

*I Wonder About America.*

Sermon written in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina

By the Reverend Lone I Jensen September 18, 2005.

If I close my eyes I can still see the images of all that was lost in the rising waters and the raging storm. In my dreams the ancient live oaks still stand peacefully with their broad canopies offering welcome shade. In my dreams, low hanging branches overhung with gray moss reach down close to the ground begging, as much as a tree can beg, for a small child to climb into their embrace. In my dreams laughing children climb those branches and families picnic underneath, under trees older than this nation, older than America. In my dreams front porches of gracious old houses are filled with neighbors talking, music drift through the air and everyone knows what matters: family, friends, neighbors and the joy of life. Pass a good time Cher, and don't ever forget who you are and where you come from. Mud is the color of water down there, Mississippi mud, Bayou murky waters, hiding unknown dangers with a flash of blue at the Gulf shores. If this land has a soul it is deep as the rivers, muddy with old injustice, sparkling with new hopes, murky with the poisons of racism and flowing

easily along on a “live and let live attitude” “darling!” And now the land and its people and its voices of suffering haunt my dreams. I want to play loudly for all the dead hold a giant Jazz funeral in their honor only all those famous cemeteries to which we might take them are themselves under water. The crowds on St Charles that at Mardi Gras each year would scream for beads and the great prizes of Zulu Parade coconuts. Now they begged for water and cried for help:

Throw us something FEMA! Throw us a lifeline, America! We are dying, thirsty, hungry and ill: Throw us something Mister! Listen to the voices of Katrina! The great prize became a water bottle and the parades were horrific, of buses loading up the sad survivors of a hellish Superdome shelter that became quite literally a Dante’s inferno, parades of boats on river streets, helicopters picking folks off rooftops, help that often came far too late. Images all along the Gulf of untold suffering, images I will never forget. Oh, I wonder about America. How could we let this horror happen here? What happened to our power, our resources?

My husband Bruce was seven when the big flood of 1927 came and the streets of his home town Lafayette Louisiana filled with refugees and good Samaritans cooked food for them in giant iron pots in the streets. The evacuees, the refugees from the flood were back then as they are now exhausted, worn out, mourning

their losses, hungry, angry and most of them very poor. This has been for sixty seven years or more a very predictable catastrophe. Back then as now the disaster brought out the very best and the very worst in people. Some risked their own lives to rescue others from the rising waters and spent all their money, what little they did have at the time, to feed the hungry, many offered houses, shelter and comfort. Others got a boat and went out to rob the victims of what little was left in their houses. Just like now. Looters are hardly new. Nor are they color coded. Does poverty have a color? And some sat comfortably in their own rich houses and did not care much. Back then is just like now. Only now we have so much more ability to rescue people. We have so much more nearly miraculous technology. I expected paratroopers to descend on New Orleans and military trucks to get folks out of there. I expected more of America. My heart is filled with fury, white hot fury. Some homeland security we have here!

How could this happen? What do we do now? We thank the compassionate who give and continue to give. We praise the many unsung and unknown heroes and heroines and we speak loudly of the goodness of people. We give thanks for those who followed their best natures, like the doctors and nurses at Charity, the public hospital in New Orleans who stayed at the bedsides of dying people and waited for five long days for rescue and help.

Tulane patients were evacuated private paying patients but not Charity's. We can ask loudly from our place of privilege why there were no busses earlier and no real help for those who followed the official's advice and went to the superdome. We who are so blessed can do that. And we can hold up as a model the one poor doctor who ended up being the only doctor among thousands of evacuees at the convention center. We can as we did last Sunday give generously to the immediate need of the cities like Baton Rouge who are overwhelmed by evacuees.

Unless we look deeper this will happen again. We must not forget. Our first principle within Unitarian Universalism was violated, that every person has an inherent value and dignity. Poverty and racism pollute our nation's soul. I don't care what party you belong to, this should not happen again. Our faith calls us to action. This shall not happen again. The most vulnerable were hurt the most, the ill, the old and the very young. As I wrote this sermon CNN was showing picture of the over 2000 missing children. And the animals, well I have a story here. Bruce's brother his niece and her husband fled the hurricane and their home in Bay St. Louis. The storm surge was over 27 feet. They had to leave his beloved cat behind a fuzzy angora that looked like something out of a star wars movie: a "Wookie" kind of cat.

After nine days they made it back to see what was left. The news was bad, the house was filled with mud and everything was destroyed. But out of the destruction came a weak meow and a hungry and unrecognizable mud creature appeared. Talk about nine lives!

Like the cat New Orleans will be back. But unless we listen and learn it will happen again. For generations we have known that the mighty Mississippi river was no longer depositing its rich life giving mud and creating new wetlands. 16.0000 acres of wetlands, of swamps and estuaries disappear every single year off the coast of Louisiana. There have been many plans to both restore the wetlands and repair the levees. But these plans never made it through congress because of the cost. 10 Billion dollars were the price of last big plan proposed in the nineties which seems like a real bargain now. We seldom look far enough ahead. The sense of history is missing. Short attention spans and short term solutions are sadly typical American characteristic. This is a religious issue for us as Unitarian Universalists. Our seventh principle is respect and I would myself say reverence for the interdependent web of which we are only a part. Think about the world we will leave our great grand children. Will they bless or curse us for what we did or did not do?

Hurricanes are also storms of the soul. The winds brutally tear off any illusions we may have about ourselves and our invulnerability. We realize how fragile our lives are and how precious all those things we take for granted really are. Like family, friends and the simple necessities of life. And it brings us also face to face with our own deepest held beliefs. There is an African American poem that says: Reach out your hand children for God's voice is in the storm. In the aftermath of Katrina those are hard words to hear. Where, if anywhere at all, is God in all of this?

Are you hurricane weary? I do not blame you. Once my husband and I found out after an anxious week of no word that his family was safe we wanted to escape for a little while. So we went up to Williams on our way to the Grand Canyon. We were sitting outside the Rail Road Hotel enjoying the cool air when a good ole boy complete with cowboy hat, boots and a pretty girlfriend and a few beers under his belt wanted to talk. Conversation soon turned to the hurricane aftermath. Well said the young cowboy his grandmother had told him that she heard in church that the reason New Orleans was destroyed was all the sinning, the drinking and sex they were doing down there. The irony of him saying this with a beer in hand did not occur to him. Well I must admit the minister in me got the better of my good sense and I answered in my

strongest preaching voice that I did not believe for one minute in a God who would do this. How about the babies I asked, what about the elderly, what about the children. What had they done to deserve this? I was just getting going good and strong when his embarrassed girlfriend pulled him away.

What has God got to do with it? Is there a voice in the storm we need to listen to? Not according to my faith is there the voice of a God who punishes the innocent. Or a single issue politicized distorted image God as the group called Columbia Christians for Life believe in as it announced God's purpose in the storm it was to destroy the five abortion clinics in the city.

But if we look at God as simply the creative force for good working in human hands and hearts well then, God's voice was indeed heard loudly in this storm. We hear and see it in the helping hands and compassion shown to the suffering survivors. God's voice in this storm, for me, is a call for deep change in America. No one can stop the wind but we surely can do better with the aftermath.

Is this the country we want for ourselves, let alone for our children and grand children? So even though it gives me nightmares I will continue to listen to the voices of the storm and its aftermath. I will always remember these days and the soul searing images. And wonder about America and which way to go.

