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What It Means

The final New Orleans experience I will record in this journal is, fittingly, one of exile. I'm on the outskirts of Houston, stuck in a sterile motel room and pining for the rich, convoluted streets of the Crescent City. The soaring expanses of freeway disorient me; my eyes haven't focussed on anything farther away than a few blocks in a long time. And, instead of looking at peeling multicolored shotgun houses with oddly dressed people sitting on their porches and others walking dogs in the street, my eye falls on the featureless beige wall of a Best Buy and the acres of parking around Sam's Club.

But, most of all, I'm lonely. I was in Beaumont, Texas, having vegetarian fajitas at an outpost of the Acapulco Mexican Grill chain, when I noticed a woman at the next table looking at my food. "That looks good," I heard her whisper to her mother. I kept expecting one of them to lean over and shout, "Hey, babe, what's that you're eatin'?", and for all of us to end up at the same table. But they kept to themselves.

"Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans?" an old song asks; another reminds us, "You don't know what you got 'til it's gone." Since Katrina, I've often been asked (though never by someone in New Orleans) why the country should bother rebuilding it. Is it really worth the billions it would take to protect this small, poor, economically inessential city, which is sinking into the delta muck as global warming

raises the sea around it? But the question of “whether” has been settled—New Orleans is rebuilding itself, albeit slowly, fitfully, and imperfectly. Now it’s only a matter of how and how long. That is better news than perhaps the rest of America fully understands.

It’s the American way to focus on the future—we are dreamers and schemers, always chasing the horizon. Looking forward has made us great, but it comes at a price. (Mexican immigrants often describe life in the United States as *puro reloj*, or “nothing but the clock.”) New Orleanians, on the other hand, are excellent at the lost art of living in the moment. Étienne stopped at our house one afternoon to drop off some papers he wanted me to see. No, he said, he couldn’t stay; someone was waiting for him downtown. But we got to talking, and gradually moved to the chairs on the porch. We had a beer. The shadows lengthened as the day cooled, the jasmine across the street smelled sweet, and a few houses away someone was practicing the saxophone. Margaret brought out a dish of almonds. We all had another beer. It was dark by the time Étienne left. And here’s the true miracle of New Orleans: the person waiting for him downtown no doubt had an equally pleasant couple of hours, and Étienne surely paid no social penalty for being late.

When Margaret and I first arrived, in January, I noticed that I kept getting stood up. If I arranged on a Monday to meet people for lunch on the following Thursday, they often wouldn’t show. When I tracked them down later, they’d ask why I hadn’t called that morning. It hadn’t occurred to me to do so; everywhere else in America, people use calendars to manage the future. It took me a while to figure out that in New Orleans the future doesn’t really exist. There is only the present.

Long before the storm, New Orleans's infrastructure was decrepit; the schools were a shambles; poverty, corruption, and violence were rampant. It was, by most conventional standards, a terrible place. But few who had tasted life there willingly gave it up. Right before Katrina, a Gallup poll found more than half of New Orleanians "extremely satisfied" with their lives, despite the city's wretched state, a higher percentage than in any other city surveyed. New Orleanians have more time than money, and they like it that way.

The city's unique appreciation for the present makes life there rich indeed; it's why people call New Orleans "the Big Easy." It is not a world view conducive to getting things done, however, which goes a long way toward explaining why New Orleans is having so much trouble recovering from Hurricane Katrina. There are exceptions, but, as a rule, New Orleanians—no matter what color or how wealthy—aren't great at planning meetings, showing up on time for them, running them in orderly fashion, deciding on a course of action, and then following through. This isn't simply laziness or fecklessness; it's a reflection of a commitment to enjoying life instead of merely achieving. You want efficiency and hard work? Go to Minneapolis. Just don't expect to let the good times roll there.

New Orleans endures as the national repository of the loose-jointed Huck Finn spirit we Americans claim to cherish. While the rest of us pare down our humanity in service to the dollar, New Orleans is a corner of America where efficiency and maximized profit are not the civic religion. As I drive past endless repetitions of Wendy's, Golden Corral, Ethan Allen furniture, Jiffy Lube, Red Lobster, and the like on my way back to Colorado, I realize that I haven't spent a dollar anyplace but locally owned business in four months. A long time ago, David Freedman, the general manager of the listener-supported radio station WWOZ, described New Orleans to me as a kind of resistance-army

headquarters. "Everyplace else in America, Clear Channel has commodified our music, McDonald's has commodified our food, and Disney has commodified our fantasies," he said. "None of that has taken hold in New Orleans." In the speedy, future-oriented, hyper-productive, and globalized twenty-first century, New Orleans's refusal to sacrifice the pleasures of the moment amounts to a life style of civil disobedience.

This is my last dispatch for New Orleans Journal. (Margaret and I can be found at www.knoxandbaum.com.) We are on our way back to a city full of high-achieving software engineers and real-estate brokers who have built a fabulously well-organized community, with excellent schools, thriving businesses, and immaculate parks, but who can't find the time to sit a spell on the porch, let alone enjoy a second beer. Everybody in New Orleans tells Margaret and me that we'll be back, that we now have the city in our blood and won't be able to live anywhere else. We don't yet know if that's true. I can tell you that, wherever we live, I'm comforted knowing that New Orleans is there. It's no exaggeration to say that, without New Orleans, the United States would be lost.

[Permalink](#)

May 31, 2007

Eight Lives

The book that Margaret and I have been working on during the past four months will intertwine the life stories of eight New Orleanians. Some of them will be familiar to readers of the New Orleans Journal: Wilbert Rawlins, Jr., the miracle-working band director at O. Perry Walker Senior High School; Ronald W. Lewis, the retired streetcar-track repairman with a vest-pocket culture museum in his back yard; Joyce Montana, the widow of the longtime Mardi Gras Indian Chief of Chiefs, who is fighting to save St. Augustine Church; and Anthony Wells, from

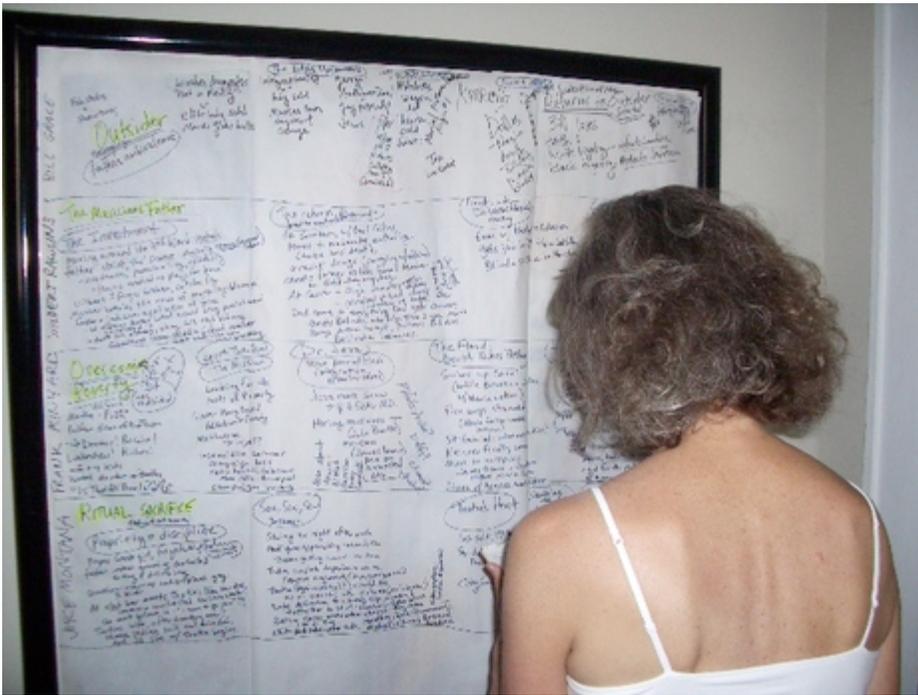
America Street. The others are Bill Grace, a lawyer who is a former King of Carnival and a pillar of the exclusive uptown society that both fascinates and enrages the rest of the city; Frank Minyard, the jazz-playing parish coroner who, at the age of seventy-six, swam two miles to his office on the morning of the flood; Joann Guidos, the transsexual owner of Kajun's Pub, on St. Claude Avenue, who held the neighborhood together during the disaster; and Tim Bruneau, a police officer who carried a dead woman around in his car on the first day of the crisis because there was nowhere to take her. The manuscript is due at the end of January, and is to be published in 2009, in time for Mardi Gras.

Each of our subjects has sat for hours of interviews that, in their depth and candidness, were more like psychiatry sessions. Only in New Orleans, I think, would eight total strangers have so thoroughly unwrapped their lives for me. Maybe New Orleanians, still bruised and stunned by Katrina, welcome the chance to analyze their lives and the terrible thing that has happened to them. New Orleanians are great storytellers (as previously noted) and generous to a fault, so I suspect that, had I asked these eight individuals before the storm to spend several days divulging intimate details about their lives, most would have happily complied. It must also be said that, even after Katrina, New Orleanians still get a big kick out of talking about themselves.

Margaret and I have worked together for twenty years, ever since we quit our jobs at the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, got married, and moved to Zimbabwe to begin our freelance careers. When our daughter, Rosa, was born, in 1993, I became the legs and eyeballs of the operation. I do the research and write the first draft. After that, the real work begins. I compare my part of the work to hauling a big block of marble up the spiral staircase and into the studio. As Margaret and I endlessly hand the story back and forth, she finds the sculpture inside.

Because modern nonfiction requires a strong individual voice and the occasional foray into the first person, a double byline wouldn't make sense. Margaret says she doesn't care about not getting credit; her reward, she maintains, is the time she gets to work on her novel.

New Orleans upset our rhythm. These columns for [newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com) are the first pieces I've written since 1987 that Margaret hasn't edited. She doesn't read them until they've been posted, and then usually with a furrowed brow. Another difference is that, with Rosa studying in Costa Rica for the semester, Margaret has been free to come along on a lot of interviews and has met all the characters in our book except Anthony Wells, who is stuck in eastern Tennessee. She agrees that we have tons of great material, but that also worries her; she fears an incoherent mass of unrelated yarns. One day about halfway through our stay in New Orleans, she made me lie down on the couch and tell her everything I had learned while she made notes on a four-by-five-foot sheet of butcher paper. Margaret found a narrative arc for each character ("Wilbert's arc is the quest to become the Father"), sketching out their triumphs and setbacks with circles and arrows and skeins of tiny print. The result was like a Dr. Bronner's label the size of a bedsheet.



As long as Margaret is there to interpret it, I'll be fine.

Permalink

May 30, 2007

Details

Ever since somebody broke our car-door handle, Margaret and I have faced a dilemma. Getting the damage repaired in New Orleans would doubtless be less expensive than in Boulder, and we'd be putting a little money into the local economy. On the other hand, Randy Newman famously said on National Public Radio, "New Orleans is not a place to get your car fixed" to explain the city's unique relationship with the work ethic: "It's famous for being inefficient, and lovable because of it."

We decided to take the car out to the gleaming Toyota dealership in

suburban Metairie. Fit men in matching Toyota golf shirts took down information on a complicated form, technicians in spotless uniforms came from the back to puzzle out the repair, and our customer-care representative produced an estimate that represented our dining-out budget for a month. We decided simply to buy a new door handle and have the work done elsewhere. We approached the parts counter, where a man looked up the handle we needed on a computer, printed out a complicated receipt that we had to take to the cashier, and gave us a bubble-wrapped package covered in bar codes and numbers.

One day not long after that, Margaret came home from running errands in Treme and told me about a group of men she'd seen sitting around a funky garage at the corner of Dumaine and North Prieur Streets. "They waved and smiled at me," she said. "The place had great murals of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X painted on the garage doors." Those being sufficient criteria for choosing a New Orleans body shop, I drove out to the garage in Treme. Several middle-aged African-American men sat on torn vinyl chairs enjoying the morning sunshine, and a short, bald white guy with tattoos all over his neck was running a sanding wheel over the Bonded fender of a Mustang GT. Tools lay on the crumbly ground; it looked like the range of equipment didn't go much beyond the sander than a ball-peen hammer, a couple of socket wrenches, and an old bathtub filled with dirty water, for finding tire leaks.

The tattooed man introduced himself in a banjo-string Florida accent as Juicy. He said he could install the handle, hammer out the dents and scratches around it, paint the door, and touch up all the other dings on the car for two hundred and twenty-five dollars. I watched his eyes as he talked, trying to figure out whether he meant to dismantle my car, sell off the parts, deny he'd ever seen it, and threaten me with an ass-whopping if I complained.

As we were talking under the lurid, stylized figures of Martin Luther King, Jr., exclaiming, "I Have a Dream," and Malcolm X, exhorting me to "Know Thy Self," a huge man named Lloyd got up from his chair, walked over to us, and, in a low, rumbling voice, offered to detail the car inside and out—shampoo the seats and rugs and everything—for eighty dollars. This Toyota is the first new car I've ever owned, and I've long harbored bourgeois dreams of having it "detailed." I wasn't even completely sure what the word meant, but I knew it was something my software-executive friends in Boulder do to their cars and I liked the idea.

"We are all Christian people here," another man called to me from his chair. He knew what buttons to push: "We'll get it done right. Have your work done right here. Right here in this community."

I told them I'd be back in a week to have the work done. Margaret and I wanted to wait until the last possible minute before moving back to Boulder, because, between the potholes, lunatic drivers, and narrow streets, New Orleans is hard on automobile exteriors. Juicy and I arranged to meet at the garage the following Thursday at 9 A.M. When he wasn't there by nine-thirty, Lloyd said, "He'll be along," but I began to think about that spotless dealership in Metairie. Juicy finally showed up at nine-forty-five and I handed over the keys. "I need it by five," I said, because I had an appointment to be on a live radio show at six. Then I rode off on my bike and worried all day.

Lloyd was just finishing applying black lacquer to the tires when I returned. The car looked brand-new. The body, stripped of the dead bugs that have been accumulating on its hood and grille since Clinton

was President, was straight and gleaming. Inside, the rugs looked as though they'd never been stepped on, the vinyl glowed, and years of grit and dust had been excavated from the folds in the shift-lever bag. It even had a new-car smell.

I walked around to the damaged side. The door was as smooth as the skin on an F-16 and the color match was perfect. But a gaping hole greeted me. Juicy hadn't been able to install the door handle. The dealership in Metairie had sold me the wrong part.

Permalink

May 29, 2007

Packing Heat

Recently, stacks of flyers appeared on the counters of the bars we frequent on Frenchmen Street, about a mile from our home:

Warning

There have been several attacks in the area within the past week. It looks like the attacker is targeting women walking at night. Several brutal beatings have taken place with inflicting injury as the primary objective and robbing to be only secondary.

It then went on to describe the suspected attackers.

Murders associated with the drug trade are horrible enough. Ever since the AK-47 replaced the 9-mm. handgun as the standard drug-gang infantry weapon on the streets of New Orleans (a transition, my friends at the morgue say, that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union), victims have included uninvolved neighbors sitting on their porches or inside their houses down the street. But at least drug-related violence has a twisted logic to it. The attacks described on this flyer are creepy because the culprits seem to be beating women for the fun of it.

Such attacks can happen in any city, I know, but it's hard not to see them as a symptom of the slow-burn wig-out under way in New Orleans. I don't notice it as much anymore, because I'm used to it, but re-reading my first post, from January, I know that people here looked heavier, paler, and more exhausted than I remember them looking last May. A mental-health crisis is smoldering here, with few resources to relieve it. People are good at covering it up, but get them talking—which isn't hard to do—and sooner or later the name of their sleeping pill or their antidepressant will surface. The illegal-drug trade probably explains a lot of the violence, but certainly not all of it.

As we get ready to return to Boulder, there are moments when I say to myself, "I can't leave this place. I love it too much." And there are other moments when I say, "Just a few more days and I'm outta here." A lot of our friends make a point of leaving town for a few days every few months, and if I weren't about to leave for good I'd be planning a short vacation. Between the political meetings, the casual encounters with strangers at the supermarket that turn into weepy forty-five-minute monologues, and the gnawing worry about crime, life here is intense. It's easy to imagine how people who are coping with next-meal or ruined-house stress and don't have the option of a vacation can begin to boil over.

One thing I'm looking forward to doing in Boulder is taking a walk after dinner. Here, when the sun sets on the Bywater, one does not idly stroll the avenues. We come and go on our bicycles, and we're constantly asking others if they think it's a good idea to ride home through this neighborhood after, say, ten o'clock at night. We keep hoping someone will say, "Oh, sure," but nobody ever does. People either throw up their hands in horror or shudder politely. The least paranoid of our neighbors will tell us they do it, but then they'll describe the precautions they take: riding in the middle of the street, peering into the shadows ahead, making a U-turn if they see anything suspicious. That was exciting for the first few weeks. Now it's getting old.

This is the first place we've ever lived where we kept loaded guns in the house. After a couple of people described to us some recent botched "home invasions"—in which gangsters, thinking they were hitting a rival's house, burst in intending to kill everybody—we held a home-invasion drill. We lay side by side on the bed, imagined we were hearing the front door splintering off its hinges, and talked about what we'd do. Then we both felt really stupid.

A friend who lives around the corner described being robbed at gunpoint before Katrina, right in front of the house where we now live. Three young men slid out of the shadows; one held a pistol to his head while the others went through his pockets. Then the muzzle travelled down and pressed against his heart. Our friend described the gunman's eyes as thoroughly dead; he got the sense that it wouldn't matter to the thug whether he pulled the trigger or not. The robbers took his money and walked away. A neighbor later told the police that she heard one of them say, "Six dollars! We should have shot him."

Raymond Chandler, the author of the Philip Marlowe mysteries, once received a letter from a reader who wanted to know what kind of gun his fictional private eye carried. Chandler wrote back that Marlowe started out carrying a Luger, but switched to a Colt, then to a Smith & Wesson .38 special. Later, Chandler wrote, "My favorite weapon is a twenty-dollar bill." The idea of money as a weapon has stuck with me. When I heard my friend's story of nearly dying because of a skinny wallet, I started packing Chandler-style heat: a roll of fifteen twenties. Margaret thinks I'm nuts; conventional wisdom is to carry as little as possible in high-crime areas. But if someone's going to rob me at gunpoint I want that man running off happily, as fast as he can, to enjoy his good fortune.

Permalink

May 25, 2007

The Agent

My first daily-newspaper job was with the Anchorage *Times*, which was so reviled as an organ of the oil industry that I found myself a social leper. I had a hard time getting someone to rent me an apartment in Anchorage. Women wouldn't go out with me. People would disinvite me from parties when they discovered where I worked. So I have some idea of how it must feel to work for an insurance company in New Orleans. Just about everybody here has a hard-luck story that features a dismissive, inaccessible, coldhearted insurance company that's trying to wriggle out of paying Katrina-related claims or delaying payouts beyond reason.

Margaret and I were surprised, therefore, to hear our friends Bob and Marie praise Steve Barrios, the agent who sold them their homeowner's policy. Four feet of water sat for weeks in their house, which was full of antiques and diaries from ancestors involved in the Underground

Railroad. Barrios himself came to their house while the National Guard was still guarding the city, Marie told us. "We don't know him socially at all," she said. "He's just the guy we buy insurance from. I was talking to people who say they socialize with their insurance agents and still couldn't reach them. His secretary told me, 'It's not just you, it's his mission.'"

Marie's story was so out of the ordinary that Margaret and I crossed the Mississippi River to meet Barrios in his office, in Terrytown. He turned out to be a big guy with glasses, a fine head of steel-gray hair, and a baritone-sax voice that he puts to use on the radio doing color commentary for Tulane football games. A former Tulane gridiron star, he has been inducted into the university's Athletics Hall of Fame.

Barrios waved away the suggestion that he was doing anything extraordinary. "I care about my clients, because if we don't live up to our promises we're not going to get customers, and that comes out of my pocket," he said. Barrios works for State Farm, the biggest insurer in Louisiana. Before the storm, Barrios evacuated to Baton Rouge, where he was able to tap into his computer from the office of a local State Farm agent. He got back into the city while it was still full of water and began visiting his clients. In most emergencies, Barrios would be able to pay up to five thousand dollars out of his office checkbook, so that his clients could get money quickly without having to go through a national claims center. For the Katrina disaster, that limit was raised to ten thousand. "I know agents who lost their office, home, fishing camp, everything overnight. They were evacuees like everybody else," Barrios said. As for visiting his clients himself, he said, "I wanted to do what I could do before it got to claims. I was able to get to Marie, for example, and expedite up to ten thousand. And, if any future questions arose, I had inspected the property and could verify damages."

People are angry at their insurance companies, he said, because many held homeowner's policies that specifically excluded flood damage. He pulled from his desk the booklet that comes with every homeowner's policy and opened it to the section titled "Losses Not Insured," which was highlighted with a yellow marker:

c. Water Damage, meaning: flood, surface water, waves, tidal water, tsunami, seiche, overflow of a body of water, or spray from any of these, all whether driven by wind or not.

"That's pretty clear," he said. "People think they're covered, but if they didn't have flood insurance they're not. They're angry. I understand that."

Permalink

May 24, 2007

I Cover the Waterfront

As I've conducted interviews for my book these past four months, one recurring theme has been the rapid evaporation of New Orleans's middle class in the nineteen-seventies and eighties. Many middle-aged African-Americans describe childhoods in the fifties and sixties that sound like Norman Rockwell paintings: stable two-parent families, with a father who could support a wife and three or four children in a comfortable home, even though he may never have finished high school. In those days, the city's vast waterfront was a promising source of well-paying manual labor.

New Orleanians often talk about white flight as the beginning of the

city's undoing. Between 1960 and 1980, the population of New Orleans fell by about eleven per cent, to a little more than half a million, as whites decamped for the suburbs to avoid sending their children to the newly integrated schools. This mass exodus gutted the city's tax base and effectively resegregated classrooms. But blacks were somewhat insulated from the economic consequences of white flight, because ships need to be loaded and unloaded by big crews of strong men. In the mid-seventies, the longshoremen's union had as many as seven thousand members. The warehouses and food-processing plants along the waterfront also provided many union jobs.

By the middle of the eighties, however, much of this work was gone. Shipping containers—those steel crates the size of boxcars that can carry products from Shanghai to Chicago without ever being touched by human hands—meant that the Port of New Orleans no longer needed thousands of longshoremen. Most of the other waterfront jobs also disappeared. The mid-eighties oil bust further shook the New Orleans economy, and, to complete the catastrophe, crack cocaine began appearing around the same time.

Containerization affected seaports everywhere, but the decline of New Orleans's waterfront was one of the biggest calamities to hit the city before Hurricane Katrina. The Port of New Orleans now moves less than one per cent of the country's containerized traffic, and it lost market share in 2006. Houston, Miami, Savannah, and even Gulfport, Mississippi, handle more containerized imports than New Orleans does. New Orleans remains strong, relative to other ports, in "break bulk," or non-containerized shipping, but, even so, today the longshoremen's union has fewer than a thousand members.

The conventional wisdom in New Orleans—I've heard this a million times—is that the city is so feckless, lazy, and corrupt that it failed to modernize its equipment and compete with other port cities in the Sun Belt. But some reasons for the decline of the Port of New Orleans were beyond the city's control. Being on the Mississippi was an advantage back when most goods moved in and out of the heartland on river barges, but now its geography has become a liability. New Orleans lies a hundred and five miles from the Gulf of Mexico. "It may cost a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a day to operate a big container ship," one freight-forwarder I spoke with said. "If it takes eight hours to get upriver from the Gulf, and eight hours to get back, that's a real cost." Hiring river pilots to guide a ship both ways adds to the cost.

Nowadays, a port needs regular traffic from a big Asian shipper to prosper, and New Orleans doesn't have one. As the freight-forwarder explained it, there's a chicken-and-egg problem: the Asian carriers won't call without a big distribution center nearby to insure a steady demand for traffic, and companies such as Wal-Mart don't build distribution centers unless the Asian shippers serve the port nearby. Savannah cut this Gordian knot by investing in a huge industrial park that attracted first Home Depot and then the Chinese shippers. Houston, which built a wide, deep, and relatively short canal to the Gulf, was able to persuade Wal-Mart to build a two-million-square-foot distribution center near its port, because the population of Texas is larger and wealthier than Louisiana's.

Another disadvantage New Orleans faces is that, unlike Houston and Savannah, which have plenty of undeveloped land, New Orleans sits on a morsel of soft ground between the river and Lake Pontchartrain. In the past decade, the city and the state have invested more than a hundred million dollars in a state-of-the-art container terminal, but the only place to put it was on a sliver of land at the edge of a residential

neighborhood that is too small for a major distribution center.

For more than a century, New Orleans could count on being the port of departure for cotton grown in the South. But, because of the severe trade imbalance with China, Chinese shippers will carry American cotton at very low cost in containers that would otherwise return home empty. So growers in the Mississippi Delta put their bales in containers and can send them back through Long Beach, California, for a fraction of what it would cost to send them through New Orleans. Once again, the Crescent City loses.

The decline of New Orleans's port is a tremendously complicated affair that can't be fully told here. And it may be that part of the story is the way New Orleans does business. But it's also worth remembering, especially as the city struggles to recover from Hurricane Katrina, that bad things happen to good cities. The nation has been blaming the victim ever since the levees broke, and some of that criticism is warranted. But when it comes to the loss of its port business and the failure of its levees New Orleans is largely the victim of forces and circumstances far beyond its control. Who isn't?

Permalink

May 23, 2007

Maestro

As we pack up to leave New Orleans after four months, our house is full of cardboard boxes and there are clothes strewn everywhere. But I also find myself standing among the shards of many shattered preconceptions. Before living here, for instance, I'd imagined that the jazz scene was a closed, exclusive world of too cool cats in wraparound

shades, dissolute men and women contemptuous of the daytime world and aloof in artistic arrogance.

What a dope I was; that's what you get for learning about "jazz" from watching sixties movies with Quincy Jones soundtracks. The jazz scene in New Orleans turns out to be a warm, welcoming family, and we've been privileged to drift around its edges. We see the same musicians over and over again, often in different configurations, and it always strikes me both how tender and supportive they are with one another—and how accepting they are of atonal squares like me. (The jazz scene also appears, to my eyes, to be the only New Orleans milieu in which race is genuinely irrelevant.) The musicians whom we can hear on any given night, just by walking up the street, are musical giants, artists and technicians of breathtaking soul and technique, and here they are slouching around town like the rest of us, always ready to stand around and gab, generously handing out their CDs and inviting us to shows. Joe Braun of the New Orleans Jazz Vipers, Chaz Leary, Bart Ramsey and Neti Vaan of Vavavoom, Aurora Nealand—the list is endless. People will be listening to recordings of these folks in the twenty-second century, but for the moment they're just working-class stiffs getting by. Even irascible old Bob French, who has been avoiding me for months (he has stories I want for my book), not only showed up at our going-away party on Sunday night but spent two hours, at age sixty-nine, shucking oysters with his precious hands before running off to yet another low-paying drumming gig.

To single out one New Orleans jazz musician for being talented and likeable is absurd. But, not long after moving here, Margaret and I were at a night club with friends when Tom McDermott, a thin, sandy-haired man, shuffled up to our table. He had a big head, a crooked smile, stooped shoulders, and a boyish, loose-jointed way of moving. McDermott greeted our friends and then shook our hands with a vaguely

old-fashioned solemnity. He was the least “cool” guy imaginable; he seemed awkward, almost embarrassed to make our acquaintance. I took him for a really popular fourth-grade teacher or an animal-shelter volunteer.

A few minutes later, McDermott took the stage, sat down at the piano, and set it on fire. He can do anything. We’ve heard him play ragtime, “trad jazz,” swing, *choros* from Brazil, musettes from France, and any number of other genres. He doesn’t just play tunes, either. He writes his own. How many other American musicians are writing musettes, for heaven’s sake? Like every other musician in New Orleans, Tom works like a stevedore, slogging from underpaid gig to underpaid gig, sometimes two in one night, and driving twice a week to Mississippi to play in a casino.

Our favorite Tom McDermott show took place the night we happened upon the Contemporary Arts Center and popped inside. It was a very atypical New Orleans jazz experience. The audience sat in rows, cell phones turned off. There was no talking, no smoking, no ordering drinks; we sat with our hands folded in our laps, shut our mouths, and listened like grownups. Tom played with a group he’d pulled together for the occasion: Tim Laughlin on clarinet, Jason Marsalis on drums, Matt Perrine on sousaphone and bass, Jamil Sharif on trumpet, and Rick Trolsen on trombone. It was like wandering into a park and finding Roger Maris, Sandy Koufax, Lou Gehrig, Reggie Jackson, and Alex Rodriguez playing a pickup game. While rendering one of his *choros*, Tom churned so much sound out of the piano that it sounded like three people playing. And then on the next number, a hymn of his own composition, he somehow made the huge black concert grand sound like a tinny upright in a church basement.

Tom is from St. Louis but has lived in New Orleans for many years, and he travels often to France, Brazil, and elsewhere, in search of music he can incorporate into his own. He lives alone in a house in mid-city that is dominated by a piano the size of an aircraft carrier. He throws great parties that spill into the street and attract the city's best musicians. He'd like to have a girlfriend, but doesn't at the moment. At big gatherings, he stands around conversing for a while, but sooner or later seeks out the piano and loses himself in music. At our going-away party, he played rags and jazz for a roomful of people, and then, when the crowd thinned out and he was almost alone, he lapsed into a kind of Beethoven trance.

Block

As if the guy weren't remarkable enough, he does all this while suffering from tinnitus. For years, he has lived twenty-four hours a day with a loud, grating squeal in his ears.

We have all of Tom's CDs, so when we're shuffling our iPod through our stereo, it seems that every third song is being played by Tom McDermott. That's fine with us. He plays so many musical styles, and with such heart and precision, that we never get bored.

Permalink

May 22, 2007

A Wily Mollusk

Last year during Jazz Fest, Margaret and I somehow got invited to an outdoor party in Gentilly. Most of Gentilly had been badly flooded, but the Gentilly Ridge, a strip of slightly higher ground that you'd never notice while driving around the city, made all the difference for a couple of blocks of houses. The party was in the side yard of an undamaged grand Victorian on the Gentilly Ridge. Many crawfish died that night as a nine-piece brass band played. It was a wonderful evening.

The only hitch was that the oyster-shucker never showed up. As is fashionable to say nowadays when something dreadful happens: What an opportunity! I slid a chain-mail glove over my left hand, picked up a short, strong, blunt oyster-shucking knife with my right, and went to work. It's not as hard as it looks. The trick is wedging the knife point into the hinge and twisting. The oyster opens with a soft, satisfying pop.

I may be the most happily married man I know, so it is a good thing I did not learn how to shuck oysters when I was in my twenties. I'm not particularly attractive, but fresh oysters are, and at the party I soon found myself surrounded by half a dozen beautiful young women watching my hands expectantly, shiny lips parted, practically aquiver with anticipation. What could be sexier than extending a dollop of pure

briny protein, shimmering in its pearlescent shell, liquor dripping between one's fingers, to a young lady dressed for a summer evening? Let me warn young men everywhere: Stay in school. Nothing but sin and degradation lie down the oyster-shucking road.

For most of my life, I've lived in places where I had to arrange financing before ordering a dozen oysters. But our four months here are nearly over, and Margaret and I decided to buy a sack of oysters direct from the boats for our goodbye party. We drove down the Mississippi River to Belle Chasse, where we boarded a tiny ferry for a ten-minute trip across the muddy river. It was a gorgeous day, warm and clear, with little humidity, and the sun's rays gleamed off the superstructures of container ships plowing their way upriver. The far bank was a tangle of jungly green, and dead flat.

On the far side of the river, we started down Highway 39, through Plaquemines Parish, with the grassy-green levee to our right. The word after Katrina was that Plaquemines, which occupies a big swath of the lacy, disappearing peninsula that juts into the Gulf of Mexico, had "ceased to exist." Most of the houses we saw, however, looked either undamaged or entirely rebuilt. Soon, the road veered away from the Mississippi River levee and began following a second levee, on our left. The only clue that something terrible had happened here was the occasional FEMAville of white trailers visible through the trees in the flat artificial "valley" between the two levees.

The oyster boats dock at a marina at Pointe a la Hache. We crossed over the left-hand levee and found ourselves among a couple of dozen old wooden boats with peeling paint, tied to listing docks. On a cement slab, a small group of tired-looking, middle-aged African-American men

sat around a cable spool eating Cheetos and drinking Cokes. They raised their cans at us. Then a fit, energetic white guy in his forties came out of the adjoining shed, which had a hand-lettered sign reading "Store" attached to it. He introduced himself as Don Beshel. His mother's family has been in Plaquemines since "Napoleonic times," he said, and his father's family, relative newcomers, arrived around the time of the Civil War. In addition to running the little store and some oyster boats, Beshel serves as the District 1 member of the Plaquemines Parish Council.

Inside the shed was a map issued by the state, showing how far out oystermen have to go before they can start harvesting. Oysters are best taken from the saltiest water; they not only taste better (they're often advertised in New Orleans as "salty oysters") but are less likely to carry some bacteria. A new map is issued four times a year. Right now, Beshel's oystermen have been venturing sixteen miles to gather bivalves, since the rush of melting snow from Ohio to Montana makes the salinity of the Gulf drop close to shore. That may be why the guys sitting around the cable spool looked so tired.

Don and a friend hauled out a burlap bag full of oysters that weighed about a hundred pounds and held, more or less, three hundred oysters. We'd brought a white hundred-and-twenty-quart cooler that looked like a small casket, and Don poured a layer of ice cubes into the bottom. Then a layer of oysters, a layer of ice, a layer of oysters, and so on, until the cooler was full. Don produced a cannister of salt and poured that over the ice. He warned us to store the cooler on an angle, with the drainage plug open, when we got home, so that the oysters wouldn't sit in fresh water and die. They'd stay fresh two or three days, he said.

It took three of us to hoist the cooler into the trunk of our Toyota. Don bought beers for Margaret and me, and we stood looking out at the emerald-green marshes, talking about Katrina—the storm surge was more than twenty feet high here—and the dismal economics of oyster harvesting. We had to catch the five-thirty ferry going the other way, so we started to excuse ourselves. It was time to pay. “Twenty-five dollars,” Beshel said, a little sheepishly. “But they’re beautiful oysters.”

We took a different road north, and from there the destruction was awe-inspiring. Trailers stood everywhere, either singly on lots or clustered into FEMA villages. Few other structures were apparent. The most poignant monument to Katrina was a set of concrete front steps in the middle of a grassy lot. The house they’d once led to was completely gone. Atop the steps, someone had placed a foot-tall statue of Jesus.

Permalink

May 21, 2007

The Art of Asking for Help

New Orleanians woke up to a particularly dispiriting headline recently: “Most Katrina Aid from Overseas Went Unclaimed.” Kuwait, Britain, China, the United Arab Emirates, and Canada were among the countries that pledged more than eight hundred million dollars in cash and oil that could have been sold for cash, but the federal government couldn’t figure out how to collect more than a small percentage of that, and only forty million has actually found its way to programs that serve Katrina victims. The U.S. also failed to take advantage of food from Estonia and cruise ships from Greece that could have been used for housing or floating hospitals. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told the Washington Post that the United States is, “frankly, not accustomed to receiving large-scale foreign assistance offers.”

Many New Orleanians are still living in trailers or with friends, and those who aren't physically displaced are emotionally displaced. "Everybody" is the kind of big word journalists avoid, because someone can always come up with an exception, but I'll go out on a limb and say that everybody who lived in New Orleans before Katrina is still off-kilter. The other day, I was having lunch with a wealthy friend from uptown New Orleans—the kind of person with a vacation home, and enough insurance and money in the bank, to ride out the crisis without catastrophic financial harm. Those more grievously affected call uptown an "isle of denial," and my friend would be the first to admit that he is luckier than most. But, among his equally wealthy friends, four have committed suicide since Katrina. "Depressed," my friend said. "They're traumatized by seeing what happened to the city. They couldn't cope with it."

So imagine having sat on your roof for four days waiting for rescue, and now being stuck in limbo with a ruined house and no forthcoming insurance payment or federal-housing assistance—and then hearing that the government refused roughly three quarters of a billion dollars in aid. In fairness to the Bush Administration (there's a phrase that will get you tarred and feathered in New Orleans), accepting help is not only logistically difficult but culturally and emotionally problematic as well. We Americans are taught to stand on our own two feet, pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, be rugged individualists, and all that other Ayn Rand tommyrot. How can the U.S. be No. 1 while accepting canned goods from Estonia? And, if accepting help is hard, asking for it is nearly impossible.

Which makes Ronald W. Lewis a rare Katrina hero. Lewis is a fifty-five-year-old resident of the Lower Ninth Ward who worked for three decades as a streetcar-track repairman. In the seventies, he helped organize his colleagues into the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, at a time when white bosses were not accustomed to

negotiating with their black employees. (Lewis refused ever to call his white foreman "Mr. Freddy" the way the other repairmen did, and instead just called him "Freddy." "My mother always said, 'You have to do their work, but you don't have to dance for them,'" he told me.) Later, Lewis helped create the Lower Ninth Ward's first social aid and pleasure club, and a Mardi Gras Indian tribe, the Choctaw Hunters. When his wife, Minnie, got sick of the parading clothes and Indian suits cluttering up her house, at 1317 Tupelo Street, and threw them in the back yard, Lewis gathered them into the garage and created a tiny museum. He called it the House of Dance and Feathers, and he had just officially registered it as a nonprofit when the levees failed and covered Lewis's house in fourteen feet of water. Lewis escaped with two suitcases full of photographs, newspaper clippings, and a few small artifacts from his museum.

As much as any individual, Lewis has led the campaign to rebuild and restore the Lower Ninth Ward. He does not lobby, organize fund-raisers, or attempt to throw levers of power to which he has no access. He looks people in the eye and asks for help.

While still an evacuee in Thibodaux, Louisiana, Lewis was interviewed on National Public Radio; he described the richness of the Lower Ninth with such clarity and passion that other reporters, academics, and activists sought him out. A couple of months after the storm, as aid organizations were agonizing over whom to help, how to rebuild, and even whether to rebuild, Lewis attended a conference in Baton Rouge set up by Louisiana State University and the community-organizing group ACORN. "I said, 'Help me,'" Lewis told me afterward. "'Help my community. Help me. My house is paid for. Start with me. Help me.'" Then all these TV stations converged here. Every time one of them put a camera in my face, I'd say, 'We need help down here.'"

A group of University of Montana students gutted Lewis's house during their winter break. Later, a group from Kansas State University showed up to rebuild his house and create a brand-new House of Dance and Feathers. The walls of glass panels in the new museum can be opened to the breeze, and the twisted metal roof recalls the fury of Katrina's wind. Every time I've stopped by during the past four months, Lewis has had visitors looking through his photograph albums, fingering the beadwork on old Mardi Gras suits, and poring over his extensive news-clip files.

Lewis is not ashamed to direct visitors' attention to the donation box on a shelf. He supports the museum on a streetcar-track repairman's pension. Just this week, he arranged to buy a six-hundred-dollar car to replace his "struggle-buggy," an ancient Cadillac that leaks coolant and hasn't had a reverse gear in months.

"After Katrina, I had no reason to be humble, do a song and dance," Lewis said as he and Minnie and I sat on his front porch. "Here I am in my mid-fifties and I got to rebuild my life, not just for me but for this woman here and for my grandchildren."

Lewis's house was one of the first in the Lower Ninth Ward to be restored and reinhabited after Katrina. The House of Dance and Feathers draws tourists into the stricken neighborhood, which lets them experience it firsthand, and then educates them about the depths of loss in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Lewis does what he can to redirect student volunteers who are willing to help. "I ask people, 'You need help? I got plenty of people.'" He

mentioned a friend who is cooking in the evening at Mickie Bee's. "He came around here and said, 'I need my house gutted.' And I said, 'I got people right here.' I tell people, 'If help becomes available I'll send them in your direction.' This community don't belong to me."

Permalink

May 18, 2007

Mickie Bee

During the Katrina crisis, soldiers patrolled the foot of the St. Claude Avenue Bridge, which crosses the Industrial Canal to the Lower Ninth Ward. No part of town other than the Lower Ninth was cordoned off by troops this way; one could only imagine, with a shudder, what was going on there. It took me until the Friday after the levees broke to get up the nerve to ask the soldiers for permission to cross.

"You don't want to," the sergeant in charge said. "It's all gone. Flooded. They're shooting back there, too."

"Let me just cross as far as I can go and see it," I said. He frowned a moment.

"I can't let you take the vehicle," he said. "Park it over there and I'll have one of my soldiers walk with you." A husky young man with an M16, his helmet strapped on tight, fell in beside me.

"Where you from?" I asked him.

"Tempe, sir," he said. This was my first hint that I was dealing with the Arizona National Guard.

"How do you like New Orleans?" I asked as we huffed up the bridge's incline in the soupy humidity.

"Beats Baghdad," he said.

We crested the bridge and both of us fell silent. As far as the eye could see, houses sat immersed to their rooflines in viscous, Army-green water. The stillness was absolute. No birdsong, no breeze, and certainly no shooting. No rescue effort, either, at least from our vantage point. We walked down to the foot of the bridge, which is where the water began, and looked down St. Claude Avenue, which had been the Lower Ninth Ward's primary commercial boulevard. All of it was covered with water.

The silence was broken by three black S.U.V.s speeding along the bridge toward us, engines roaring. It was too small a motorcade to be President Bush, but I thought it might be Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice or Governor Kathleen Blanco. The trucks stopped, and a platoon of suits and security agents jumped out, and then, one long leg at a time, Diane Sawyer emerged, in fishing waders that were turned down at the top. As the soldier and I hiked up the bridge, I turned and looked back at

the tableau of destruction. I remember the words “never happen” popping into my head, meaning, The recovery here will never happen. This place is dead.

Not long ago, as I was driving past the foot of the St. Claude bridge, I noticed an illuminated sign for Mickie Bee’s Lounge. I pulled over to check it out. A blast of air-conditioning hit me as I stepped into a small wood-panelled barroom. Four African-American men who appeared to be in their fifties and sixties were sitting around the corner of the bar; all of them raised their glasses to me and invited me to come in out of the heat. A young woman behind the bar served me a longneck bottle of Budweiser for two dollars. A flat-screen TV glowed on the wall, digital fish swam in an electronic aquarium above the bar, and an Internet jukebox on the back wall was ready to play just about every song ever recorded. It was the woodwork that told me that a lot of money had been spent on reopening the place. The grain was rich and deep—the real thing, not veneer. I felt as if I were belowdecks on a yacht.

A man with gray hair and a Mickie Bee’s cap sat on a high stool at a small round table; he introduced himself as Michael H. Morris, the owner of the bar. Morris told me that he had had a comfortable childhood here in the Lower Ninth Ward; his father had owned a janitorial service that had the good fortune to win a contract from a white-owned company that was building houses in the new neighborhoods of New Orleans East. “During that time, the black man had a fear of losing what he had if he made a wrong move,” Morris told me. “My father said, ‘I know we’re making a nice amount of money. But I think we’d better buy some property in the black community so we have something to fall back on in the black community.’” In 1971 and 1972, Morris’s parents bought a row of commercial buildings near the St. Claude Bridge. They opened a bar-restaurant called Mor’s in one; the others held another Mor’s restaurant, apartments, and a beauty salon.

Morris spent fifteen years driving a front loader for BFI, the big waste-management company, and helping his sister run the two Mor's restaurants. In 2004, he suffered a stroke, but he recovered completely. When Katrina hit, Morris's wife, Jolyne (Jo), evacuated, but he stayed in his New Orleans East house, trapped alone for days without much food or water. He then spent days more in a boat, helping neighbors get to the high ground of a nearby freeway overpass, before he escaped.

When he was finally allowed back into the city, he said, "I went into the house, and it was unbelievable. I called Jo and said, 'I'm going to need a generator, a portable TV, a little refrigerator, and a fan. And a mattress. I'm going to stay here, and start gutting this out right now.' I'd get up in the morning. I'd eat Spam for breakfast. I started hauling furniture out. All my kids are grown and gone, and they were scattered, so it was just me. There was nobody around. Nobody. It was like being the last man on earth."

All the while, he was thinking about opening a bar, he said. "I wasn't going to let my parents' legacy go down. I had a lot of people say, 'You lost your mind.' But I believed. You have to believe you can make something happen."

Morris paused to ask his bartender for a Diet Coke, reached into his pocket, and handed over two dollars for the till. "We had insurance on the house, flood, too," he continued. "That's how I fixed the house. This here is S.B.A. loan money. I did all this for a hundred and ten thousand."

Mickie Bee's has strict rules. Nobody under thirty is allowed in, which excludes "all those gold-teeth, big-T-shirt guys" who tend to cause trouble, Morris said. "I know all these fellows," he said, gesturing toward the customers. "I grew up with them." Mickie Bee's closes early—1 A.M. at the latest—and it's closed on Tuesdays for cleaning.

"The bar's doing good," he said. "It's the only one open in the Lower Nine."

Permalink