

Mourning Becomes Katrina

Michael Kane

(May 30, 2006 Note: this was written very early as the crews started searching for the bodies in the 9th Ward, then called off the search because FEMA would not fund the search teams. Now nine months later and at the start of the hurricane season, we are still finding bodies or the remnants of bodies in the Ninth Ward. For awhile there were some attempts at the New York Times memorials in the daily paper, but those were very incomplete. As of today there are 350 persons still unaccounted for. We have not yet buried our dead, physically and spiritually. And they still wander these streets.

I was thinking this morning of all the deaths at the World Trade Center. I was thinking of the poignant articles that were written about each one of the lives of the persons lost. All of us were touched by the little details that the New York Times put into those biographies, real lives lived... stockbrokers, restaurant workers, diplomats from all the countries of the world, secretaries and captains of industry, window washers and artists, poor, rich, middle class, all of the infinite variety that makes New York the capital of the world, a world of fascinating possibilities and real accomplishments. Each life became a real person lost to the world forever. We never knew what we would miss until we read about those lives what those lives added to our lives.

That public acknowledgement of the lives lived was a celebration that touched all of us who read them first thing when we picked up our copies of the Times. It was the first thing that I read each day. Somehow they mesmerized all of us and came to symbolize the spiritual value of each one of those lives: the quirky hobbies, the touching revelation of a busboy's or a stockbroker's secret fascination with art, with movies, with cars; their connections to a web of communities we would never have expected just reading the names and job titles.

New Orleans is full of plans today. Proposals. Committees. It is rebuilding time. A certain desperate optimism fills the air. The dice are being rolled. The people in New Orleans East, in the Ninth Ward, in Gentilly, in St. Bernard Parish are all determined that their place on the planet will not yield to the bulldozers. The cleanup in certain neighborhoods is beginning to lessen the stench of decaying food and open trash. The Post Office is opening up again. The flies seem to be making peace with the populace.

People are coming back. The restaurants in my neighborhood are jammed with the affluent. More and more signs of a city coming back to life. The Urban Land Institute is coming in to plan a utopian community many of us could have never dreamed. New Orleans has a chance to become a model for something else besides desperation. It is an exciting time.

But something makes my stomach queasy. Something besides the pungent smells of the garbage still rotting in the streets is making me sick today.

Probably a thousand people mostly old, some young, and mostly poor and Black, died in this city less than two months ago. They died horrible deaths that were made even more absurd because it did not have to be. The deaths, unheralded and un-mourned, still haunt my dreams.

It is a truism you can find in all the tourist books: This is a city that mourns; and while mourning, makes a pledge to the dead that we will keep them as close as possible to the rhythms of this city, its smells, its foods and its follies. Our bargain is that if we honor them they will leave us alone and melt into the background. The dead here are never really dead. Here we bury our dead above the ground so they can listen to the music every day of their eternity.

Each year since my childhood, November 1 has been the time we go to the cemeteries. People bring wine, food, and other more powerful libations. The crazy uncles utter loud prayers and slowly inebriate themselves. They know their turn is coming. The kids run wild among the tombstones. It is the natural order of things.

Many a native New Orleanian has been through the ritual: The Saturday before, you go and clean the graves of all your ancestors. You take white paint and put a fresh coat on the graves. You clean the area around the grave and sometimes even sweep a neighboring grave. Then on November 1, all Saints Day, you honor the dead with flowers and storytelling, fueled by religion and strong drink, about who that person was, what they meant. Priests say prayers. Pastors lead hymns. It is our Creole way of doing the New York Times memorials.

If you are Black and Catholic (and this city has the largest population of Black Catholics in the South... at one point in our colonial past, a historian

friend argues that this was a Black Catholic city, period. Even the late Pope made a special effort to underline that fact in his one and only visit to these swamps) you do it with an African flavor; if you are Italian you do it the way your Sicilian forebears did it when they settled the French Quarter; Germans and Italians and Irish, all part of the mix, do it their way. Nobody gets in anybody's way. It is a catholic ritual. The Day of the Dead is a much more diverse celebration than Mardi Gras.

Today in New Orleans, understandably, the living want to move on, get on with their lives, pick up the pieces, put their shoulders to the wheel, etc. Many of the living suffered terribly; 80 % of the city flooded, many, many people, of all social classes, lost their homes, their possessions, everything they valued. Families were separated. Many of them became part of a Permanent Diaspora with no home to live in, shelters or FEMA trailers their destiny.

Today two of my closest friends, Ted and Brenda, are in town and staying with us. Their horrible task is to pick up what they can salvage from a home which was the first one they ever owned. It is the place where they cared for two kids (not their own), who became great adults and an old Aunt who died peacefully in one of their bedrooms. It is filled with their history with each other and with a passionate commitment and actions for social justice in this community, and memories of friends they lovingly hosted each thanksgiving and Christmas for many years. Each day they trudge out in their bio-suits into a neighborhood contaminated by the sludge and the waters of Lake Pontchartrain. It is pretty understandable after that experience that people just want to get on to the next thing. Many want the dead to stay dead.

And yet, the dead? What is it that is owed to the dead? They are poor. They are old. They are children. They are –in the vast majority– not white. The City is ready to move on. It seems as if it wants to forget this side of its story, in death, even more than in life. I hope I am wrong, because the dead continue to haunt me and I would prefer to believe I am just a bit overwrought by all this tragedy. But non-white people, poor people, young people, with a few exceptions for our world-class artists (made famous only when they left this place), were never very honored in this city. This I know.

Today the dead lie in a temporary government morgue in St. Gabriel Louisiana, which is like China to people from these parishes. There are more than 800 bodies there. Only 90 or so have been identified and released to families. The daily paper has no names, or very few. Nothing special is being done. Death is remote; it is too painful. St. Gabriel is deliberately remote: the government doesn't want us to take pictures of the place. No reporters are there. It is the coffins of Iraqis and United States soldiers writ large on New Orleans. And this, in a city built upon the proximity of life and death in everything we do. At this rate, the dead may be in St. Gabriel until he blows his trumpet on the last day.

This is also a Vodun and Santeria town. Dambala and St. Joseph and Prester John (AKA our Dr. John) are mingled together in a sacred gumbo. We make a Creole religion here. That is our real gross domestic product. Here their rituals and sacred rites, sometimes masked as piety, are practiced with as much fervor as they are practiced in Miami, in Santo Domingo and in Port-Au-Prince. Here, if the dead are not honored, they are restless. They invade the dreams of the living. You can find curses and cures anywhere in the city.

Zombies roam here as freely as in Port-Au-Prince. Living dead. They cause ill will. They meddle in the plans of the living. Few are asking how our most recent dead died, why they died, what was the meaning of their lives, what is the lesson of their deaths. They cannot get their rest. Now the dead have tempers too. They are as frustrated as the living with the stupidity and the absurdity of these events. Like most of our close relatives, we know they have to be near, but we don't much like them overstaying their welcomes.

Before we move on, we had better bury our dead.