

### The Calming of the Storm

My first images of Hurricane Katrina were a comfort to me. I remember being flustered and alone at a guesthouse in India, where I, an 18 year old American girl, was the only guest. Unable to sleep with the lights on and a Swiss army knife under my pillow, I switched on the TV. There was nothing on that could distract my trembling self from the glowing dark eyes of the crowd of men that had gathered outside my door, laughing and peering through the thin curtain that was too short for my window. What scared me more were the geckos and cockroaches creeping along the floor. I found myself in this place because I was on my way to begin volunteering for relief of the 2004 tsunami, which, at the time, was the world's most unprecedented natural disaster. I had deferred my enrollment at Tulane University because it was not my school of choice, and because my youthful romanticism called me to do humanitarian work. It was difficult though for me to recall my initial motivation while I was in that room. All I really wanted was my Mom. Or at least a teddy bear. I kept flipping between the television's four channels, but none of the whimsical Indian music videos could soothe my nerves. I continued searching, until one of the channels became static and the images of jolly belly dancers shifted to stoic reporters on BBC World News. Suddenly the tsunami had become last year's disaster.

New Orleans was being devastated by Hurricane Katrina, and I was relieved to have English TV. Of course I was shocked and distraught, but the storm gave me

something more important to be concerned about than my own immediate comfort. It also reconnected me to home—I considered that I would have been living in New Orleans if I had not been in India. That night would be the last news coverage of Katrina that I saw for six months. At first I struggled with the idea that I had flown to the opposite side of the globe to volunteer while there was such urgent need so close to home. I soon dismissed these anxieties with the reasonable assumption that things would be well taken care of by the “American determination to clear the ruins” (Baum 3), as professed by President Bush on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005. From then on, the only updates I would get were over the phone, anti-Bush ramblings from my Mom, punctuated by urges for me to apply to different colleges because Tulane might not be an option any more. For me, college choice had become irrelevant. I was a child in awe of the culture of volunteerism, and the prospect of taking any time away from treating orphan’s lice to further cushion my upper-class American lifestyle by applying to more colleges was unacceptable to me. Before Katrina, Tulane was unappealing to me because the images I had of New Orleans consisted of little more than *Girls Gone Wild: Bourbon Street*. In a selfish way, Katrina somehow made Tulane attractive.

I boarded the plane to New Orleans with a vision of myself gutting houses every weekend, alongside a crowd of enthusiastic Tulane students. I anticipated vibrant student action shaping a social movement the way universities were supposed to and once did—could Tulane be the next Berkeley? When I met my roommate I was glad to find she shared my idealism and motivation, and we signed up together to work on houses the coming Saturday. Saturday came, but unfortunately, it came after Friday night, and no community service could draw her hungover body out of bed. I hastily turned my nose up

at her, but soon found myself forfeiting time with Habitat for Humanity to study for that one Geology test, with every intention of volunteering the next weekend. But then the next weekend came and I stayed on campus to write a paper. The year continued to pass like that, with a constant internal anxiety about how to reconcile my obligation and desire to serve, with my responsibility to take seriously the privilege of higher education.

My own hypocrisy and inaction have allowed me a sense of empathy for the political and social processes that have followed Hurricane Katrina. I have learned that ambivalence often wears the mask of apathy. New Orleans does not lack compassion, but conviction. The challenges to recovery are so multi-faceted that it is daunting to choose which to embrace, and problems can be so overwhelming that doing nothing can seem as effective as searching for solutions that may never be realized. As contradictory as conditions may be, however, I refuse to be a pessimist. This may not be based entirely on practical reasons, but personally I do not have the will to accept that New Orleans will disappear. Katrina can be used as a catalyst to galvanize the formation of a better New Orleans, but as much as we should be positive, we must not be unrealistic. We must seek a model for rebuilding that is optimistic and achievable, not idealistic and disposable.

In order to understand the prospects for the future of New Orleans, we must familiarize ourselves with the Pre-Katrina city. New Orleans' bright reputation for lively music and food is juxtaposed with its inundating presence of crime and poverty. In his *New Yorker* article "In the Ruins", Nicholas Lemann calls New Orleans "the opposite of a city that works... an economically optional city" (Lemann 2-3) that depends on "an intentionally impoverished, unempowered, and uneducated populace" (Lemann 3). Places like the Ninth Ward, which became notorious following Katrina, have been plagued with

structural violence since before the destruction of the storm. Jed Horne's book *Desire Street: A True Story of Death and Deliverance in New Orleans* illuminates the housing projects that served to "quarantine the social undesirables" (Horne 24) and created a haven of crime. In Horne's book, a Desire Street resident named Curtis Kyles is accused of murdering a white woman, and his trial asks us to question the extent to which society can be blamed for personal faults. A juror asks himself, "Do you forgive hell for not being heaven?...Curtis Kyles killed that lady because he could not escape the world that had replaced what was there before. The truth is... we created the world that allowed that to happen" (Horne, 310-311). Now we have the opportunity to recreate that world, and the question is: do we want to rebuild New Orleans as it was before, and, if not, what is the scope of our power?

Many would argue that New Orleans is not innately socially ill, and that the problems that exist have not always been there. Journalist Jon Lee Anderson visited Desire Street shortly after Hurricane Katrina and interviewed Lionel Petrie, who had lived his entire life in the Ninth Ward with great affection for his neighborhood. In his article "Leaving Desire," Anderson describes Petrie's recollection of the area: "It had once been a good place...but...it had turned bad. He blamed the federal housing programs for concentrating young, jobless, uneducated people together in the same area. Those who weren't bad turned bad...and they had turned the others bad, too" (Anderson 5). What is important to take from this is not the conception that the government is intentionally debilitating the impoverished, mostly black communities, but the idea that these communities can exist without being crime-ridden.

In New Orleans, the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association is an example of the great potential that lies in individual neighborhoods Post-Katrina. A historically black and predominantly middle class area of the Lower Ninth Ward, Holy Cross has boldly asserted its determination not only to rebuild, but to do so in an environmentally friendly fashion. The Neighborhood Association has formed alliances with national non-governmental organizations including the Sierra Club, Green Light Project, and Sharp Solar, as well as newly-founded local non-profits like Global Green New Orleans and the Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development to actively promote green rebuilding. Completed projects have included: preventing the Army Corps of Engineers from destroying two-hundred homes, creating a community garden, planting the St. Claude Neutral Ground, placing and maintaining new street signs, building the Delery St. Playground, repairing ninety homes, organizing Neighborhood Watch, and obtaining local, state, and national Historic District Status<sup>i</sup>. All of this has taken place post-Katrina. In the *New Yorker* article “The Lost Year” writer Dan Baum comments, “More than just New Orleans is at stake...New Orleans could serve as [an] example of how to rebuild, smarter and better, a city flooded on an unprecedented scale” (Baum, 5). Within New Orleans, Holy Cross could be that example.

Holy Cross is also important because it has shown that successful rebuilding stems more from solidarity within communities than from a reliance on government initiative. Government responses to Katrina have been disappointing, and although the government must be held accountable, they will not be able to “hand down solutions like beads from a Mardi Gras float” (Baum 8), and, as “the vision of a planned recovery slipped away...an every-man-for-himself ethic replaced it” (Baum, 8). That is not to say

the government's role is not essential, but that citizens must actively pursue legislation that will meet their needs. For example, in March 2007 the New Orleans City Council approved legislation for net metering, a policy that allows people to sell excess energy produced by solar panels in their homes, thereby providing economic incentives for energy efficiency; the creation of this policy resulted directly from activism in the Holy Cross neighborhood. Holy Cross has illustrated that direct citizen engagement is the only way to achieve social change and guarantee recovery. Following the New Orleans tradition of benevolent and mutual aid societies, Holy Cross shows that trust in neighbors is essential for economic and social stability. A Lower Ninth Ward resident named Greta Gladney observes that "People will depend on the kindness of strangers... That's not good public policy, but that's what there is in poor neighborhoods" (Baum 8).

I struggle to form an opinion on New Orleans because I feel it is not my place. There has been so much judgment following the storm—judgment of local, state, and federal governments for improper response; judgment of poor blacks who feel sorry for themselves; judgment of rich whites who made it out unscathed; even judgments of emergency rescue workers. It seems that people are seeking a scapegoat more fervently than a leader. Perhaps that is because the city's future is so unclear that it is easier to seek answers in a traumatic past than in a future that is too blurry to perceive. When a year and a half have already passed and still there is neither a distinguished leader nor an apparent plan for the rehabilitation of New Orleans, it tells me that there is no general consensus on what will become of the city. Personally, I am still trying to piece together an understanding of New Orleans itself and expand my familiarity with what has taken place

since Katrina before I can formulate even the most humble diagnosis of what should or will happen. Who am I to judge?

What I must do is reflect internally and determine my role as a Tulane student in Post-Katrina New Orleans. If I say that I came here because of the storm, what does that really mean? It is important to remember that New Orleans is not the only college town in serious need. What should distinguish social issues here is the idea of “Katrina-as-opportunity” (Baum, 5). As college students, we should give, but our main objective is to learn. When I was volunteering in India I worked my hardest, but with good intentions as my only asset, I did not give as much as I gained. However, that which I learned in India will enable me to contribute far more in the future. I cling to the significance of Holy Cross because it can serve as a powerful model from which other communities can learn. For the rest of my time in New Orleans, I will make an effort to give to the city; however I know no matter how much I may do, the city will give more to me.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://holycrossneighborhood.org/content/view/15/31/>