

BUSINESS NOT AS USUAL

At first the people of New Orleans thought they'd been spared. Not that Katrina had left the city unscathed—folks like Lisa Moore and Larry Morgan had seen large sections of their roofs blown off. Still, it had not turned out to be the catastrophe some people had predicted. But just as people began to take down their storm shutters, the levees gave way, the waters poured in, and the Big Easy was inundated. Especially the Ninth Ward, one of the poorest parts of the city. A place where most folks barely hung on in the best of times.

Lisa and Larry and their ten children were confined by the waters to their attic for four days—four horrific days. They never had lots of food, and supplies were especially low before the storm. In fact, they got by over those four days in the attic on two cans of fruit cocktail.

They did what they could. They parceled out bits of fruit and liquid to the children. They stood on the roof, waving a towel, shouting for help. Not the first day. Not the second. Not the third. Not until the fourth day were they rescued.

On that day a helicopter finally arrived, and they thought their troubles were over. In truth, they had only just begun.

The chopper could only carry five people. The four youngest children were badly dehydrated and fading fast. So Larry and Lisa passed them up to the rescue crew. And then, Larry told their oldest child O'Neil, to go along as well.

After the chopper left, Lisa, Larry and the other five children all got into waiting boats. They assumed the whole family would be reunited in a few hours at the Superdome.

They were not.

O'Neil and the four youngest children were taken sixty miles away, to a shelter in Houma. Lisa and the other children were taken to the Convention Center in New Orleans. And Larry was taken to the Superdome. The family was scattered over three locations.

Larry and Lisa desperately tried to find each other, as well as O'Neil and the youngest children. But communications were almost non-existent, and transportation near impossible. They were, as you can imagine, frantic.

What Lisa and Larry experienced in the Superdome and the Convention Center defies description: babies dying from dehydration, young girls being raped, inadequate and overflowing sanitary facilities. Meanwhile in Houma, O'Neil did

what he could watch over his four siblings. The youngest was so terrified that she literally clung to her brother day and night. O'Neil managed to gather food and water and diapers and clothes for his brother and sisters from relief workers and kept careful watch over his stash, making sure they had whatever he could get for them. He kept them alive—and together.

Meanwhile, both of his parents were transferred to Texas. Lisa to Austin, Larry to Houston. They finally gained access to telephones, and were able to track down each other—and in time discovered where O'Neil and his siblings were being sheltered. Then, thanks to a network of volunteer pilots, they were all reunited days later in Austin. It turned out to be Larry's forty-fifth birthday. And as clichéd as it is, it is one he will never forget. A happy ending? Well, in part. But their future is most uncertain, they had little to begin with, and now they have lost it all.

It is hard to believe that such a thing could happen in America. But it's just one of hundreds, if not thousands of such stories. And not all of them end so well. And most such stories involve those who are among the poorest in our nation.

The *Washington Post* conducted a poll among the New Orleans evacuees in the Houston shelters, including the Astrodome, where Larry Morgan had been. The statistics are both startling and telling. 72% of those polled have no homeowners insurance to cover their losses. 52%, no health insurance. 72%, no checking or savings account. Among those who didn't evacuate when they were first ordered to do so, 42% said they didn't evacuate--because they had no way to leave.

www.washingtonpost.com)

Craig Colton, of Louisiana State University, summed it all up this way: "The evacuation plan was really based on people driving out," he said, "[Those who couldn't get out] didn't have buses. Didn't have trains Out West there is a saying that water flows to money but in New Orleans, water flows away from money. Those with resources who control where drainage goes always chose to live on higher ground. So the people in the low areas [the poor] were hardest hit." (*New York Times*, 9-4-05, 4-4)

By and large, those who got out safely were those with cars and money, those who could make it to relatives or motels or shelters further inland. Those who were and are higher up the economic ladder were those who got out first. And those lower down the ladder, got out last, or not at all.

The first were first, and the last were last. It was business as usual.

This past Wednesday, President Bush gave an address providing an overview of the situation on the Gulf Coast. He acknowledged that the response on the part of the federal government had been too slow and too disorganized. He spoke of the inexcusability of American citizens, folks like Lisa and Larry and O'Neil, spending hours, even days, on their rooftops, surrounded by flood waters, with little or no

food and drink. “We have witnessed the kind of desperation no citizen of this great and generous nation should ever have to know,” he said, “—fellow Americans calling out for food and water, vulnerable people left at the mercy of criminals” (New York *Times*, 9-16-05, A-19)

At one point in his speech he even took responsibility for the poorly planned and executed rescue and response efforts. “[T]he system at every level of government was not well-coordinated and was overwhelmed Americans have the right to expect a more effective response in an emergency. When the federal government fails to meet such an obligation, I as President am responsible for the problem and the solution.” (New York *Times*, 9-16-05, A-20)

It should come then as no surprise that in that Washington *Post* poll of evacuees in Houston, 61% of the respondents said their experience has made them feel as if the government doesn’t care about people like themselves.

I suspect, much like in the wake of 9-11, there will continue to be a great deal of second-guessing and finger-pointing, some of it well-deserved. But, despite what the President says, in a democracy such as ours, we *all* have a measure of responsibility for both the problem and the solution. And I hope, in the midst of all the political positioning, we do not lose sight of two things. First the needs of the victims themselves, and second, the powerful, but painful truth, about our country that Hurricane Katrina has laid bare. For the winds and floods didn’t just blow the roofs off of countless homes and businesses, exposing their occupants to grave danger. They also exposed the grave dangers already present in the lives of hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of our fellow citizens. To his credit, the President acknowledged that fact in his speech: “As all of us saw on television there is . . . some deep persistent poverty [in the gulf region] That poverty,” he went on to say, “has its roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action.” (Ibid)

I leave it to you to judge for yourselves whether or not the proposals he then laid out are bold enough, but whether they are or not, he is right about this: we must confront poverty. It can not be business as usual. Rather we must begin by honestly acknowledging both the ignorance and the indifference about poverty that is so rampant in our nation. We must confess that we often conveniently forget about the poor until something like Katrina comes along and issues a wake-up call.

Here are a few realities. Last year, another million people fell into poverty—37 million Americans now live at or below the poverty line. For a family of four that means squeaking by on an annual income of around \$14,000 or less. Among those in poverty, there are thirteen million children. Bread for the World estimates that one in ten households in the United States either lives with hunger or are at risk of doing so. (www.breadfortheworld.org) And when it comes to health insurance, close to forty-six million Americans are uninsured. (*Sojo Mail*, 9-16-05)

Sociologist Andrew Cherlin, referencing the aftermath of Katrina, notes: “Americans tend to think of poor people as being responsible for their own economic woes . . . But this [hurricane] was a case where the poor were clearly not at fault. It was a reminder that we have a moral obligation to provide every American with a decent life.” (Newsweek, 9-19-05)

A moral obligation.

A moral obligation we will never be able to meet as long as we go about conducting business as usual. Sisters and brothers, its time for business NOT as usual. It’s time to readjust our national priorities. Its time to put the last first, even if it means, as in Jesus’ parable, putting the first last.

We Americans are responding to the plight of Katrina’s victims in record-setting ways. We are pouring out our gifts in great abundance. And that we must. Especially those of us who are Christian, for we have a special obligation to be generous. We must give all we can, not only today in the wake of Katrina, but at all times. For we must always be willing to share with those who have less. Such charity is both a good and a necessary thing. *I applaud your generosity.* But how much better a world it would be if there were no need for charity? And that will only happen if we are willing to not only engage in charity, but also to work for justice.

Famed preacher and prophet William Sloane Coffin once wrote: “Had I but one wish for the churches of America it would be that they come to see the difference between charity and justice. Charity is a matter of personal attributes; justice a matter of public policy. Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice; justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it. Charity in no way affects the status quo, while justice leads inevitably to political confrontation.” (Credo, 62)

I know, some of you are saying, “Oh no, there he goes with the political stuff.” But we’re not talking partisan politics here. We’re not talking about the Democratic agenda or the Republican plan. We’re talking about all of us—no matter our political affiliation. We’re talking about looking at the basic structures of society that have allowed this to happen and asking why? Why? Why? We’re talking about looking at the basic structures of our society and rebuilding them in a way that corrects past wrongs and looks to a future where there truly is justice for all. Social *and* economic justice.

This past week I signed a pledge called the Katrina Pledge. Perhaps you’d like to join me. It’s quite simple—yet it recognizes the need for both charity and justice. It recognizes the need to serve the last first.

“As a person of faith,” it reads, “I believe the poverty we have witnessed on the rooftops of New Orleans and the devastated communities of the Gulf Coast is

morally unacceptable. Therefore I join my fellow Americans across the barriers of race, religion, class and politics in the following commitments:

- 1. I pledge to be personally involved in helping those whose lives have been affected by this natural disaster.**
- 2. I pledge to work for sweeping change of our nation's priorities."**

If you too would like to take the Katrina Pledge, you can find it online at www.sojourners.com.

Perhaps you've seen the car insurance ad on television that announces Connecticut is the wealthiest state in the nation. Buy our insurance e and save some money, says the announcer, and make sure Connecticut maintains its status as first in wealth.

That, I suppose, is one way to live. But it's not Jesus' way. For he calls us to first tend to the needs of the least among us. The needs of the last. In fact, he might like the way Larry Morgan put it.

When Larry sent young O'Neil along on that chopper to help care for his younger siblings, Larry gave him a simple instruction. "Look after one another," he said.

Sisters and brothers, Jesus calls us to do the same: "Look after one another."

Especially the least. Especially the last.

**Amen
John H. Danner**