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Katrina Stories: Windows into Religious Meaning, Pathways to Social Justice

Barbara J. Fleischer[1]

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged an area covering ninety thousand square miles of the United States[2]—an area about the size of Great Britain[3]—with catastrophic effects on the Mississippi and Louisiana Gulf Coasts. New Orleans and its neighboring parishes also experienced a second "human-made" disaster after the breach of poorly designed levees, flooding 80 percent of the city and nearly 100 percent of neighboring St. Bernard civil parish.[4] Nearly sixteen hundred human lives and an untold number of nonhuman lives were lost to this one storm.[5] Counting the cost extends far beyond the billions bandied about as the final price tag for recovery, rebuilding, and future storm protection. The natural world and human community in these areas have been sundered, and the deep wounds to these areas revealed glimpses of ultimacy that are rarely visible on such a massive scale.

In the midst of these events, the Gulf Coast abounds with many harrowing stories of survival and heroism, inspiring tales of hope and resilience, and poignant accounts of loss and meaning. They are too numerous to recover and recount. I have collected only a sliver of them and have chosen to explore only a portion of those.[6] The stories chosen for this paper focus on the experiences of residents who have lost all or most of their possessions. They emerge from a humanity exhausted and raw from loss upon loss and come with little dross. Thus, they reveal concerns that are deeply human and offer a clear window into the desires of the human heart. Through these stories from residents who learned abruptly what mattered most to them, four major themes related to their losses seemed to

coalesce—*community*, *sacramentality*, *vocation*, and *natural beauty*. These deeply human yearnings provide us with a glimpse into the human spirit and also offer spiritual guidance for realigning our priorities for the common good. In this paper, I will give examples of how each of these themes has been expressed in the stories of residents coming back to their homes following Hurricane Katrina and will offer a theological reflection on the themes that emerged through the narratives. I will also discuss the implications of these issues for religious institutions and leaders and offer possible pathways of resonance through which congregations might awaken to the work of social justice.

My experience of the stories from those affected by these unprecedented storms is limited to those I have heard in the New Orleans area and Gulf Coast of Mississippi. The stories come from conversations, emails, radio, television, and newspaper articles. I have been immersed in them. While my own home received only moderate wind damage from the hurricanes, those of many of my friends were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable. Nearly all of the workers making repairs to my home and my parents' home lost their own homes and everything in them. In some instances, I have asked the question, what has been most difficult about the losses you have sustained? In most cases, I have just listened. Thus, I do not claim a systematic approach to usual random sampling techniques or data collection. I have simply been a well-embedded participant observer, and I speak from my own hermeneutic of religious language and questioning, as well as from my own grief for all the losses experienced in this community.

I. COMMON THEMES IN STORIES OF LOSS

In reflecting upon what I heard through the process of gathering stories, I noticed common patterns emerging in the narratives. When people in this devastated area speak of their significant losses, by far the deepest grief is for *loss of community* as they speak of friends and family now gone, as well as the loss of those whom they did not know by name but who were once a

part of daily interactions at stores and public places and within the larger community. Second, people distinguish between "stuff" and those items that connect them with family members, friends, or significant events of the past. Such items function as *sacramentals*—things that we hold sacred in some way because they participate in and connect us to a larger reality. They signify much more than the monetary or functional worth of the objects lost. Loss of a sacramental goes beyond immediate loss of a possession; what is lost or diminished is the powerful constellation of memories, emotions, and meaning easily evoked by the item. A meaningful thread of connection is lost. Third, people lament the loss of meaningful work and creative endeavors, which can no longer be accomplished because of current circumstances. Some anguished over losing the tools of their trade or grieved the loss of the fruits of their labors. This is a sadness that goes beyond a concern for loss of revenue and speaks to *vocation***,** the life work to which we feel called or which gives our life meaning. Finally, in addition to those three recurring themes related to personal losses, there is a sense of the common loss of *natural beauty* in the surrounding area.

A. Loss of Community

Perhaps the most common loss—touching all in the ravaged areas in some way—is the loss of community. Even those who sustained minimal property damage due to storms have endured wave after wave of goodbyes to friends and families who once shared their daily rhythms of life. Those who stayed in the area have been in a perpetual mode of bidding friends and families adieu as many have been forced to leave by circumstance or who have chosen to leave to avoid future traumas of evacuations and storms.

Sociologist Amitai Etzioni describes community as consisting of the "social webs . . . that bind individuals, who would otherwise be on their own, into groups of people who care for one another and who help maintain a civic, social and moral order."[7] These webs spin through families, friendships, neighborhoods, workplaces, voluntary organizations, centers of

worship, cultural groups, civic organizations, and the city itself. Hence, as authors James and Evelyn Whitehead note, "The word *community* is hard to pin down. . . . For some people, the word signifies the strong emotional ties of family or close friendship. For others, the word simply means a group that they like, a place where they feel at home."[8] In the stories I heard, the intricate social webs that sustained and extended people's lives were strewn apart. A few spoke specifically of how their close-knit extended families, who once lived in the same neighborhood, were now scattered in various states; others spoke more generally about the utmost importance of the people who had surrounded them. For example, an African American graduate student, who could not move back to the city due to the utter destruction of her neighborhood and the high cost of the few rental units available, sadly commented, "I lost my house but that was mainly things. I miss my neighbors, my coworkers. I still don't know where they all are. It's the people I miss."[9]

Janet, now in her seventies, grew up in New Orleans.[10] She is a retired teacher and remains active in her grandchildren's school activities as well as in her church and social organizations. Her wide social network has often benefited from her many personal acts of kindness, as she has often visited friends in hospitals, prepared meals for bereaved families, and seems to always remember everyone's birthdays and anniversaries. She particularly enjoys getting together with friends for lunch and other social activities. In a post-Katrina lunch where I joined Janet and other friends, the conversation focused on connections: "Has anybody heard from Ruth? Is she ok? Will she be coming back?"[11] Later in the conversation, Janet sighed, "My friend Catherine is now living with a daughter up north and won't be coming back. So many people are leaving. It's so sad."[12] Another woman, younger by a few decades, commented to me in a chance encounter at work, "I keep going to goodbye lunches for my friends, and I cry everyday. It's tough, it's really tough."[13] A workman who came to do repairs at my parents' home spoke daily about his losses. At the house, he

spoke of the caring family he had in St. Bernard Parish, with his mother and brother living within walking distance and his grown children living in the area. "Now everyone is gone. My mother is in Mississippi. My brother left, too. And my daughter is in Lafayette." He spoke of his escape from the "black water" that came in so quickly—how he had cut a hole in his attic roof to get out and then swam to get his neighbor's boat, still tied to the house. He spent the next week rescuing friends and neighbors in his community, cutting them out of attics. "I couldn't stop crying for weeks." His outpouring seemed at first cathartic and healing, but then one day he just stopped coming to work. I later learned he had gone to Lafayette, a city 130 miles west of New Orleans, to stay with his daughter and recuperate.[14]

Those who live in the most devastated areas, such as the towns of Arabi and Chalmette in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana;[15] the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans;[16] Waveland, Mississippi;[17] or Delcambre and Erath, Louisiana, hit by Hurricane Rita[18] have seen most of their communities wiped out.[19] Gloria from Arabi speaks about her loss in these terms: "How would I describe my loss? I lost my *life*—my community—what I would do every day with my friends, and the people I would see, even in passing. Everything and everybody is gone."[20] Gloria grew up in New Orleans' Ninth Ward, but in her twenties moved with her husband to Arabi in adjoining St. Bernard Parish, where she raised her four children. Many of her neighbors had shared their parenting together, as well as their social and church life. Only one in four St. Bernard residents would return after Katrina.[21] Gloria would not be one of them. Most of her friends had moved, and the pain of returning to such devastation would be too much. She would eventually return to the Greater New Orleans area to once again be near friends and family, who had relocated to higher ground in the region, and to enjoy the social and creative cultural life of New Orleans. It wouldn't be the same as before Katrina, but no place else felt like home.[22]

In places like St. Bernard Parish, the social webs of family, friends, and the city itself all seemed to blend together. Heath Allen, a television news

reporter who raised seven children with his wife in Chalmette, tearfully reflected, "It's really about family. St. Bernard is very closely knit. Moms and dads lived next to sons and daughters . . . so much of the fabric of your life . . . gone, just gone."[23] Heath had watched in stunned silence, with others stationed at the St. Bernard Civic Center during the storm, as the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (often called "Mr. Go") and Lake Borgne swept over everything they knew and loved in their beloved civil parish.[24] Summing up the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina, he reflected, "This was a people bomb. This was the bomb that dropped and blew everybody to the four corners."[25] His colleague and news anchor Norman Robinson, who also lost his home in the deeply flooded New Orleans East area, reflected, "Life as we knew it is lost. The fabric of our communities torn apart."[26]

Community is more than immediate families and friends. It includes those gossamer connections among those who together hold a love of place, values, and traditions; who immerse themselves in common celebrations and share an enjoyment of the same life-giving sounds, tastes, and smells. An article, written by New Orleans resident Anne Rochell Konigsmark for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and circulated among Katrina evacuees shortly after the storm, summarizes this dimension of community:

> You should have seen my husband when the service person at Cingular pronounced our beloved city "gone." "It will never be the same," she said. Lady, he wanted to shout, like you even know what it was. Do you even know what shell ginger and sweet olive smell like? Have you ever been sitting at dinner when a brass band just bursts into the restaurant for fun? Do you even know that we count off our seasons as shrimp, oyster, crawfish and crab? Do you have any idea what it means, to miss New Orleans?
>
> So I wandered from store to store, mindlessly purchasing a belt for my husband, a crib bumper and long pants for Gus and shoes for me. In J. Crew, a woman heard me say my ZIP code, and approached me. She too is from New Orleans and lives not far from me. Of course, because New Orleans has only one or two

> degrees of separation, within two minutes we had figured out several people we knew in common. She owns a store on Magazine Street and has two school-aged children. She was headed to North Carolina to be with family. She didn't know if she would return. "Well, I hope to see you on Magazine Street again one day," I said. And I burst into tears. There I stood, in my flip flops, surrounded by bags of meaningless replacement items, mourning what may never be replaced.
>
> That is what it's about.[27]

B. Sacramentality

Victor Frankl, in reflecting on the trauma and suffering of Nazi concentration camps, concluded that the *search for meaning* is ultimately the deepest yearning of the human heart.[28] His conclusion is echoed in Bernard Cooke's *Sacraments and Sacramentality* in which Cooke reminds us that humans are "symbol making being[s]" who interpret their lives and come to know themselves and their communities through the symbols they use, both to understand, and to communicate the meaning of their experiences.[29] Key symbols or experiences play a particularly significant role in our interpretation of life events and everyday living. Their meaning in our lives "affects the meaning of everything else."[30]

Cooke broadly interprets *sacrament* as "that which affects something by its significance. Sacrament, in other words, is that which gives new meaning to things."[31] Christian sacramental liturgies are those special moments in the lives of Christians through which the community remembers who they are in God and what they are called to do because of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.[32] But all humans live by the meaning of their key symbols that help them remember who they are and with whom they are connected.[33] Key symbols transform our consciousness as they become touchstones of meaning in our lives.[34] This symbolic meaning making and resultant transformation of consciousness is what Cooke refers to as the sacramentality of life.[35]

In speaking of Katrina losses, people in the Gulf Coast area often named items whose meaning went well beyond their practical or monetary value. These "things" often functioned as *key symbols*—connections to community, to significant friends and family, or to other meaningful events of the past that themselves functioned as key symbols for life's meaning. These symbol-items resonate with meaning and thus function as sacramentals of community life.

Topping the list of items mourned or prized by Katrina evacuees were photographs. A coworker recalled wistfully, "As we were packing up to leave, my daughter packed all of our photo albums. She said that those were the only things in the house worth saving."[36] I spoke with an African American senior citizen whom I met when I attended a gathering at her church in a neighborhood that had flooded to over nine feet. She told me, "I lost everything. But I did manage to save a photograph of my great grandmother."[37] In evacuating, Anne Rochell Konigsmark grabbed her prized possessions: "We took a wedding album, a baby book, my husband's watch—a wedding present."[38] A teacher sighed and relayed, "I lost twenty-eight years of photographs of the children I taught."[39] Rejoicing in a photograph, a friend in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, said, "We only found the slab of our house. Everything was gone. But I saw something sticking out in the sand and found that it was a photograph of my mother. It had survived and I knew we were going to be all right."[40] Her mother had died several years earlier, and the sight of her mother's photograph as the only remaining item took on a deeply spiritual significance. Despite the ruins, there was a larger reality at work here; what really mattered was the loving connection that they shared—a connection that transcended time and death.

Beyond photographs, there were many other items charged with meaning, symbolic of family and community. At work gutting his flooded house, a resident of Metairie, Louisiana, reminisced about his grandfather, a candy maker in St. Louis who often shared fresh handmade chocolates with him. "One of the hardest things to put on our pile of rubble was my grandfather's

table. My grandfather was a chocolate maker. I had the table that he used to use in making and cutting his chocolate. Before we threw it away, I put pieces of chocolate on it and took a picture of it."[41] A Lakeview, New Orleans, resident lamented, "All the furniture that I had from my mother's home is moldy and rotted. I couldn't bear to see it on a pile of trash out on the street."[42] Her mother's beautiful antique furniture was worth thousands, but the pain of the lost furniture stemmed not from the monetary value but from the loss of the memories it evoked of her beloved mother. To see these treasures tossed on the street, moldy and trashed, seemed almost like a sacrilege.

Houses themselves can be symbols resonant with memories and meaning. Television anchor Norman Robinson reflected, "The house is a living, breathing entity. It's where all your dreams are. It's where all of your experiences are with your children."[43]

These items, resonating deeply with the evacuees' lives, function as key symbols, making present the family, friends, and the community they signify. As community is the primary touchstone of meaning and identity, these symbols of connection become sacramentals that awaken consciousness to the "more" of life and love. Their loss threatens a diminishment of memory and life-giving ties to kith and kin.

C. Vocation and Creativity

New Orleans is known for its savory cuisine, unique jazz and fusion music, splendid architecture, internationally known literary and visual artists, and expressive celebrational festivals.[44] They spring from the heart of the diverse cultures that intertwined in this port town. Whether in work settings or beyond, creative expressions—such as African American neighborhood brass bands or Italian St. Joseph's Day altars—abounded in this cultural mecca.[45]

Many of the things grieved by residents of the Gulf Coast connected strongly with creative work and artistic endeavors. Lost were not only

significant people and communities and the symbols that brought them to mind but also the creative endeavors—along with the means to create them—that expressed talents and a spending of oneself for others. In a city well known for its creative arts and music, New Orleans was replete with stories of lost creative works and symbols of accomplishments.

Rock-and-roll icon Fats Domino lost the grand piano on which he had composed and played so many of his well-known songs.[46] Internationally known jazz clarinetist Pete Fountain lamented the loss of nearly all of his instruments, as well as his gold and platinum record awards.[47] Following Katrina, the Neville Brothers, a well-known gospel and rhythm and blues band, scattered to different areas of the country.[48] Cyril, the youngest brother of the band, lost all of his recording equipment and tape library and settled in Austin, Texas.[49] Lead singer Aaron Neville could not return to his beloved city to perform until 2008 because of asthma complications and his fear of the air quality in post-Katrina New Orleans.[50] Art Neville did return to New Orleans and expressed gratitude that his wife thoughtfully saved his Grammy Awards from potential looters by wrapping them up and stuffing them in their clothes dryer before evacuating,[51] but Art himself was hampered by what was widely known in the city as "Katrina cough."[52] While these musicians were all eventually able to continue performing, these emotion-laden losses and treasured awards point to the significance of creative work in their lives.

Beyond the Crescent City music scene, many university professors bemoaned the loss of their research in flooded muck. One adjunct professor told me that he had to grieve the loss of his opportunity to teach, as universities cut budgets and adjunct positions were lost.[53] A graduate student in literature lamented, "You know, expensive china and glassware did pretty well in the flood. Between my husband [a university professor] and me, we lost about three thousand books, including two first edition works signed by Gertrude Stein. I would trade all of my expensive china for just some of my books."[54] A plumber recalled, "My truck! I lost my

truck and all my tools in the flood. I got a job in Arkansas and was doing ok, but, man, I didn't have my truck. Then, I was able to get a loan, and I bought a new truck. I started feeling ok again. My brother-in-law helped me buy me a new set of tools. Then I really felt good. The Lord blessed me. I could come home and start helping people get their homes back together again."[55] He came back to live in a FEMA trailer for over a year, but he expressed his joy on several occasions, while working at my parents' home, to be able to practice his trade again at this time of his neighbors' need.

The narratives related to loss of creative work were not solely connected to employment; stories of losses included beloved hobbies. My friend, Carolyn, is a true "steel magnolia,"[56] devoted to her friends and extended family in Louisiana. In preparation for her husband's approaching retirement, Carolyn and her husband moved several years ago from the New Orleans area to Diamondhead, Mississippi, near the Gulf Coast beaches. Her heart and friends, however, remained in Louisiana. With extra time on her hands in her new Mississippi home, she was able to return to her love of painting and continued studying fine arts, focusing on watercolors. Relating her story at a post-Katrina luncheon reunion with friends, Carolyn explained what she found when she returned to their home: "Everything was gone. The only thing I found was an earring where our house was. All my paintings were gone . . . my watercolors. I have started painting again—blue alligators with a tear in the shape of a fleur de lis to signify my sadness for Louisiana."[57] Another friend in St. Bernard Parish spoke of the loss of her handmade quilts, painstakingly crafted over the years. "I put them on the second floor. We thought they would be safe there. I had to grieve those."[58] Their home of many years had flooded to over fifteen feet.

The creative works of our hands, head, and heart are more than accomplishments, achievements, or even gifts of service. As many of these stories reveal, they expand our spirit and at times seem to be extensions of our very selves into the world.

D. Natural World and Beauty

New Orleans is a lush, subtropical city,[59] where streets are lined with southern trees of every variety, most notable of which are the sprawling canopies of live oaks. City Park, Audubon Park, and a host of other smaller green spaces dot the city landscape with inviting shade and colorful gardens. Flowering crepe myrtle trees and palm trees, relative newcomers to the city, stand as sentinels along the "neutral grounds," the grassy middle ground between two sides of the street in many neighborhoods. The fragrance of magnolias and sweet olive bushes—which smell more like apricots than olives—mingle with night-blooming jasmine and gardenias to give the evening hours a faint perfume that adds to the city's sensual charm. Due to the area's milder climate and its ample rainfall,[60] New Orleans and Southeast Louisiana stay green year-round, sporting various verdant shades ranging from the dark greens of ligustrum and live oak leaves to the lighter greens of grass and caladiums.

Those immediately returning were stunned by the overwhelming grey cast to the city formed by dead and moldy shrubs, trees, and grass. I had heard about the deadening color via numerous phone calls with friends before I actually arrived back into the area. In my first drive through the city in October of 2005, street after street seemed to show no signs of life; a colorful city had turned into shades of grey. As I trod on the sacred ground of one home, returning to open it after it had sat for several weeks in six-foot-deep brackish and toxic waters, we stopped in silence to marvel at one green weed that had managed to spring back to life. It became our sign of hope for the day. Others commented, "Have you seen the magnolia trees on Broadway Street?" All had perished and stood in a long, drooping, brown line along the entire street where they had once graced all with fragrance and greenery. Others said, "We lost a lot of live oaks along St. Charles Avenue" The "we" obviously meant all of us, not just a resident speaking of a personal home. Grief in post-Katrina New Orleans included a collective sorrow for the destruction of natural beauty, lost not only through

the death of plants and animals,[61] but also through the growing piles of debris in streets and parks.[62]

II. THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF KATRINA STORIES: A SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNITY, CREATIVITY, AND BEAUTY

Because of the similarities in many of the stories I heard from residents returning after Hurricane Katrina, I propose that these stories have something to say to us about the longings of the human heart. The need for community and vocation, the sacred symbols that resonate with these needs, and a longing for the restoration of natural beauty consistently appear as examples of what really matters in the stories I have attempted to retell. What might these common human experiences say to leaders of religious groups and other institutions? Do they connect with any theological writings that form the basis for many of our collective values and action, and how might these experiences connect to the wider work of social justice?

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556),[63] the Catholic saint, activist, and mystic who founded the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), a Catholic order of priests dedicated to education and other ministries,[64] centered much of his spirituality on discovering the most authentic desires of one's heart.[65] For example, in his *Spiritual Exercises*[66]—a guide for offering spiritual direction to others based on his own experience of conversion—he includes a stage in each of the exercises whereby the directee asks "God our Lord for what I want and desire."[67] In commenting on Ignatian spirituality, Jesuit priest E. Edward Kinerk, S.J., notes:

> He went to great pains to draw the best out of his men by helping them to discover for themselves what they most deeply desired; and he always assumed that the most effective and energetic Jesuits would be those who could generate their own zeal. In fact, he did not want any other kind around, since the far-flung and ambitious mission of the Society demanded men whose energy and

> apostolic desires would in turn be sources of animation for others.[68]

Kinerk goes on to say that "[o]ur authentic desires are vocational. The question 'Who am I?' can never be answered directly. Only by asking the further question 'What do I want' do we begin to approach the nature of our unique vocations in life."[69] Ignatius saw an indominable goodness in all of creation because of the goodness of the Creator;[70] thus we could "find God in all things"[71]—especially in the desires of our deepest selves. Those desires, in turn, would lead us to discover our true calling in life in service to others.

Theologian Elizabeth Dreyer proposes that a spirituality inclusive of all and geared to everyday life can draw resources from Judaic and Christian scriptural roots.[72] She reminds us that the biblical images of Spirit as breath of God (*ruah*) and the power to love (*dynamis*) present the divine Spirit as the inner spark in human hearts that moves us into loving connections and community.[73] Ultimately, this gift of Spirit is mediated to us through relationships[74]—we come to know the God of love by the act of loving others and receiving love in turn. Moreover, she reflects, "The supreme aspect of the gift of the Spirit to us is a unifying love. The effect of the Spirit's presence among us is to build creation into a community."[75]

Community functions as the *locus* of God's gift of Spirit. There we find the *more* of our lives, the orchestral sounds of life played in interconnecting patterns. It forms the bedrock of our life in Spirit. Community gifts us with identity, possibility, and joy. And, as Thomas Berry reminds us, sacred community includes the nonhuman world and the wider web of life that both sustains and delights us.[76]

Spirit also spawns our creativity and vocations in life.[77] Jewish and Christian theology affirms that the *dynamis*—loving power—of God continues to create throughout the cosmos in endless expressions of beauty and self-gift.[78] This divine creativity continues throughout the ongoing expansion of the universe and its sustenance in its myriad diverse forms.

Hence, human creativity and divine creation are intimately intertwined through the *dynamis* that courses throughout all of the cosmos. The human creative spirit draws its breath and inspiration from the natural beauty of the earth: its flora and fauna, its rocks and rivers, and its surrounding galaxies. Dreyer, speaking from a Christian perspective, notes that humans share in this divine *dynamis* as they engage in creative works and self-giving on behalf of their wider communities:

> How do we talk about human spiritual power? To begin, we say that it is the work of the Spirit, not in the sense of something added on to human existence, but rather as something intrinsic to our very beings as created and loved by God. . . . The Spirit, the power of God in Christ, does not obliterate our power as humans, but enhances it, enabling us to effect change for the good.[79]

As created in "image and likeness" of divine life and sharers in the gift of Spirit, persons are called from within the center of their being to creativity and self-giving, self-expressive work. This sense of vocation goes beyond a job or means for a livelihood. It flows from within the human heart and longs for expression. It incarnates the life of the Spirit in self-giving for others. Dreyer's theological reflections thus speak of the longing for community and creative work as deeply connected to the "work of the Spirit"[80] within human hearts.

When "things" such as photographs, gifts from others, and instruments become imbued with connections to community and creativity, they become sacramentals and means of our vocations, helping us to incarnate a loving self-giving that itself becomes a participation in God's creative and self-giving sustenance of life. In community and in our creative work, especially when we are surrounded by natural beauty, our lives become richly resonant with meaning and life-giving connections. The losses named by those experiencing the full brunt of Katrina's fury attest to these core values. When what really counts is separated from the monotony of daily living, what are missed most and what are most meaningful are

community, symbols or sacramentals of community connections, vocational work, and the beauty of the natural world. Through Katrina, the deepest desires of the human heart were exposed for us to ponder.

III. SOCIETAL LESSONS OF KATRINA

With respect to our societal structures, Hurricane Katrina uncovered a layer of reality that has often gone unacknowledged in U.S. life. The wide disparity between "haves" and "have-nots" exploded searingly into our collective consciousness through the relentless news media that revealed shocking inadequacies of government at all levels in the midst of the crisis, and, perhaps more importantly, decades of inattention to squalor, poor education, and human needs in largely African American communities. Our national relationship to "things" has hardly been sacramental. Our self-giving in work ventures has too often shifted into self-service. Our communal worlds have become enclaves, exclusive and small. Our pursuit of comfort and wealth has devastated the natural beauty and balance of our planet.

Perhaps because of effective advertising in our consumerist society, material things have come to symbolize other possibilities—status, attractiveness, and comfort.[81] These accentuated values, however, may lie at the surface of deeper desires to belong, to be cherished, and to enjoy the gifts of life and nature that true sharing can bring. The lessons in values shared by those experiencing major losses in the wake of Gulf Coast hurricanes reveal and illustrate deeper longings of the human heart and larger possibilities for our societies. The hurricanes shocked those of us in these devastated areas into realizing what really matters. Community where life is shared and symbols that connect us with a larger world of meaning, creative work, and care for the natural world are clear human desires emerging from piles of rubble and disruption in the wake of Katrina. Can these lessons be brought to other cities and areas not so rudely awakened? How do religious and other organizations connect with these very deep and

basic human desires? And will those in areas affected by Katrina be able to broaden their circles of community to deepen bonds across racial and economic lines? These are crucial questions which religious and social justice leaders in all regions should present for extensive dialogue and reflection. The remainder of my reflections will focus primarily on what religious congregations and their leaders might do in response to Katrina's lessons.

IV. A CALL TO RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

Religious institutions have the opportunity to be at the forefront of expanding our collective sense of the common good, touching upon the themes of community, sacramentality, vocation, and the natural world so close to the human heart. Religious participation is meant to create communities of meaning where questions of ultimacy may be honored and explored and collective expressions of creative self-giving may reach out to a wider world. Too often, however, religious gatherings slip into drowsy repetitions of weekly rituals laced with brief and sometimes superficial connections among the gatherers. How might faith communities deepen the bonds of trust and openness that truly connect persons to one another and to the wider sacred community of life? The experience of Katrina calls upon religious leaders to reflect upon the symbols that speak meaning deeply into our everyday lives and touch our hearts. Religious congregations can do much more to help members find and cherish their life's work and affirm it. Certainly, they can spur more people to social action, including the work of preserving and enhancing the natural beauty that nourishes all. The large outpouring of volunteer help on the part of faith-based organizations to assist the Gulf Coast and other areas devastated by natural disasters[82] is testimony to the many religious organizations that have embraced a wider sense of community and calling by responding to their brothers and sisters in need. Yet even more can be done by congregations to respond to the wake up call heralded by Katrina.

In religious settings, where the search for meaning and community is heightened, one strategy for values clarification may be to promote conversations whereby the Gulf Coast devastation, or other areas where loss has been prevalent, becomes an opportunity for reflection. Such moments of reflection might use the images and stories from this event to help people imagine what loss of their own local communities, homes, significant symbols, and creative endeavors might mean in their own contexts. For example, leaders and facilitators could help members sift through an imagined rubble of their lives to visualize clearly what matters most to them. Based on such values clarification, the group could then move to a discussion on how members might make new life choices based on their core values. The Gulf Coast experience provides but one opportunity for group reflection that may help people connect with their own true centers of meaning and cut through the layers of messages that the consumerist elements in our society so heartily provide.

Religious leaders might also ask themselves where in their congregations do members have the opportunity to search for the authentic desires of their hearts. Many congregations gather for worship wherein the presider interprets and preaches lessons from sacred texts to the members gathered. Rarely in these worship venues do members have an opportunity to enter into conversation with others to raise their own questions and search their hearts; for many people, a different, more personal and dialogical venue is needed.[83]

One approach would be to provide more opportunities for ongoing personal and communal spiritual guidance and reflection, whereby members might clarify and discern their life patterns and choices. "Spiritual direction," based upon the processes developed by Ignatius of Loyola and others, offers an excellent opportunity to guide people on an inward journey of searching for the true desires of their hearts. Through the process of spiritual direction, the directee grows in self-knowledge, prayerfully sifts through emotional tendencies and life patterns, and discerns his or her life

direction.[84] The word "direction" may be a misnomer, however, since the process involves more *listening* than telling. Shawn McCarty, S.J., for example, describes this most basic skill in spiritual direction:

> Listening . . . is perhaps the most important skill (or art) needed; reverential listening to the unfolding mystery of another person's story—not just with the ears, but with the heart; not just to words, but to melody. Listening can do more to help a person clarify who God is and what God is asking of him or her than any other activity (or passivity) I know.[85]

In spiritual direction, the guide becomes a soul friend[86] or companion where "both parties in the relationship are expected to become attentive to the Holy Spirit."[87] Carolyn Gratton describes how the process then unfolds:

> Gradually individual blocks and resistances to spiritual growth will be uncovered and brought to consciousness. With increasing depth the desires of the true or core self are revealed when compulsive reactions of the false self give way to positive, truly free responses to divine initiatives. . . . In a manner somewhat different from that of former times, today's direction is explicitly concerned with pointing to connections between all beings, to our involvement with the whole of life. . . . Direction now involves not only one's relationship to the Sacred Otherness that underlies and upholds life; it is also concerned about one's openness to the environing universe and to cultural and social contexts. It questions us on issues of global justice and peace as well as on our response to immediate commitments embodied in family, work, and civic responsibility.[88]

Such spiritual direction can happen on an individual or communal basis.[89] One possible drawback to this approach for use in congregations, however, is the dearth of qualified spiritual directors who have undergone a process of development and affirmation of their own skills.[90] Organizations such as Spiritual Directors International[91] offer a directory for finding qualified guides, and a number of centers, such as the Archdiocese of New Orleans Spirituality Center,[92] have sprung up to train lay, as well as

religious, spiritual companions for this delicate work of spiritual midwifery. However, to make this skilled spiritual guidance amply available in every congregation, religious leaders will need to make a concerted effort to identify and enlist potential spiritual directors among their congregational members and to make formative resources available to them.

Another approach to helping congregational members sift through their life experiences in light of the wisdom texts of their tradition is the formation of smaller communities within a larger congregation.[93] These reflective groups offer members an opportunity for naming and discussing their life questions while learning about and personalizing the central religious values of their faith. As ongoing communities, they offer not only a venue for deepening members' spirituality and integrating the current implications of their faith tradition, but also create value-laden communities that, in themselves, meet the deep human need for bonding with others.[94] Ministry consultant Teena Stewart points out that large congregations often create a feeling of isolation and alienation among members if they do not provide members with an opportunity to interact on a more personal and substantive level, stating that "[e]very church, no matter its size, can benefit from small groups. The larger a church grows, the more crucial it is to have them, because the sense of alienation increases with the size of the church body."[95]

Thus, religious leaders could place an emphasis on forming small faith communities as one major strategy for enabling congregation members to strengthen their bonds of community and integrate faith values into their life journeys. But the formation of these small communities may not be sufficient to ignite communal action on behalf of justice and aimed at the transformation of social structures. A national study on the small Christian communities (SCCs) in the U.S. Catholic population found that most members of the SCCs became more conscious of social issues and the value of social commitments, but "SCCs do not yet engage significantly as a community in Christian social action."[96] The researchers, led by practical

theologian Bernard Lee, S.M., concluded that "to be effective, skills in social analysis are needed."[97]

Several possible strategies might begin to address this need. One approach might be to form small Christian communities comprised of people who share similar vocational interests. Teachers, reflecting together on their work and faith, might be able to explore and strategize more effectively on how to address challenges they encounter, since they already share a basic knowledge of the social structures in which they work. Similarly, artists and musicians might be able to brainstorm creatively together on how to direct their talents toward the common good of their neighborhoods and wider communities. Those who love to garden or cook might enjoy reflecting on the spiritual dimensions of what they do and find ways to share their gifts with others. Connecting community with vocation, in light of faith traditions, could thus potentially synergize the *dynamis* at work in these smaller communities.

Beyond this coupling of small community with vocational interests, the results of the national study on Catholic SCCs suggest that educational interventions to teach effective social analysis and intervention skills might be in order for members of small faith communities. One way in which congregations have brought these essential skills to their members is through broad-based community organizing,[98] as exemplified by the multicongregational groups Jeremiah[99] and All Congregations Together[100] in New Orleans. In these broad-based organizations, congregations join together to hire professional community organizers who, in turn, offer trainings and help the organization identify key issues and effective strategies for changing existing social systems.[101] These faith-based organizations provide the added advantage of bringing various congregations together across religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines in solidarity to confront issues in the public arena that affect the most vulnerable in their areas. They therefore provide a powerful means and

educational basis for congregations to become involved in the work of social justice.

V. THE ONGOING JOURNEY OF CONVERSION

Theologian Bernard Lonergan speaks of conversion as "fundamental to religious living"[102] and defines it as "a radical transformation on which follows, on all levels of living, an interlocked series of changes and developments. What hitherto was unnoticed becomes vivid and present."[103] While conversion is intimate and personal, it need not be solitary.[104] Lonergan notes that "[it] can happen to many and they can form a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation, and to help one another in working out the implications, and in fulfilling the promise of their new life."[105] The stories of Gulf Coast residents affected by Hurricane Katrina suggest that conversion may be more a matter of discovering and affirming what lies within our hearts than of adjusting to an external set of prescriptions. Religious institutions should certainly be the vanguard of facilitating this conversion process. Perhaps as we collectively discern our ultimate values, we will clear a visible path to the true desires of the human heart and engender a creative work that opens the floodgates of social justice, at last embracing a community that is inclusive of all.

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[1] I have enjoyed the delight and privilege of living and working in the New Orleans area since 1980. Before coming to Louisiana, I lived in south Mississippi. I feel a strong bond of connection with the courageous people of this region, especially in this difficult time of recovery from devastating storms. I want to thank especially those who opened their hearts and griefs to me in the months immediately following Hurricane Katrina. I have pondered these stories in my heart and hope that the reflection I have submitted here authentically reflects their experiences. I also want to thank the editorial staff of the *Seattle Journal of Social Justice* for their helpful suggestions.

[2] News Release, FEMA, By the Numbers: FEMA Recovery Update in Louisiana (Jan. 26, 2006), *available at* http://www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=22841.

[3] NAT'L GEOGRAPHIC, ATLAS OF THE WORLD 133 (8th ed. 2004), *available at* http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/places/countries/country_unitedkingdom.html (listing the total square mileage for the United Kingdom as 93,788).

[4] Habitat-NOLA.org, Current Projects: St Bernard Parish Recovery Effort, http://www.habitat-nola.org/projects/st_bernard.php (last visited Oct. 31, 2008).
[5] Michelle Hunter, *Deaths of Evacuees Push Death Toll to 1577*, TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans), May 19, 2006, at A1.
[6] As I listened to residents experiencing losses through Hurricane Katrina, I kept notes on the responses that I heard regarding what each person missed the most. I have not included comments related to loss of human life in this collection. These notes cover a time period from October 8, 2005, through April 30, 2006, and therefore, generally express relatively early reactions to loss. For confidentiality purposes, the identities of the interviewees are not included, but the author has detailed research notes on file.
[7] AMITAI ETZIONI, THE SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY: THE REINVENTION OF AMERICAN SOCIETY 248 (1994).
[8] JAMES D. WHITEHEAD & EVELYN EATON WHITEHEAD, THE PROMISE OF PARTNERSHIP: LEADERSHIP AND MINISTRY IN AN ADULT CHURCH 57 (2000).
[9] *See supra* note 6.
[10] *Id.*
[11] *Id.*
[12] *Id.*
[13] *Id.*
[14] *Id.*
[15] *Seven Days That Changed New Orleans* (WDSU TV broadcast Aug. 25, 2006) (DVD on file with author).
[16] Susan J. Popkin, Margery Austin Turner & Martha Burt, *Rebuilding Affordable Housing in New Orleans*, *in* AFTER KATRINA: REBUILDING OPPORTUNITY AND EQUITY IN THE *NEW* NEW ORLEANS 18–19 (Margery Austin Turn & Sheila R. Zedlewski eds., 2006).
[17] DOUGLAS BRINKLEY, THE GREAT DELUGE: HURRICANE KATRINA, NEW ORLEANS, AND THE MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST 155 (2006).
[18] Jeff Moore, *Hurricane Rita Anniversary*: *Living at the Water's Edge*, ADVERTISER.COM, Sept. 24, 2008, http://theadvertiser.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080924/NEWS01/809240333/-1/rss01.
[19] *See generally Seven Days That Changed New Orleans*, *supra* note 15; Popkin et al., *supra* note 16; BRINKLEY, *supra* note 17; *see also* Habitat-NOLA.org, *supra* note 4 and accompanying text (describing the damage Katrina caused).
[20] *See supra* note 6.
[21] *See* U.S. Census Bureau, St. Bernard Parish QuickFacts, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/22/22087.html (last visited Nov. 3, 2008) (indicating that in 2000, the St. Bernard population was 67,229; but, the estimated population in 2006 was 15,514).
[22] *See supra* note 6.
[23] *Seven days that changed New Orleans*, *supra* note 15.
[24] *Id.*
[25] *Id.*
[26] *Id.*

[27] Anne Rochell Konigsmark, *Hurricane Katrina: It's Not About a House*, ATLANTA J.-CONST., Sept. 4, 2005, at D3.
[28] *See generally* VICTOR FRANKL, MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING (1963).
[29] *See* BERNARD COOKE, SACRAMENTS AND SACRAMENTALITY 44 (2nd ed. 1994).
[30] *Id.* at 21.
[31] *Id.* at 58.
[32] *See id.* at 75–76, 132.
[33] *See id.* at 21.
[34] *See id.* at 28.
[35] *See id.* at 54–55.
[36] *See supra* note 6.
[37] *Id.*
[38] Konigsmark, *supra* note 27.
[39] *See supra* note 6.
[40] *Id.*
[41] *Id.*
[42] *Id.*
[43] *Seven Days That Changed New Orleans*, *supra* note 15.
[44] Maria-Rosario Jackson, *Rebuilding the Cultural Vitality of New Orleans*, *in* AFTER KATRINA: REBUILDING OPPORTUNITY AND EQUITY IN THE *NEW* NEW ORLEANS 55 (Margery Austin Turn & Sheila R. Zedlewski eds., 2006).
[45] *Id.*
[46] Associated Press, *Fats Domino Finds Big Easy Home in Ruins*, YAHOO! MUSIC, Oct. 16, 2005, http://music.yahoo.com/read/news/24655629.
[47] Pete Fountain, Loyola University New Orleans Commencement Address, (May 2006).
[48] Joel Selvin, *Big Easy's Siren Calls Art Neville Home*, SAN FRANCISCO CHRON., Apr. 30, 2006, at A17.
[49] *Id.*
[50] *Id.*
[51] *Id.*
[52] *Id.*; Arthur Nead, *Researcher Seeks Truth About 'Katrina Cough,'* TUL. U. NEWWAVE, Jan. 8, 2008, http://tulane.edu/news/newwave/010208_cough.cfm.
[53] *See supra* note 6.
[54] *Id.*
[55] *Id.*
[56] *See* STEEL MAGNOLIAS (Tri-Star Pictures 1989) (using the term to describe a strong, independent, yet feminine—in a traditional southern sense of feminity—woman).
[57] *See supra* note 6.
[58] *Id.*
[59] Wordtravels, New Orleans Climate and Weather, http://www.wordtravels.com/Cities/Louisiana/New+Orleans/Climate (last visited Nov. 2, 2008).
[60] *See* WEATHERBILL, PRECIPITATION AVERAGES, SEASONALITY, VOLATILITY AND TRENDS IN THE UNITED STATES 5, 6 (2007), *available at* http://www.weatherbill.com/static/content/rainfall_study_2007.pdf.

[61] An estimated six hundred thousand pets and animals lost their lives during Katrina. *See* 152 CONG. REC. H6806 (daily ed. Sept. 20, 2006) (statement of Rep. Shays). One carpenter recently (October 4, 2008) told me that he was "a little sad" because he hardly ever saw squirrels in the neighborhood anymore.

[62] In November 2005, Becky Zaheri, who calls herself a "stay-at-home mom," founded the "Katrina Krewe" to mobilize volunteers to rid New Orleans of the accumulated trash and debris that remained on streets and in parks. An estimated ten thousand volunteers participated; they bagged and removed two hundred and fifty thousand tons of Katrina debris. The group has morphed into an organization promoting a cleaner and more beautiful New Orleans. CleanNO.org, http://www.CleanNO.org (last visted Nov. 3, 2008).

[63] ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA: THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND SELECTED WORKS 9 (George E. Ganss et al. eds., 1991) [hereinafter IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA].

[64] *Id.* at 1–2.

[65] E. Edward Kinerk, *Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus*, *in* 16 STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS 5 (1984).

[66] ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF SAINT IGNATIUS: A TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY 113 (George E. Ganss trans., 1992) [hereinafter THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF SAINT IGNATIUS].

[67] *See, e.g.*, *id.* at 40, 156 n.36 (first exercise of the week); *see also id.* at 53 (asking in the first exercise of the second week "for the grace which I desire"); *id.* at 81 (asking in the first exercise of the third week "for what I desire"); *id.* at 91 (asking in the first exercise of the fourth week "for what I desire").

[68] Kinerk, *supra* note 65 at 1.

[69] *Id.* at 3.

[70] ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, *supra* note 63, at 11.

[71] THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF SAINT IGNATIUS, *supra* note 65, at 184.

[72] *See* ELIZABETH DREYER, EARTH CRAMMED WITH HEAVEN 54–55 (1994).

[73] *See id.*

[74] *See id.* at 55.

[75] *Id.*

[76] THOMAS BERRY, THE DREAM OF THE EARTH 5–12 (1988).

[77] *See* DREYER, *supra* note 72, at 58.

[78] *Id.* at 56, 54–62 (Both Jewish and Christian writings speak of God as Creator, and therefore, the source of all creativity and beauty. The Genesis story speaks of God's breath or *ruah* forming the universe from *within*. Hence, contemporary theologians such as Dreyer, Karl Rahner, and others speak of divine self-giving as inherent in the act of creation.)

[79] *Id.* at 57.

[80] *See id.*

[81] *See* BRIAN SWIMME, THE HIDDEN HEART OF THE COSMOS 13 (1996) (estimating that by the time a child enters first grade in the United States, he or she will have watched thirty thousand television advertisements; by the time a child is a teenager, her or she will have spent more time absorbing advertisements than their entire time in high school).

[82] CORP. FOR NAT'L AND CMTY. SERV., NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS IN YEAR 2 OF KATRINA RECOVERY EXCEEDS HISTORIC 1ST YEAR 1 (2007), http://www.nationalservice.org/pdf/07_0820_katrina_volunteers_respond.pdf. Statistics from this report show that approximately six hundred thousand volunteers worked in Katrina recovery in 2007, with five hundred fifty thousand volunteering in 2006. *Id.* Statistics were gathered largely from many faith-based organizations such as Catholic Charities USA, Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, Episcopal Relief and Development, Lutheran Disaster Response, Mennonite Disaster Services, United Jewish Communities, United Methodist Committee on Relief, and many others including nonsectarian organizations such as Habitat for Humanity. *Id.* at 2.
[83] *See* TEENA M. STEWART, SUCCESFUL SMALL GROUPS 11 (2007).
[84] Carolyn Gratton, *Spiritual Direction*, *in* THE NEW DICTIONARY OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY 912 (Michael Downey ed., 1993).
[85] Shawn McCarty, *On Entering Spiritual Direction*, *in* 25 REVIEW FOR RELIGIOUS 859 (Daniel F. X. Meenan, ed., 1976).
[86] DAVID LONSDALE, LISTENING TO THE MUSIC OF THE SPIRIT 66 (1992).
[87] Gratton, *supra* note 84, at 913.
[88] *Id.*
[89] LONSDALE, *supra* note 86, at 124–136.
[90] *See* McCarty, *supra* note 85, at 855.
[91] Spiritual Directors International, http://www.sdiworld.org/ (last visited Nov. 1, 2008).
[92] Spiritual Directors International, North America Enrichment, http://www.sdiworld.org/northamericaenrichment.html (last visited Nov. 1, 2008).
[93] STEWART, *supra* note 83, at 11.
[94] *Id.*
[95] *Id.*
[96] BERNARD J. LEE ET AL., THE CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE OF SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES 127 (2000).
[97] *Id.*
[98] *See* BERNARD J. LEE & MICHAEL A. COWAN, GATHERED AND SENT: THE MISSION OF SMALL CHURCH COMMUNITIES TODAY 170–175 (2003).
[99] *Id.* at 174.
[100] Internet Video: All Congregations Together (Vincent Sylvain, NOLA.TV 2008), http://www.nola.tv/news/251.html.
[101] *See* LEE & COWAN, *supra* note 98, at 171.
[102] Bernard Lonergan, *Theology in Its New Context*, *in* CONVERSION (Walter Conn ed., 1978).
[103] *Id.* at 13.
[104] *Id.* at 13.
[105] *Id.* at 13.