

Katrina's Answer: Part Three: The Final Chapter?

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The rebuilding of New Orleans has begun,
yet many of its citizens seem perplexed.
It seems many are wondering
if it's worth it to rebuilt just yet.
No citywide utility services are available,
especially in most of the 'black' wards.
Many homes are still wrecked and inundated
with flood-related debris in their yards.
Damn! The Gulf Coast is still mess!
Locals are fighting bureaucratic haggles, anemic
healthcare,
and tricky evictions as if they are entrapped in a
hornets' nest.
And to make matters worst, there is an ongoing
investigation
because some ill citizens may have been
euthanized.
Now that's Orwellian. But are you really surprised?

FEMA has acknowledged it failed in its role.
It seems hundreds of first-responders and their
equipment were not utilized, as initially told.
Remarkably, six months later some displaced
citizens in hotels are being given the boot.
What happened to the 18 months the Stafford
Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act
proscribed, is it now moot?
The death toll has been reported to be 1,300 or so,
with 2,300 still unaccounted for.
But Since Katrina, local morticians are just as busy
as before.
Hmmm. What gives?
It seems deaths among the displaced
are significant but difficult to access.
Relocated and now potentially homeless
among 47 states.
Damn, what a mess.

Katrina's mishaps were investigated by a
Congressional inquiry.
Huh, but none of 'ours' showed up regularly except
Cynthia McKinney.
The Congressional result noted a national failure
to properly respond in Katrina's wake.
They noted that officials failed to perform their
duties
from the federal level, to the local effort, and the
state.
The White House report revealed, essentially, the
same inept fate.
But strangely, the president offered no new money
for Katrina's victims in his budget of late.

It's probably a sure bet New Orleans won't be a
"Chocolate City"
despite what Mayor Nagin said, when the deal is
done.
But hey, the die is not yet cast, so don't be forlorn.
We'll get our people back, just as sure as you are
born.
But the curious thing is, there was no earth-shaking
outray for the planned demographic shift.
Hmmm? I wondered why no great rift?
Could it be that New Orleans will be less black,
more white and Hispanic? Voilà! That's it!
So roll up your sleeves and let us show 'em what
we all can do.
That is, bring Nawlins back with all its
peculiarities, Gumbo, and Roux.
This great city has too much of our blood in her
veins and soil to lose.
So gather yourself, so we can do what we have to
do.
To bring back the Gulf Coast, and especially our
beloved Voodoo!

My Last Circus, Part Two

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This is the second part to “My Last Circus,” which appeared in the February 2006 issue, page 303.

By now I was wishing to be sitting at my second-hand desk at Caanland School—a segregated, run-down elementary school in the fifth-grade room of Miss Roquemarc, who herself was a black overseer with nonpareil. This seemingly never-ending journey from street main with a pail in each hand to dressing tent became physical and mental labor I had not countered or reckoned with. But even more riveting was before our young black eyes, the performers began stripping and proceeding to do all their toilette while we were “lifting those pails.” Suddenly, I noticed how drab and ordinary these ladies of the Big Top looked with their faded, smeared and misplaced mascara, which failed to hide the lined faces. The cruel southern autumn sun at high noon that day left no flaw to the imagination, through the long years before today I had fantasized about these glamorous creatures swaying and swinging on the trapezes, bowing daintily and graceful as they were being caught in the arms of their handsome male partners.

However, this day, all of my fantasies and preconceived notions about the glamour, travel and excitement of circus life exploded on that autumn red clay in an impoverished Ark-La-Tex town.

Seeing those imagined Venuses and Adonises as they really were instead of being the creation of an adolescent mind hewn from an oppressive and

repressive environment suddenly threw me into pandemonium. I let out a nearly stifled cry, threw my pail of water down and fled home without that precious circus pass. Home was less than two blocks away because the circus always came on the fringes of the colored neighborhood in most southern towns. By this time, my mother would be coming home from work, and I was distraught thinking of my destroyed illusions, my truancy and my failed foray into manual labor (pail filling). I got into bed immediately and feigned illness, because I knew that I could not attend the circus tonight with my aunts and sister. No way could I bear to watch those ladies swinging gracefully on the trapeze under the glare of those flattering lights without having a psychotic break.

So my aunts, parents and sister accepted my feeble lie that I was sick and left me in my darkened room.

Even now when I read of Ringling Brothers Circus coming to the towns I have lived in since that autumn summer day over 60 years ago, my mind travels back to when I came face to face with my life’s first disillusionment.

So no matter how often I have recreated myself years later, my last circus would remain forever a part of my secret garden.

An Odyssey

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Approximately 23 years ago, I stopped smoking—three packs daily after 44 years. Afterwards, a whole new world opened up for me. How all this happened is almost like an out-of-body experience.

I was attending a medical meeting, sitting by myself in lonely splendor, puffing away. In the early years at these meetings, few doctors sat near me because of my race, and toward the end no one sat near me because of the smoke clouds. A young doctor who had worked briefly with The Rolling Stones approached me after the meeting and asked, “Jim, do you want to stop smoking?” Quickly, I became defensive, as most smokers do, and told him angrily, “What do you think?” He stated kindly that he would and could help me to stop smoking. Defiantly, I responded, “You will have to come to my office, it has to be on a Wednesday, and it has to be free. The young doctor agreed to all three of my demands, so the rest is history—I have been smoke-free to 23 years.

My new world now consists of exercise (walking), meditation, prayer, new hobbies, and becoming a more gentle human-being. These are the major stress-busters, which have enabled me to cope with the medicine of practice as I never had been able to in the 55 years I have been in practice. I have learned that the times we live in are not kind to the more vulnerable among us, and realized that we can protect ourselves or our patients from the personal pain of living.

After stretching exercises every morning, I proceed to do my toilette, which, in combination with stretching, gives me a tremendous boost of mental and physical power for my daily walk of 6–7 miles. This ritual prepares me for my daily grind of seeing a family practice mix of many problems and ethnic groups.

I do not have a radio in my car, which allows me, while driving from home to office (seven minutes), to say my daily prayers instead of listening to morning news, which, in years past, left me emotionally divided about world happiness.

The stress-busters I have outlined above give me peace and stamina to deal with an ever-changing mode of medicine to which I have had to adjust since leaving medical school decades ago.

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