



Rebuilding after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

By Angela Blanchard

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Hurricanes Katrina and Rita left behind unparalleled destruction and caused immense pain for residents of Gulf Coast cities. Two storms hitting so close to home in the period of a few weeks is almost unthinkable.

But if there is good news among the stories of devastation and sadness, it is that Houstonians – indeed, Americans – have opened their hearts, homes and wallets to aid and support those in need. We owe them accountability and effectiveness not just in our first response but in the longer term response as well.

So the question now becomes: How best to use the private and public resources that continue to flow in?

I've given careful thought to that question – after many hours “on the ground” here, in shelters and with families in our centers. I've heard first-hand reports from Louisiana and southeast Texas – from my own family members and from strangers who no longer seem like strangers.

I've thought about what it took to recover from Tropical Storm Allison – a much less devastating storm and a less “personal” disaster in that the loss of buildings was more at issue than the loss of lives. We're all trying to get our bearings by comparing this to Allison – and to 9/11. Sadly, it is more like 9/11. It is a major economic upheaval – not a regional issue but a national one with devastating repercussions for our nation's economy.

Divided by pain

Closer to home and as important to the stability of the nation is the issue of our response to the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

The slowness and inadequacy of the response is a psychic wound to the soul of this nation. It has split us – rich and poor, black and white, Democrat and Republican, urban and rural. Unlike 9/11 – a wound inflicted from the outside, a tragedy that brought us together – Katrina has divided us.

No one blames the hurricane. We blame the failure of the response mechanisms, the failure to maintain the levees, the failure, even with clear foresight, to prepare and protect, and finally the failure to come when called. This has reminded us that all resources are not

distributed equally, while making us feel painfully vulnerable. Not only are we unprotected, we are abandoned in our desperation. Someone must say, “I’m sorry.”

Unfortunately, the images out of New Orleans, the stories being told by survivors, the sad and horrific aftermath are all too reminiscent of third-world countries. We are sadly inured to these images when they are thousands of miles away – they cut to the quick close to home and call into question the promise of this nation. We were supposed to be safer, stronger, better. We were supposed to value life – *every life at any cost*. The pictures coming out of New Orleans seemed to tell a different story.

Along with our grief over the preventable loss of life is a sense of shame and embarrassment. Not ashamed because we are the ones that need help – we needed it after 9/11 and we were proud to accept it – but shame that we failed to demonstrate the strength of this nation. And everyone *is* watching.

Redeveloping the Gulf Coast

So what kind of help matters? Well, the temptation in the face of the horrible pain and destruction is to spend in sympathy and to spend to assuage guilt. Let’s don’t do that.

We have the opportunity – if the federal, state and local authorities can find a table around which they might all be seated – to redevelop the Gulf Coast region, to rebuild the infrastructure of New Orleans with an eye – not just toward its significance to its residents, but toward its strategic importance to the nation.

It means we rethink the Gulf Coast ecology. We can’t move the oil, but we can change the ecology of the coastline where the oil comes ashore and perhaps buffer the impact of future hurricanes. We can’t move the Mississippi, but we can rethink how it serves the country and redesign the levee system to serve the larger national purpose – while protecting the citizens of New Orleans.

Finally we can recognize that the music, food and culture of New Orleans are unique, that the people of that region are a treasure themselves and that we can’t afford to permanently disperse them all over the country.

The idea that people will not be returning is nonsense – 77 percent of the people of New Orleans *were born there*. Multiple generations lived within blocks of one another. Many of these temporarily displaced families are poor, but they will be poorer still without one another and without the supporting culture. We need to rebuild New Orleans and preserve the culture. People carry the Cajun/Creole spirit within and we have to bring them back to the delta region where that spirit best flourishes.

Help for the people

Let us face the monumental failure not of our response to the aftermath of Katrina but of our failure to see the *everyday* pain and despair in the wards of New Orleans and Houston and Los Angeles and Miami and Detroit.

Let us remember this rare and raw glimpse of poverty and isolation, oppression and marginalization – and maintain that picture so that when we next outline a plan for the future of this nation we make a plan to include, educate and care for all those folks we “never knew existed.”

For example, let’s fund the education and training of this generation of young adults in Louisiana and the Gulf Coast. We can use the reconstruction funds to do it, if we mandate that all contractors make the employment and training of residents a contractual obligation.

Make it a reconstruction requirement that a percentage of all contracts go to jobs for residents and that employed persons receive, after a year, in addition to wages, an amount to be used for a down payment on a house in the city of New Orleans. This strategy will create real ownership, improve the tax base and over the long term result in better a funded education system.

Create a “training corps” aligned with the Army Corps of Engineers and fund them to create civilian apprenticeships. Let’s put much of the “off the books” employment *on the books* in Louisiana by direct subsidies to small businesses for hiring flood victims, instead of the de facto illegal “subsidies” that have been the traditional means of employing temporary and unskilled labor in Louisiana.

Whatever the strategies, if we don’t allow Katrina and Rita victims to clean up, rebuild and eventually own a piece of their own city, then we will have failed them twice.

Many faith-based organizations have been called to social service duty without the infrastructure to be accountable for the resources routed through them. If they are going to provide the services and receive the funds, let’s establish the framework and fund the infrastructure so that we don’t substitute faith for efficiency.

The entire social service infrastructure of New Orleans – all the nonprofits, faith-based or not – will have to be rebuilt. We can funnel the charitable dollars through the national affiliates in the short term but over the long term these fragile non-profits will need help in getting back on their feet. Grants that require the rebuilding of local social service infrastructure as well as the distribution of financial assistance to victims are the answer. Not one or the other but both.

The voices of the “New” New Orleans will be unique – the break in the levee is a defining marker in the history of the city, and from now on people will mark time before Katrina and after Katrina, the way New York City marks “before 9/11” and “after 9/11.”

Finally, when people are without the basic necessities we often forget that healing is more than restoring power and shelter, rebuilding infrastructure and reconstructing businesses. There is a need for spiritual and emotional recovery. The people of New Orleans and the

Gulf Coast must give voice to the experience of survival and grief and longing and loss so that the most essential element of recovery – that of the spirit – occurs.

To aid in that, we should not hesitate to fund the arts. Rebuilding venues for New Orleans artists will speed recovery. Far from being a luxury, music and drama, writing and painting, dance and song are the means by which the voices of the people of New Orleans have been heard in the past and they can be the means by which longing and loss may be transformed into healing and celebration.

Be assured that when this generation sings the blues they will sing of Katrina ...of what was lost and what was found.

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