

Stories from Katrina: Lessons in Community, Sacramentality, and Vocation

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**2006 REA/APRRE Meeting
Atlanta, Georgia**

Hurricane Katrina destroyed an area covering 90,000 square miles of the U.S. Gulf Coast, or an area about the size of Great Britain. New Orleans and its neighboring parishes also experienced a second "human-made" disaster, with the breaching of levees poorly designed that gave way to flood 80% of the city and nearly 100% of neighboring St. Bernard civil parish. Over 1600 human lives and an untold number of non-human lives were lost to this one storm. Counting the cost goes far beyond the billions bantered about as the 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 reveal glimpses of ultimacy that are rarely and starkly visible against the backdrop of rubble.

There are many harrowing stories of survival and heroism, inspiring stories of hope and resilience, poignant accounts of loss and meaning in the midst of these events. They are too numerous to recover and recount. I have only a sliver of them and have chosen to explore only a portion of them. In this paper I am focusing on the stories of those who have lost all or most of their possessions. These losses comprise a widespread and common experience in this area and such stories abound everywhere. More importantly, I believe these stories have much to say to our societies where material possessions are prized, and therefore they offer religious and moral lessons for our times.

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, from emails, radio, television, and newspaper stories. I am immersed in them. While my own home received relatively minor wind damage from the hurricanes, those of many of my friends were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable. Nearly all of the workmen with whom I have come in contact lost their 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 am simply 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. These stories emerge from a humanity exhausted and raw from loss upon loss. They come with little dross and thus they uncover concerns that are deeply human, perhaps offering a clear window into the desires of the human heart. The themes emerging from these stories also offer religious educators a set of heartstrings that their larger stories must touch.

In reflecting upon what I have heard, I have noticed three major themes that seem to reoccur in stories related to loss of home and possessions. As 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 and the loss of even those whom they don't know by name but who were once a part of daily interactions at stores, public places, and the larger community. Second, in speaking about things that they have lost, people distinguish between "stuff" and those items that connect them with family members, friends, or significant events of the past. Hence, there is a theme of symbol or *sacramentality*, as these items participate in a larger reality and signify much more than the monetary or functional worth of the objects lost. Third, there is a lamenting for a loss of meaningful work and creative endeavors that can no longer be accomplished because of current circumstances. This is a sadness that goes beyond a concern for loss of revenue. This theme speaks of *vocation*. In this paper, I will give examples of how each of these themes has been expressed and then reflect on the implications of these issues for religious educators.

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 damage due to storms have endured wave after wave of good-byes to friends and families who once shared their daily rhythms of life. Those who have stayed in the area are in a perpetual mode of bidding friend and families "adieu" as many have been forced to leave by circumstance or choose to leave to avoid future traumas of evacuations and storms. Mary, now in her 70s says, "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." Another women, younger by a few decades, says, "I keep going to good-bye lunches for my friends, and I cry everyday. It's tough, it's really tough." A workman who came to my house spoke daily about his losses. 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 to stay with his daughter to recuperate. At my home, he had spoken of the close-knit family he had 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 neighbors in his community, cutting them out of attics. "I couldn't stop crying for weeks."

Those who live in the most devastated areas, such as the towns of Arabi and Chalmette in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana; or the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans; or Waveland or Bay St. Louis, Mississippi; or Cameron or Erath, Louisiana hit by Hurricane Rita have seen their entire communities wiped out. Ollie, for example, 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 everyday with my friends, and the people I would see, even in passing. Everything and everybody is gone." The sense of loss of community also

relates to the potential loss of the entire city and its spirit. Heath Allen, a TV news reporter who with his wife raised nine children in Chalmette, Louisiana tearfully reflected, " It's really about family. St. Bernard is a very closely knit... moms and dads lived next to sons and daughters... so much of the fabric of your life ...gone just gone" (WDSU TV). His colleague and news anchor, Norman Robinson, who also lost his home reflected in the deeply flooded New Orleans East area reflected, "Life as we knew it is lost. The fabric of our communities-- torn apart."

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. His conclusion is echoed in Bernard Cooke's *Sacraments and Sacramentality* where Cooke reminds us that humans are "symbol making beings" (44) who interpret their lives and come to know themselves and their communities through the symbols they use to both understand and communicate their experiences. 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" (21).

Cooke broadly interprets *sacrament* as "that which effects something by its significance. Sacrament, in other words, is that which gives new meaning to things" (58). Christian sacramental liturgies are those special moments in the life of Christians through which the community re-members who they are in God and what they are called to do because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. But all humans live by the meaning of their key symbols that help them remember who they are and with whom they are connected. Key symbols transform our consciousness as they become touchstones of meaning in our lives. This symbolic meaning making and resultant transformation of consciousness is what Cooke refers to as the *sacramentality* of life (54-55).

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. They resonate with meaning and thus function as *sacramentals* of community life.

At the top of the list items mourned or prized by Katrina evacuees were photographs. "As we were packing up to leave, my daughter packed all of our photo albums. She said that was those were the only things in the house worth saving." An African American senior citizen said, "I lost everything. But I did manage to save a photograph of my great grandmother." In evacuating, "We took a wedding album, a baby book, my husband's watch--a wedding present" (Konigsmark 2006). A teacher sighed and relayed, "I lost 28 years of photographs of the children I taught," and 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."

Beyond photos, there were so many other items charged with meaning, symbolic of family and community. A resident of Metairie, Louisiana, working on gutting his flooded house said, "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." 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." Houses themselves could be symbols resonant with memories and meaning. TV 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" (WDSU TV).

These items that resonate 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.

Vocation and Creativity

Many of the things grieved by residents of the Gulf Coast connected strongly with work and creative endeavors. Lost were not only significant people and communities and the symbols that brought them to mind but also the creative endeavors that expressed connections 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. Fats Domino lost his grand piano on which he had composed and played so many of his well-known songs. Pete Fountain spoke frequently of the loss of nearly all of his instruments and his gold and platinum record awards. The Neville Brothers lost years' worth of audio recordings, including new works not yet released. Many university professors lamented 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 back and adjunct positions were lost. 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 3000 books, including two first edition works signed by Gertrude Stein. I would trade all of my expensive china for just some of my books." 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 back to this area and start helping people get their homes back together again."

The loss of creative endeavors was not necessarily related to paid work. Losses of creative endeavors included beloved hobbies. A friend, originally from Louisiana but living in Diamondhead, Mississippi said, "Everything was gone. The only thing I found was an earring where our house was. All my paintings were gone...my water colors. I have started painting again-- blue alligators with a tear in the shape of a fleur-de-lis to signify my sadness for Louisiana." Another friend in St. Bernard Parish spoke of the loss of her hand-made quilts, "I put them on the second floor. We thought they would be safe there. I had to grieve those."

Theological Reflection

Elizabeth Dreyer, reflecting on models of Christian spirituality, proposes that a spirituality that is inclusive of all and geared to everyday life can draw resources from three theological roots: Spirit, Creation, and Incarnation. She reminds us that the biblical images of Spirit as breath of God (*ruah*) and power to love (*dynamis*) present the Spirit as the gift that moves us into loving connections and community (54-55). Ultimately, this gift of Spirit is mediated to us through relationships (56). Community, then, and loving relationships are 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 (6-12) would remind us, sacred community includes the non-human world and the wider web of life that both sustains and delights us.

Spirit also spawns our creativity (Dreyer 58). The *dynamis* of God surges throughout the cosmos in endless expressions of creativity. God's creativity continues through the ongoing expansion of the universe and its sustenance. Humans share in this divine *dynamis* as they engage in creative works and self-giving on behalf of their wider communities. As created in "image and likeness" of divine life and sharers in the gift of Spirit, persons are called from within to creativity and work. This sense of *vocation* goes beyond a specific calling to a designated ministry. It flows from within the human heart and longs for expression. It incarnates the life of the Spirit in self-giving for others.

Christians focus on Jesus of Nazareth as the culmination of God's loving and incarnate self-expression in history, and as Dreyer points out:

The messages enfolded in the incarnation are many. Incarnation reveals a God who is courageous, whose gestures reveal an unfathomably generous love in a willingness to communicate and give God's self in the world for us...It makes holy every cubic inch of reality from quarks to human beings--cosmos, world, flesh, matter, spirit (63).

When "things" become imbued with connections to community and creativity, they open us to the breath and power of God's Spirit. 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.

The Lessons of Katrina

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 both 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" and use of tax revenues has hardly been sacramental. Our self-giving in work ventures has too often turned to self-service. Our communal worlds have been too small and exclusive.

Perhaps because of effective advertising in our consumerist societies, material things have come to symbolize other possibilities--status, attractiveness, and comfort. These accentuated values, however, may lie at the surface of deeper desires to belong, to be cherished, and to enjoy the gifts of life that true sharing can bring. The lessons in values shared by those experiencing major losses in the wake of Gulf Coast hurricanes reveal deeper longings of the human heart and larger possibilities for our wider societies. The hurricanes shocked us in these devastated areas into realizing what really mattered, at least for this window of time. Can these lessons be brought to other cities and areas, not so rudely awakened?

I ask religious educators to make this Gulf Coast devastation an opportunity for reflection. Use the images and stories from this event to help people imagine the loss of their own local communities, their significant symbols of connection and creative endeavors. Help them sift through an imagined rubble of their lives to see clearly what matters most to them. Perhaps then we can collectively clear a path to the true desires of the human heart and, at last, embrace a community that is inclusive of all.

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