

# The Bright Side of Hurricanes

**I**T'S HARD TO BELIEVE THAT hurricanes have a positive reason for being, but I think they're as corrective as they are destructive. To anyone who doubts this, think of the wisdom of the poet Bob Marley. He said, in song, "When one door closes, another opens." I quote that often enough, but even more frequently, "Time will tell." Marley's music is sprinkled with positivism and the belief that "every little thing is gonna be all right," but we must wait and see.

I learned a lot about hurricanes living in Jamaica and listening to Bob Marley, whose very life was a hurricane of sorts. But, as they say in the Parish of St. Mary, "After the storm there must come a calm." Those of us who went through the maelstrom of Florida storms in the summer of 2004 find ourselves reaching for quotes of all kinds. Interestingly, to me, most of them turn out to be positive.

A friend said, "I learned to be wary of hurricanes, but I also learned to be thankful for neighbors." For without one you would not know the other. Hurricanes bring human beings closer together.

Hurricane Charley. He took a real bite out of our paradisiacal existence



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here on Pine Island. But, all in all, and it being over, I have to say there were many mysterious harmonies that I harvested from Charley's fury. Our mango tree, for instance—the same one that produced the most delicious Tommy Atkins fruit—Charley brought this lovely tree to the ground. I felt sad over the loss of that tree, for it was a friend. But I can still gaze

at that tree today—well, the youngster that came up from the parent root—and I see a productive mango-bearing, resilient tree that knows a little something about bending at the knees. I learned that lesson myself clearing the dozens of down trees in our yard and repairing our house.

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Charley killed off the possum haws that grow by our pool, and I thought I'd never see them again. But here they are, two years later, great big, lolling-tongued oafs with green floppy ears and great red, waxy-looking petals that bring Christmas a little early. The milky petals of the haws turn crimson in November. These ruby-eyed florets would make a fine wreath, but we leave them where they loll, watching with delight as they toss in the wind.

We had a few haw plants prior to Charley—now we have 50. Nature passed along a dauntless message that is also in a song of Marley's— "Live if you want to live!" An exhortation equal to any I know.

Before Charley, we had a few scattered stalks of goldenrod. Now our mosquito ditch is dotted with them. Before you run for your Roundup, hear me out: Goldenrod is a weed that I used to be extremely allergic to. The sight of it would start me sneezing. One day, an acquaintance who practices holistic medicine said, "I can't imagine why the flower would go against you. I can imagine why you might go against the flower, but not the other way around. For, after all, the plant is ignorant of you."

Indeed, why was this particular flower an enemy? I learned that goldenrod isn't a sinus-attacking roadside weed, as I had thought. It's just a flower. But what a flower!

I did some reading on the subject and as it turns out, goldenrod is a community of flowers all arranged

on the single branch of a solitary stem. Tiny floral tufts make up a community of florets. Most surprising, goldenrod rarely produces what is known as hay fever. Why? Because the flowers I describe have sticky rather than dusty pollen. Furthermore, this pollen isn't wind-borne.

So, you may be asking, what causes the sneezing?

The answer is ragweed, also a roadside resident, but one that has a dusty, wind-carried pollen, which does indeed tickle the schnoz.

For years I have blamed the wrong wildflower. And it took Charley to make this obvious to me because Charley reseeded the goldenrod. After reading up on this poor scapegoat flower, I miraculously quit sneezing. And now I can admire these golden autumn torches all day if I want to.

**W**E ALSO HAVE CHARLEY TO thank for many wild vines growing on our land. Some are pretty, like the Virginia creeper. Some pretty ugly, like the potato vine. The Virginia creeper adorns the gnarled pines that Charley turned to skeletons. But the synchrony came later—the pines assumed strange, lugubrious shapes. Shrouded in vines, they look like highwaymen on a full-moon night holding up a silver coach of clouds. Well, it's easy to wax poetic about the way old Charley prettied up the place. The day after, it looked like a wasteland. But time did tell another tale; we waited as paradise grew new clothes.

Months after Charley, I noticed we had horsetails sprouting up. Some of these have grown six feet tall. Their stalks resemble a little Australian pine, but horsetail plants go back to the Paleozoic era. To me, it is curiously reassuring to see a plant that shaded dinosaurs. It's a nuisance to some—a volunteer Charley weed—but for me, these are short-lived friends. By late autumn they've lost their horse feathers and turned to dry sticks.

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And then, come spring, they’re back horsing around again.

Charley rearranged the lilies that grace our pond, too. They ended up in bunches. Over time these conglomerate plants formed islands. And this summer, for the first time, the islands actually sprouted grass. My wife and I have named the islands according to their shape. One is Elephant Island, another is Creep-Up Island because it inches onto the land each day and quite soon will be all the way on our footpath.

Sometimes my wife, Lorry, gets irritated with how positive I am about all these things. It’s hard to talk about Katrina being benign, she points out, and I certainly agree. I do admit to chaos and to the speculation that global warming is worsening the environment. But just the same, I believe in time.

Time will tell, Bob Marley said, and his eldest daughter, Cedella, says “strongend” instead of weekend. I like to say “liveline” rather than deadline because it sounds and feels better to me to say it that way. But it’s all in the way you look at it. My wife reminds me that right after Hurricane Charley, we found a set of teeth from a barber’s trimmer driven into our almond tree. “What’s so positive about that?” she asks.

“Have you looked at that tree lately?”

She shakes her head, wondering what I’m up to.

“Well, it’s the *tallest* almond tree on our street.”

She laughs at me. “It’s the *only* almond tree on our street.”

“Yes, but nature’s generous and soon there will be more.” And before she says, “How do you know?” I say, “Time will tell.” †