A Lost Tree’s Lesson

The locust tree toppled, leveling one day this past fall by ceaseless, gusting winds, its roots undoubtedly loosened from ground super-saturated by days of rain. There the locust sat stretched out in our side yard, looking much bigger than it did when it was standing. Peering out a window at it through the dreary rain-drenched skies, my wife and I felt like we’d lost a family member. That first spring after we moved into our house several years ago, we thought the tree was dead. While other trees sprouted leaves and blossomed, the locust tree’s gnarled branches remained empty-handed. We waited. And waited. Finally, weeks after the others, it came to life. In the following years, it was the same story. We always waited for the locust to liven up the yard and let us know that it had embraced spring.

While contemplating the locust tree’s fallen fate, I surveyed the nearby countryside, looking for other trees taken out by the high winds of that day. Down the road, an old maple had lost part of its trunk and a pile of branches. But that was all I noticed, making me wonder how the locust had given in. After all, in fall 2002 and spring 2003, we were hit by two ice storms. Trees cracked, crashed, and crumbled. Limbs were scattered everywhere. Those storms thinned the locust of some of its tired branches, but didn’t claim it. We felt fortunate that it survived, thankful for its resilience.

Now, thanks to the help of a chainsaw-wielding friend, all that remains is a stump. That part of the yard looks empty to me and the skyline is forever changed, but it also gives me perspective. More trees could have been wiped out—the situation could have been much worse. That’s what I keep reminding myself, and it isn’t difficult to accept after witnessing all the natural disasters that attacked the globe in the past few months. What’s one tree amid the lost lives and catastrophic destruction wrought by hurricanes, earthquakes, mudslides, wild fires, and floods? Our story on Hurricane Katrina (page 34) provides a glimpse of what students, alumni, and others endured. It’s heartening to know that when so many people are in dire need and depending on others for their very survival, we are willing to lend a hand, whether we’re helping a neighbor, a Gulf Coast resident, or an unknown person on the other side of the globe.

Despite the hard luck and devastation, there are always lessons to be learned in trying times. We’ll never escape natural disasters. There’s no stopping Mother Earth when she decides to stage a revolt. All we can do is, hopefully, be prepared, and react with compassion. Ultimately, we can gain a stronger sense of who we are and how important it is for us to understand the natural world and our place in it. And whether it’s a fallen tree in the yard or an area swamped in floodwaters, it’s a powerful reminder that the forces of nature can upend us in an instant and we have no control over the matter—only the will of our spirit to deal with the consequences.

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Syracuse University Magazine (USPS 009-049, ISSN 1065-884X) Volume 22, Number 4, is an official bulletin of Syracuse University and is published four times yearly: spring, summer, fall, and winter by Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244. It is distributed free of charge to alumni, friends, faculty, and staff. Periodical postage paid at Syracuse, NY, and additional mailing offices.

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On the Cover: U.S. Navy sailors search a flooded New Orleans neighborhood for Hurricane Katrina survivors. U.S. Navy photo by Photographer’s Mate 2nd Class Michael B. Watkins ’05, a Mississippi native and graduate of the Newhouse School’s Military Visual Journalism Program.