

Going Back to New Orleans

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It's all anyone talks about. Katrina, pre and post, but mainly post. You hear it in the streets, in restaurants and clubs, and in every personal, serious conversation. They try to maintain some comic sense of the absurd about how things are now – FEMA trailers are condominiums, and if they're placed on a parking lot with a storm fence, it's a gated community. But in spite of the legendary New Orleans sense of humor, nobody really jokes about it.

In the airport as I'm heading back to BWI and Carroll County, I overhear the shoeshine men. They're talking about THE GAME – the Saints miracle win over the Eagles – but also about how the Philadelphia tourists loved New Orleans, and maybe they'll come back. And how “I spent a week gutting my bruthah's house in Pass Chris-ti-ann.” And how people came from everywhere to help. This is a city where people are grateful that so many ordinary Americans from all over the country answered the call, even if the government all but hung up.

They've got to talk about it. Every conversation opens the valve for a little pressure venting and, maybe over the long run, some pain will be released. But it's not easy. There's no formula for letting go of the anguish. The entire city is suffering a collective post traumatic stress disorder. A friend said, “I'm getting tired of all the Katrina stuff. I wish we could just be over with it,” which is exactly the sentiment shared by so much of America, at least on ~~hate~~ talk radio. There's only one problem. It's not over. The ruined, deserted neighborhoods stretch for miles...miles! A tourist, however, can miss it. With half the city functioning, it almost appears normal. The Saints are at the Superdome. Bourbon Street is alive and decadent. The Uptown and downtown clubs have live music every night. Half of

what New Orleans was can still look pretty good to anyone who doesn't want to look farther.

But beyond the cozy confines of the Quarter, you can see it immediately. Just a few blocks up Elysian Fields, the eastern border of the Quarter and Faubourg Marigny, the horror show begins. At first, it doesn't look all that terrible. Traffic rolls along, the houses almost look OK, but look closer. Every house bears spray painted code markings from the various search and inspection crews of September 2005. With very few exceptions, Alice doesn't live here anymore. It's a city of empty houses and broken dreams.

As I drive around New Orleans, I love listening to the radio, especially WWOZ, a community supported station that provides exposure to local musicians and all genres of New Orleans music. The OZ music is a lifeline, a reminder that music is the heart and soul of this city. It's the music that has helped people endure in spite of the daily vicissitudes and occasional calamitous tragedies that New Orleans has dealt out to its populace for hundreds of years. It's the music that makes you feel happy and good about life. Not only is life worth living, but joy abounds if you just let go a little – and live.

OZ has been fund-raising, and what's the subtext? What else? Everyone has their stories. Many of the on-air personalities and guests have just returned from various states of exile and refuge. They're glad to be back, ecstatic to be in The City that Care Forgot – only now no one can forget. So many have not made it back and may never return. "Send your donation to the greatest radio station in the world in the greatest city in the world." As part of the promotion, a nine year old girl accompanied by her daddy on guitar performs a live on-air version of "I Saw the Light" with the chorus in French. Yeah you right. Only in NEW ORLEANS She follows with her original song about her experiences with the Katrina Diaspora. It's hard to feel so good now.

Friday, October 13

I'm standing in what has got to be a Guinness record security line at BWI. It's backed up from Concourse D almost to the International Terminal. No way I'm going to make it to my flight in the next hour. I would have expected this type of inconvenience in New Orleans but not BWI. The process winds up being surprisingly efficient, however, and within 15 minutes I'm in sight of the screeners. The phone rings. It's my old band buddy from New Orleans, Vic (aka Vic Trix and His Beatnix). "I'm playing at Fritzel's on the 700 block of Bourbon Street at ten tonight. C'mon down." I played a couple of times at Fritzel's 30 years ago, a classic Bourbon Street dive. I'm going to New Orleans to do volunteer work gutting houses with ACORN, but that doesn't start until tomorrow, so in keeping with the protocol of the Big Easy, I should have some fun tonight.

The plane is packed with Eagles fans who also aim to be on Bourbon Street by ten, although they have higher aspirations of alcohol consumption than I do. I don't think a hangover will go well with wearing a hazmat suit and respirator at 7:30 tomorrow morning. As we fly into Moissant (the old name of the airport sits better with my nostalgia), I see plenty of lights. It's hard to tell if anything is different. I wonder if the blackness is more than just Lake Ponchartrain.

I arrive at the airport about 9:15, rent a car, and drive into town. From the I-10 at night, it looks like business as usual. Metairie is lit up, and the skyline of NEW ORLEANS is impressive. The Quarter is jumping on a Friday night. Bourbon Street is filled with the usual mélange ranging from Tulane frat boys dressed in identical blue blazers and rep ties to every possible variant of sexual orientation. I find Vic at Fritzel's who tells me he needs a bass player. It just so happens that there's an old gut string upright in the utility room, so by a little after ten I'm playing a set with Vic on guitar and Ryan on clarinet doing jazz standards. As far as the crowd knows, I do this every night and live in the Quarter. Only in New Orleans.

I wouldn't mind playing another set, but I'm staying at George's place across the river in Gretna.

George has just gotten home from directing the video shoot of the football game at Chalmette High School where he teaches video and communication. He's tired after working a 15 hour day and doesn't want to wait up until all hours for me to get there.

George has taught at Chalmette High School for a number of years and lived in St. Bernard Parish at the time of Katrina. His house was totally destroyed by ten feet of water and George found himself a refugee in Troy, Alabama for the better part of last year. A couple of twists of fate brought him back to NEW ORLEANS, but he's feeling a little unsettled in the city where he's lived his whole life.

We stay up talking much later than we should about - what else? He's had his own year in hell and he needs to talk about it. In fact, his emails are a large part of the reason I've come. From describing what it was like to come back to his ruined home for the first time (the heat, the smell, the utter despair), to reflecting on the deaths of several friends, to sharing that in spite of the miracle that Chalmette High School is up and running, he's not so sure he can stay here anymore, George has opened a window for me to a scene that is painful to observe. The devastation is overwhelming, especially for someone who has to drive through New Orleans East and St. Bernard Parish to get to work and back. Perhaps uppermost in George's mind is the threat of another hurricane. He's had to evacuate several times in the last few years, another slice of hell that makes beltway backups around here look like Sunday drives. How can anyone live this way - in a state of anxious dread for four months of hurricane season, getting ready to evacuate at a moment's notice, wondering if everything you've done to rebuild your life will be wiped out again. Ironically, Katrina was far from the worst case scenario. Wait until a Cat 4 or 5 comes up the mouth of the Mississippi. And the odds are that one day it will.

I get a good five hours of sleep on George's couch, have a 6:30 am bowl of cereal with him, and drive to ACORN, 1016 Elysian Fields. I immediately discover that ACORN runs as advertised. You register over the internet and show up at 7:30 any day except major holidays. I go in. My name is on

the list. I sign the waiver. Others drift in. While most volunteers come from out of town, on the weekend locals join in. Today our work crew consists of Matt, an EPA communications officer from Texas who was here right after Katrina and is currently in town doing a six week assignment; Meredith, a local medical malpractice lawyer who represents Charity Hospital; some of the “Chicago 5”, middle-age professionals (at least two are doctors) who all do volunteer work at a shelter in Chicago; Alice, a New Yorker with 17 successive Jazz Fests to her credit; Vermitz, one of the contingent of post-modern hippies who have moved temporarily to New Orleans to help out; and our ACORN supervisors, Billy and Paulie, who happens to be wearing an Eagles jersey. What’s up with that?

ACORN maintains a list of hundreds of houses that need to be gutted. It is a volunteer service that saves the homeowner around \$4,000. Houses that are not gutted will be torn down, with a bill sent to the owner. With a gutted house, the owner at least has a choice whether to rehab it. It’s anyone’s guess how many displaced residents will return, and even if they do, there may be no point to rehab, but ACORN wants the choice to be in the hands of the people, not the City. It does not matter to me (or anyone else around here) if the house eventually does get demo-ed. What’s important is keeping that decision in the hands of the owner.

Our first site takes us down the Chef Menteur Highway in New Orleans East. At first, it seems like an ordinary Saturday. We pass plenty of cars, but no real traffic, and see houses that all look OK. Then I begin to notice the ubiquitous FEMA trailers. Some blocks have none or one or two; on some probably every other house has a FEMA trailer in the driveway. You’d think half the city was getting ready to go on a vacation, until you realize what this means. None of the houses is inhabitable. A trailer in the driveway serves as the owners’ current home while they work to rehab their house. An empty driveway means an empty house.

My introduction to gutting comes on the tail end of the work on this house. The interior has been

ripped out to the studs. We finish up by pulling out as many errant nails and screws as we can find and sweeping and hauling out the remaining debris. I learn that people who put up wallboard use a lot of screws. We've turned this house into a shell, but it's an improvement over what it had become.

What surprises me is that this is not a poor neighborhood. This was once a nice, modest middle-class home. Katrina did not discriminate which neighborhoods it struck; the discrimination falls more on who is able to return. Middle class neighborhoods have more FEMA trailers because the residents were able to get back, notwithstanding the deplorable conditions.

After about two hours of work, we're ready to move on to the next site, but the house is already spoken for. I learn the newest term in the New Orleans lexicon, "demo." It's not about making a record anymore. Instead, a demo crew has shown up to tear down the house completely. Apparently, the owners decided it wasn't worth it to gut. They've thrown in the towel on returning to their home.

After a phone call back to ACORN, we find a new site in the upper Ninth ward. Nothing is deceptive here. It looks like the aftermath of fire. This is a poor section of the city of single and double shotguns, the narrow stack of single rooms that defines much of New Orleans residential architecture. Almost no signs of life exist. You hear more unhinged doors banging in the wind than you hear any sounds of human activity. Virtually no FEMA trailers are in sight. This is the world of the truly dispossessed and displaced who lack the means and often the desire to return.

We meet Clyde, the owner of the house we'll gut. He's gracious, good-natured, and thankful – thankful that we're going to clear out what little remains of what he once called home. The work is harder and more rewarding or at least satisfying in a destructive kind of way. Armed with a crowbar, I manage to pull down the kitchen cabinets and counters fairly quickly and then it's off to ripping out wallboard and sheetrock. It's dirty, smelly, hot, humid, and ultimately depressing, but this is what I'm here for. When we finish up by two, I'm ready to rip off my coveralls (literally - it's amazingly pleasing

to tear the hazmat suit apart) and turn in my crowbar for the day.

Less than 24 hours back, and everything is starting to feel familiar and comfortable. It's not home anymore, but it is a sense of deep connection, a living memory of a time when I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. It's also terribly depressing.

I finish up the day and night at George's. We're all too beat to go out, and George forgot to soak his red beans last night, so he prepares steak Dijon instead. His girlfriend, Donna, joins us. We eat and drink well, and lose ourselves for awhile jamming in George's music room. It's a reunion of the hundreds of times we've had nights like this before. It's a party, a celebration that we're together, here, doing this. And yet Katrina is all around us.

Donna, like most everyone here, has *her* story, another tail of surviving horror and despair. It is a testament to her will to endure but hardly has a happy ending. After being displaced in Texas and north Louisiana with her invalid mother and sister with a disability, Donna made it back to her house last fall. Only two feet of water had come through, but Donna found out that two feet was good enough. In a one story house, everything must go. So, Donna gutted her house herself and then went online to find out how to put it back together. So far she's completed two rooms, a monumental achievement. She could host "Trading Spaces" by this point. She appreciates the fact that I'm volunteering with ACORN, but my newfound expertise in house gutting probably doesn't impress her. While she puts her house back together piece by piece, she lives in her FEMA trailer in her driveway. It's already been badly damaged by a car that ran into it.

It's great to be together, to be so connected. But my friends are hurting.

I feel like a veteran when I show up at the ACORN office and daily staging area for the volunteer crews. Each morning at 7:30 volunteers simply show up at ACORN. Most have registered previously, usually through the internet, but a total neophyte can just show up, register on the spot, and

go to work. The staff at the office keeps track of the list of houses; when one is finished, the next comes up. In spite of the looseness of the operation – or maybe because of it – it functions seamlessly. The office manager of the day decides how many crews based on the number of volunteers that morning. During my three days, the total runs from about ten to twenty, meaning one or two crews. Although the website suggests bringing your own supplies, ACORN supplies hazmat suits by the truckload; you go through at least two per day, at least if you want to eat lunch. They provide respirators, gloves, and hammers and crowbars. Gotta have the right tools for the right job – and we do.

The crew goes out under their own motor power as much as possible, but the ACORN supervisor or supervisors always have room in a truck or van for carless souls. We convoy from headquarters to the site on the list, Clyde's house. Today, we have one crew – Billy from ACORN, Matt, Alice, no Chicago 5 but a Western Massachusetts church group of about 6 who arrived in town yesterday, and a similar size group of college students from Ripon College in Wisconsin who made it to town earlier this morning!

We spend the morning ripping out more of Clyde's house, getting it down to the studs. I'm feeling pretty skilled with my crowbar technique such as it is. We don't talk all that much; it's not easy wearing a respirator. Gutting a house is not a very social occasion at any level. Besides, the purpose of volunteering is to work, which is what everyone does. Part of the ACORN magic is the lack of supervision. The work just gets done. It may not be the most efficient process imaginable, but trying to train us all to use some sort of system would be more time consuming. We came here to rip out walls and nails, and it's not exactly rocket science to figure out what to do.

Additionally, everyone is aware that you've got to pace yourself. Some of the volunteers from Massachusetts are in their seventies, and I'm pretty damn impressed to see them dig in like everyone else. When you feel too hot, sweaty, exhausted, or ill to stay in a rotting mold infested house covered

from head to toe (the hazmat suits have booties as well as hoods), face encased in a respirator that must have come from *Ghostbusters* props – well, you’ve got to get out. So we take breaks whenever we need to, not by the foreman’s clock. We each march to the beat of a different drummer, but somehow the tempo stays together.

As we cross paths outside of the house after we’ve whipped off our masks to get some fresh air, we do get to know each other a little. The students from Ripon are floored to discover that I know their dean, whom a number have had as a professor. We talk about places to go – mainly music clubs. I try to steer them away from Bourbon Street to the Uptown wilds of Tip’s and the Riverbend, but this is their first time in the Big Easy, so the Quarter it will be.

I decide I need a decent lunch and drive to the Faubourg where I’m able to get red beans and rice with cornbread at the Praline Connection. By the time I’m back at the site, I find both the flesh and the spirit are weak. I don’t do much more than pull nails. It’s so dark in some rooms that I have to run my hand along the wall to find them. Billy must sense that we’re wearing down because he calls it a day a little before 2. Besides, he wants to watch the rest of the Saints game.

As I drive around on this Sunday, things are quiet, which is actually not eerie. The Saints are beating the Eagles 17-3 in the first half, and Who Dats everywhere are hunkered down in their FEMA trailers or preferably, neighborhood bars to watch the game. I buy some souvenirs for my kids at the not-so-crowded French Market, pick up some wine at the uptown Super Walmart, and work on my journal at PJs, one of my many coffee house haunts from my graduate days at UNO. The Saints pull off a miracle victory, keeping possession for the last eight minutes before winning with a field goal as the clock runs out.

I’m spending tonight and tomorrow, my last night, with my friends Don and Debbie in Harahan. Don’s a contractor and builder who had the foresight to build his beautiful plantation style home a

whopping 12 feet above sea level. When Katrina came, he did not evacuate immediately. By Tuesday, the only damage from the hurricane was debris scattered over his lawn, which he and his son shoveled and swept up the same day. Their home was fine, but without electricity, water, stores, or a remote connection to civilization, it was pointless to stay. Eventually, the family found itself exiled in Santa Barbara, a hardship most of us would love to have thrust on us. The irony did not escape Don, and he enjoyed his turn as Santa Barbara's token refugee celebrity. It's easy to make fun of being exiled to the most upscale community in the country, but it still wasn't home, and Don and Debbie came back as soon as possible in late September.

They both have been through a crazy year, one way of describing it for anyone from New Orleans. Unlike many residents who returned to find themselves unemployed, Don and Debbie had more work waiting for them than they could possibly manage. Debbie says that she feels a little guilty that her Katrina experience wasn't more horrific. She hears tales of suffering and woe daily and knows she was simply lucky. Don harbors no such guilt. As he says, all he's been doing for the last year is trying to rebuild New Orleans. He and his partner have put up about 15 houses in the last year as well as some commercial work. They can't handle anywhere near the requests that come in; they've been sticking to friends and established clients. Don's work is about as good as it gets – his own home makes the case unequivocally – so I know there are now 15 beautifully built homes that did not exist in September, 2005. Don goes to sleep each night with a clear conscience and an exhausted body.

I've made it clear to both of them that we'll all be better off if I start my visit by taking a shower, which feels extraordinarily good after a day in a mask and hazmat suit. We sit, talk, drink wine, and eat Bar-B-Que shrimp, a New Orleans specialty that's broiled, not grilled – but that's another story. We end the meal in traditional fashion, soaking up the butter/shrimp sauce with French bread. I'm a volunteer by day, gourmand by night – a good combo for this city.

Monday, October 16

I tussle with the morning commute in gray rain, and in that tedium I feel as if I've never been away. I'm listening to chatter and news on WWL, always one of my favorite ways to soak in another flavor of local culture. This morning it's all about dem Saints. I had lost sight of the intense relationship the Saints and their perennial losing ways have with their long suffering fans. I believe the team still holds the record for going the most consecutive years without a winning season. In recent years they've done better but always with a Sisyphean letdown that rivals the tribulations of the Cubs. As the excited congratulatory calls to WWL stream in, one man says, "I've been a Saints fan for 40 years since I was nine years old, and I've never seen a team pull together like this one and I...uh....I..." He can't continue. He's weeping. On WWL during morning drive time. And I realize he's not really weeping about the Saints. Rather, the emotion of yesterday's win has opened the emotional floodgate of Katrina yet again. He's weeping for his city, his home, his family, his life. With all the hurt and pain that pervades so much of life in New Orleans, his beloved Saints, the perennial doormat of the NFL, have made a glorious statement about overcoming the odds. The jury is still out on the rest of New Orleans.

Monday morning at ACORN and the joint is jumpin'. Enough volunteers for two teams of about ten each have arrived. As I'm driving out to Clyde's house on my own and irresponsibly distracting myself by talking to my wife on the cell, I overshoot North Rocheblave and wind up deep in the Ninth Ward not far from the Industrial Canal. The devastation is literally breathtaking. Here there is no life, just an occasional demo crew. In every direction, blocks of sagging, dilapidated and destroyed houses stretch to the horizon. In other parts of the city, many of the houses look OK even though they are a mess inside. These houses hide nothing. They are collapsing or have collapsed. Random debris, not the piled and semi-organized detritus from gutting, sits and drifts in loosely strewn heaps. This is what

tourists should see. Get your Go-Cup and see the Apocalypse.

When I get back to Clyde's house, I join up with the Mass gang, Vermitz, and a couple of ACORN staff supervisors new to me. This shouldn't take more than an hour, mainly a sweeping process by this point – so we think. But even tearing a house apart requires attention to detail. There's always something that has been missed or left to do. Not all the wallboard in the bathroom came down, a ceiling and sheetrock remain in another room I haven't even seen until today, floorboards need to be ripped up, and the seemingly resurgent population of nails and screws demands attention.

Gutting is a fundamentally depressing process. One of the Mass volunteers points out, "This is a lot different than helping to build a house." In spite of the fact that gutting is part of the solution, it feels destructive and invasive. I get some satisfaction tearing a house down to its studs – but not a lot.

Clyde comes by to thank us again. One volunteer tells him, "I'm sorry for your loss." He wanted to bring water for us, but he doesn't have a car. He manages a pretty cheerful demeanor with the crew and talks to the ACORN supervisor about paperwork that he'll do back at the office. As he gets ready to go, he says. "If I stay any longer, I'll start to cry."

The infamous New Orleans humidity is at full force today filling the air with a thickness that makes everything sluggish. By the time we break for lunch and I tear off my hazmat suit, I'm *completely* soaked through and will stay so throughout the day.

I drive out to UNO to see my alma mater. UNO looks great – busy with students and traffic everywhere. Because it's on relatively high ground right on the lakefront, I think a lot of the water basically swept through the campus without getting too deep and then settled in all the neighborhoods literally below that stretch back about five miles to the Quarter. The destruction around UNO is appalling. The university used to support a modest commercial neighborhood, but nothing is left.

I realize that my diet has been lacking in some basics of nutrition (never confuse Creole cooking

with healthy eating), so I head back to the Praline Connection where I order the collard greens and rice plate. I wonder how many times they serve this lunch, but with enough pork fat, even the darkest green matter tastes fine to me.

I've over extended my lunch break, a luxury I take advantage of as a last day volunteer. When I get back to Clyde's house, the remainder of the crew is packing up, and we head deep into New Orleans East. Once again, the ruin is overwhelming. New Orleans East is a big area geographically stretching from one side of the Industrial Canal to St. Bernard Parish, about five miles. Nothing functions here. With the exception of several apartment units constructed in the last year, it doesn't look like anyone is living here. Nearer to downtown, there were plenty of FEMA trailers. As we get further out, there are no stoplights because there is no electric, nor any other utility for that matter – just like the Ninth Ward. So, there are no FEMA trailers. The utility companies won't put many areas of the city back on the grid unless they know people will return. Of course, in the chronic Catch 22 that defines so much of life around here, people can't return if there are no utilities.

My final gutting is on a suburban rancher that must have been this family's hard-fought and shining piece of the American dream. Gutting reveals a cheap, flimsy, and almost tawdry construction that is endemic to lower end housing development. It's irrelevant in the end. Katrina's destruction literally leveled the playing field, damaging the strong as well as the weak. Ten feet of toxic water will do that.

The family that fled this home never came back. In the middle of the kitchen stands a closed refrigerator. Rule number one: Do not open. Repeat: Do not open. The other crew has been here since morning and much has been accomplished. That doesn't stop me from wading into thousands of roaches, Palmetto sized, as I pry out the cheap paneling in what was once a family room complete with wet bar. I don't mind the roaches. When you live in New Orleans, they are a simple fact of life.

Besides, in my hazmat suit, gloves, and respirator, they can crawl all over me with impunity. Popping paneling turns out to be the most satisfying of my wrecking duties, so much so that I take pride in expertly prying the pressure points that pop out whole panels at a time – followed by an onslaught of bewildered roaches. I see one staff member carrying out a pet cage with an indiscernible form in it.

When we finish at 2:45, I'm as sopping wet as I have ever been in my clothes, with no shower in nearby sight. I say goodbye to the staff, including Paulie, who was wearing his Jerome Kearsse Eagles shirt on Saturday. "I almost felt sorry for you," I rib him, "but not quite." He says he was waiting for me to say something. We both laugh.

I decide to drive back across the river to Algiers Point to see my buddy Vic, whom I played with on Friday night. He and his wife, Karen, live in a converted commercial space that feels like a ground floor loft, including a combination kitchen/master bedroom on a second floor in the back. Vic and Karen's kids are both in college, and they faced empty nest syndrome by moving out of their suburban rancher and returning to their hippy roots.

The visit is wonderful, a reminiscence of playing together in the band. We listen to an old tape and take satisfaction that we rocked when we were young. Vic and Karen seem to have weathered Katrina well. They live in a section of the city that was spared any real damage. Because Karen is a puppeteer, they can both work on the road, sometimes the best way of dealing with living here.

I find my way back to Harahan, surprising myself that I still know the good routes and shortcuts. Don and Debbie are taking me out to dinner – at least after I shower. We head back Uptown to Mat and Naddies, a small upscale bistro serving nouvelle Creole/New Orleans cuisine. To capture an abundance of the culinary creativity, we order a table full of appetizers – sweet and spicy pecans, grilled oysters, a vegetarian antipasto, paprika potato skins with garlic pesto, shrimp bisque, smoked scallops, fried oyster salad, and shrimp and crayfish fritters. I indulge in crème brulee for a decadent dessert, because, well,

even Katrina can't stop the decadence that is New Orleans. In fact, Don believes that a positive outcome from Katrina has been a renewed appreciation of enjoying the fun that is the culture of this city. Life is fleeting and unpredictable. You never know when you'll be swimming in your living room, so laissez les bon temps rouler.

Tuesday, October 17

I drive to the airport on the Jeff Highway – totally old school. Turning on OZ, I immediately hear Dr. John and the Nevilles singing the tune that's been playing in my head since I left Baltimore, "Going Back to New Orleans." Last night at dinner, George called just to tell me how great it was to spend time together. At the New Orleans airport, Vic calls to tell me the same. The trip has been...meaningful – and wonderful. It just feels good to connect with these people whom I care so deeply about. But there's so much pain. There's so much hurt. The healing will take a long time. The scars will last forever.