

# **ARE MONSTERS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER?**

**By Linda María Rodríguez**

This past Monday marked the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11. I watched the remembrance ceremony from NYC and was overwhelmed with grief as family members read out loud the victims' names. I remember well that day. The fear, shock, disbelief, helplessness, and also anger. Victims of “natural” disasters also go through a myriad of feelings. Yes, this year September 11 fell on a particularly difficult Monday.

## **HURRICANES AS MONSTERS**

Just the week before Hurricane Harvey had flooded parts of Texas: Images of seniors up to their waist in dirty water. Premature babies being evacuated to cities with functioning hospitals. Thousands of homes and the memories that they held within their walls utterly gone. Young men electrocuted. Whole families being swept away in the torrents of water.

And just days before September 11, Hurricane Irma devastated the Caribbean. The first images came out of Barbuda and the man who had taken the photos said on CNN that it was like a disaster movie, mothers hiding their children in bathroom cabinets, running for cover in the middle of a Category 5 hurricane. But this was not a Hollywood movie. It was a very grim reality for all those that lived through the storm that had broken all known records. On TV meteorologist and newscasters and even President Trump commented on the unprecedented size and force of Irma. It was a monster!

At first we didn't have the full picture of the destruction and chaos. But I kept scouring the internet and TV for news. Some refugees began to arrive in Puerto Rico for medical treatment. The local authorities welcomed them and transferred them to hospitals in the San Juan area even though all our medical facilities are understaffed as hundreds of doctors have left the island because of the ongoing financial crisis. Other well-known refugees, as Sir Richard Branson, eventually also came to Puerto Rico to settle into the hotels in the Condado area where there is running water and electrical power although many on the island, including my parents who are in their '70's, still are without electricity.

## **PREPARE FOR THE HURRICANE**

On Wednesday, September 6<sup>th</sup> Hurricane Irma's eye passed just north of Puerto Rico. It was a chillingly close call for us. An outer band, which felt like a tornado, had knocked out the electricity in my neighborhood during the early afternoon. My house has solar panels and a generator plus we had began stocking up on gasoline days before. So during the storm I continued watching the news. One of the worst feelings during a hurricane is not knowing what is developing around you.

Atop my house I also have an enormous tank of water. Plus as Irma approached I filled up buckets, the bathtub and two enormous trashcans with water. I have some idea what the aftermath of a major hurricane looks like, and water is one of the essential elements to keep going after you wake up to the devastation around you. It's not only drinking water you need, but water to wash up and water to flush toilets. It's not pretty.

## **IN THE EYE OF THE HURRICANE**

Let me take you back to September 21, 1998: Hurricane Georges taught me to always be ready. It also taught me to genuinely be afraid. The eye of Hurricane Georges hit Puerto Rico head on as a Category 3. It was late afternoon and the beginning of a very long night. I had a radio and batteries. Terrified voices started to communicate through the darkness and driving rain. They spoke of tornadoes. And I'm

very afraid of tornadoes. The eye was slowly crossing the island from East to West and tornadoes were forming along the route of destruction. When the eye reached the western side of Puerto Rico, Georges stopped right over where I was living. Suddenly I was in the center of the vortex.

I immediately recognized the phenomena because my grandmother Isabel had told me about hurricanes. I know you are not supposed to, but I had to do it. I went out of my apartment and walked in the eye of the hurricane. It was deadly silent. I looked up and clearly saw the stars shining in the night sky above. Then I rushed back into my apartment and laid down for some rest on a soaking mattress (because horizontal rain makes it through any type of window). I fell asleep until the back side of the hurricane roared up again. Although I know in my heart I was in the center of the hurricane, some people say the eye split into two horrific whirlwinds as Georges came on land on the eastern edge and moved over El Yunque, the sacred mountain for the first inhabitants of Puerto Rico, the Taínos.

The Taínos didn't think of hurricanes as monsters but beheld them as the appearance of a powerful god, Juracán. In the center of the Juracán rides an angry female spirit, Guabancex. Some say this female spirit would appear when Mother Earth needed to be defended against a conspiracy of Air, Fire and Water. It's interesting that now there is a conspiracy against documented news and facts related to global warming. And the more some politicians deny humanity's role in causing extremely dangerous weather, it seems Juracán and Guabancex's cries grow stronger.

## THE POLITICS OF HURRICANES

We are thankful in Puerto Rico to have been spared the worst of Hurricane Irma's fury. But as this terrifying hurricane approached, anxiety on the island grew and grew. Adding to this anxiety was the thought that we would not receive any federal aid after the devastation. Where did this idea come from? President Trump's tweets.

Trump has been very adamant about “NO BAIL OUT FOR PUERTO RICO” of any kind, not even for humanitarian reasons. He clearly tweeted out his sentiments last April when a block grant for Medicaid needed to be approved by Congress. At that time he said: ***“Democrats are trying to bail out insurance companies from disastrous #ObamaCare, and Puerto Rico with your tax dollars. Sad!”*** And he added, ***“The Democrats want to shut government if we don't bail out Puerto Rico and give billions to their insurance companies for OCare failure. NO!”***

Personally I nearly died of anxiety as Hurricane Irma approached the island. I didn't sleep for nights or if I slept, my dreams were vivid and un-restful: Strangers, lost and scared, all around me. My dog, Captain Morgan, drowned in a pool of water. Somebody grabbing me, violently twisting my head back and shaving off all my hair.

And I became a somnambulist, walking around my house in the dark, checking doors and windows, doing loads of laundry at 4 AM trying to get everything washed before we would be without power for weeks or months. Because these are the very non-glamorous realities that follow these super storms that we feed with all our practices that continue to warm Mother Earth and our atmosphere.

I've had some close encounters with Juracán and Lady Guabancex. They are very angry at the present time and getting angrier. But they still can be appeased with the help of some fact-driven leadership and thoughtful actions. Hurricanes are not the monsters. It's those who don't act responsibly who will be remembered for their monstrosity.