



Reflections on Hurricane Katrina

© By Bolton Anthony

Probably like many others in the country, I have been captive to the news ever since hurricane Katrina took aim two weeks ago at my hometown. New Orleans is “where I’m from”; though we moved to Houston when I was six, both sides of my family have roots in New Orleans that go back generations. My oldest son was born there after I returned — just out of graduate school — to teach English and creative writing at a black university in the late sixties. Like anyone who has spent time in New Orleans — who has had the peculiar experience of walking up, not down, to the river — I knew what disaster waited if the city took a direct hit from so fierce a storm and the waters topped the levees.

I’d had minor surgery on Friday, and — under orders to do nothing — spent most of my time watching the hellish images wash across the television screen: the miles and miles of devastated coastline, the flooded sections of the city, and the anarchy at the Convention Center

and the Superdome where the poorest of the poor were left to fend for themselves — without food, without water, without succor or rites for the dying and the dead.

We had house guests Wednesday evening. After dinner we ventured out for dessert to a restaurant at the mall. Stepping outside for the first time in five days, it came as almost a physical shock to see the houses in our neighborhood standing undamaged and the streets free of bilge and storm debris: the storm had become such an all-consuming reality.



Bolton Anthony is the founder of **Second Journey**, a North Carolina-based non-profit organization which promotes “Mindfulness, service and community in the second half of life.”

Photo credit: The photo on the left in the montage above was taken by Richard Alan Hannon of the *Baton Rouge Advocate* and appeared in the September 12, 2005 issue of *Newsweek*. The caption on the picture reads: “A Louisiana State Police officer offers an orange to a dying hurricane refugee outside the Superdome. Soon after this photo was taken, the woman passed away.”

At the mall we stopped to tour one of Chapel Hill's stranger landmarks, a self-styled "gourmet emporium" known as A Southern Season. And as we meandered through this seemingly endless collection of esoteric items — whole aisles devoted exclusively to hot sauces, to green tea, to Belgian chocolates; display after display of glassware and fine china, of crudité and paté platters, of rare and vintage wines — I tried to understand the knot gripping my stomach.

There was nothing here I needed. Among the hundreds of thousands of items, there was not one thing I needed. My sense of need had undergone a radical leveling triggered by the images of those who lacked the most basic things we need for survival.

My wife Lisa, who is trained as a psychiatric nurse, volunteered 10 days ago for deployment to the Gulf Coast and is stationed, as of yesterday, at a Red Cross evacuation center in Natchez, Mississippi, where she will provide grief and crisis counseling. The tremendous pride I have felt in what she is doing is accompanied by the regret that I have no comparably "useful" skill set with on-the-ground applications.

It has also come home to me that Lisa's ability to respond is the true gift of her time of life. She "no longer has to worry about raising a family, pleasing a boss, or earning more money." From the dividend our generation now enjoys — all those extra years of life — comes "the chance to join with others in building a compassionate society, [a society] where people can think deep thoughts, create beauty, study nature, teach the young, worship what they hold sacred, and care for one another" — "the chance to do great good against great odds" (Theodore Roszak). "'Tis a consummation/ Devoutly to be wish'd" and the faith and hope behind my own work with Second Journey.

I told Lisa before she left that I knew she would come back changed. If watching television accounts was enough to trigger soul-searching and a reassessment of one's personal priorities, how much more witnessing the devastation and human suffering firsthand? I expect a homecoming not unlike that of T.S. Eliot's magi who return to their "Kingdoms" disquieted: "No longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,/ With an alien people clutching their gods." It will be a challenge to keep up with Lisa.

The scriptural readings this Sunday came from the great story of the Exodus — how Yahweh's avenging angel, coming as fire and water, rescued the Hebrews

and led them out of the slave camps of Egypt. In Katrina we have seen another avenging angel. She has torn aside the veil behind which was hid that "other America". She has delivered "the lost and the forgotten ones" — the anawim to whom Jesus promised the Kingdom of Heaven and the Earth as their inheritance. She has delivered them from their ruined city, branded our hearts with indelible images of their exodus, and scattered their numbers through every state in this country where it is hoped they shall be much harder to ignore.

I am writing this on the fourth anniversary of the terrorist attack of September 11. I am writing with fervent hope that we will not again squander the opportunity that a great national tragedy presents. I have in mind specifically the way the public conversation after 9/11 was co-opted:

"In those first weeks, it was as if we had all gone down to our own Ground Zero, the Ground Zero in our hearts and our souls. The public conversation expressed the most beautiful values and behavior in the inspiring examples of the rescue workers, the world's support and love for the American people, and every American's desire to help, give blood, or send money. People opened their hearts in so many ways...

"Then after just a few weeks, when the collective state of shock and mourning started to show up as an economic downturn, specifically as a serious fall in retail sales, President George W. Bush in a televised address called upon Americans to support the economy by getting back to business, the business of spending money. Shopping was portrayed as an expression of patriotism, a way to show the terrorists that they could not destroy our economy, our consumerism, the American spirit, or the American way of life."

The point of Lynne Twist's essay is that a conversation grounded in sufficiency — a conversation which united us in mutual support and opened our national conscience to deep soul searching — became a conversation grounded in scarcity — a conversation which divided us from our global neighbors and stoked our fears. "The you-and-me world vanished, replaced by the you-or-me world."

I hope this doesn't happen again. I hope the public conversation which could lead to a thoughtful re-evaluation of national priorities — around such critical issues as poverty in America, conservation of our wetlands, our oil dependence, and global warming (to name a few) — does not again become co-opted.

I hope we continue "no longer at ease" in our "old dispensation" of conspicuous consumption...for a long, long time.