

Your Personal Coach

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“Forewarned is forearmed” should be a mantra for those of us living in fragile areas by the edge of the sea. And with hurricanes, we are certainly forewarned. Unlike tornados that give about a nanosecond’s warning, nature herself -- and cable news networks – warn us to get our proverbial ducks in a row before vicious winds and torrential rains blast us.

Like most of my neighbors along the North Carolina coast and especially those who experienced Isabel two years ago, I spent days last week glued to The Weather Channel as the storm experts gauged the agonizingly sluggish approach of Hurricane Ophelia. I assembled my hurricane kit – fresh batteries, two – count ‘em two – weather radios, scanner, extra flashlights, camping lamps, an old fashioned phone sans a cordless handset, and a percolator coffeepot that brews a nice cup of java on the grill. Our friend James helped us board up three big bay windows that are a perfect target for flying tree limbs. Like an old fashioned barn-raising and just as quickly, other friends helped us lug deck furniture inside. We tied up everything else in the yard that didn’t move. After much study, we figured out how the generator works and gassed her up. We pre-cooked a big pot of chili, baked cookies (can’t have enough of those during a hurricane), and assembled a supply of non-perishable food that could last six months. Fifty pounds of dry dog food and enough bottled water to float a boat were standing by. After a day or more of preparation, with copies of our homeowners and flood insurance policies in a safe, dry place, we moved the cars to higher ground. We were ready.

And then we waited. And waited. And waited. We watched the news as our neighbors to the south – Topsail Beach, Atlantic Beach – got clobbered by this slow moving category one hurricane.

Sitting in a darkened room (that plywood really cuts out the light) and checking the computer models for Ophelia’s trajectory on the NOAA website, I felt proud of just how exquisitely prepared we were for this big blow. “Dig your well before you’re thirsty,” says an old Chinese proverb. “Don’t go to the fishpond without a net,” advises a Japanese legend. Miguel De Cervantes reminds us, “To be prepared is half the victory.” “Expect the unexpected,” says Bear Bryant. “You gotta be ready for the fastball,” warns Ted Williams. Well we were ready for the fastball or anything else. And we waited. And that’s when I started to go stir crazy. If I hadn’t been waiting, I could have used my time productively. I could have finished my new book proposal, balanced my checkbook, returned emails that have been accumulating, watched a movie, or taken a nap. But I found that I couldn’t do anything because, well, I was waiting. For Ophelia. For Godot.

“What about those ants?” I yelled during the middle of Jim Cantore’s report from the Nags Head pier. “Get a grip,” I was told. “You know that Aesop fable? I think it’s important” I cried back as I rummaged through my books of legends and teaching stories.

The Ants were spending a fine winter's day drying grain collected in the summertime. A Grasshopper, perishing with famine, passed by and earnestly begged for a little food. The Ants inquired of him, “Why did you not treasure up food during the summer?” He replied, “I had not leisure enough. I passed the days in singing.” They then said in

derision: "If you were foolish enough to sing all the summer, you must dance supperless to bed in the winter." Ouch!

"See! It's important and wise to be prepared," I called out.

And then by some incredible luck, grace itself, or an invisible steering current, Ophelia took a little jog to the east. We waited under overcast skies for the blow that – thankfully -- never came. Ophelia bypassed the northern Outer Banks as she rumbled her way north to pay a visit to Cape Cod. We pulled the plywood off the windows, put our gear away, moved the cars back home, counted our blessings, and watered the plants that hadn't seen a drop of rain in weeks.

The teasing of Ophelia has the potential to make us complacent. All that work, all that preparation for naught. But we can't always count on luck or steering currents. So now, I've got my eyes on Phillipe. If he's coming our way and he's a big boy – say a category three or worse – I'm outta here. If he's a category two or below, I'll, once again, pull out my stuff, board my windows, plan for the worst and hope for the best. But I'll be ready for him. After all, who wants to dance supperless to bed in the winter just for passing the days singing in the summer?

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