The day after Hurricane Katrina decimated the Mississippi Gulf Coast, I was hundreds of miles away in Arkansas, horrified and speechless as I watched the devastation from my television. By that time, news organizations had already begun covering Katrina’s wrath in New Orleans, with the exception of fleeting glimpses of the destruction in Mississippi. I watched thousands of nameless faces staring blankly at camera lenses, perhaps wondering how they were going to be able to pick up the pieces of their broken lives.

I was safe. I was warm. I was home. My parents were still alive. The house I grew up in was still standing. I didn’t have to wonder when I would have my next meal. And little did I know as I absorbed hours of heartbreaking, unimaginable Katrina footage that one of those nameless faces seeking one thread of hope to hold onto was my future husband, Zachary.

Our lives collided when we met at the University of Mississippi three years later. I knew his entire family was scattered along the Gulf Coast and that they endured the traumatic experiences of Hurricane Katrina, but I never wanted to directly approach the subject, as Zachary always seemed to become numb whenever exposed to reminders.
And in Mississippi, there are reminders everywhere.

As a student journalist, my curiosity was often too much to bear. I desperately wanted to hear his story. What did he see? What did he feel? Did he ever fear for his life? But Zachary avoided these questions, for the most part, so I left it alone.

Then I picked up a copy of Listening is an Act of Love; and my entire world cracked open. I pored over every page, every story, reading about people who fearlessly asked their loved ones about anything and everything. *I could do this*, I thought, *I could interview Zachary about the storm*. Days later, I discovered one of my journalism professors wanted us to do a StoryCorps audio project for our class and I knew it was time. This would be the safe haven for Zachary to tell his story.

I wasn’t prepared for what I learned during the interview, but it was one of the most beautiful moments of my life. Through tears and trembling hands, Zachary recalled the storm’s aftermath; how he found his grandparents alive in the mangled wreckage of their home, holding each other in bed just so they could spend one last night in their house; how he’ll never forget the inescapable smell of salt water, burning debris and bodies rotting in the humid Mississippi heat; and how just when he thought the worst was over, he received a call from a family friend asking if he would help remove her four-year-old son’s body from the attic where he drowned.
Nothing prepares you for that kind of breakthrough. Nothing prepares you for watching someone’s heart open in such a powerful way. But it did, and it’s something I will carry with me forever.