
The apocalypse next door

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It looked like the end of the world.

Flying over the Superdome in a private plane a few days after Hurricane Katrina, I saw the gash in the roof, debris flapping in the opening like a giant flag of surrender. The dry part of the city looked like the top of everything - trees and buildings - had been shorn off. The submerged part looked as if the missing tops from dry land were scattered and floating in the brown water.

After I landed and started driving through the evacuated New Orleans, the only real traffic was overhead, from thundering helicopters. Occasionally, heavily armed military vehicles drove by. No people on the streets, no electricity - steel beams from buildings bent over, as if they were still resisting the wind.

Whatever picture I came in with after seeing the images on television got replaced immediately. This was worse. So much worse than was possible to portray through camera, keyboard, or pen. It was epic in its awfulness.

I went there with Gary Morsch, head of the Olathe, Kansas-based Heart To Heart International, a humanitarian relief agency, to get medicine, food, and water to some of the worst-hit areas, and to determine where the big shipments of medicine should go. Heart to Heart was coordinating tractor-trailer and air shipments of insulin, antibiotics, tetanus vaccinations, saline solution, pain relief medicine, and critical care kits into the area. The president of Jefferson Parish, one of the devastated regions, gave Heart to Heart permission to pass through all check points and restricted areas to get supplies in.

We headed for one of the few open hospitals. Hospital staff had been "looting," the head of that hospital told me, from local pharmacies to try to get enough drugs for the thousands of people in his facility. We passed over the freeway that had served as the city's evacuation area. Empty wheelchairs and cots, shoes, clothes, and garbage were scattered for miles - a rapture scene from your worst childhood fears.

Then we got lost. Our maps were useless because roads were gone. Whole sections of the city were gone. As we came over a hill on Veterans Boulevard, we encountered police officers with automatic weapons waving us down. We got out of our vehicle, not believing what we saw through the windshield. There was no road ahead - the entire community before us was under water. Rescue boats ferried people from their homes to dry land. The rescuers knew there were still survivors in that water. They would worry about the bodies later, they said.

An elderly woman approached the uniformed men.

"Are you taking people from this neighborhood to see their homes?" she asked.

"No. Maybe in a few weeks. Right now we're trying to get them out, not in."

She turned to us.

"Can you take me to see my house? I want to see what's still there before I leave forever."

Waist deep in the water was what looked like a resident: a wiry, unbathed, unshaven man who resembled actor Al Pacino, a cigarette in his mouth and behind each ear, dislodging his fishing boat from a tree branch.

"Can you take this lady to see her house?" we shouted to him.

He squinted at her.

"What's your address?"

She told him.

"We're neighbors. Get in the boat."

She looked at the water - a color not found in nature - fouled with floating animals, waste, debris. Putrid. Toxic. Diseased.

"Wait there," he told her. He slogged out of the water like a John the Baptist stunt double, picked her up and carried her to the boat, gently setting her in. He came back for her 60-year-old niece and set her next to her aunt. He looked us over.

"I'm not carrying you. If you want to go, get in."

We stepped into the water and waded to the boat.

We motored past, and above, Frances Smith's church, the school her children attended, the neighborhood convenience store, which our driver circled for a few minutes, using his landing net to scoop up cartons of cigarettes floating at the rooftop.

"I guess now I'm a looter," he said.

He cut the engine a few houses from our destination, and quiet momentum carried us the rest of the way. The bow of the boat gently bumped against her useless gutters. She had lived in this house for 79 years.

"The oak tree looks good," she said, looking at the top third - all that was visible. Who knows what childhood memories that tree held? She gazed at the house for several minutes, the way we visit headstones at cemeteries. No one made a sound.

"The roof's gone," she said, finally.

"Is there something you wish you could still get?" I asked her.

"I've got my life," she said. "There's nothing in there that I can't replace."

"We don't want to get stranded here after dark," the driver announced, starting up the motor.

On the return trip the propeller stalled briefly after hitting a submerged vehicle.

Walking back up the street, with Frances bone dry and me soaking wet, I asked her if she had cried yet.

"None of that has come out," she said. Then she whirled to look me right in the eye. "I feel like I died and woke up. That's my old life, out in that water. It's over. Now I have to move on."

When I first got to New Orleans, I thought I was witnessing the end of something. But in that moment it dawned on me that I was seeing the beginning of something, too. I saw suffering and hope as two sides of the same coin, exposed by the kindness of a neighbor who had a boat. I saw the failure of our government - are we really surprised by that anymore? - and the goodness of people.

I heard the same stories you heard about the terrible actions of some - people whose hearts seem set on harming others. But I also encountered people whose inner compasses point to helping others. Many came from all over the country or provided services at their own expense, because the images they saw evoked questions out of their own hearts: "What can I do? How can I help?"

I saw resilience, compassion, courage, hope, the desire to help: new beginnings.

Two scripture passages came to mind during my time there. One was Psalm 121: "I lift my eyes to the hills. Who will rescue me?" This was the lament of the poor in the Gulf Coast. In some cases, no one came to rescue them.

The other was the exchange between Moses and God in Exodus 3 and 4. "I have seen the misery of my people," God says. And after a discussion/argument, God asks Moses a question that I believe he asks all of us: "What do you have in your hand?" Moses had a staff for leading sheep. God told him that whatever he had in his hand at that moment would be usable enough for Moses to lead people out of their suffering.

This is what I saw in New Orleans: People used whatever they had in their hands at the moment they heard about the suffering, and let God use it to ease the misery of others.

It looked like the end of the world. But it felt like the beginning of a new one.

Dean Nelson directs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University, California. His new book on serving others, written with Gary Morsch of Heart To Heart International, will be released in 2006 by Berrett-Koehler of San Francisco.