

HURRICANE KATRINA QUESTIONS

By Rev. Harris Riordan

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Hurricane Katrina showed us Nature's other face, fierce and frightening. What faces us now is the long work of recovery that we must do as a nation. Where shall we go from here? What sense will we make of the damage and the deaths, caused by the storm itself and caused by too little help arriving too late? How long will it take to rebuild so many communities and heal so many lives? What part of the work is ours to do?

There are so many nodes of pain in all this. The primary one is the people. If last year's storms scared you, there's no need to look at the pictures on TV. The heart knows how right now someone else is living out our worst nightmares. Sending a donation doesn't seem enough, although it may be the best we can do today.

There will be more to do in the weeks and months ahead. And I have faith that Americans will do it, no matter how enormous the task. Person by person, project by project, we will find ways to rebuild and help each other heal. But the work might be easier if now, at the beginning, we were able to let go of some of our illusions.

Our culture nurtures images about nature that may not serve us well. Whether it is our biblical heritage, which gave us dominion over the earth, or the psychological tendency to confuse wishes with realities, we humans have a tendency to think that we are -- or ought to be -- mother nature's favorite child. We know, of course, that hurricanes and tornadoes, blizzards and mud slides are part of a larger whole, and have a necessary place in sustaining our planet's climate. And yet many of us live as if we had a promise from the cosmos that they will happen someplace else. We avoid preparing for the worst, when we have the intelligence and the resources to increase our margins of safety.

On my block, very few houses were shuttered before the storm and lawn furniture stayed outside -- as if we all knew that the weather report was 100% accurate, and the storm would take our favorite track. Big storms may be part of our fears, but we somehow continue to believe they will not be our fate. We might do better to cultivate a deeper humility; a vision and spirituality that allows us to enjoy and make good use of the incredible abundance around us and at the same time acknowledge that we are but one of earth's creatures -- as dependent and vulnerable as those frogs that live in the wetlands we continue to drain.

The storm churned up more than our relationship with nature. It blew through our image of ourselves and our relationships with each other. The story of the coast of Mississippi and Alabama is a story of widespread, horrible storm damage. But we have all been riveted on New Orleans. How could that happen? How could it take so long to bring relief? In a country as rich as America, as enamored of being the single superpower as we are, why did it take days to get help to those who needed it? It will take years for us to tease out the elements of that story. Surely it will be a complicated one. It will be rooted in the gambles and compromises of generations past, as they made decisions for the

community's growth. A story of planning that once seemed reasonable and turned out to be inadequate to the challenge. It will be a story of faulty assumptions and absent back-up plans. It will be a story of the plodding nature of bureaucracies, of failures of procedure and glitches in the chains of command. It will be a story of panic and fear, of what people will do when they feel they are up against it, alone. It will be a story of political and social priorities.

I hope America musters the courage to first see clearly and then learn from the truths embedded in this terrible story. For this time there is no enemy, was no surprise attack. We and our government are the only ones who can be held accountable. If we do that, if we come to understand what went wrong and find ways to fix it, if we grab hold of what was never thought about and bring our creativity to it, if we push the dialogue deeper than party politics, we may be able to make America more of what we dream it should be.

If there is any good to come out of this hurricane, it will be if those winds blow away our illusion that our nation is a class-less society. We need to stop pretending that the rich and the poor live in the same America. They don't. Many of the folks who did not get out of town couldn't. They had no place else to go and, once the public transportation system shut down, had no way to get anywhere. Certainly some poverty is a direct result of personal choice, but most of it is systemic. Those of us who by luck or hard work have more must stop pretending we have no shared obligation to those who have less.

There are many ways to explain the prejudices away, and every one of them is an excuse. All of us should be outraged and make that sentiment known. Only if we are honest about the prevalence and power of institutionalized racism do we have any hope of someday becoming the America we already claim to be.

The rebuilding that needs to be done is both unimaginable and entirely doable. As individuals and as a nation, we do have resources and strengths for the task. If we find the courage to look past our fears, to wake up from illusions, and use our imagination and compassion for each other, we will not be overwhelmed. If we start now and stay at it, the good we do will make a difference.

I know some of you have already offered to take in those in need. If you have room in your house and would be willing to host someone now homeless, I urge you to sign up at one of the two web sites listed on your insert. Next week the Sunday School will ask us grown-ups to join them in a relief effort. They are organizing a bucket brigade to collect supplies for those who survived the storm. Anything you bring in will be of use. But maybe equally important, by following the children's lead and making their drive a success we will teach them about the power of individual choice and the ability of a community of people to face trouble and share hope.

On September 18th, we will take up a special collection for the Gulf Coast Relief Fund. Tell your friends, remind each other, that on that day we will gather what we have to give, and united in caring reach out to the brothers and sisters who need us now.

My six-year-old says that all she's ever learned in Sunday School is that where there's a

will, there is a way. May we all live up to her faith.