be to Dr. Pou?
- 11) Analyze Tenet’s obligations to Memorial employees post hurricane Katrina compared with other neighboring institutions. And, discuss what would count as “desertion” given the circumstances.

Chapter 8 – Part Two (274-331)

The investigation stalls now that key players, under legal counsel, are advised not to offer too much information. Readers learn about the nuances of end-of-life treatment and consent. The story continues to garner national attention.

- 1) Discuss the New York Times Magazine’s ethics columnists statement, “Why weren’t there plans to cope with these patients when you knew a storm was coming? Sometimes the ethical—the most important ethical question sometimes is the one you ask not at the moment of crisis, but the duty you have to anticipate certain kinds of crises and avoid them” (375).
- 2) How is the media shaping public opinion throughout this story? What role *should* the media play?
- 3) Describe Gina Isbell’s contribution to the testimony. Analyze her mental state following the hurricane.
- 4) How does Schafer view the less-than-forthright testimony from employees after they consult with Tenet’s attorneys? How does Rider view this issue? Who do you agree with on this issue? Why?
- 5) What effect do the subpoenas have on the investigation? How is jurisdiction decided in this case?
- 6) Describe John Thiele’s perspective of the storm and their circumstances at Memorial. How was he able to ultimately feel it was right to smother a man?
- 7) Discuss the various interpretations and nuances of end-of –life preferences in the book that take into account religion, consent and medical conditions.
- 8) Analyze the statement that follows Ray Culotta’s testimony: “Moral and legal culpability for the deaths rested on the wisps of contrast between wanting, foreseeing, and intending death” (303).
- 9) What circumstances forced Dr. Pou to stop performing surgeries? What effect did this have on her patients?
- 10) Forensic pathologist, Cyril Wecht, is taken off the case due to his alleged financial wrongdoing. What impact do you think this will have on the case? How strong is the case now that investigators have eyewitnesses Kristy Johnson and Dr. John Skinner?
- 11) Why does Butch Schafer refer to the hospital’s major players as “uppity-ups”? Who was responsible at Tenet for the decision making process to give lethal doses to patients?
- 12) What information was still missing when Agent Rider is told about the impending arrest of Dr. Anna Pou? Why was she being treated as a flight risk?

Chapter Nine – Part One (332-380)

Dr. Pou is arrested. Forensic pathologists familiar with the case meet. The first anniversary of Katrina approaches and lawyers continue to file petitions in the names of the Memorial and LifeCare dead.

- 1) Why does Fink choose to share the story of James O’Bryant with the reader s in such detail?
- 2) What stood out to you with regard to Pou’s arrest? What were you feeling as she was taken to jail. How must she have felt?
- 3) Just looking at Foti’s press conference and the response by Pou’s lawyer, Rick Simmons, on what points will innocence or guilt be determined?
- 4) There was plenty of blame to go around in the aftermath of the storm. One fact that came to light was that, “Most of the worst crimes reported at that time never happened” (347). Discuss the importance of this.
- 5) When it came down to it, “what mattered most and had the greatest immediate effects were the actions and decisions made in the midst of a crisis by individuals” (348). How does one develop the skills necessary to provide leadership during a crisis?
- 6) Discuss how others close to the scene perceived the arrests.
- 7) What did the meeting of forensic pathologists reveal? How do Michael Morales and DA Jordan come into the picture? What do they each have to gain/lose through this case?
- 8) How do you feel about the slew of legal actions filed by families, workers, etc.?
- 9) The one-year anniversary news coverage of Hurricane Katrina helps the reader see how events unfolded at other health care facilities. How does this impact your view of Memorial nurses and doctors? Of Tenet?
- 10) Why did Charity Hospital fare much better during the hurricane? What lessons exists in this example for disaster training and planning?

Chapter Nine – Part Two (381-432)

Dr. Pou receives support from the community and the AMA as she faces charges. Readers learn a brief history of arguments for and against euthanasia. The media continues to shape public opinion.

- 1) What is the rule of double effect? How is it critical in this case?
- 2) Read an excerpt from the *60 Minutes* show referenced in the book. Square this narrative with the book you are reading. Was it fair? Why or why not? <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/was-it-murder/>
- 3) Frank Minyard’s testimony will be critical in this case. Why does he choose to meet with Dr. Pou following the CBS airing of *60 Minutes*? How is this case causing people to become entrenched in one side or the other? Were you surprised upon reading his determination published in the New Orleans daily newspaper?
- 4) Dr. Horace Baltz asks, “Was there some inherent flaw in our leadership?” (390). Discuss the concept of leadership and its role in how the events at Memorial unfolded.

- 5) Why is it important that Fink includes information about high-profile murders and the murder rate in New Orleans?
- 6) View the episode of *Boston Legal* and its possible impact on Dr. Pou and her case. <http://www.tvland.com/episodes/mxacxe/boston-legal-angel-of-death-ep-055>
- 7) How do the historical perspectives offered on pages 396-405 impact your view on mercy killing? What factors seem to sway thinkers from one side to the other? Are any perspectives missing from this short historical lesson?
- 8) Why did Dr. Pou's attorney have such a difficult time finding useful guidelines from the AMA on comfort in care during disasters? What is Arthur Caplan's opinion of what happened at Memorial? What did the AMA decide following Hurricane Katrina?
- 9) How did the disaster preparedness seminar and dinner dance fundraiser help shape your understanding of Dr. Pou? Discuss the role of religion in this part of the book.
- 10) How are the terms, "beyond emergency care," "reverse triage" and "proactive defense" important to Pou's case?
- 11) Who are the Danziger Bridge Seven and how is this case similar to the allegations against Dr. Pou?

Chapter Nine – Part Three (433-462)

The grand jury hears the case against Dr. Pou and declined to indict on every charge. Readers learn that Pou continued to practice surgery and also became a popular lecturer on ethics in disaster medicine.

- 1) How are nurses Cheri Landry and Lori Budo faring? Karen Wynn? What did you think of their testimony before the grand jury? Whose testimony was conspicuously absent from the grand jury proceedings?
- 2) Discuss the fate of John Thiele. How do you think that Pou felt about his situation compared to hers?
- 3) What are your feelings surrounding the grand jury's decision in Pou's case? What about the similar cases? And, the impact on Attorney General Foti?
- 4) What do you make of Dr. Pou's false claims in subsequent speaking engagements? Is this harmless embellishment or knowing deceit?
- 5) Engage the questions posed on Page 453: "What was it about death in the United States? Why did it seem like Americans were so unprepared for it when it occurred?" What attitudes about death exist outside the United States?
- 6) Reflect on the differing opinions offered following the grand jury decision. In your opinion, was justice served? Why or why not?
- 7) Discuss the role of religion in the book. Where do we see the influence of religion in people's personal beliefs? In the history of ideas surrounding end of life care? In the law?

Epilogue

- 1) Put yourself in the shoes of Sheri Fink in NYC as Hurricane Sandy draws near. What changes did take place in disaster planning post Hurricane Katrina? What remains unaddressed? Why? How does this story impact your feelings about the AMA?
- 2) What does the case of Nathalie LeBrun teach us about triage medicine?
- 3) What did Dr. Evans learn from Hurricane Katrina to help her navigate the dilemma of the six power outlets? What questions remain?
- 4) Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Maryland's approach to disaster planning. What does Fink mean when she says that, "Sometimes individual medical choices, like triage choices, are less a question of science than they are of values" (481).
- 5) How does this story impact your feelings about the AMA? The justice system?
- 6) Do you agree with the statement by Roger Bernier, "I'm not sure we believe in democracy in America" (481)? Why or why not?
- 7) It seems that no policy can replace swift thinking and a steady stream of hope in a crisis. To quote Fink, "Life and death in the immediate aftermath of a crisis most depends on the preparedness, performance and decision making of the individuals on the scene" (486). How can your education prepare you for making the right decisions in such a situation? What wisdom does this book offer? What will you do with it?

