

Remembering, Healing and Acting – September 11, 2005 The Rev. Suzelle Lynch, UUCW

FIRST READING – “Leap” by Brian Doyle (adapted)
(Doyle is the editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland in Oregon.)

A couple leaped from the south tower, hand in hand. They reached for each other and their hands met and they jumped.

Jennifer Brickhouse saw them falling, hand in hand.

Many people jumped. Perhaps hundreds. No one knows. ...

A kindergarten boy who saw people falling in flames told his teacher that the birds were on fire. She ran with him on her shoulders out of the ashes.

Tiffany Keeling saw fireballs falling that she later realized were people. Jennifer Griffin saw people falling and wept as she told the story. Niko Winstral saw people free-falling backwards with their hands out, like they were parachuting. ... Stuart DeHann ... saw a shirtless man falling end over end, and he too saw the couple leaping hand in hand.

... he reached for her hand and she reached for his hand and they leaped out the window holding hands.

I try to whisper prayers for the sudden dead and the harrowed families of the dead and the screaming souls of the murderers but I keep coming back to his hand and her hand nestled in each other with such extraordinary ordinary succinct ancient naked stunning perfect simple ferocious love.

Their hands reaching and joining are the most powerful prayer I can imagine, the most eloquent, the most graceful. It is everything that we are capable of against horror and loss and death. It is what makes me believe that we are not craven fools and charlatans to believe in God, to believe that human beings have greatness and holiness within them..., to believe against such evil hourly evidence that love is why we are here.

No one knows who they were: husband and wife, lovers, dear friends, colleagues, strangers thrown together at the window there at the lip of hell. Maybe they didn't even reach for each other consciously, maybe it was instinctive, a reflex, as they both decided at the same time to ... jump out the shattered window, but they *did* reach for each other, and they held on tight, and leaped ...

SECOND READING From the New York Times, September 8, 2005, “Macabre Reminder: The Corpse on Union Street,”
By Dan Barry (adapted)

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NEW ORLEANS, Sept. 7 - In the downtown business district here, on a dry stretch of Union Street, past the Omni Bank automated teller machine, across from a parking garage offering "early bird" rates: a corpse. Its feet jut from a damp blue tarp. Its knees rise in rigor mortis.

Six National Guardsmen walked up to it on Tuesday afternoon and two blessed themselves with the sign of the cross. One soldier took a parting snapshot like some visiting conventioner, and they walked away. ...

Hours passed, the dusk of curfew crept, the body remained. A Louisiana state trooper around the corner knew all about it: murder victim, bludgeoned, one of several in that area. The police marked it with traffic cones maybe four days ago, he said, and then he joked that if you wanted to kill someone here, this was a good time. ...

That a corpse lies on Union Street may not shock; in the wake of last week's hurricane, there are surely hundreds, probably thousands. What is remarkable is that on a downtown street in a major American city, a corpse can decompose for days, like carrion, and that is acceptable.

Welcome to New Orleans in the post-apocalypse, half baked and half deluged: pestilent, eerie, unnaturally quiet.

Scraggly residents emerge from waterlogged wood to say strange things, and then return into the rot. Cars drive the wrong way on the Interstate and no one cares. Fires burn, dogs scavenge, and old signs from les bons temps have been replaced with hand-scrawled threats that looters will be shot dead.

The incomprehensible has become ... routine here.... Maybe the slow acquiescence to the ghastly ... is rooted in the intensive news coverage of the hurricane's aftermath: floating bodies and obliterated towns equal old news. Maybe the concerns of the living far outweigh the dignity of a corpse on Union Street. Or maybe the nation is numb with post-traumatic shock.

...

Rush hour in downtown now means pickups carrying gun-carrying men in sunglasses, S.U.V.'s loaded with out-of-town reporters hungry for action, and the occasional tank.....

On the other side of downtown across Canal Street in the French Quarter, the most raucous ... of American avenues is now little more than an empty alley with balconies.

On Clouet Street, where a days-old fire continues to burn where a warehouse once stood, a man on a bicycle wheels up through the smoke to introduce himself as Strangebone. The nights without power or water have been tough, especially since the police took away the gun he was carrying - "They beat me and threatened to kill me," he says - but there are benefits to this new world.

"You're able to see the stars," he says. "It's wonderful."

Today, law enforcement troops began lending muscle to Mayor C. Ray Nagin's vow to evacuate by force any residents too attached to their pieces of the toxic metropolis.

Meanwhile, back downtown, the shadows of another evening creep like spilled black water over ... (the) corpse (on Union Street).

THIRD READING Hurricane Katrina brings a foretaste of environmental disasters to come by Bill McKibben, 07 Sep 2005

If the images of skyscrapers collapsed in heaps of ash were the end of one story -- the U.S. safe on its isolated continent from the turmoil of the world -- then the picture of the sodden Superdome with its peeling roof marks the beginning of the next story, the one that will dominate our politics in the coming decades: America befuddled about how to cope with a planet suddenly turned unstable and unpredictable.

Over and over last week, people said that the scenes from the convention center, the highway overpasses, and the other suddenly infamous Crescent City venues didn't "look like America," that they seemed instead to be straight from the Third World. That was almost literally accurate, for poor, black New Orleans (which had never previously been of any interest to the larger public) is not so different from other poor, black parts of the world: its infant mortality rates, life expectancy rates, and educational achievement statistics mirroring those of many African and Latin American enclaves.

But it was accurate in another way, too, one full of portent for the future. A decade ago, environmental researcher Norman Myers began trying to add up the number of humans at risk of losing their homes from global warming. He looked at all the obvious places -- coastal China, India, Bangladesh, the tiny island states of the Pacific and Indian oceans, the Nile delta, Mozambique, on and on -- and predicted that by 2050 it was entirely possible that 150 million people could be "environmental refugees" [PDF], forced from their homes by rising waters. ...

... No single hurricane is "the result" of global warming, but a month before Katrina hit, MIT hurricane specialist Kerry Emanuel published a landmark paper in the British science magazine *Nature* showing that tropical storms were now lasting half again as long and spinning winds 50 percent more powerful than just a few decades before. The only plausible cause: the ever-warmer tropical seas on which these storms thrive. Katrina, a Category 1 storm when it crossed Florida, roared to full life in the abnormally hot water of the Gulf of Mexico. It then punched its way into Louisiana and Mississippi ...

So far the U.S. has done exactly nothing even to try to slow the progress of climate change: We're emitting far more carbon than we were in 1988, when

scientists issued their first prescient global-warming warnings. Even if, at that moment, we'd started doing all that we could to overhaul our energy economy, we'd probably still be stuck with the 1 degree Fahrenheit increase in global average temperature that's already driving our current disruptions. Now scientists predict that without truly dramatic change in the very near future, we're likely to see the planet's mercury rise 5 degrees before this century is out. That is, five times more than we've seen so far.

Which leads us to the second problem: ... in the last century, we've seen change in human societies speed up to an almost unimaginable level, one that has stressed every part of our civilization. In this century, we're going to see the natural world change at the same kind of rate. That's what happens when you increase the amount of heat trapped in the atmosphere. That extra energy expresses itself in every way you can imagine: more wind, more evaporation, more rain, more melt, more ... more ... more.

And there is no reason to think we can cope. Take New Orleans as an example. It is currently pro forma for politicians to announce that the city will be rebuilt, and doubtless it will be. Once. But if hurricanes like Katrina go from once-in-a-century storms to once-in-a-decade-or-two storms, how many times will we rebuild it? Even in America there's not that kind of money ...

Our rulers have insisted by both word and deed that the laws of physics and chemistry do not apply to us. That delusion will now start to vanish. Katrina marks Year One of our new calendar, the start of an age in which the physical world has flipped from sure and secure to volatile and unhinged. New Orleans doesn't look like the America we've lived in. But it very much resembles the planet we will inhabit for the rest of our lives.

*This essay was originally published in TomDispatch.com. Bill McKibben is the author of many books on the environment and related topics. His first, *The End of Nature*, was also the first book for a general audience on global warming. His most recent is *Wandering Home: A Long Walk Across America's Most Hopeful Landscape*.*

FOURTH READING The Fountain by Denise Levertov

Don't say, don't say there is no water
to solace the dryness at our hearts.
I have seen

the fountain springing out of the rock wall
and you drinking there. And I too
before your eyes

found footholds and climbed
to drink the cool water.

The woman of that place, shading her eyes,
frowned as she watched—but not because
she grudged the water,

only because she was waiting
to see we drank our fill and were
refreshed.

Don't say, don't say there is no water.
That fountain is there among its scalloped
green and gray stones,

it is still there and always there
with its quiet song and strange power
to spring in us,

up and out through the rock.

SERMON: Remembering, Healing and Acting – 9/11/05

Four years ago today, in the early hours of the morning in the Pacific Time Zone of Washington State, I was awakened by a wail from my then-two-year-old daughter. This was not an uncommon occurrence, of course, and she was not hard to soothe, but going back to sleep was not an easy thing for me. So I turned on the television. And there on national TV, before my eyes, before the eyes of billions of Americans, unfolded the terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in Manhattan, and the Pentagon.

I saw the plane sticking out of the first tower. I saw the second plane hit the other tower. I heard the shocked voices of the news announcers as the towers burned. I was in shock, too, so much so that I didn't even wake up my husband to tell him what was happening. It was as though I simply could not take it in – I went into denial immediately.

About an hour later, my husband woke up, came into the living room, looked at the TV and said, "oh my god a plane crashed into the World Trade Center!" "Oh yes," I said. "I saw that at least an hour ago." He said, "Why didn't you wake me up?"

Why didn't I wake him up? I began to cry. I woke up. It was hard to let him go to work, to surrender my daughter to our nanny and go to work myself.

An hour later, sitting in my office at church, a young peace activist from my congregation burst in and threw himself into my arms, sobbing. My first thought was, "Gee, what's wrong?" I had gone into denial again. I woke up again, and the young man and I quickly went to work planning a way for our congregation and anyone else who needed a place to go to come together that evening, to

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talk, to share our grief, to keep hope alive. We kept the church open all day and far into the night every day for the next two weeks, to give people a place to go, a place that would hold them in their shock and grief, and help them go on.

We did go on, we Americans. We went on immediately into action. Emergency workers, firefighters, and volunteers of all kinds went to Manhattan to rescue those who were trapped, and to find the bodies of those who had died. We rank and file citizens gave our money by the millions and our blood by the gallons to aid in relief efforts. From President Bush on down we spoke out against intolerance, asking people to seek to understand Islam, not oppress or hurt our neighbors. And then we went to war in Afghanistan. We rounded up accused terrorists and tormented them in Abu Graib prison. And we went to war in Iraq.

On an individual level, we saw freedoms curtailed by the Patriot Act. We endured heightened airport security – we've become used to it by now. But at the time we knew it as a symbol of fear. We who believed that our nation could have responded differently endured our despair at the rise of a nationalistic patriotism that called for sealing the borders instead of seeking to understand and reach out to others. And perhaps we've also become used to the climate of fear that arose in the wake of 9-11.

The road from there to here has not been easy. And while I venture to say that we have more than begun to heal from the events of four years ago, I also know that we will always carry the lived trauma, the wound the time when everything changed, the time when our national and personal security was shockingly shattered.

And so here we stand, on the fourth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001, with another incredible tragedy staring us in the face – the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. And not just a tragedy, truly, but yet another revelation of our incredible vulnerability, and the uneasy state of our nation.

Bill McKibben, in our readings, says, "If the images of skyscrapers collapsed in heaps of ash were the end of one story -- the U.S. safe on its isolated continent from the turmoil of the world -- then the picture of the sodden Superdome with its peeling roof marks the beginning of the next story, the one that will dominate our politics in the coming decades: America befuddled about how to cope with a planet suddenly turned unstable and unpredictable."

I do not want to believe it, but in my heart I know Bill McKibben is right: we can no longer count on the earth to be what it was when we were children. And as a nation, we are not prepared to cope with this. There are those who scoff at global warming, and the ongoing and permanent effects of climate change already in evidence. I am sad to say that I so scoffed back in the late 1980s when my crunchy-granola, organo-groovy friends began to issue warnings they'd read of impending doom due to ozone depletion and polar ice cap melting. I do not scoff any more.

The environmental story is a horror story not just for our nation, but for every industrialized nation. There's another story here as well, a geopolitical one. A recent Journal-Sentinel online poll asked a question that has been on the minds of many, "Considering its geographic vulnerability, should the city of New Orleans be rebuilt?" Two thousand, four hundred and forty six people replied – 69 percent of them saying no, and 31 percent saying yes.

George Friedman, chairman and founder of the world's leading private intelligence company, as well as founder and former Director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies at Louisiana State University writes, "Geopolitics is the stuff of permanent geographical realities and the way they interact with political life." ... "The United States historically has depended on the Mississippi and its tributaries for transport. Barges navigate the river. Ships go on the ocean. The barges must offload to the ships and vice versa. There must be a facility to empower this exchange. It is also the facility where goods are stored in transit. Without this port, the river can't be used. Protecting that port has been, from the time of the Louisiana Purchase, a fundamental national security issue for the United States."

"Katrina has taken out the port -- not by destroying the facilities, but by rendering the area uninhabited and potentially uninhabitable. That means that even if the Mississippi remains navigable, the absence of a port near the mouth of the river makes the Mississippi enormously less useful than it was. For these reasons, the United States has lost ... the utility of its river transport system -- the foundation of the entire American transport system. There are some substitutes, but none with sufficient capacity to solve the problem."

He concludes, "New Orleans is ... a terrible place for a city to be located, but exactly the place where a city must exist. A city will return there because the alternatives are too devastating. The harvest is coming, and that means that the port will have to be opened soon. As in Iraq, premiums will be paid to people prepared to endure the hardships of working in New Orleans. But in the end, the city will return because it has to."

The city will return because it has to. Our nation needs a city at the mouth of the Mississippi. But what kind of city will it be? Will it be a city only for those who can afford to rebuild? A Louisiana legislator has been quoted as saying, "We couldn't clean up the (New Orleans housing) projects, but God did it for us." Hurricane Katrina has ripped the cover off a more personal American storybook – exposing to the world how little we seem to value our poor, elderly, and disabled folks. It's a story of racism too. Friday evening, on public television's "Now" program, two families in small town coastal Mississippi – one European American, one African American – spoke of how they had received no help, how the police cars simply pass them by – they feel our nation has simply thrown them away. The media, now feeding us heartwarming stories of rescue and the beginnings of recovery for the evacuees, has overflowed with stories of elderly and disabled folks left to drown or to fend for themselves in makeshift shelters. The National Center for Missing and Abused Children reports that more than

1500 New Orleans-area children have been separated from their parents or custodial grandparents by the chaos and stupidity of the evacuation. And the disrespect for human dignity so evident in the story my sister sent about the corpse on Union Street in New Orleans is almost too terrible to bear.

Even the recovery stories unwittingly reveal the great divide between races and classes in this disaster: our own Journal-Sentinel's front page featured the stories of two evacuees -- one European American, one African American, and the contrast is stark. Both arrived only days ago; the white woman is living in a fancy bed and breakfast mansion's honeymoon suite, and instantly found a job. The other woman is jobless, and living with seven other people in a two-bedroom house.

I am generally an optimistic person, someone who has rarely lost hope, even though I have known despair. I do not usually put much stock in conspiracy theories. But it hard to not see the slow, unemotional response of our federal agencies, the vicious suggestions that the victims got what they deserved because they didn't evacuate when many of them simply had no means to do so, and the current "let's not play the blame game" rhetoric as par for the course in an overall administrative strategy that seems designed to erode the commonwealth of this nation to such a degree that we will allow the government to do whatever it wishes in the guise of keeping us safe. Katrina was a natural disaster, true. But the deepening of the suffering of tens of thousands of people through deprivation of food, water and hope; media manipulation that plays to white fears, attitudes like that of Barbara Bush, who said publicly that Katrina was

in a way a good thing, because it will supposedly improve the circumstances of the evacuees since they were so underprivileged anyway; and the jacked up fear level over energy shortages and soaring costs: these are human-made disasters.

And I am angry about them, even as I grieve deeply for all that has been lost. I know many of you are feeling the same way. And they are normal, these feelings – grief, anger, helplessness. When the attacks of nine-eleven happened, my colleague and friend Dr. Roger Kuhrt shared some information with me (adapted). He wrote, "Because of their degree of violence and complete unexpectedness, these events may have left you with a number of unsettling reactions. These reactions are shared by people undergoing sudden trauma (from natural disaster, crime, accidents, acts of war, etc.) and are normal ways of trying to deal with abnormal situations." Here are some common Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviors:

1. Preoccupation with the event or difficulty thinking about other things, being riveted to television, radio, and web reports. This is our way of trying to absorb the enormity of the event, and of trying to reestablish some sense of understanding and control.

2. Trouble remembering or concentrating. This happens because our intellectual and emotional energies are focused on dealing with the shock.
3. Guilt. We all cope in different ways. If you use humor to cope, don't feel guilty for not being "appropriately sober" in all your responses. If you use activity to cope, don't feel guilty for not wanting to spend every moment listening to the news. If you use the news to cope, don't feel guilty about that. Each response is understandable and helps us in different ways.
4. It is also normal to feel anxious and fearful, numb or withdrawn, or to feel great sadness, distrust, and anger. The desire for revenge and feelings of helplessness also are normal.
5. You may find yourself wanting to spend time talking and being with others. You may find yourself feeling protective of loved ones. You may also have insomnia, bad dreams, or other sleep disturbances.

All of this is normal, and have experienced all of it in the past week and a half. In particular I have felt a desperate longing to talk with my big sister, a New Orleans resident for the past twenty years, who fled the hurricane with her husband and some friends at the last minute and is now staying in Florida with other friends. In a recent email message, she wrote: "I'm sorry I haven't called you back my darling sister. Lately I've been having a hard time talking to anybody except those here. It's a surreal existence. We are in a fantastic vacation spot on the beach but are very sad and lethargic in our strange evacuee status. Our friends are loving and every comfort is met, but the unknown long term future and the mesmerizing draw of the TV reporting create a quagmire of dreary emotion. I feel useless, sad and powerless – so much suffering, so much lost, so much unknown."

My friend Roger, in the information he gave me four years ago, listed some Ways to Help Yourself and Others Cope.

Do talk with people, he wrote. This helps us feel less isolated and anxious and realize our feelings are normal. It can also help bring back to reasonable parameters feelings of vengeance or fear.

Give yourself permission to be distracted.

Be kind toward others and tolerant of ways in which their coping needs may differ from yours.

Avoid real and symbolic violence. If you're feeling overwhelmed by the television images, listen to the radio. Or avoid news sources altogether for a while. Avoid violent entertainment.

Structure your time. Keep your life as normal as possible.

Help your children understand in ways that are not overwhelming. Young children need breaks from television images. They need reassurance that it's all right for them to not know what to do, and that there are responsible and competent adults on the job.

Roger also wrote, "Eat well, try to get enough sleep, and don't demand that your body perform at high levels. Be gentle and caring towards yourself."

Spend time with people you enjoy, doing things you enjoy.

Engage in activities that reaffirm your sense of yourself and others as members of a caring community." (end of Roger Kuhrt info.)

We are doing this last item here in our church. A volunteer team has been organized to help the evacuees who arrive in our area. Our PieceMakers quilting group has created colorful, warm blankets to be given to those who need them. Many of you are giving or helping in other ways as well. Many of you gave generously last Sunday and this Sunday to the Gulf Coast Relief Fund – I even received a \$500 check for the fund this week by mail. We do care. We are caring for each other, and we are taking action. We are helping, giving, talking to one another. We are talking to our legislators, writing letters to the president and letters to the editors of our local newspapers – asking not for someone to blame, but rather, that those in power be accountable for their actions or inactions.

And that gives me hope. You give me hope!

Recently I read a magazine article that spoke of the ways in which tragedies of the scope of the attacks of nine-eleven and Hurricane Katrina crack open new sources of power. The author spoke of our relational power, the people's power to get involved, to fight through our sense of smallness, to give what we can, to get involved, to pray, to team up with others. He spoke of not surrendering our power to institutions, but instead, taking responsibility and acting on our belief that our world is one world, one people, one nation, one earth. ("All Together Now," Ode magazine, March, 2005)

For me, this is the fountain Denise Levertov describes so beautifully. The fountain that is still there, always there, springing up through us and out from the rock, the fountain that solaces the dryness at our hearts. It is a fountain of peace, hope, compassion and justice, a fountain that is filled and refilled by the waters we bring.

May this fountain ever flow, to solace the dryness at our hearts, and the world's heart. And may we always remember that love is why we are here.

Amen.