

Six Months Since Hurricane Katrina

September 2005 - February 2006

by Mary Gehman



I feel I've been sleepwalking through the six months since Hurricane Katrina blew into New Orleans and turned all our lives inside out. The city is a shadow of its former self, and at every turn there are hardships and irrational demands made on us survivors. There was the month of September spent in Jackson, Mississippi as an evacuee. I rented a room and bath from a woman there—we became friends, so the situation was comfortable, and I would have been welcome to stay on. But my time in exile was spent trying to organize things so I could return to New Orleans. Two trips back assured me of a place to stay with friends uptown where there had been no flooding and things were rapidly returning to normal. My house and 5 rental buildings, three of them neighbors on my block, were badly flooded, and it was obvious the road to rebuilding or renovating would be long, arduous and even perhaps impossible. However, I had to be in the city to handle the zillions of details before decisions

could be made. I also continued being paid my full teacher's salary by the community college I had worked at for 17 years. To continue that job, I had to be available to help with advanced registration of students and some other assignments to publicize the reopening of the school in January. I was also happy to have my son and his family moving back too.

With some apprehension I returned for good to New Orleans the first week of October to tackle the daunting task of rebuilding a life, a way of life, one that would never be the same as before the storm. More than people in most other parts of the U.S., New Orleanians have a sense of place; their identities are tied to a neighborhood, a high school, a corner store or a hangout down the block. That's what makes life here so disorienting since Katrina. Those identity-related landmarks are mostly gone. Except for the "sliver by the river" as some dub the 20 percent of the city near the Mississippi that did not flood, neighborhoods are silent. Very few people are about. At night there are no lights for miles, only dead, uninhabited and often uninhabitable buildings. A lone streetlight here and there marks the street; often the street signs are missing. And all around there is destruction, refuse, debris. Houses list dangerously, fences are down, awnings torn off, out buildings upside down, resting at odd angles. Trees, thousands of wonderful trees, are gone, torn up by the roots, their core branches broken, or their black, dead silhouettes stark against the bright sunlight. Especially magnolia trees have been hard hit—they all are still standing but brittle and dark brown from root to crown. One rarely hears the sound of birds.

Just driving around in this devastated landscape is stressful. There are so many memories of what was and who lived where, so much sadness for the unspeakable

loss, the lives uprooted and tossed around the country. I stop at a friend's house, someone unheard from since the storm, and leave a note on the door: "If anyone knows where ----- is, please call -----." Weeks go by without a response. I check on houses of friends, who are out of state and can't get back, for signs of forced entry and looting or changes among neighbors that might indicate people are coming back. Someone is hauling sheetrock out of a front room; we chat briefly, exchanging local news and familiar complaints. No one, absolutely no one, is upbeat and hopeful. We look and sound shell shocked. Mostly we just don't know what to do next.

A moment in time that profoundly touched me recently was watching two young women walk silently in the middle of the street past my flooded, abandoned buildings. Their heads were slightly bowed. They did not speak. When they came by the second time, I asked if they were looking for someone. They shook their heads and finally one spoke, explaining they were with a church volunteer group from Kentucky working on gutting out a house around the corner. On their lunch break they were walking reverently through the empty streets, praying for the people who had once lived there, for the loss, the heartache and the hope. Seeing my tears, they stopped beside me, held my hands and prayed for me too. It was all I could do to tell them how much their simple act of caring meant to me and to my neighbors in absentia.

Every day as I approach the community college where I teach and when I leave, the route from the parking lot to my office leads past a childcare center with a full yard of slides, swings and lots of toys where the children of students and faculty used to run and shout. Now it lies totally silent, ghostlike, the almost new playground equipment marked with floodwater rings and unusable. It will all have to be replaced. A bit farther on the library is also closed, yellow caution tape across the door and a huge mound of moldy, discolored books tossed haphazardly at the corner. The library took on only a foot of water but it sat in that fetid mix for two months in a hot, humid climate.

Thousands of books had to be thrown out, computers and other equipment disposed of. The enormity of loss and expense to remediate or replace things across the campus is painfully mind-boggling. But there is a healthy enrollment of over 4,000 students, a bit more than half of our pre-Katrina numbers, and four buildings are operating. There are no working phones, a scaled back cafeteria makes do, copy machines for students don't exist; the bottom line is we are having a spring semester—everyone seems grateful for that.

My two story house stands stalwart, a bit worse for wear from the high winds and five feet of water it had to endure, but foundationally sound. I go by there every other day or so, feed two stray cats, sort through books, dishes, tools and other belongings that managed to escape the water and mold. Upstairs it looks as if I never left. A friend of a friend stays there much of the time since he has steady work in town. He makes do without electricity or gas. At least there's running water for the bathroom. It is still my house but it no longer feels like my home—I have begun to live with the reality that it may never be home again. I miss the dogs, of course. There have been no traces of them, so I can only hope they were shot and disposed of rather than having to suffer fending alone like so many bedraggled animals shown on TV standing on empty porches in the weeks after the hurricane.

My house, like so many others, was eventually looted. Fortunately, I had taken some of the portable valuables with me after my first visit from Jackson, but the person who neatly went through the drawers and closets between my visits still took off with items I

cannot replace—a few pieces of jewelry, a digital camera and printer, the wind-up radio that was so helpful after electricity failed during the storm. Some missing things don't come to mind until I look for them and they don't show up. The looter left all my computer equipment alone, or maybe there wasn't time to make a second trip. In any case, I'm grateful to have it along with a full set of heirloom 1930s blue willow china, which also eluded the intruder. I have had to marvel how material things become totally meaningless once removed from their familiar and comfortable context. Books packed away in boxes, for example, bring none of the joy and satisfaction they once did organized on shelves and available at the flick of a hand. My whole life is tucked away, compressed, waiting till I can settle into a home of my own again.

And so we displaced persons all live with a sense of transience. Will the levees be strong enough to withstand more hurricanes this summer? What is to become of the neighborhood around my house? If very few property owners come back and rebuild, is it worth my investing insurance money to upgrade my buildings only to lose them down the line to developers at bargain prices? City government has given us no direction as to how things will be done. We're all in a holding pattern like thousands of jets circling the airport, waiting for instructions to land.

Living in post-Katrina New Orleans is fraught with catch-22s around every corner. A lot of things don't work like they did before; others don't work at all. In the best of times changing one's address, transferring a phone from one address to another, or getting a daily newspaper forwarded to a different house are tedious tasks. In these times they are almost impossible and can take months. The U.S. postal service here, despite a hike in the price of stamps, has been the worst. For two months after Katrina, there was no home delivery. Mail piled up at the post offices and citizens lined up there to pick it up, an errand that could take minutes or a half hour; one could never predict. Of course, the offices being short of staff were open from only 10 to 3-- God help the person who had a regular job! Gradually home delivery was reinstated for certain unflooded areas where people had resettled, but even in the best areas, it is very sporadic, with deliveries once or twice a week and not at all predictable. Two weeks for a letter to travel cross country is still not unusual. No magazines or catalogues (nor junk mail) are being delivered; and getting credit for missed editions is still difficult. We imagine the mountain of People and Playboy sitting somewhere in a dark warehouse where postal employees can paw through them.

The large blue mail receptacles outside the post offices disappeared for several months, and there were no other boxes on street corners. To mail a letter or bill, one had to park, get out of the car and walk inside the lobby to toss the envelope through a slot. I've noticed the blue receptacles are back in front of the stations in recent weeks but it's doubtful we'll ever see mailboxes on street corners again. I have wondered for months now how people without cars or with disabilities get their bills paid. And don't mention needing to mail out a package or oversized envelope, because for months there were only one or two stations in the city that had their scales working. When the raise in stamp prices occurred back in December, most post offices ran out of the two-cent stamp to legitimize the 37-cent former one or the new 39-cent stamp.. It took some ingenuity to mail first class letters and bills for days.

Banks opened a branch or two in non-flooded areas early on. Most areas have no access to neighborhood banks and it will be months if ever till they reopen. The problem has been safe deposit boxes. Fortunately, I haven't had to access mine since Katrina,

but when I do I will have to make an appointment to meet an officer at my old branch (they offer this service only one day a week), even though the boxes are on a second floor where there was no water damage.

Gas stations in the city itself were slow to reopen, though gas has been available in the suburbs. We've all had to watch our gas gauges a lot more carefully than before because we never know which stations are neither open nor how late. Once a fair number of stations opened in the city proper, the price was 10 to 22 cents higher per gallon than in outlying areas, and it continues to be that way, which is insulting to those of us having to conserve wherever we can. A trip to a cheaper station in the suburbs is counteracted by the gas burnt getting there!

It took me ten days straight of calling and fussing with the circulation manager of the Times-Picayune, the daily newspaper, until wonder of wonders, the paper magically appeared on my porch one morning. I was on the list to have my phone transferred from my old house to where I'm staying temporarily for weeks and was told it would be about two months. While my cell phone served me well for phone calls, I was anxious to get my dial-up Internet service installed. Suddenly early one Saturday morning, the call came that Bell South was in the area and would run a line to my place within the hour. What a pleasant surprise. Oddly, the neighbor next door still didn't have a phone hook-up and had to use my success to pressure Bell South to return and do the job for him.

There have been fewer health issues associated with the flood than were at first predicted. Many of us have spent days and weeks cleaning out soggy furniture and belongings in moldy houses. Even with breathing masks, gloves, rubber boots and a paper coverall-suit for protection, there was no way to avoid some contact with pollutants. Except for the usual winter sniffles and flu bugs, few complaints have emerged to do directly with the cleanup and return. Of course, some microbes may not work their harm for years, so it could look quite different a decade from now. The main problem in terms of healthcare has been the closing of all but one hospital in the city and the return of only a fraction of the New Orleans doctors and dentists in private practice. Those of us with cars go to the suburbs for our health needs, though even there beds for emergency patients are scarce, and surgeries may have to wait. This is not a good time to be sick or suffer physical or mental trauma in New Orleans!

The major stressors in post-Katrina New Orleans are dealing with insurance adjusters and agents, getting mortgage holders who are co-recipients of any insurance check over \$10,000 to release funds for repairs to property owners, and navigating the ever changing rules and regulations of the Safety and Permits Dept, in City Hall. Thousands of us have spent hours daily on the phone or meeting agents and bankers in person, trying to burrow through the bureaucratic maze. Long waits on the phone, being available for calls back from voice mail messages, being able at very short notice to meet an adjuster or inspector at one's property, and keeping organized files for reference on all these matters pretty much preclude having a job or daily routine for months at a time. Insurance checks often go out to old addresses and do not get forwarded, requiring a re-issuance of checks, and the wait begins all over again. Six months after the flood many of us still have outstanding insurance checks with no idea when the matter will be settled. This does not include, of course, the hundreds of situations where owners are appealing their insurance settlements.

The transience affects us in many ways. Should we change the address on our driver's licenses to our temporary perch? Can we even get through to the Office of Motor Vehicles to change the address if we want to? When someone asks, "Where do you live?" it takes a moment to reply. Where did we live and where do we hope to live again? The simple task of giving one's telephone number is a challenge, first to remember the new home phone number and then to recall the cell phone number. The brain has to map out new memory paths and block out the old.

Traffic patterns are erratic. Often lights are not working, sometimes the stop sign that substitutes for a light is not obvious and out-of-towners run the stop sign before realizing it. Streets are blocked with FEMA debris hauling equipment or utility or phone workers restoring service. Pot holes, buckled roadways and gravel covered holes that quickly wear down are the norm, not to mention nails and other tire punching objects left in the street. All of us are constantly checking our tires and getting them patched. How many plugs can a tire take before it's hopeless?

Institutions suffer the same uncertainties as individuals do. Churches, social clubs, businesses large and small all have to decide whether they want to rebuild when a large chunk of their membership or customer base is gone. Schools have downsized yet must be ready to accommodate the children whose families are gradually reappearing. Often this means a new teacher, different classmates and a strange building.

No wonder then that for all of us nostalgia is the order of the day, and we cling to the familiar, to what once was. The opening of a favorite neighborhood restaurant or shop, the chance to get a good poorboy sandwich, the stubborn shoots of a long dead flower or bush suddenly showing green are all causes for celebration. It's not uncommon to see friends separated for months meet each other on the street, hugging and crying. Emotions are always close to the surface; tears well up at the sounds of a familiar song or the trill of a bird back early for spring. On the other hand, we wallow in each other's stories and misfortunes, can never get enough of them. The local cable TV community access channels have been running for weeks a steady diet of still photos taken of the destruction around town, backed by a sound track of hauntingly sad music: scene after scene of flooded houses and cars, close ups of abandoned toys, a hat hanging on a wall rack where half the wall has been torn away. It's easy to become mesmerized by the images when we all recognize them as our own or at least those of a neighbor or friend. There is an odd comfort in the sameness, the shared losses, no one being sure what to do about coming back or getting out altogether.

Often I am asked how I cope with all this. I can only say there is little choice but to get up each morning and tackle a new day. Counting one's blessings also helps. I'm glad I can be here to experience the historic era of Katrina, to settle the difficult issues with my properties and help in some small way to rebuild New Orleans. I pace myself, spending limited time sorting through things at my flooded house or hanging on the phone with insurance agents. Babysitting my grandson, a meal out with friends, dealing with students all help to normalize life here. Most days the sun shines and there are glimpses of a home and a neighborhood that **can** come back—eventually. That's what keeps us going. That's what gives us hope.

Mary Gehman is a writer, researcher and publisher who after Katrina relocated to Donaldsonville, Louisiana. © 2006 margaretmedia.com