

But that's what's really rich about New Orleans, that we really embrace the simple things about life. It's a very African tradition, that we all extend a hello, we always extend a kiss to people that we know. But my question is, what's going to happen to all the culture that was there, all the music? Boys walking down the street blowing horns. That's what we really enjoyed about our lives. It's more a connection with human beings that we really, really value.

—Gina Charbonnet, *New Orleans native, Katrina volunteer*

PREFACE

Pompeii and 8/29

IN EARLY AUGUST 2005, my wife and I joined our tour group on a bus from the port of Naples to the ancient city of Pompeii. It was a hot summer day, but a gentle breeze stirred the dusty streets of a city excavated from the hardened lava and mud left by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The Italian guide led us to spots where grand houses once stood. He led us to the rumbled sites of former horse stables, grand bath houses, and the temples of the goddess Venus and the god Apollo.

We stood shoulder to shoulder in the heat as he told us about the activities that once thrived at the Forum Plaza, Pompeii's center of religious, civil, and economic life. We were amazed at how modern this ancient city was, with its sophisticated water heating and cooling systems in the bath house; its fast-food restaurants situated about the city, where merchants and townspeople could pick up a quick meal of fish, olives, fresh vegetables, and wine; and its paved streets with raised large stones to keep one's feet from getting soaked on a rainy day.

We happened on a large wired pen with plaster casts of the bodies of the unfortunate citizens of Pompeii who were unable to escape the wrath of the hot-headed Vesuvius. Some of the victims were buried with precious items in their hands.

"Who do you think these people were?" our guide queried the group.

After a few wrong answers, my wife raised her hand.

"They were the slaves," she proffered. When her answer was affirmed, the guide quizzed her again.

"And, why do you think they didn't leave the city?"

"The slaves did not own horses or carriages."

I couldn't help but flash on this memory as I watched the unfolding of tragic events during Hurricane Katrina later that month in New Orleans and other parts of the Gulf Coast. The way it was for the poor of Pompeii is the way it was for the poor citizens of New Orleans. They were ensconced in a city rich with culture and yet they couldn't take full advantage of its incredible delights. They served a ruling class and visiting tourists but they were kept from the pleasures they helped to provide. And when the city fell to the fury of nature, they were most vulnerable to the environment's brutal backlash.

The guide also pointed out that many of the slaves were chained to the wheat grinders, mules attached, as selfish and uncaring owners fled the city. The tragic replay in New Orleans on August 29 is unmistakable as city elites and the well to do fled without thought of their poor citizen-servants. And many of the slaves in Pompeii were found with grand and expensive items, things they wouldn't ordinarily possess but that they took nonetheless, knowing they couldn't make use of them during the disaster but wanting to feel what it was like to have nice things, if only for a few fleeting, fatal hours. Like their peers in Pompeii, some of the poor of New Orleans took televisions and

other luxury items they had not usually had access to, trinkets of treasure they had been denied by grinding poverty. Perhaps it would blunt for a moment the realization that they had been left behind by their government. But their crime, if it can even be called that, paled in comparison to the criminal negligence that affected their lives long before Katrina.

Of course, unlike Pompeii, New Orleans will be rebuilt. But will it resemble the funky and soulful place that it was made by the percolating gumbo of French, Spanish, and especially African identities? Or will it become a playground for the wealthy, or, perhaps, a zone of integrated pleasures razed of culture's fruits and flaws—Las Vegas in Louisiana? As Tulane University historian Lawrence Powell writes of New Orleans:

Will its recovery result in one of those "lost cities" that have been restored solely as sites of tourism and myth? Will this quirky and endlessly fascinating place become an X-rated theme park, a Disneyland for adults? Will the gaming industry carpet it with casinos backlit with neon and frosted over with the confection of glitz and garish glamour? Is it fated to be the place where Orlando embraces Las Vegas? That's the American Pompeii I apprehend rising from the toxic sludge deposited by Lake Pontchartrain: an ersatz city, a veritable site of schlock and awe. No less troubling is the possibility that New Orleans will be demographically unrecognizable after its reconstitution: whiter, smaller, and less diverse than when I evacuated two days before Katrina stormed ashore, literally bereft of the African American roots that have seeded so much that is authentic in American popular culture.¹

But even before such questions are answered, we must ask several more. Why did the black and poor get left behind? What took the government so long to get to the Gulf Coast, especially

New Orleans? What do politicians sold on the idea of limited governance offer to folk who need, and deserve, the government to come to their aid? Why is it that the poor of New Orleans, and, really, the poor of the nation, are hidden from us, made invisible by our disinterest in their lives? Why was it a surprise that they are in as bad shape as the storm revealed? Has the administration's hostility to science matters like global warming made us even more vulnerable to natural disaster? Has the war in Iraq diverted critical social attention from pressing domestic issues and depleted our emergency resources? Has the war on terror made us forget the urgent need for emergency management and mitigation? Does George Bush care about black people? Do well-off black people care about poor black people? Did God cause Katrina? Can we really afford to proceed as a nation without addressing how race, poverty, and class gang up on too many of our citizens and snatch from them their futures? Unless we answer these questions, we are in jeopardy of becoming a morally and politically lost nation bled dry of our humanity by disasters of nature and soul.

COME HELL OR HIGH WATER