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A Terrible Grace: Building a Just Society on the Rubble of New Orleans

Mark S. Markuly¹

For those of us living through the chaos of the fall of 2005, when Katrina, followed a few weeks later by Hurricane Rita, battered the Gulf Coast, it is almost impossible to share with others what it was like to live in a city with almost no infrastructure. Government and industry failed simultaneously, and for months, life in New Orleans resembled a frontier town. People had to rely on themselves and their neighbors, and the challenge pulled the very best out of some of us, and the very worst out of others.

The toll of destruction from Katrina and Rita is still hard to grasp, and often the extent of the loss of life and destruction is hard to determine. Conservative estimates put the death toll immediately following the storm at one thousand, mostly by drowning, with at least half of those deaths among the elderly.² The stress of Katrina and Rita, coupled with the pressure of the chaos in the city in the months and years of seeking to rebuild took many more lives, probably bringing the death toll to more than 1800, with 705 missing.³ Of the total, 1460 of the loss of life occurred in Louisiana alone.⁴ Because of the catastrophic volume of destruction, an accurate assessment of total damage is difficult to determine. FEMA records estimated nearly a quarter of a million homes were damaged, well over one hundred thousand severely.⁵ However, a more comprehensive federal study determined that three hundred thousand homes were destroyed completely or rendered uninhabitable.⁶ Overall, it is estimated that Hurricane Katrina caused \$97 billion dollars in damage: \$67 billion in housing, \$7 billion in consumer durable goods, \$20 billion in business property, and \$3 billion in business property.⁷

The ecological damage is equally mind boggling. It is estimated that 320 million trees were destroyed or severely damaged by Katrina and Hurricane Rita.⁸ This represented an estimated \$2 billion in damages.⁹ The rotting wood and foliage from the two storm's destruction expelled 1.1 billion tons of carbon emissions, as much greenhouse-gas as the rest of the nation's forests can remove from the atmosphere in a year.¹⁰

One of the biggest tragedies of Katrina in New Orleans has been its effect on the more than one million people impacted. To appreciate the human toll of Hurricane Katrina, we can review the growing list of memoirs of those who went through the experience¹¹ and take note of the shoddy treatment the most vulnerable in the area received—particularly the poor and elderly. Perhaps the most powerful image of the catastrophe is the photograph of a woman who had died, the victim of a hit-and-run the day the levees broke, her body left behind by friends or family in the fashionable Garden District. The body was covered with a sheet that was held down by bricks. A hand-scrawled note on the sheet read, “Here Lies Vera . . . God Helps Us.”¹² But, for many in the city, at times it seemed as if even God did not care.

The highest cost in the region, however, has arguably been born by the next generation, which learned a lesson about the United States and our commitment to each other and the common good—a lesson that will be difficult to unlearn. Laura Belsey's movie, *Katrina's Children*, documents the psychological damage to the children of the region, particularly the damage to their ability to trust.¹³ As Belsey notes, many of the youth of the region learned through their experience that they could not trust their schools, their community, the Army Corps of Engineers, the mayor, the governor, or the President of the United States.¹⁴ It is impossible to calculate the human and societal cost of having so many children aware that adults failed to protect and nurture them, but poet C.D. Wright seems to capture it most poignantly:

And as of Sat Nov 12
according to the Associated Press 2,066
of our members will remain Forever Young
O when the saints go
marching

At the level of policy their kids don't exist
never did will never reach the sun-drenched shore¹⁵

In the months and years following Katrina, New Orleans has become a poster child for social injustice. A *Newsweek* headline that ran several weeks after the storm captured the essence of one aspect of those social injustices: "Poverty, Race, and Katrina Lessons of a National Shame."¹⁶ Contrary to many national perceptions, which seemed often to blame the ineptitude of local politicians for most of the problems in New Orleans after the storm, a great deal of the destruction, and the ensuing chaos, was the direct result of long-standing social injustices at the state and federal level, as well as the local. These injustices were deeply woven into the fabric of governmental structures and entrenched in the habits of thought and behavior of the humans leading and working in those structures.

Although enormous sums of money were raised and appropriated by Congress for aid to the New Orleans area, "disaster corporations,"¹⁷ the lavishly compensated private industry cleaning up most of the nation's largest problems, skimmed off large sums in the early months of the recovery. For instance, in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina, FEMA paid the Shaw Company \$175 a square foot to place blue tarps on many of the thousands of roofs damaged by the storm, even though the government provided the tarps. The actual workers doing the installation were paid as little as \$2 a square foot. Shaw and layers of subcontractors siphoned off the rest of the money.¹⁸ Due to bureaucratic hurdles, or perhaps something more sinister, huge sums of money never seemed to get to the intended

recipients. In January of 2008, FEMA still owed the state's colleges and schools \$350 million for damages caused by Katrina, and an additional \$37 million for the destruction of Hurricane Rita.¹⁹ Private colleges were still battling with their insurance companies and dipping into endowments to keep the operations running during the battle.²⁰ Social service agencies, tending to the difficult work of finding housing for the homeless, many of them mentally ill, strained their own coffers waiting for reimbursement from the city.²¹ Often, money was loosened only when news reports pressed the issue.²² Although \$504 million was appropriated by the federal government in 2005, with more added in 2007, to help Gulf Coast landowners replant and ward off the invasive ground cover growing over the 320 million downed native trees, more than two years later only \$70 million had been promised or disbursed.²³

Fortunately, destruction is not the only story. Like Vietnam veterans, most of us who endured the insanity of the post-Katrina city find each other at meetings and parties. We usually slip into a corner of the room to recount tales of frustration, abandonment, and disrespect by a raft of service providers. However, we also recount tales of hope, human solidarity, and the kinds of companionship that are only borne of sharing tragic circumstances. And, we share humor—belly-rattling, chest heaving humor. We laugh at nonsensical rules and regulations, we laugh at the absurdity of a society in which at times it seemed virtually nothing worked, and we laugh at ourselves.

You see, New Orleans is not just a story of generations of social injustice. It is also a sign of heroic efforts to create a more just society. As government and industry dropped the ball again and again, hundreds of thousands of volunteers descended upon the city to help in small and large ways.

This influx of young idealists, coupled with locals who will not give up on the city, have inspired hope and cautious optimism in the midst of the rubble of the city. The entire New Orleans area, for instance, is a massive

educational experiment, staffed by young, idealistic teachers. Some 250 new college graduates descended on the city in fall of 2008 to begin teaching in a patch-quilt school system consisting of mostly charter schools.²⁴ Others, like Tom Green, have returned to the city after the storm to lend a hand. Green is a former assistant district attorney in New Orleans who left the city in 1991 to pursue theology studies for the priesthood.²⁵ Now a Jesuit priest, he returned recently and has taken on the task of representing the immigrant population that flooded into New Orleans to help with the rebuilding process, especially the estimated one hundred thousand Hispanics relocating to the city after Katrina.²⁶

Although “the storm and its consequences may have irreparably severed the organic connection between community and culture,” which has been the lifeblood of poor and racially polarized New Orleans for decades, the stubborn return of Mardi Gras celebrations and the two-weekend music extravaganza, *Jazzfest*, speaks to the resilience of the community.²⁷ The famous jazz tradition, stripped of many local musicians, remains vibrant, although the distinctive New Orleans jazz is blurring into a wider assortment of sounds.²⁸

Perhaps more significantly, though, the state is taking on corruption. One of the first things done by the new 36-year-old governor of Louisiana, Bobby Jindal, was to use public opinion and business pressure to force an extensive set of ethics bills through the state legislature.²⁹ As Jindal put it, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita “caused people to rethink how they wanted their social institutions to be designed, how they wanted services to be delivered, what kind of state they wanted to call home.”³⁰

Understanding how the injustices were allowed to occur for decades without redress and, more importantly, figuring out how to restructure a more just society in the Crescent City take careful study and critical thinking.

The articles in this edition of the *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* bring the disciplined conversations of various academic fields into dialogue with

the vast organizational and structural failures that contributed to the near destruction of a major metropolitan area. They also reflect on some of the more creative efforts individuals and organizations have made to build a more just foundation on the ruins of post-storm New Orleans. To have a group of New Orleans-based academics writing about their research in the region is itself a blow struck for justice. After the storm, many out-of-state academics flooded into the Gulf Coast in search of data for research and publications, usurping the funding opportunities and career boosts that might have come to local professors, who were still reeling from the storm and trying to put their homes and lives back together. Few of these out-of-state researchers asked locals if they wanted to collaborate on projects even though New Orleans had eleven universities and colleges. This robbed the early research of an important perspective, but it also took from academics in the city a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a significant contribution to their fields of study.³¹

The academics writing the articles in this journal not only live in the New Orleans area, they have also made contributions—often in major ways—to the rebuilding effort. Michael Cowan, for instance, appeared for months on a regular news program discussing issues of racism.³² Barbara Fleischer helped small companies organize a workshop with Margaret Wheatley, a popular business writer, to discuss strategies for survival.³³ Ted Arroyo, SJ, is heading up a major social research organization based at Loyola University New Orleans.³⁴

Social injustices are constant reminders of the imperfection of the human condition and the inadequacy of the political and social institutions regulating our common life, as well as the cultural and religious institutions impregnating our society with meaning. Nations, like humans, tend to lose sight of the precise causes of social injustice. The roots of the dysfunction are difficult to see because they hide in the shadow land of citizens' thinking. They hide in the relationships citizens do not question, the structures they do not think about critically, and the corporate symbols and

mythologies they do not reinterpret or change to fit the challenges of new contexts. While it is true injustices inundate our daily world, periodically an event, like Katrina, exposes this shadow land. Such events offer a terrible grace in the midst of tragedy—an opportunity for a nation to identify the root causes of its injustices, to discover the intricate connections between relationships, structures, symbols and mythologies.

May we have the wisdom as a nation to learn from this moment of a terrible grace. God help us if we do not.

¹ Mark Markuly, the current dean of the School of Theology and Ministry (STM) at Seattle University, organized the authors writing about New Orleans for this edition of the *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* (SJSJ). When Dean Markuly began his position at Seattle University, he asked SU Law School Dean Kellye Testy if the editors of the SJSJ would consider a series of interdisciplinary articles on social justice issues related to pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans. The editors accepted enthusiastically. All of the New Orleans authors are deeply appreciative for the opportunity to explore together in these pages one of the most complex social justice events in U.S. history.

² See *Hurricane Katrina Death Tally 1000—Half of them Elderly*, Aug. 28, 2008, http://www.healthline.com/blogs/healthline_connects/2008/08/hurricane-katrina-death-tally-1000-half.html.

³ Michelle Hunter, *Deaths of Evacuees Push Toll to 1,577*, TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans), May 19, 2006, at A14.

⁴ LA. DEP'T OF HEALTH AND HOSP., REPORTS OF MISSING AND DECEASED (2006), available at <http://www.dhh.louisiana.gov/offices/page.asp?ID=192&Detail=5248>.

⁵ OFFICE OF POLICY DEVELOPMENT & RESEARCH, U.S. DEP'T OF HOUSING & URBAN DEVELOPMENT, CURRENT HOUSING UNIT DAMAGE ESTIMATES: HURRICANES KATRINA, RITA AND WILMA (2006), http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/GulfCoast_HousingDamageEstimates_021206.pdf.

⁶ FEMA, THE FEDERAL RESPONSE TO HURRICANE KATRINA: LESSONS LEARNED 7, (2006), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/reports/katrina-lessons-learned.pdf>.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Marc Kaufman, *Hurricanes' Toll: 320 Million Trees*, SEATTLE TIMES, Nov. 16, 2007, at A3.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ The first such book was written by local author Tom Piazza. See *Why New Orleans Matters*, Harper Perennial, 2008; Two books by writers for the local newspaper, *The Times-Picayune*, catch some of the pathos of the event: Chris Rose, *1 Dead in Attic: After Katrina*, Simon and Schuster, 2007; Jed Horne, *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City*, Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008; See also the memoir of Julia Reed, *The House on First Street: My New Orleans Story*, Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers. Though he did not live in the region, Michael Eric

Dyson's, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, Basic Books, 2006, explores the role of racism in creating many of the problems after the storm.

¹² Anna Badkhen, *A Death in New Orleans: Tired of Waiting for Authorities to Help, Citizens Rescue the Living, Bury the Dead*, S.F. CHRON., Sept. 4, 2005, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/09/04/BADKHEN.TMP>.

¹³ Leonard Pitts, Jr. *If You're Quiet, You Can Hear "Katrina's Children" Weep*, SEATTLE TIMES, Aug. 24, 2008, at B10.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Joel Brouwer, *Counting the Dead*, N.Y. TIMES BOOK REVIEW, June 22, 2008, at 11.

¹⁶ Charlie Varley, *Poverty, Race and Katrina Lessons of a National Shame*, Newsweek, Sept. 19, 2005, at cover.

¹⁷ For an interesting theory on how these firms developed and the role they have played in restructuring the capitalistic economy, see NAOMI KLEIN, *THE SHOCK DOCTRINE: THE RISE OF DISASTER CAPITALISM* (Picador) (2007).

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Katherine Mangan, *New Orleans Colleges Slog Toward Recovery from Katrina*, CHRON. OF HIGHER EDUC., Jan. 11, 2008, at A1, A22.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² Such was the experience of two agencies, Unity, a consortium of agencies serving the homeless, and Hope House, a transitional housing program. Katy Reckdahl, *City Hall Sitting on Aid Money, Critics Say*, TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans), Jan. 20, 2008, at A1, A21.

²³ Marc Kaufman, "Hurricanes' Toll: 320 million trees," SEATTLE TIMES, November 16, 2007, A3.

²⁴ Paul Tough, *A Teachable Moment*, New York Times Magazine, Aug. 17, 2008 at 32.

²⁵ Tom Green, SJ, *A Matter of Human Dignity: Advocating for Immigrants in New Orleans*, Company: The World of Jesuits and Their Friends, Winter 2007, at 12, 12-16.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Lawrence N. Powell, *Chasing the Blues Away*, The American Scholar, Summer 2007, at 12, 12-13.

²⁸ Jack Sullivan, *Partying and Praying*, CHRON. OF HIGHER EDUC., Feb. 8, 2008, at A3, A3-A5.

²⁹ Daniel Kensington, Editorial, *The Reform Louisianians Want*, TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans), Jan. 20, 2008, at A7.

³⁰ Adam Nossiter, *New Louisiana Governor Pierces Brazen Style of Business as Usual*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 28, 2008, at A1, A1-A18.

³¹ See Jennifer Howard, *Stories from the Storm*, CHRON. OF HIGHER EDUC., Sept. 14, 2007, at A10, A10-A11.

³² Norman Robinson, a television anchor for New Orleans television station WDSU, dedicated a certain portion of his Tuesday evening broadcast to the specific discussion of racial issues, which became exacerbated after Katrina. Cowan was a regular guest on the show, sharing his insights as a psychologist and theological educator, as well as his

experience as a participant in a well-known New Orleans interracial choir, *Shades of Praise*.

³³ Barbara Fleischer, an organizational psychologist and theological educator, helped to organize several workshops to help small businesses re-imagine their businesses after Hurricane Katrina. The most significant event many have been to is a workshop by international leadership expert Margaret Wheatley. Fleischer arranged for Wheatley to lead a discussion with small business leaders, entitled *Thriving Through Creative Connections*, which occurred on Jan. 18, 2007.

³⁴ Jessica Davis, *Fr. Arroyo Leads Research Project Aimed at Keeping Ethics in Public Policy*, *LOYOLA TODAY*, Oct. 11, 2002, <http://www.loyno.edu/newsandcalendars/loyolatoday/2002/10/arroyo.html>.