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## Finding balance between work and family after a difficult story

By Vincent Laforet, The New York Times

One the great things that *The New York Times* offered its staff upon their return from covering Katrina, was the chance to go see a counselor who specializes in debriefing journalists who return from particularly difficult assignments. This story hit me harder than anything I've ever covered, and I was happy to have such an opportunity - especially since it was free.

I have no formal training in the area, and far from an expert - but I just thought I could share some of the basic pieces of advice I was given with the community at large. The suggestions you'll find below are so basic - that they may seem almost too simple. But I can tell you that having done this for close to 15 years, I've had to learn them the hard way and



Photo by Vincent Laforet / The New York Times

Smoke-filled dawn breaks over the flooded city of New Orleans on Saturday, September 3, 2005.

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that I know that I would have benefited from knowing many of these things earlier.

First - when you cover a war, famine, or any assignment that is particularly difficult, although your first instinct will be to come home ASAP to see the family you most dearly miss - that is likely not the best thing to do.

Pat Drew <http://www.patdrew.org> / the counselor that I spoke with told me that perhaps the single best thing I could do would be to take a few days off to myself. She suggested I go on a mini-vacation - a few days or however long it takes.

To do something I really enjoy (in my case scuba diving) or some repetitive task of some sort (such a painting a house or something where you can let your mind get a little lost.) This will help you either process what you just went through - or just to let it go. This is key. Although it may seem like the single most selfish thing to do given that your family has been without you for so long and that your spouse likely deserves as much, if not more of a vacation than you do - in the long run this may be the best thing for your relationship.

Going straight home is my natural instinct. My wife and son are the only thing that keep me going when things get real rough. And I miss them terribly. Yet going straight home is not necessarily fair to them for two reasons:

1. They don't know what you went through, can't relate, and don't really understand how to deal with they way you may be feeling.
2. You don't want them to know what you went through, don't want to expose them to the negative energy or stress you were exposed to either and probably need to time to sleep in for a few days and decompress - so being home in that state may not make much sense.

Which brings me to the second piece of advice that Pat Drew gave me: It may not be the best idea for you to talk about what you went through with your



spouse/partner, because they're not trained to deal with it. You may come to resent them for not being able to grasp the

"magnitude" of what you went through, and they may not be ready or able to help you, let alone understand what you've gone through. So take your time. Don't hesitate to seek the help of a professional.

I did want to share the following anecdote:

When I flew down to the Midwest in preparation for Hurricane Rita to meet the helicopter pilots that I had originally flown with for Hurricane Katrina - I stayed with one of them at their homes. And what I saw was a mirror image of what I had experience years ago with my wife when I had just begun going to these types of assignments, or with what I have seen my friends/colleagues go through themselves.

So I thought I'd share some of these patterns with you so that you would be able to recognize them in case you happened to go through the same thing:

The pilot had come home to a hero's welcome. He hadn't just been flying photography runs during the hurricane, but he also rescued a number of people and therefore the local television station was there when he got home and the local paper also did a piece on him.

He and the other pilot were given awards at city hall. All of his buddies wanted to share in his glory and for well over a week he was being taken out to dinner and drinks - deserving every bit of attention he got.

Of course this meant that his wife wasn't getting much attention and she really wasn't getting any ticker-tape parade for having taken care of their four children all by her self during the hurricane and now that he was home and out having fun.

While he was out flying around like "GI Joe" for a few weeks - she was all alone running after the kids (which to her probably makes covering a hurricane sound like fun relative to what she had to go through.)

The point here is - no one is at fault. But both

**Photo by Vincent Laforet / The New York Times**

4-year-old Clara Anisha Brown grasped onto volunteer Chad Meaux as they made their way through the flooded streets of New Orleans after she and her family were rescued from St. Bernard, LA after 3 days without food and water.

parties need to know the following:

The more he decided to agree to interviews and to go out with friends - the better it was for him, his reputation and business. Yet at the same time that meant more time away from his family.

His wife understandingly wanted more time with him.

At one point I heard her say, within seconds of being introduced to me for the first time, and while there were four other strangers around us:

"Well I haven't had a chance to spend an hour with my husband in days but I guess I'll just have to wait a little longer..."

You could take this statement the wrong way, but it's just a cry for attention on her part. The problem is that it only makes him more likely to over compensate by spending more time with his guests, perhaps spurred on by that comment. It's a vicious circle and could be avoided if they did the following:

A. Perhaps he could have taken some time off before returning home.

B. He should find a better balance between the time he spends with friends and his family.

C. She somehow could find just a little bit more patience to give him (even though she'd already given him plenty during his time away) so that he could come to terms with everything before he returned to normalcy.

I mention this because any attempt on her part to pull him closer to her may only help to distance him more. It's a lot easier to come home to a hero's welcome and to be asked by everyone to repeat your "war stories" over



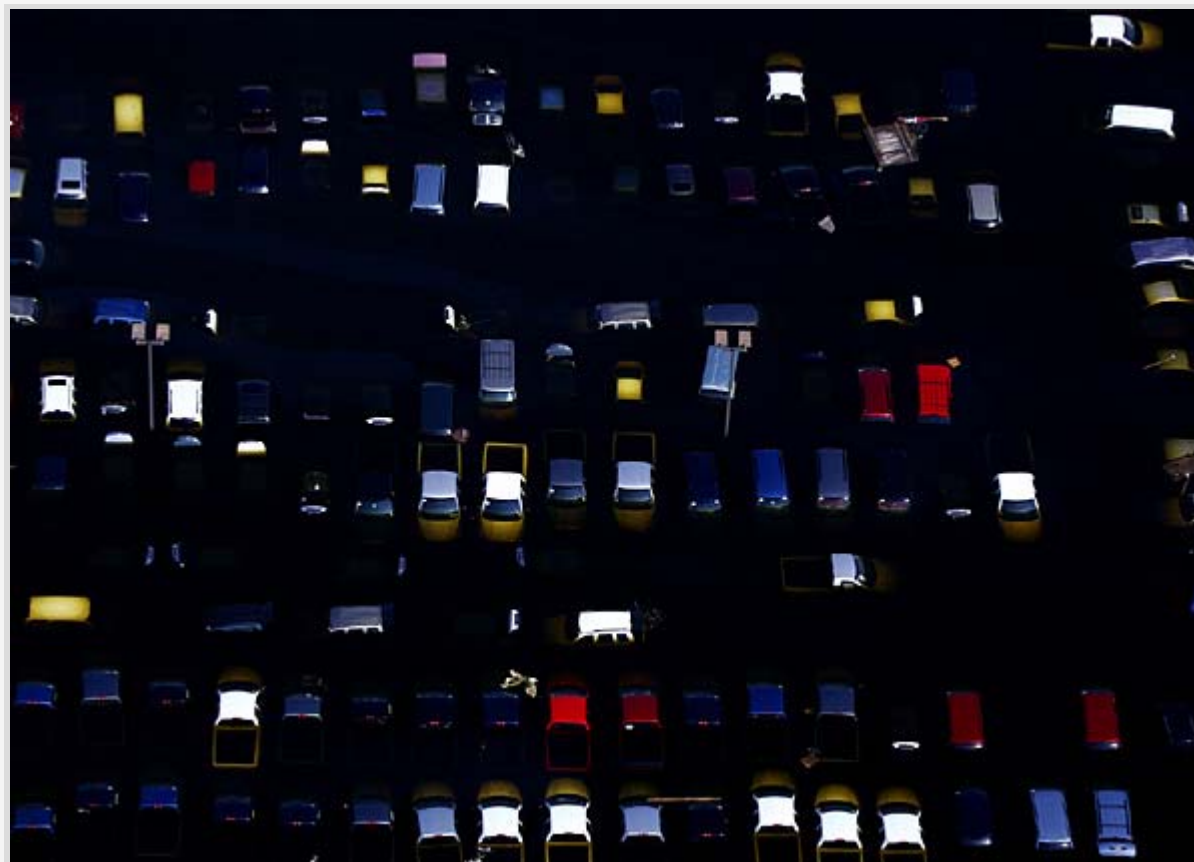
Photo by Vincent Laforet / The New York Times

Aerial views of New Orleans on the 5th day following Hurricane Katrina.

and over again because it allows you not to slow down, and to stay in the same mode you just came out of.

He might be afraid of slowing down - going back to normalcy for many reasons: a little of it is ego, a little of it is being afraid that you need to share in this celebration before everyone forgets about what you did, or more likely he just doesn't really want to have to think through his recent experience just yet. He may have a hard time looking at his children without thinking of all of the horrible stuff he saw out there.

Just some possibilities - and a lot of reasons why a lot of relationships don't survive in this business: these experiences push journalists to areas they may never have had to go to - and may make them question who they are as people, may cause them to call their careers into question, may cause you to re-evaluate your relationships with just about anybody - basically may become an incredibly destabilizing force - i.e. the reason for taking some time to things through before you run back home.



**Photo by Vincent Laforet / The New York Times**  
Aerial views of New Orleans on the 5th day following Hurricane Katrina.

I hope this example helps illustrate just how difficult it is to find a balance when you get back from tough

assignments - and that while there are no solutions that will work for everyone, if both parties do their best to slowly return their lives to normalcy, perhaps at their own separate pace - there is a good chance things will work out more smoothly.

Because the mindset you're in (i.e. survival mode) does not mix well with your life back at home. While you may indeed start to think you're a hero - the real heroes are usually the ones who were waiting for you at home (and single-handedly keeping your normal life in order) throughout your time away.

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*(Vincent Laforet is as staff photographer with the New York Times and a regular contributor to the Sports Shooter Newsletter.)*

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