

Oh, FEMA! Where Art Thou?

**“Whatever you’ve heard about New Orleans, the reality is much worse.”
- Bob Herbert, New York Times (December 2006)**

Several days after Hurricane Katrina changed the face of New Orleans, I was invited into the studio of a local television station in Washington, D.C. I was the participant on a panel with a couple of black journalists. Our task that afternoon was to explain what was going on in Louisiana. The media had already given us images that were still haunting us. We had seen bodies floating in polluted water and people trapped on roof tops. We had seen mostly black faces, angry, hot and disappointed in the failure of the U.S. government to assist them. A remark was made that New Orleans looked like a Third World country; and this statement perhaps accurate made future attempts to provide aid just as difficult as if one was trying to turn the tide in Haiti or Darfur.

When it was my turn to talk about Katrina on television, I made reference to how one had to go back to 1968 and Martin Luther King, Jr, to best understand what was happening in New Orleans and the coastal regions of Mississippi and Alabama. I said we were either looking at the failure of the Civil Rights Movement or its Unfinished Agenda. Katrina had unmasked the poverty of America and many of us didn’t know what to do. Poverty is the source of world instability. In his last book Where Do We Go From Here?, King had made the following statement:

“ The poor in our countries have been shut out of our minds, and driven from the main stream of our society, because we have allowed them to become invisible. Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for “the least of these.”

King during the last year of his life was concern with organizing his Poor People’s Campaign. He wanted in April 1968 to bring thousands of America’s improvised from all backgrounds and races to the District of Columbia.. For King this would be his third level of what might be called his evolution. He had started out as a Civil Rights activist and had become an antiwar proponent of peace. Now in 1968 he was emerging as a champion of a Bill of Rights for the disadvantaged. He was advocating a domestic Marshall plan.. King was 39 when he was assassinated in Memphis. Thirty-seven years later the “least of these” would be the sufferers of New Orleans.

Whereas King’s body was carried on a simple wooden wagon drawn by mules, many poor people in New Orleans were left without even this small bit of symbolic dignity.

If people didn’t know what was happening in America prior to Katrina, they had no excuse after the Hurricane left and the levees broke.

When one thinks of America a number of cities immediately come to mind: New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, D.C. – and New Orleans.

In many of these cities a considerable number of the inhabitants are black and people of color. New Orleans is seductive. It's jazz, jambalaya, Mardi Gras, Bourbon Street, and Hoo-Doo hollerin. It's a city of writers – Tennessee Williams, William Burroughs, Tom Dent, Bob Kaufman, Kalamu Ya Salaam, Mona Lisa Savoy, Jerry Ward and Brenda-Marie Osbey. It's The Big Easy and plenty of romance. The French Quarter defines New Orleans for tourists and tours, but there is the invisible New Orleans that has always been very black and very poor.

In May 2006, nine months after the killer storms Katrina and Rita struck Louisiana, I had the opportunity to fly to New Orleans and talk about the poet Langston Hughes at the Jefferson Parish Library. I stayed at a hotel in the French Quarter – and I could see tourism slowly coming back. Almost all the guests were white. Many seemed to be contractors helping with the rebuilding but also looking to have a good time at night. At night everyone was told to be careful before leaving the hotel. I saw a few tourists who reminded me of deer that could be taken down with just the threat of robbery.

My first afternoon in New Orleans, two librarians gave me a tour of where the levees broke and the 9th ward. We drove around for about an hour, and every street we went down was gone. Desolation and devastation. Just as I could never imagine the towers of the World Trade Center collapsing, I had no way of understanding what I was looking at and experiencing in New Orleans. I had seen photographs of Hiroshima after the dropping of the bomb – and maybe this was the only image I could find a match for. Where and how could anyone ever begin to rebuild?

I was standing in New Orleans, nine months after Katrina hit and it seemed as if she has just walked out the door. I immediately realized that as a writer it was words and language that had confused me. I had grown up in New York and the word hurricane meant heavy rains and strong winds. In the early 1970s, a hurricane was a sweet drink with rum that I could purchase near DuPont Circle in Washington. Hurricane as in the boxer Rubin Hurricane Carter, the guy whose life was placed behind bars, and Bob Dylan turning his life into a song. Hurricane was a word I knew but the word levee was new to me. I had no idea what happens when a levee breaks. As a student at Howard University I did know about floods and blues, because I often heard the great poet Sterling A. Brown reciting his poem “Ma Rainey” and how she sang “Backlash Blues.” Brown in just a few lines showed how the blues singer captured the collective memory of a people:

*I talked to a fellow, an' the fellow say
“She jes' catch hold of us, somekindaway.
She sang Backwater Blues one day:*

*It rained fo' days an' de skies was dark as night,
Trouble taken place in de lowlands at night.*

*Thundered an' lighened an' the storm begin to roll
Thousan's of people ain't got no place to go*

*Den I went an stood upon some high ol' lonesome hill,
An' looked down on the place where I used to live
An' den de folks, dey natchally bowed dey heads an' cried,
Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey moufs up tight an' cried,
An' Ma lef' de stage, an' followed some de folks outside."*

*Dere wasn't much more de fellow say:
She jes' gits hold of us dataway.*

Because of the power of today's media we are all able to stand on a high ol' lonesome hill and see the place where black folks and other Americans once lived.

Blues people are witnesses; so the testimonies of people affected by Katrina becomes an attempt to speak truth to power. Katrina revealed that the US government does not perform well on the local, state and federal level. The government was helpless in the face of a natural disaster and left many wondering how the US government would respond if confronted with another major terrorist attack. Even with a Homeland Security Agency – one wonders how secure is the United States of America. The Homeland Security Act was signed by Bush on November 25, 2002.

Katrina survivors will forever ask the questions - could this have been prevented.? Could human life and property have been saved?

I think Katrina made us more aware of the environment; it was as if we had all morphed into Al Gore over night. How else to explain the increase in hurricanes each year without acknowledging climate changes and global warming.

Along with the word levee another word entered my vocabulary as a result of Katrina. That word was wetlands. Many experts feel that the destruction of the wetlands around New Orleans removed the natural barriers of protection which the city once had. New Orleans was founded by the French in 1718 on high ground along the Mississippi, on top of a natural levee of sediment deposited by the Mississippi River. The wetlands are also a nursery for the commercial fisheries. Louisiana is the largest producer of oysters and supply 50 per cent of the nation's shrimp. The total annual value is \$2.85 billion and the Fisheries are responsible for providing 40,000 jobs.

The destruction of the environment for economic gain during pre-Katrina times was a major issue. This is a world wide problem. The protecting of New Orleans from a major storm was never a priority from even people living in New Orleans. Wetlands absorb storms as they attempt to come across the mainland. Today New Orleans is sinking, while offshore oil and gas fields exist in places that should not be inhabited. The focus is on building bigger levees to control rather than preserve nature. An estimated 30% of the Louisiana coast's wetlands has slipped into the Gulf.

(Wall Street Journal/8-3-07)

Two years after Katrina the focus is on rebuilding – but this focus is on homes and neighborhoods, not the rebuilding or restoring of the environment.

It was Martin Luther King Jr who said, “The stability of the large world house which is ours, will involve a revolution of values to accompany the scientific and freedom revolutions engulfing the earth.”

It has become obvious with each passing year, that many corporations and governments do not possess the values that would instruct them to cherish the earth. Unless our values change we will destroy the human spirit. It is the elevation of the human spirit which is needed if we are to save this planet.

Two years after Katrina there is still much work to be done. My friend Wiletta Ferdinand who lives in Pontchartrain Park, New Orleans sent me an email in July which said, “The neighborhoods are still dark, not many houses have lights. When I put the trash out at night, I still feel like a pioneer.”

Wiletta’s use of the word pioneer seems to be filled with multiple meanings and possibilities. It seems to disengage her from our highly technological society. The word is also one of empowerment, and the claiming of control of one’s life. The word is also one that might be used to describe the foreigner or stranger. The person who attempts to subdue the wilderness. Wiletta’s reference to darkness and light seems to echo something written by the novelist Ralph Ellison. Perhaps Wiletta’s is concerned about her own visibility, and like the protagonist in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, we can hear a voice saying – “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”

Some of the people in New Orleans today might be pioneers, trying to find new beginnings. We wish all of them well. But many of the people who have been unable to return are poor people. They are not pioneers, they are not first, they are last. Last to be remembered and last to be helped.

Two years after Katrina many poor people have not returned. Where would they go? Where are the rental homes and affordable housing? According to an article in the *New York Times* on July 12th (of this year) only 21 per cent of the 77,000 rental units in the five parishes in the New Orleans metropolitan area are slated to be rebuilt through government grants and tax credits. Some money that had been set aside for renters have been transferred to homeowners.

Without a place to live, why would someone return to New Orleans to work? For those who find employment they might be confronted with long commutes. I was reading in a newspaper about a guy (Jeffery Evans) who was lucky to find a warehouse job – but had a two-hour bus ride from his apartment.

Many of the people who have been displaced by Katrina are the young and the elderly.

Some local jurisdictions in New Orleans have been fighting to prevent the construction or repair of rental units. In Jefferson Parish (suburb west of N.O.) officials blocked a 200-unit complex for the elderly.

The opposition to building rental units is connected to the belief that rental units simply attract crime. New Orleans – especially the 9th ward has a sad history – one filled with violent crime and drug trade. These problems however confront every American city .

New Orleans, the city known as the Big Easy however must find a way to halt the corruption and crime and rebuild. According to a recent article in The Nation (9/10/917) New Orleans has the highest incarceration rate of any major US city- it's double the national rate.

Looking to the future, we might measure the impact of Katrina on our lives in a number of ways.

Let me mention four:

1. Katrina created what we can call the Katrina Diaspora, the forced migration of people to other cities. People have been dispersed to over 44 states. What impact will these new residents have on other parts of America? Migration plays a key role in the history of African Americans and the shaping the United States. What will be the social, economic and cultural implications?
2. The health care of African Americans, especially mental health issues related to post-traumatic stress. Will we be able to diagnosis the problem? Will people be able to receive help and treatment? How might depression for example damage the future homes of African Americans? How might it be linked to substance abuse, crime and unemployment?
3. The survival of African American culture; elderly artists, high school band teachers, books, art work. Katrina raises the question of protection and preservation of African American culture. How do we store our artifacts, etc? How do we not lose the focus on human life but also focus on what human life creates?
4. The role of government in our lives. What do we expect our government to do? If you lose your home does the government have a responsibility to give you a new one? How does our government function during a time/or period of crisis?

Michael Eric Dyson in his popular book Come Hell or High Water made the following statement that I found to be very insightful:

“But charity is episodic and often driven by disaster. What is needed are structures of justice that perpetuate the goodwill intended in charity. Justice allows charity to live beyond crisis.”

It was Bob Dylan who once proclaimed that you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. I think we all might sadly agree that there are going to be other hurricanes just as bad or even more terrible than Katrina. We don't need a weatherman to inform us.

What we must continue to do is study nature, study the changes in nature. We must prepare to govern well and act well during a crisis.

The next president of the US will have to address the challenges of recovery. New Orleans and the Gulf Coast is a microcosm for the larger issue of poverty and racial discrimination. Democratic candidate John Edwards kicked off his campaign for president in the 9th Ward last December. Since then other candidates have made the visit. Hopefully from these trips will come more than just new promises and pictures. Two years after Katrina we struggle to remain optimistic.

If we fail, then we might find ourselves back in St. James Infirmary - the place Louis Armstrong sung about:

*"I went down to the St. James Infirmary
Saw my baby there
Stretched out on a long white table
So sweet...so cold...so fair."*

E. Ethelbert Miller
Board chair /IPS

This speech was given in Stavanger, Norway on September 14th at the Stavanger International Festival of Literature and Freedom of Speech.