

Katrina Journal 2006

by Mary Gehman

In mid-2006 a supply of dozens of artistically decorated empty notebooks was sent to the church I attended in New Orleans by an anonymous donor with instructions that we should write journals about our post-Katrina experience. These are selected entries made in my journal for the rest of that year while I was relocating 55 miles upriver from N.O. and traveling back and forth once or twice a week to work on salvaging rental property and to visit family and friends.

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Crying out the Silent Tears June 11, 2006

One woman telling her story of surviving Katrina and its aftermath stated that she has not allowed herself to cry because she is terrified that once she begins, she will not be able to stop, that her insides -- including her heart -- will heave up out of her body. Such is the pain and pressure she carries within herself.

I identified immediately with that sentiment, as do most Katrina survivors. What we have seen and heard, the immense loss and tragedy of it all, is simply too much to vent in one long cry. It comes from deep within our psyches, and it is indeed terrifying in scope.

This journal is my gradual crying out the silent tears of Katrina and what she has done to us all.

I staunch the memories
 And images with my words
 Like a tourniquet to keep
 From crying to death

Viewing the Corpse June 11, 2006

This week two groups of friends returned to New Orleans for the first time since they evacuated August 28, 2005 to face the stench and devastation of their former homes. In both cases they have relocated to the northeast and have no plans of returning to live here.

We hugged and cried a bit and spoke of detachment. Nine months later they have long given up the illusion of salvaging much from the rubble -- dry now at last but useless all the same.

Mostly they wanted the sense of closing the door on a troubled part of their lives, much like viewing the corpse of a loved one makes it possible in an inexplicable way to let go of that person and his or her place in one's life. It is seeing and touching that releases within the psyche a sense of farewell, of detachment so one can move on to other things in life.

Heartburn of the Soul June 11, 2006

A friend asked if I have been writing much about Katrina since my original lengthy account and the February 2006 six-month update. The question startled me because I haven't processed much of what happened, and because daily I keep facing the repercussions and stresses of Katrina's aftermath. She's like a stalker, lurking unwelcome and uninvited in my recent past. I've yet to shake her off.

It's very hard to write about something while in the moment of experiencing it. The best we can do is begin to make sense of the cataclysmic event by digesting it in mouthfuls as at a meal and stepping back from it once we are temporarily full. Otherwise heartburn results, and I know of nothing to take for heartburn of the soul.

The Color of Loss June 12, 2006

When a person's house full of furnishings and belongings -- a lifetime collection -- suddenly is no more, the total loss is like an elephant. It fills all the space for breathing and maneuvering. One can't see past it. There is a huge, grey void where once a place, a slot in the world, existed.

The elephant doesn't move. It is stalwart, always there, overwhelming, and all that the house's former occupants can do is try to encircle it, learn its dimensions, find color in the grey space.

That color comes in small surprises: a picture frame intact though the photo it once held is gone; a woven basket that happened to be on a top shelf and serves now as a bittersweet souvenir.

Today in unpacking some boxes salvaged from my house I came across a beautiful Polish Easter egg painted startling blue with white etching, hand-decorated and given me with affection by a dear friend a year or two ago. It had made it through Katrina, but had crumpled in the box where I had not sufficiently packed it for the move. Lovingly I dropped its piercing blue shards into the garbage can. Loss upon loss, handcrafted loss in greys and blues and all the other hues altered by murky flood water.

Transient Numbers June 12, 2006

Transience is the hardest thing to deal with month after month. Most of us evacuated for a full month in September 2005 to somewhere far from home. There were new phone numbers and addresses to learn for that, new streets to follow when driving, a whole new environment to comprehend and navigate.

Many of us were able to return during the last months of 2005 or early 2006. That has meant temporary housing with family or friends, perhaps in a FEMA trailer. Again there are new phone numbers to commit to memory, lots of new reference points when traveling around town. New bank accounts, credit cards, that sort of thing, all require more numbers layered on top of the others.

As the year wears on we find ourselves moving again, into something more permanent inside or outside of the city. After a while the numbers become interchangeable. I find myself quoting my new phone number in three segments: new 3-digit area code of a land line, three numbers from my pre-Katrina phone and the last four from my fairly new cell phone. Help!

Veil Between Dreaming and Waking June 12, 2006

The dream last night made me awake in a sweat. Not a nightmare or a flashback -- I haven't had any of those, thankfully. But I tend to dream about forgetting something, missing an important appointment, being hopelessly late to teach a class.

In last night's dream I became suddenly aware that it was morning and I had left an infant girl, entrusted to me to baby sit, in the glove compartment of my car over night. My first thought was that she must need to be fed and have her diaper changed.

Then it occurred to me that she might also have been crying for much of the night with no gentle hands to soothe her. I felt ashamed, useless. How could I have forgotten something so crucial? Troubled, I searched my memory as to how it had happened, then woke up worried without having found an explanation.

At times like this the veil between dreaming and waking is hard to distinguish.

What does "Moving on" Mean? June 12, 2006

What does moving on mean? I never wanted to move anywhere! My life in New Orleans was just fine, thank you. Of course, there were ups and downs, but all told, I never imagined leaving my house, let alone New Orleans.

Moving to another place that is high and dry-- is that what it means to move on? Or can one stay in the same house in New Orleans, raise it up and renovate it to live in again eventually? Can that be called moving on if one doesn't move anywhere?

Isn't moving on a state of mind? Putting the past behind us, making new plans, meeting new friends, making the best of a bad situation -- all this, it seems, is part of progressing in life.

What about those who can't move on? Do they run in place? Do they start to lose their pace, fall back and get swallowed up in the slough of despond?

We're all on the move these days; we just don't know where we are going.

Losing a Lover--New Orleans June 13, 2006

I forgot -- or just never thought about it -- that once one moves away from home and spends time elsewhere removed by distance, it's hard to keep up with what's going on back there. TV stations on cable and satellite are local. I subscribe to the Times-Picayune daily newspaper but it arrives in clumps at least a week late. Radio talk shows have a national or else very local bent-- little news or discussion about New Orleans filters through.

Our concerns focus on the local, what affects us at the moment where we live, who our neighbors are. We don't vote in New Orleans anymore. It doesn't make sense to renew memberships in organizations there.

I want it both ways! I'm still an Orleanian in my heart and soul. In some ways I will always be. Separation is tougher than I imagined, sort of like breaking up with a lover after 36 years. It hurts much more than it should.

Sucking it up at Bud's Broiler June 25, 2005

Even the most mundane things in New Orleans are either gone or drastically changed. It's unsettling, for example, to walk into a Bud's Broiler, a low-end burger place near the university section, and be told by the lethargic person at the counter that not only are there no fried pies (peach, apple or cherry turnovers), but the coffee machine doesn't work either. Bud's has been around for at least 40 years, a locally owned chain dear to the hearts of most natives and long term residents.

My surprise and disappointment are met with a blank stare by the counterperson. To her it's business as usual. "Suck it up!" her dark, disinterested eyes seem to say.

I will suck it up, just as I suck up all kinds of other absurdities in this town. What choice do we have? It's not the lack of a fried pie -- goodness knows, I'm better off without the calories-- and iced tea serves a decent second to coffee.

What gives me pause about the whole experience is that in a place so familiar, so predictable a part of my pre-Katrina life, nothing remains familiar nor reliable except having to suck up the frustration of it. I think about the many Friday evenings on pay day when my son and I looked forward to going to Bud's Broiler (childishly he pronounced it Bird's Boiler). It was the only treat I could afford. The nostalgia of it haunts me now when all I want is continuity and a delicious, powdered sugar sprinkled fried cherry pie.

Baghdad West June 25, 2006

At night especially, New Orleans can remind one of a war zone. Last night I was driving from a wedding reception uptown to my son's house in Lakeview. Exiting the interstate, I drove for several miles through a hard hit area. Houses

sagged in dark shadows. The streets were abandoned, only a FEMA trailer here and there emitted a ray of light and life.

On the radio there was a commentator describing an area of Baghdad, Iraq wracked now for four years of unremitting turmoil. I glanced out the car window and realized that what lay outside resembled eerily enough scenes described by the radio spokesperson. Except in Iraq enemy lines are clearly drawn and our government exhibits the will to do whatever it takes to stabilize the place. How sad that we cannot expect the same here.

Cast in a Pitiabale Light June 27, 2007

This is the first time in my life that I've been in a pitiable situation, as is true of many others. It's all part of the Katrina whiplash. People from across the country and world, for that matter, feel sorry for the victims of the hurricane and extend their sympathies as well as attempts to help.

Last night I had a table selling books at the American Library Association's convention held in New Orleans as a show of support for the city. The ALA is the first national organization to book its convention here post-Katrina. Local speakers and publishers who took the lectern to speak were profuse in their thanks to the ALA attendees, and everyone who passed my table and checked out my books on display expressed concern about what is to come of the wonderful city New Orleans once was.

I found myself telling and retelling summaries of my own evacuation experience and frustration to eager listeners. Most had toured some parts of the devastation but had not spoken to anyone directly impacted. While I busily cut and pasted my relocation address and phone number outside of New Orleans on my business brochures, passersby discussed how the city looks to others -- from New York, Minnesota and Virginia.

We are not forgotten but rather remembered as a pathetic people. That doesn't feel very good. Inertia is killing us. But pity is not really an antidote to inertia either.

Perhaps we should be grateful for the few people who venture down here and give us kind looks. They are all we've got.

Missing Pieces July 4, 2006

Piecing a life back together reminds me of doing a jigsaw puzzle. Not all the pieces are available. It took me several days of unpacking to find a chunk of files missing from one of my collections. Today I thought I'd finally located all the boxes of dishes and cookware only to end up missing six or eight ceramic cups. The saucers are here but the cups didn't make it, or they are hiding in a box filled mostly with non-dish items.

I'm not even sure when the cups and saucers were packed nor by whom. So much has happened since I last saw and used them that it's impossible to

reconstruct a packing scenario. I have to simply wait until all the cartons are unpacked and hope the cups show up.

Not every jigsaw puzzle is complete. Sometimes we have to simply accept the missing pieces.

Grateful for Selective Memory July 4, 2006

The human mind has a way of protecting its owner; it shuts down, turns off, blocks out certain memories and thoughts that hinder the process of recovery.

An example is the other day when I was checking out something on my website and came across my 32 page Katrina story with photos posted there. It had been eight months since I last looked at it, and I started to read it as though for the very first time. Fascinated, I kept going until the very end of the lengthy piece.

I was in tears. Much of the pain and frustration of the ordeal came back to me as though I was reliving it, only this time from a safe distance. Many of the details seemed new-- it's been so long since I read the whole thing through.

I'm grateful for selective memory. Having to constantly relive my story in its original intensity would be lethal.

Magic of Electricity July 7, 2006

A major aspect to getting flooded houses in New Orleans habitable again is to get them completely rewired and have the electricity turned on. This should be a fairly simple operation, but in post-Katrina times it requires a near miracle and the patience of a saint.

Power is flowing through the electric lines across the city, but once a meter is removed by Entergy at an address, as most of the flooded houses attest, it takes an act of God to get the meter put back in again.

The first step for a home owner is to find a reputable, licensed electrician, sign a contract, make a substantial down payment and then wait several weeks until the electrician files a permit with the city and starts the job. We're talking inflated prices for both labor and materials -- often double what it would have cost before the storm. Some materials are hard to find, have to be ordered or waited for.

Once the rewiring is complete, the electrician's bill has been paid in full, and a deposit of \$75 is paid to Entergy to set up an account at that address, the electrician has to file an affidavit that the work has been done according to code. There is another undetermined wait for the city to send a work order to Entergy to have the actual power turned on.

Often there are problems with the permit to turn on the power. The city, without informing homeowners or electricians, now requires, for example that all light fixtures are installed before power is turned on. The process, aside from being expensive, is also long and tedious. So much depends on its success, yet we are treated like pawns in some sadistic chess game.

One of my tenants rigged up a hot wire to the pole outside. I chose not to comment about it, despite the risk of fire to the house. After all, lawfulness is not exactly encouraged right now.

The Road Ahead-- What Road? July 9, 2006

The minister in church this morning spoke about decisiveness and how when we see the road ahead, it's incumbent on us to make the first steps and keep going. I should explain that this was a church in Baton Rouge, not New Orleans. Had the minister been addressing a group in New Orleans, he would have known better. Because for those of us whose properties flooded, there is no road ahead, only lots of paths branching off into obscurity.

We have no way of telling to what end a certain path will lead, and thus find it impossible to make decisions. There is a jungle that lies before us with at best a few indications of paths someone has attempted to forge in order to cut into the thickness. Without a road we stay hung up in this awful limbo.

Getting Back to Pre-Katrina Standards July 9, 2006

This morning I had a conversation with a neighbor in New Orleans who is fighting with his insurance company to pay him to replace double ceilings in his house, to put them back as they were pre-Katrina, as his homeowner's policy promises to do. The double ceilings, he explained, are a 12 foot tall one installed when the house was built in the 1920s, and an 8 foot tall one his father had installed in the 1950s when dropped ceilings were all the rage.

During Katrina the 12 foot ceiling caved in due to roof damage, and its weight caused the 8 foot one below it to drop too. The neighbor wants to install an 8 foot ceiling but is worried about the four foot space between it and the attic rafters if the original height ceiling is not there anymore.

He has a point. It sounds simple and logical when we say that insurance should pay to restore a house to exactly what it was before. Should that include dropped ceilings and all? So many tough questions, so few satisfying answers.

Shadow People July 9, 2006

I like the way demographers and urban statisticians confidently proclaim that there are X number of people now living in New Orleans and the metro area. Frankly, they don't have a clue, and their ignorance is hurting people who are actually there.

From my experience of the past 5 to 6 months in renting out various apartments and previously flooded houses in the Mid-City area of N.O., I can personally attest to seeing and interacting with dozens of human beings who are not counted as residing in our fair city.

First there are the laborers, thousands of them, with no place to stay. Most have good jobs and a steady income but still cannot afford the hideously high rents so common today.

Then there are the previously homeless people, the addicts, the prostitutes, thugs and thieves who have always lived by their wits, an occasional boost by food stamps, donations from friends, and so on.

Those who are not off working all day hang out at the quick markets and gas stations nearby. At night they live in their vehicles, slip into abandoned buildings whose owners never show up, or bum a shower and a floor for the night from a legitimate tenant or family member.

These thousands of shadow people don't have credit cards or bank accounts nor do they receive mail and thus cannot be tracked by statisticians. Often they use cell phones, e-mail which they access through the public library, or phone minutes they buy on a phone card. They are ninety percent male and about sixty percent Hispanic.

To ignore and deny this sizable population is irresponsible and serves no one, least of all those of us who are trying to return as legitimate residents. People existing in the shadows are part of our world, whether we like it or not.

To Rent or Not to Rent July 19, 2006

Much frustration these days in New Orleans is due to spiraling rents and the inability of working people to afford them. Two-bedroom apartments in moderately good shape and decent locations went for \$600 to \$800 prior to Katrina. Now they can't be touched for under \$1200, deposit and references required.

Landlords such as I with rental properties that flooded, located in iffy neighborhoods where rents pre-Katrina were in the \$400 to \$500 range for two bedrooms are faced with a dilemma. Right now there are no buyers for the houses. We can walk away from the buildings and wait to sell when the market picks up; we can invest all the insurance money and some of our own to totally renovate the gutted out buildings with little hope of recouping our costs for the next decade; we can sell now, probably for very little and to developers who will sit on the land until the market improves; or we can rent the apartments as is to desperate people for minimal amounts to cover property taxes, insurance bills and water bills. No matter which move we make, it is a sizable gamble.

After some deliberation, I have chosen the fourth alternative and agreed to rent for \$200 per month units that are completely empty, have the sheetrock removed up to the water line, no electricity except a generator run by one tenant, and no heat or air conditioning. There is running water but only cold water. Amazingly, people are lined up to move in. One woman has set up a tent and lives in the courtyard of my former home for free.

Besides covering my basic costs this option also means there are people around to keep the houses from being looted and vandalized. Already a door has been kicked in and squatters had to be chased out. If I rent the units out, at least I know who is living there and have minimal control.

This has not been an easy decision. It is often stressful, unrewarding and dangerous. I have to hunt tenants down for payment of the rent, threaten them

with eviction if things get too rough, and deal with minimal repairs. I may have to resort to Plan B if things get too crazy, but so far, I'm hanging in there the same way my tenants are.

Dithering Leadership July 19, 2006

I sometimes forget what Katrina means, especially now that I've relocated an hour's drive upriver. It hits me though, the minute I leave the expressway and drive down main streets of New Orleans; passing dilapidated houses, piles of debris, traffic lights blinking or not working at all, street signs missing or replaced by makeshift cardboard ones. There are also the more subtle things like the flood lines and code numbers spray painted on fronts of houses, drab yards and gardens where flowers and lush foliage once grew, schools boarded up, signs on businesses "We have moved to..." or "Opening soon, we hope."

From driving the streets one can't take a read on the people living in the flooded out areas --are they hopeful, depressed, ready to leave permanently? Talking to them one realizes their reactions run the gamut, and the longer the uncertainty and indecision continue, the greater the chance of such people giving up and pulling up stakes altogether.

If there has been one single error on the part of state and city leaders it has been to dawdle and dither about plans to rebuild New Orleans. It's starting to be too late to even matter.

Thankful for Unkind Favors July 19, 2006

Today's headline news was that finally most of the thousands of flooded vehicles under overpasses and along city streets in New Orleans are being towed away. Finally!

The real issue here is what the hell took so long? Eleven months after the disaster one of the most unsightly and most visible reminders of the devastation is at last being addressed. This car/truck towing issue was so blatant, so visible; one wonders if an administration unable to deal with this fundamental problem can begin to manage the rest of the recovery.

We already know the haphazard way most things are being handled. Gratefulness for vehicles towed so long after the fact is similar to thanking an abusive parent for being less threatening at last. The abuse has already been felt. Relief is short lived.

When the Tears Come July 28, 2006

Sometimes the tears do come. Despite all the distractions and bravery, there are times when it is simply overwhelming. I've had few good cries since the hurricane -- one or two in eight months. Last evening on the drive back home from New Orleans and a harrowing day trying to evict a tenant, I watched the sun setting in eerie light over the LeBranche Wetland, former cypress swamp, on either side of the interstate highway. A hauntingly lovely piece of classical music played on the radio.

Suddenly I felt tears welling up in my eyes. Eventually they became heaving sobs.

The car was a safe, private place to cry my heart out at the unbearable sadness of a stagnant New Orleans and the loss and problems associated with that, at the awful frustration of being stuck owning rental properties that demand everything from me just to keep them occupied and the bills paid, at the desperation so many of us feel to get back to normal, to see a viable plan for our neighborhoods, just to be home again.

I cried too about being torn between two identities-- New Orleans and now my new home upriver in Donaldsonville. It's exhausting living in two places simultaneously, both demanding my time and attention.

Forty five minutes later, crossing the Sunshine Bridge high over the Mississippi, I had composed myself. I was going home to a quiet, peaceful place with several days to recuperate from New Orleans. Hopefully the next visit would be under better circumstances.

So yes, we cry our hearts out and then go on. It happens, but I'm not sure how.

Twilight Zone August 5, 2006

A lot about New Orleans these days has the feel of illogic, of operating in a twilight zone where nothing quite fits together or makes sense. Yesterday was a good example. I had the unpleasant task of filing for eviction of two tenants in separate apartments. Under the best circumstances prior to Katrina, this task was difficult and expensive. Now it has become surreal.

At least the office for filing was still in the same location -- the civil court building at Poydras and Loyola streets. On the brochure about the eviction office it read "Cash only. Checks only if business is on the approved list." Thus I armed myself with cash : \$87 per case to file court papers and \$60 each for the constable's office down the hall.

When I paid at the court cashier and saw the sign "Cash. No checks" I asked, just out of curiosity, if credit cards were accepted. The cashier, who was obviously preoccupied with a cell phone call to a friend, nodded that yes, credit cards were accepted. I paid cash and went on to the constable's office.

There was no sign posted there, so I asked if checks and credit cards were taken. "We take checks but no credit cards," the woman at the counter replied. When I asked out of sheer bafflement why the court's office took credit cards but no checks, she said something about that office having had problems with bounced checks.

Anticipating my question as to why the constable's office was comfortable accepting personal checks, she added, " We don't have the equipment for accepting credit cards, so we take checks." Hmm...I walked away scratching my head on that one.

Before I could get out the door she hit me with another piece of odd news. Whereas before Katrina the constable brought several workmen with him to

empty the apartment of its contents and put them out on the sidewalk, post-Katrina there was a shortage of laborers, causing landlords to have to hire their own workmen to stand by a fairly large part of the day on call for whenever the constable arrived at the building to oversee the actual eviction. There was still the same constable fee for the service, but no service. Hmm...some more head scratching and a feeling that I was definitely in a twilight zone that would be lasting a long, long time.

Serendipity of Adversity August 5, 2006

One of the benefits I've noted about living an hour's drive from the city and having to co-ordinate multiple errands and tasks for the same day when I'm in New Orleans is that now more than when lived here I get to see people and go places I didn't see or frequent before.

Typically there are one or two time sensitive things to accomplish like a dentist appointment or a call on my insurance agent, but then there is an hour or two in between when I can wander around, grab a cup of coffee, shop, or drop by to check on a friend.

Recently, for example, I was set to meet friends for a 5:30 p.m. meal on Frenchmen Street but found myself footloose an hour before that. I drove to the restaurant, found a parking space, which is often hard to do later in the evening, and realized I was a half block from the home of a friend who had been undertaking a large preservation project before the hurricane hit. Not having heard from him since Katrina, and finding he did not answer his phone, I ambled up to his gate and rang the bell.

Wonder of wonders the bell worked and my friend appeared shortly at the gate, his dachshund yapping merrily at his ankles. He invited me into the small former slave-quarters apartment he occupies in the back of the property, offered me some wine, and we had a very pleasant chat. The fact that he had yet to get Bell South to fix his phone seemed a minor irritation compared with the larger issues he and his project were facing since the hurricane.

We parted in time for me to get to the restaurant. It was great to see him again and to know he was all right. Had I been living in New Orleans it probably would have been many more months before I'd have had the opportunity to look him up.

First Year Anniversary of Katrina August 5, 2006

Much is being made about how New Orleans should mark the first anniversary of Katrina coming up in another few weeks. Technically August 29 and 30 are simply numbers on a calendar, but the whole world is waiting to see how we will observe their passing. Surely such a history making disaster deserves an equally sensational commemoration.

This is odd thinking, egged on to be sure by a media frenzy. Who should care, really, how those of us who have had no "closure" in lives that have been changed forever mark the one-year passing of Katrina? What significance will

whatever we do to celebrate have on the larger picture of recovery and getting on with the rest of our lives?

The majority of locals seem to prefer something somber and thoughtful, like a mass, church service, wreath laying for the 1600 lives lost, prayers said for those who are still struggling to pull themselves together.

The mayor floated the concept of following up mournful activities with an evening of celebration for the rebirth of New Orleans -- a comedy club review, a masquerade ball, fireworks on the river. After a massive outcry by the public that finds such joviality offensive at a time when most people are suffering and don't know where to turn, the mayor has withdrawn his plan. One wonders what was he thinking? A dysfunctional mayor of a dysfunctional city -- this is not something to celebrate.

Revitalization of which Neighborhoods? August 5, 2006

One hears the sensible prospect of neighbors getting together and deciding how they want their neighborhood to look and feel in the new New Orleans. The thinking is that if residents democratically come together, debate and discuss what they want for their future, the city will then listen to them and plan accordingly.

Nothing could be less sensible or further from the truth. After countless hours of meetings and discussions, many areas have formulated their vision and wish list for a neighborhood cleansed of all that was wrong with it before Katrina and reborn as the ideal place to live. Elaborate maps, blue prints, architectural renderings and floor plans have been created, but very little is happening beyond that.

In the two neighborhoods in Mid-City where I own property, a few homeowners are drifting back, clusters of inhabited buildings and FEMA trailers appear, but overall it is a burnt out wasteland with no plan at all. I don't know who is fooling themselves to the contrary.

There are pockets of development, like the nearby Galvez-Tulane corridor where Americorps funds support an impressive Phoenix project to revitalize the area, but I was disappointed the other day when I stopped by there to see what all the meetings, surveys, and reports had accomplished -- nothing but some maps and figures. They do nothing to address a large swath of land between Claiborne and Galvez streets or the even larger swath between them and Jefferson Davis Parkway. What good is it if the small Phoenix area gets its act together and the surroundings areas do not?

If New Orleans is going to move forward, we must ALL be part of that progress.

Confused Desires August 7, 2006

We Katrina survivors live in ambivalence much of our lives.

We want to go back home, but there is no home to go back to.

We want New Orleans to be rebuilt and returned to what it was before Katrina, yet the New Orleans of those early 21st century years had tons of serious problems.

We want our leadership to inspire us and get the recovery moving, but we know that the leaders we have elected, who have to work with scaled back staffs and budgets, can't get the job done.

We want tourists and conventioners to come back to New Orleans, but we resent the image sometimes presented in the media that the city is up and running and ready for visitors while many of us are still in survival mode.

We don't know what we really want because what we really DO want -- our lives restored, our homes rebuilt, our safety and security assured, a future without evacuation -- all this is unattainable anyway.

Color of Despair August 12, 2006

What strikes one driving through New Orleans is the color, not one color alone, like green of grass and trees or blue of sky, but the color ensemble of an area. Uptown and in areas that didn't flood there is a vibrancy of lights and shades of color -- flowers bloom, vines and hedges surround houses, the paint on buildings looks fresh and bright. From car level the scenery is alive, thriving, even often lush, which is what New Orleans has always been known for, its tropical lushness.

The stark contrast of the flooded out areas hits one directly through color. Suddenly there is little light or shade of color. Everything is dull, bone-hued, skeletal. Most plants and former greenery are now dead, a sickly brown or sometimes black. Paint on buildings has a dullness to it-- there is no glow, no shine. Few if any flowers bloom. There is simply no relief from the drabness.

I noted the other day how stalwart live oak trees in my sorry looking neighborhood can't compete in this dull landscape. Even their deep green shade is sparse, uninspired. They totter like senior citizens in a rest home.

Despair is the lack of color, or at best a monochrome of khaki as in a war zone. I don't know how long it will take to bring vibrant color back to eighty percent of the city, but it must be done before people will be inspired to go home and start up lives there again.

Obligation to Stay August 12, 2006

I re-read today the open letter written last March by a woman I know well who called to task the Creoles who have abandoned New Orleans, descendants of free people of color, who -- as she reminded her readers -- had at great sacrifice to themselves made the best of a bad situation pre and post Civil War, during Reconstruction, segregation and the civil rights era to emerge an in tact community in the late 20th century.

She enumerated the significant contributions of her ancestors and their desire to see their way of life handed down to subsequent generations. New Orleans has always been the heart of the Louisiana Creole community, she

wrote. Her fellow Creoles owed it to those who had gone before and who paved the way for them, to stay in New Orleans and make their presence felt, despite the hardships, rather than run away to an easier, more assimilated lifestyle elsewhere.

There is an important truth to what she wrote. A culture can survive only if there is a critical mass of its members to hold the core together. That core can never simply be transplanted to Houston, Atlanta or Los Angeles. It needs its roots that have always nourished it, and that requires people staying put or returning back to the core, to New Orleans, and making their presence felt.

I'm not Creole, but my friend's message is not lost on me or others who have adopted New Orleans as our spiritual and creative home. We owe it to the city to stay and be part of the rebuilding. That obligation is part of the heartache and ambivalence so many of us survivors wrestle with these days.

Third World Conditions August 14, 2006

Well before the hurricane and its disastrous aftermath, New Orleans was called a Banana Republic and referred to as a Third World country. Imagine then how much more so that moniker fits the post-Katrina city. Today, on business in New Orleans, I experienced once again the craziness of the place.

At ten minutes to 10 a.m. I pulled up into the public parking garage in the civic complex in downtown New Orleans where I had a 10 o'clock appointment in civil court to expedite an eviction of a tenant. Hoping to avoid a ticket if the parking meter on the street wound out, I chose the public parking garage with its daily rate of \$5 charge clearly printed at the entrance.

The first mistake was pulling into the bay to my immediate left. Not until I got to the ticket box on a steep angle was there a sign advising that that entrance was for electronically carded employees only. It took some maneuvering of my SUV to back out of there and into the second bay which offered tickets to the public.

Everything was parked solid or reserved up until the 6th level where at last I parked, gathered my belongings and headed for the elevator. I stood there less than a minute in the stifling heat before a woman approached and asked cheerily, "Oh, the elevators are working? They haven't worked since Katrina." Of course, there was no sign on the elevator to explain this. One of the lights even blinked occasionally. Several other uninformed parkers had gathered by then and we all dutifully followed the cheerful woman down six flights of stairs, remarking how unfair it was for the city to continue to charge the pre-Katrina rate of \$5 even without elevator service.

On the walk to the civil court building two blocks away we passed a large abandoned state office building. All around its exterior was the strong odor of urine and vestiges of homeless people having camped out there. There were still water swirl patterns on the concrete from Katrina, and some bricks and other debris that obviously had been there since the storm.

In the intense August heat I looked across the open grassy area where a pavilion built from the design of an African house peered above tall uncut grasses and felt for all the world that I was on the Dark Continent.

Returning after the court appearance to the parking lot an hour later, I was alone and faced the six floor climb in the parking lot. Fortunately, no one was lurking in the stairway, so I ventured up its dimly lit tunnel, thankful for having worn sensible shoes that day. How did sickly, overweight or disabled people make that climb? I could only imagine their agony.

Exhausted and sweating hard, I got into my car, drove down to the cashier and paid the \$5 without comment, chalking it up as one more reason some people choose not to live or do business in New Orleans. But I couldn't resist asking the cashier why there was no notice posted at the entrance of the garage that the elevators weren't working. Looking puzzled, she turned out of the booth and pointed to an 8 x11 typed sheet in a dusty plastic sleeve nailed above eye level at the public entrance.

"It's there-- you gotta look for it," she said in perfect seriousness.

Emotional Pressure Cooker August 23, 2006

Among the many pieces of advice, endless suggestions and comments about post-traumatic stress syndrome and the Katrina experience is one I read online today, that we survivors tend to emphasize the personal. Blaming the Army Corps of Engineers, Washington, city and state leadership does not really help those of us in search of peace and stability. Our day to day frustrations, the minor aggravations that accumulate, the worries that keep us awake at night are what our conversations with each other are made of.

Personal control is always local. Since we have to take out the anger and exasperation on someone, it's those closest to us who become sounding boards and even punching bags. That's why I'm grateful to live away from New Orleans where no one talks about the flood, people pursue normal lives and the stress is manageable.

When I go to New Orleans it feels like being in an emotional pressure cooker, even in areas of work and church. Not everyone is freaking out, of course, but the undercurrent of quiet courage and desperation tends to affect us all.

When the steam valve blows off the pressure cooker, it isn't the public officials in far off cities that feel the heat -- it's all of us injured ones that have to duck and cover until things quiet down again.

The Lost Day, the Lost Year August 24, 2006

Today, mid-week on a Thursday, I was called last minute to drive to New Orleans and deal with a tenant issue. What was to have been a busy day at home was suddenly swallowed up by several hours of travel time and visits to two city agencies. I followed it all up with a late afternoon visit with friends over coffee before heading back upriver.

Essentially, it was a lost day with a lot of effort accomplishing very little. Come to think of it, the whole year since Katrina has been a lost year, swallowed up by moving, weighing options, getting aggravated almost beyond endurance, losing control, and navigating the dangerous waters of high stress and anxiety.

Lost years need to be reclaimed. Hopefully, the coming one will redeem this lost one.

Stuck in Neutral September 2, 2006

Being stuck is the overwhelming sensation that comes to mind whenever someone asks what I'm going to do with my rental houses in New Orleans. Stuck between a rock and a hard place. Stuck in neutral and unable to shift gears.

The stark reality a year after Katrina is that the two neighborhoods where my rental properties sit are not coming back. Very few people are repairing their buildings. There are a few FEMA trailers, but they are either not used or house workers who don't even own a house to repair. One appears to be a drug dealer's office.

July and August this year were the first months that I received some decent rent money, nothing to get excited about, but enough to cover costs like insurance, property taxes and security lights. If insurance checks hadn't finally come through to pay for new roofs, gutting and sheet rocking some apartments, and make minimal repairs to accommodate renters, I'd have had to board everything up and forget about it. It's been a ten month struggle to get here, tens of thousands of dollar losses in rents, and almost daily there has been a new challenge.

I'm grateful for tenants who are willing to put up with some inconveniences in return for low rents. Uninhabited buildings are not insurable, and if I didn't have a rapport with my tenants, I'd be afraid to even set foot on my properties. What I can't figure out is where to go from here. Should I invest more into these neighborhoods? Will I ever recoup my losses? Now that I no longer live in the city, is it viable to be a landlord here?

It's not fun being stuck like this where there are no answers, only gambling risks. I rationalize it as being in a position to benefit if the neighborhoods in the future do make a comeback, and meanwhile I'm providing a roof over 15 people's heads and keeping the lights on in two areas of the city where there are very few bright spots.

Cruel Help September 7, 2006

There's a lot of talk about help for flood and hurricane victims--- excuse me, survivors as we prefer to be called. Billions of dollars reportedly are pouring into Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, yet most of us haven't seen a cent of it and aren't likely to in the near future.

The Road Home program, for example, offers to compensate homeowners impacted by Katrina up to \$150,000 for losses per owner.

However, it takes hours if not days to collect all the information requested for the application. When I went to input my data online, a pop up window blocked the screen and I couldn't figure out how to make it disappear.

Someone e-mailed me two phone numbers to apply for \$3000 grants to individuals from the Clinton-Bush money raised to great fanfare months ago. I've been trying repeatedly for two days in a row and get nothing but a busy signal on both lines.

The most cruel help is that which appears to be available but is still always out of grasp.

Permissive Poppa, Absent Momma September 7, 2006

Sometimes I get the feeling that a lack of parenting is what ails New Orleans and the metro region. Cities are a lot like families. They thrive when there is structure and discipline, and they tend to falter when these conditions are missing.

Ray Nagin is our father figure, or at least he was re-elected to a second term because he was expected to be. Unfortunately, he is a very permissive father, unsure himself of the best direction to pursue, changing his mind on very public issues, and saying foolish things he later has to apologize for.

And Momma? Well, we could say Governor Kathleen Blanco makes a good one for the state, but she isn't around in New Orleans to keep up with what goes on there. Poppa Ray, with all his weaknesses, looks from time to time to Momma Kathleen to set the kids straight. She just rolls her eyes as if to say, "No, not again!"

They don't make a solid team. While they try to figure out their roles, the place goes to hell. Surprise: the result is a dysfunctional family/city!

Coming Unglued September 14, 2006

There are moments, sometimes a series of moments, when a deep sadness or grief overcomes me, somewhat like heartburn where the painful sensation wells up from within and seems to have no outlet. These moments sneak up without warning and linger uncomfortably.

I think of these instances as coming unglued. Nothing makes sense anymore, there is anxiety blended with stress and hopelessness. If I had to explain it to anyone, verbalize what I feel, I'd dissolve into tears, and who needs that? These are private moments. I take comfort in knowing they will pass this time as they always do.

Coming unglued, it occurs to me, means that only the veneer buckles and becomes deformed while beneath it the solid wood holds. The foundation is firm. Gratefully, I realize that veneer can be replaced -- not easily, but it can.

War Buddies September 14, 2006

Yesterday as I was leaving the gutted out Whitney Bank branch office at Canal and Broad, after finally being able to reclaim the items in my safe deposit

box there, two men walked in. I would not have given them a second glance had our eyes not met and instantly we recognized each other from our days on the Broad Street overpass and at the Superdome. It was the father-son team who had been part of our tenacious group who stuck it out together through that nightmare.

Ecstatic to have met again almost exactly a year later, we embraced and began chatting loudly. It was instant camaraderie, as if we had been in combat together. The two men looked well. The 91 year old father had not aged a day and still had his great sense of humor.

Onlookers must have thought it strange, our excited conversation and hugs, like long lost friends. We exchanged phone numbers and determined to get together soon. I offered to bring them a copy of my Katrina account and copies of the photos I'd taken.

In a day fraught with many frustrations, running by sheer chance into those two friends who will forever share the same memories with me was a happy and uplifting experience. I hesitated to let them go, to lose them from sight.

Wild West September 14, 2006

I often find myself thinking of much of New Orleans as being on a frontier. Those of us who have to deal with the crime, drugs, transients, and absolute desolation must have a Wild West mentality. We're on our own. It is not for the faint of heart. -- they are long gone.

As before Katrina, the crime and lawlessness is not that scary except at night. In the bright sunlight, people come and go in a fairly normal pattern, but behind gates, around corners, down alleys between houses, there are all sorts of contraband traded, sold, fought over. I haven't heard gunshots yet, although various homicidal people are around-- we all know they are.

The actors in this frontier town movie are tawdry. They break into buildings, panhandle and steal to cop a fix, prostitute themselves openly. The police are mostly onlookers. When they make an arrest, they know the criminal will be released within hours, sometimes days, because there simply aren't jail beds available and no money to provide more.

I am here by chance in this Wild West movie, an extra who is trying to protect her property. It is an uneasy, depressing place. Everyone is on the take. Hardship and wasted lives are the norm. My tenants and the dozens of people they allow to come and go, scatter like rats when they see my car turning down the block. I think of them as the misbegotten, *les miserables*.

Big Details September 14, 2006

It's the little things in the breakdown of New Orleans as a city, as a community, that make life there so difficult. I think of them as enormous details, potholes not being filled, endless waits for simple things, the incapability of the

postal service, the sewerage and water board and so many other agencies to address basic human needs.

Waste Management is the company contracted to pass by houses once a week and pick up up to eight plastic bags of household garbage. They stop at houses that have running water since those owners are charged a \$13 monthly fee on their water bills for the garbage service. Despite my calling ten weeks in a row and being assured my properties would be included in the garbage pick-up, yesterday was the first time we saw a garbage truck pass and pick up some of the plastic bags that had accumulated there for months (only eight bags per customer, remember?) For appliances, mattresses, construction debris, etc. the Army Corps of Engineers is responsible and the wait can be weeks if not months.

If we are very lucky, the domestic garbage pick-up will continue at least every other week. Then maggots won't form on food being disposed of, rats and raccoons won't tear open the bags and feast on the contents, and maybe at last the street will look decent and inhabited once again. When something as basic as garbage pick up breaks down, all other quality of life issues do too.

N.O. Saints: Our Tribal Idols September 22, 2006

"Is it Monday yet?" reads a large banner across the side of the Superdome in downtown New Orleans to reflect the absolute euphoria that is consuming the city as the Saints football team prepares for its first home game since Katrina.

It's a sold-out event that has taken on a life of its own, grabbing the attention of diehard non-football fans such as I am. We all can't help but join in the hope, frivolity and joy. Whether the Saints win or not against the Atlantic Falcons is not the issue. The eyes of the country and beyond will for that one day be focused on New Orleans, the recovery, the fact that in some ways life here is getting back to normal.

At first I was going to comment here cynically about the fact that although New Orleans cannot get a handle on the rampant lawlessness and cannot offer many former residents the chance to come home, it can miraculously come up with millions of dollars to renovate the Superdome and field a major sports event.

But no, I've changed my mind. We humans are, after all, a tribal specie. We want to sit around the fire and bond with one another. Sport, more than religion, art, music or language, is our tribal fire circle, and the men in uniform our cultural idols. We need them desperately. We pay them very well and in return ask them to unify us by putting on a good show. Not a bad deal, when you think about it.

Big B and Little B: Critical Linguistic Issues October 11, 2006

Yesterday I spent several hours trying to help a tenant locate her brother who had been arrested by New Orleans police sixteen days before but did not show up in the Orleans Parish Prison computer. As far as the prison system was concerned, the unlucky Hispanic male did not exist, yet the family had received

word from inmates sharing his cell that he was there. His wife in Honduras was hysterical and his sister, my tenant, sick with worry. She had heard accounts of Hispanics disappearing in Parish Prison never to resurface, especially if there was no one fighting to get them released.

The reason for the arrest of Antonio Valladares (an alias for the purposes of this account) was unknown; the young man had walked out of a relative's house uptown in the presence of his sister and others. An anonymous African-American man approached him as if he knew Valladares, yelling "Hey, amigo!" and tossing something into the street toward him. In two seconds a police car pulled up, agents jumped out of the car and arrested both men, pushing back hysterical family members of Valladares like flies around milk.

Valladares had managed to make a phone call to his sister the following morning, announcing he needed \$500 to bail out and stating the area of the prison where he was incarcerated. The family hurried over to the prison that same afternoon with the bail money but no Antonio Valladares existed in the prison system. They had been trying every possible alternative since, even getting a lawyer to call the prison, but with the same mysterious result.

It took me trips to Central Lock-up, the district police station of the area where he was arrested and the Police Integrity Office, then back to Central Lock-Up to finally figure out the puzzle. No report of the arrest showed up. Had Valladares given another name to the booking officer? Had it been police who arrested him or officers from ICE (immigration enforcement) or DEA (drug enforcement) or maybe even the vice squad? No one seemed able to tell us because they could not find the defendant in the prison system. When I suggested we file a missing person's report, officials bristled. The man was not missing. We knew where he was. Filing such a report was illegal.

Finally, someone in the Police Integrity Office gave me the name of the man who oversees the Parish Prison data system, and a call to him assured me the young Hispanic man would be found. Almost an hour later, with the top man conducting his own search of the prisoner population, he reported that although Valladares had identification papers on him when he was booked showing the correct spelling of his surname, the booking officer understood him to say Balladares -- the letter V is called "little B" in Spanish because it's often pronounced interchangeably -- and registered him under B rather than V. Antonio had at last been located under the B's.

That simple oversight on the part of the booking officer had cost Valladares, who had no criminal record either in the U.S. or his native country, nearly 3 weeks in prison and untold anguish for his family. The \$500 bail was made within a half hour and the young man released, but there was no apology or compensation from the prison, only the assurance of a lawyer that the charges were bogus and would be dropped as soon as they went to court.

Flying Debris October 16, 2006

It's the fear we all live with as we whiz along the highways in and around New Orleans, that something will go spiraling off a truck ahead and land on the roadway, causing a major pile up. It happened to me the other day for the first time, though I had just been spooked by reading in the newspaper how a ladder had become dislodged from a truck on the I-10 and caused an accident that took the lives of two women in a sedan and almost made an 18 wheeler truck roll over.

This time it was a bicycle that fell off a rack attached to the back of a car and bounced across two lanes, coming to rest just a few inches from my front tire as I swerved slightly to avoid hitting it. I knew slamming on the brakes was a bad idea, but swerving could have been disastrous too. For a few seconds it took my breath away

We're all super sensitive to the unpredictability of life these days. The flying bicycle was a too real reminder.

Emotional Skinny Dipping October 16, 2006

In the moments when I allow myself to sit and think quietly about all that has happened in the past year, as I do at church on Sunday mornings or sometimes late at night when a particularly beautiful piece of music plays on the radio, my eyes start to well up and I feel terribly conflicted, alone and unable to find a way out of the tangle of emotions, obligations, and decisions that have found a permanent roost on my shoulders.

I never asked for this assignment, did nothing to deserve it. I resent being forced into this position of weakness and disadvantage. I would have thought by now that we all would have moved on to other lives, other things. Yet most of us displaced by the flood are almost as undecided as we were the day we were allowed back into the city to view the disaster.

These moments of sad reflection seem to me emotional skinny dipping, allowing the vulnerability to peek out now and then, anxious to find cover again.

Elusive Concept of Home October 16, 2006

A long time friend in her mid-60s commented to me the other day that even though she had the great fortune to have a nephew rebuild her flooded house and improve it in major ways in the process, she doesn't feel totally at home there. The ten months she spent in evacuation in Wisconsin allowed her to become acclimated to a different climate, to become a lot closer to her large extended family there, and to experience a cityscape with lovely natural spaces quite different from her surroundings in New Orleans.

Because her nephew volunteered to rebuild the house within her insurance compensation budget, she fared a lot better than most. She has moved back home into a brand new house with more light, better insulation, more storage areas and more efficient heating and cooling systems than before. But she really misses her old house. She still doesn't feel at home there.

My friend is learning what most of us are, that "home" is an elusive concept. We understand it only after losing our pre-Katrina homes and have to go about figuring how to move our old selves into new and somewhat foreign environments. It has nothing to do with better building materials or new drapes. It's all a matter of the heart.

Quiet Hurricane Season October 16, 2006

It must be a gift from God. How else to explain the unusually quiet 2006 hurricane season that defied all meteorologists who are supposed to be experts on such things? This season was benign, as if taking pity on us bedraggled survivors. There wasn't one serious evacuation, no contra-flow, no crowded house upriver as I had expected once friends and family would have to leave New Orleans for a few days.

Of course, there's the sinister aspect that says we have been lulled into apathy by the calm storm season. It might take a year or two of no storms to lure people back to the swamps, only to be ejected again four or five years down the road. And yes, we do have short memories, especially when it comes to distasteful things like floods, which we'd so much rather forget. To be pulled by the yo-yo of storm season predictions is harrowing. We'll have to see what next year brings.

Travails of Insurance October 21, 2006

Don't get us started talking about the abuses suffered at the hands of insurance agents. My own case is typically traumatic. The worst problems have been with the public company La. Citizens aka the FAIR Plan, the agency of last resort and often only resort for many of us property owners. Yesterday, after months of trying, I finally met in a mediation session with an La. Citizens agent. The state with La. Citizens arranged these mediation sessions free of charge for thousands of disgruntled clients in order to avoid a barrage of lawsuits.

The insurance rep was defensive and curt with me. I felt that after the hours and hours I had spent on the phone, collecting documents and trying to get someone at Citizens to call me back, he should have been apologetic.

The good news is that it was worth my time and effort to attend the session because the agent agreed to send out a new adjustor to re-inspect the building in question, I finally received a report on what the original small check received months ago covered, and it looks like I stand to get considerably more in the end.

I'm just wondering after all the trauma, why put us through such a paper mill to begin with?

Road Home: One Road Fits All October 21, 2006

The Road Home appointment in Baton Rouge this past week was a bust. Before I saw a counselor, I was photographed and finger-printed. It felt more like

a criminal investigation than an interview to apply for a grant to repair my flooded home. The counselor assigned to me was obviously new and not very knowledgeable. To her credit, she went into another cubicle several times to consult a supervisor.

What I learned in the interview that was not explained anywhere on the website or application form is that anyone who had decent home owner's and flood insurance pre-Katrina stands very little chance to benefit from the Road Home program, much touted as it is by the governor and a pricey advertising campaign. It works only for those who chose to be uninsured, under-insured, or not to have flood insurance and punishes those of us who have been responsible in our insurance choices.

For the few thousand dollars one might receive mid-2007, options are limited to three: renovate the house and live in it for three years (leaving or selling early requires a percent of the grant be paid back); sell the house to the state and use the proceeds to buy another house somewhere in the state; or sell the house to the state and be penalized 33 percent for moving out of state. It is understood, though never stated, that the sale price is determined by the state and will inevitably be less than the open market.

So much for a one-plan-fits-all approach. What about people like me who don't want to or can't move back into their former homes? Why shouldn't renovating those homes and renting them out count for something? What about homes owned by multiple family members, only one of whom wants to live there? And what about people who for health reasons, advanced age or whatever should not come back to live in a moldy atmosphere? Why has no consideration be given to these thousands of applicants?

It's not hard to understand why some people mutter under their breaths about a Road Home conspiracy that leaves the state of Louisiana holding massive amounts of real estate which it can then auction off to private developers, thus getting rid of much of the pre-Katrina population. It leaves me asking what road and what home? I don't see either.

Heart-stopping Near Accident October 29, 2006

Friday, as I drove into New Orleans, I came within inches of having a serious car wreck. Only an instantaneous reflex to drive up on to the curb prevented me from being blindsided by a large truck whose driver plunged out into a left hand turn from the median, and by his own admission never saw me coming in the lane to his right.

In the heart stopping moments when my white Chevy Trailblazer came to rest up on the curb, having escaped a terrific hit by about two seconds and several inches, the specter of that truck coming at me from the driver's side, though by all rights it should have stopped, played over and over in my mind. How easily I could have taken a hard hit, suffered multiple injuries, lost the car and had to totally rearrange my life. How fortunate that the curb at that corner

happened to be free of trees, bushes or street signs so I could jump on over it to safety.

The middle aged truck driver and I exchanged a few words. He obviously had no excuse but was as relieved as I to have averted a serious accident. He waited until I drove down from the curb to be sure there was no damage to my vehicle, then left.

It took me several days to get over the nervous stomach from that near miss. I feel like I've been given a reprieve to go on with my life and the renovation of properties in New Orleans. Else why be spared the pain, expense and fear of the accident having occurred? The anxiety itself takes a toll.

Exploring Professional Help October 29, 2006

Seeking help for post-Katrina issues had not occurred to me. I've always taken care of things by myself and it's always worked before. Before Katrina, that is. This prolonged period of indecision and high stress, however, is different.

At the church I attend there is a listening room, a space set aside for parishioners to sit after Sunday morning service and talk with a pastoral care associate. Several times I thought about ducking in there but put it off for the next week. Last Sunday tears were at the surface for me throughout the morning service and I decided to talk to someone in the listening room to see if I couldn't sort through some of the sense of being overwhelmed. I found myself talking for an hour with a kind woman named Holly.

At first I was too upset to speak, but gradually the tears slowed and I was able to explain my inability to handle everything that's being thrown at me. So often I don't know where to turn, which decision to make, how to make sense of it all. Holly listened attentively, interjecting from time to time how impressed she was at how well I had managed so far. In parting she gave me a hug and suggested I consider counseling at a mental health facility near where I live.

I don't know about ongoing counseling because of the time it would take. Just getting some of the frustration and self-doubt off my chest and sharing it with another human being, even a stranger like Holly, really made a difference. Her reassurance will last me at least a few weeks.

Basic Vicious Cycle November 8, 2006

What is perhaps the most demoralizing aspect of post-Katrina New Orleans are basic city services that simply aren't available. Once one finds, hires and pays a contractor to rewire a house, clear a gas line or replace water pipes, the battle is only partly won. Weeks and months can pass before service is restored, if ever.

In the street where I have four small rental houses, no gas service has been available since Katrina. Three weeks ago since the plumber was paid and the proper forms were filed at City Hall, nothing has happened. A call to Entergy which controls the gas supply, yielded two pieces of information: the city had not

yet sent an approval to turn the gas on at those four sites, and anyway, gas service is not available in that area and no one at Entergy knows when it will be.

Meanwhile, tenants paying minimal rents in all the houses are without heat and hot water. It's enough to make me want to tear my hair out! In century-old houses that functioned perfectly well pre-storm with gas space heaters, and gas stoves and hot water heaters, I was faced with simply forgetting about the gas and going all electric, an alternative that would be expensive to me to have implemented and to my tenants to afford the high electric bills.

As if that weren't enough aggravation, I came home the other day to a letter from Entergy stating that the gas meter reader had not been able to get into a locked gate at the rental properties to read the meters. Will the insanity ever end?

Dental Care Interrupted November 13, 2006

Often overlooked in the storm's aftermath are the thousands of medical procedures interrupted. Patients lost their doctors, records, clinics and treatments. Few if any will ever be reunited in time to be of much help.

The case of my partial bridge for my upper teeth is a good example. When Katrina hit, I was awaiting three crowns that had been paid for and were made by the LSU Dental School in New Orleans. They were intended to replace temporary crowns in anticipation of having a partial bridge fitted and made of two upper missing teeth.

About a month after the storm, one of the temporary crowns fell out and I had to have it re-glued by my regular dentist. Chewing on only my left side was not good for my teeth in general. My dentist suggested I track down the dental student who had been in charge of my case, which I did. He was working in a dental office uptown, and I finally went there for him to insert the three permanent crowns he had been carrying around in his car for months.

It took another few months to get in touch with the LSU Dental School which flooded totally and is now operating out of Baton Rouge. I was told that getting the two-tooth bridge made by the school was near to impossible and thus had to resort to my private dentist whose price was at least double that of the dental school's.

Fortunate for me, this situation was not an emergency or even life threatening, simply one of dozens of things I have had to deal with. I can only wonder how thousands of people who couldn't get prescriptions refilled or surgical procedures rescheduled in a timely manner managed to muddle through.

Dirge for Working Class Housing November 25, 2006

Those of us hardest hit by Katrina's aftermath are people of modest means owning old houses in New Orleans. Many of us have inherited these buildings, others have purchased and kept them up because they were all we could afford. This worked for us prior to Katrina when plaster and lathe walls, gas

heaters, limited electrical wiring and window air-conditioning units, though not conforming to modern building codes were nevertheless functional and unquestioned. These sturdy raised, turn-of-the-century structures built of first cut cypress with thick floorboards of long leaf pine were intended to house working class families for generations to come.

As the 20th century developed and various ethnic groups abandoned the old housing in favor of new in outlying areas, the houses were often neglected or abandoned altogether. Many became cheap rentals in marginal neighborhoods. Some thirty thousand languished on city demolition and auction lists.

Since Katrina a lot has changed for the old houses that were inhabited before. They have to be brought up to new building codes before electricity and gas can be turned back on. Flooded structures have to be completely rewired, water and gas pipes replaced. Gas heaters cannot be situated near doors, windows or throughways, making it almost impossible in small, narrow rooms. New heaters are expensive, have to be vented and thus cost a lot to install. To string new electrical wires, holes must be cut in plaster walls.

Add all of this to the cost of cleaning out the soaked contents of a house, gutting the walls and sheet rocking the parts of walls that were under water, repainting walls, resurfacing the wooden floors and retiling kitchen and bathroom floors, and replacing kitchen appliances, cabinets, etc. It can easily run \$45,000 and up for a house that pre-Katrina was worth that or less in total. Even the best insurance will not cover that whole cost, and owners without flood insurance can simply forget it. The Road Home program is a minimal help at best and an enormous hassle for which few have the stomach.

Meanwhile, property taxes and insurance premiums continue to come due, honest contractors are very hard to find, and the surrounding houses are often empty or occupied by squatters. Is it any wonder thousands of former home owners are walking away from the once lovely, unique shotgun houses and Creole cottages for which New Orleans is famous?

First Thanksgiving November 25, 2006

This Thanksgiving, our second since Katrina-- the first one two months after the disaster is a mere blur -- I was in my own house upriver from New Orleans and able to invite family and friends to a traditional dinner in my new dining room. It felt wonderful to prepare familiar dishes and entertain a table of guests. But it was also very different.

For one, I couldn't find various utensils and dishes that I thought had survived the flood. I don't yet have a kitchen stove and oven, so the turkey was baked at a neighbor's house. Friends had to drive an hour from New Orleans and leave early enough to get home before dark.

The food was delicious, the weather perfect, the company lovely, but it was all different, a different configuration of what has always been, just like everything else in our lives that has changed, been rearranged. New characters take the stage, former ones recede in memory. It feels like a First Thanksgiving.

Ironing out the Whole Evacuee Fabric November 29, 2006

The reaction one has to Hurricane Katrina depends often on what stage of life the person is in. Young people with their whole lives ahead of them plunge in full force with great optimism and zeal. They don't know yet how hard it is to replace what was lost; they haven't had time to collect much and therefore didn't lose as much.

Middle aged people have formed families, invested in homes and put down roots in their communities. For them displacement is more difficult, but they also often have energy, resources and optimism enough to start over and rebuild, unless some other issues force them to leave.

People retired and in their mid-to-late 60s or older often do not have energy or resources to start over. They keep weighing their options, take pressure from their children to move out of harm's way, find it hard to sever ties with all they've ever known.

There is a tendency by the Road Home program and whatever else is out there to see all evacuees as the same age group and hope individual differences will disappear in the ironing out of the whole fabric. That doesn't happen, and we fool ourselves when we fail to recognize how unique each person's case is.

Voting on a Done Deal December 13, 2006

Two Saturdays ago the city was asked by Mayor Nagin to participate in what he termed our last chance to let the Rebuild New Orleans team know what we envision the new city to be and what we want for our neighborhoods. To entice hundreds of us to give up a beautiful weekend day on the brink of Christmas madness, he also offered attendees free breakfast and lunch and the chance to vote directly and immediately on dozens of issues.

The event was set up in the downtown convention center. In an impressive array of technology, wide screens upfront linked us with similar groups in Houston, Baton Rouge, and Atlanta where evacuees had congregated.

Reluctantly, I went with a friend for a few hours in the early afternoon. We joined a table of other disaffected survivors and one facilitator who registered our remarks into a laptop to toss them unto the general mix. One issue we participated in was affordable housing. Options for voting were to fix up the former public housing projects and bring back the tenants who had lived there, to dismantle the housing projects and replace them with scattered-site housing, or to demolish the projects and replace them with privately owned apartment complexes.

Anyone close to this volatile issue would have supported the first option. The room was heavily stacked with former housing project tenants who pointed out the many faults of Section 8 vouchers and the rapid deterioration of privately owned complexes. The one proviso for opening up the same maligned projects was that they should be closely supervised and offer green spaces, playgrounds and services such as public transportation, stores and clinics nearby.

We all knew, however, that it had already been decided to scrap the projects, even as private developers, tax-credits in hand, were lining up to build large private apartment complexes in areas near downtown.

For all the glitz and media show, the large day long meeting was disappointing. True, the company paid handsomely to develop a grand plan to rebuild the city could now check off the box "Give citizens input and chance to vote on options" as well as show where hundreds of thousands of dollars had been spent on that effort. But no matter how we participants voted, the end results will support only what has already begun.

Upon returning to my parked car several blocks away, I was greeted by a parking violation ticket on my windshield. There were no signs anywhere to indicate it was a no-park zone; I had simply slipped in behind a string of cars already parked there. Twenty dollars payable to the City of New Orleans -- wouldn't you know it?

The Ursuline Nuns Evacuate December 14, 2006

Someone passed on to me a hand-printed account of the Ursuline nuns and their nine day holdout at the uptown convent during Katrina before they finally were forced for the first time in the order's history to leave their property, school, church and convent on State Street in uptown N.O.

This account gives an interesting perspective that I hadn't considered. Typically, the sisters meet adversity in community, though most of them are elderly, and several were already staying elsewhere when the storm hit. The sisters in New Orleans were joined by a number of neighbors, among them some men, who helped with securing various areas and buildings and used boats after the storm to visit others and get needed supplies. Some men were even housed in the living quarters of the nuns causing a bit of discomfort among the sisters. The Ursulines would have stayed through, according to the two nuns whose accounts are told, but strict orders came from a higher level of the order's supervision and they had to evacuate.

What impressed me was their sense of history; not since the first Ursulines arrived in New Orleans in 1727 had their mother house been abandoned, not during the Civil War, the Louisiana Purchase (when they asked to relocate to Havana, Cuba but were refused) nor the Battle of New Orleans. The Ursulines are New Orleans itself. They always have been.

Fortunately, their exile was short lived, but it makes us realize the enormous scope of the evacuation citywide

Booking the Losses December 23, 2006

I knew I had lost a lot of books from my personal library when flood waters claimed the bottom shelves of several bookcases, and I knew they were the larger, heavier and more expensive books that had been stored near to the floor. But not until today, almost a year and a half later, did I figure out which books were lost nor just how many.

After checking an inventory list of my New Orleans and Louisiana collection compiled well before Katrina against the books finally moved to safety and lined up on shelves in my new home, I was able to list 87 missing volumes, some hard to find and very likely irreplaceable.

I'm not sure what good this exercise does except to quantify my loss and help me from duplicating purchases in used book stores and at book sales as I begin to replace what is gone. For me my library is a lifeline to research and writing, so rebuilding it is important, as necessary as finding a new home was. It feels good yet sad to know what's still here.

Epilogue December 31, 2006

We are closing out a very tough year, like a tattered football we wish to kick into the distance and never deal with again. There is the new year that takes up where the old one leaves off. Problems, doubts and indecision are part of 2007 too.

Some things have been learned in the 16 months since Katrina hit: we can and do survive, whatever form that takes. Each of us has to decide how to move on in life, and that decision needs to be respected. Change is inevitable and often not of our choosing, but adapting to change is made easier by our acceptance of what is lost and embracing what replaces it. Many things cannot be replaced--they can merely be substituted with other things. That's life-- get used to it.

On the positive side, many good things have resulted from the upheaval of Katrina: new friendships, exposure to new places, schools, churches and communities, a chance to replace old furniture and clothes with new or different ones, a new appreciation for family and friends and the support these people provide when called upon to do so.

Friends sometimes ask gently whether I have thought about getting dogs to replace the two I lost as a result of having to evacuate without them. My answer is no. They are part of the irreplaceable past I have had to come to terms with. Responsibility for pets on top of everything else would be too much.

The sunset this evening is beautiful in its colorful striation of clouds. Tomorrow the same sun will rise on a new year. New Orleans will be rebuilt in a more haphazard way than we had hoped and much more slowly. Much of the trauma of the storm and flood has begun to recede in our memories, yet it lurks in our minds, familiar, historical. We will forever be the Katrina generation. It has marked us for life.

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