

Chapter 3

Stories of Helping in the Aftermath of Katrina

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Article abstract

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SPECIAL ISSUE: A *NARRATIVE WORKS* MONOGRAPH

**LISTENING TO
STORIES OF COURAGE
AND
MORAL CHOICE**

**CREATING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT INCLUSIVE CARE
IN OUR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES**

*EDITED BY
ADELE BARUCH, ROBERT ATKINSON, AND HOLLY KHIEL*

**Chapter 3
Stories of Helping in the Aftermath of Katrina**

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The special circumstances related to helping in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—both a natural disaster and a man-made catastrophe—are explored. Stories of individual, formal, and informal networks of helping, alongside stories of exploitation and despair, were shared by participants. Significant to the history of the aftermath of Katrina was the eventual formalizing of some of the informal helping networks, such as the establishment of a musician’s village and performance center in the 9th Ward of New Orleans. The theme of “doing the right thing” echoed throughout our participant interviews, as did “the chance to move beyond angry.” Stories of helping appeared to provide examples of hope to the citizens affected by the storm, as well as encouragement towards purposeful action. The stories of helping, along with participation in altruistic social networks, appear to provide a pathway to the recollection and transformation of traumatic memories.

Keywords: helping networks, man-made catastrophe, the right thing, transformation

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There are both similarities and dramatic differences between the stories of helping in the aftermath of Katrina and of helping during the Holocaust. The first and most obvious difference is that, while thousands suffered oppression and discrimination in the aftermath of Katrina (with whole neighborhoods and hospitals left behind in large-scale rescue efforts), basic individual rights were still protected by law. While thousands were literally trapped by catastrophic weather conditions, helping those individuals was not forbidden by the state, and those who helped did not fear for their lives and their family's lives because of their acts of providing help. Katrina was a natural disaster *and* a man-made catastrophe, compounded by neglect and by a callous and uneven response, but it was not a calculated extermination.

However, helping was frequently dangerous, at least in the immediate aftermath. Trent Angers (2008) tells a moving story of Doug Bienvenu, who used his airboat to rescue victims in neighborhoods deemed too dangerous to enter by the local government (pp. 55-165). Roger, a participant who helped with the Red Cross in the week just after the hurricane, described confrontations with gun-wielding angry residents. Since all of the victims of this man-made and natural disaster remained free citizens, there is an added dimension to these stories. The reciprocity in response to being helped was fairly immediate instead of occurring years later when freedom was attained. Additionally, news of helping traveled very quickly in both formal and informal networks. Bob, a teacher and resident of Southern Mississippi, tells stories of working on a food distribution truck with a man from Spain, who claimed to be royalty who garnered local media attention by helping while stranded in Mississippi.

Those who helped constantly heard stories of informal and formal networks of helping. Those stories were immediate and highly visible, and they continued for many weeks and months after the hurricane. Additionally, a natural disaster can be an equalizer of sorts. While many neighborhoods were discriminated against and essentially left to suffer, those who might ordinarily live with great privilege were also left homeless with unresponsive insurance companies and little formal help for many weeks. Out of this suffering, however, arose networks of helping. One respondent described the social interaction as, "the way life should be," with neighbors checking on and helping neighbors, not diverted by other kinds of demands or interests.

It is worth noting that the devastation and the helping response played out differently in different regions across the Gulf Coast.

However, while the interviewees for this study¹ came from different regions (two from New Orleans, one from rural Mississippi, one from western Florida, and one from New England who volunteered for several weeks in New Orleans), each talked about stories of helping from both formal and informal networks of individuals. The formal networks were extremely diverse, from the National Guard, to the Mennonite community, to the Red Cross. Informal networks of helping sprang up among artists, coworkers, women in public assistance, and neighbors, among many other groups.

Our informants did not want to sugarcoat the response engendered by the catastrophic conditions. Along with stories of helping, there were also stories of violence and exploitation demonstrating Staub's (2003) central hypothesis that we are all capable of both great evil and great goodness, and it is worth examining the conditions that engender both extremes.

Since the effects of the aftermath of Katrina continued for many years, it was possible to observe the formalization of informal helping networks. For example, artists and musicians worked with Habitat for Humanity to create the ongoing community of a musician's village in the 9th Ward of New Orleans, anchored by a donated multipurpose performance center. Interviewees spoke about being influenced by the stories of helping they heard and witnessed. Melody described a "spark" that was created when she heard stories of helping. Bob describes an experience in the early days after Katrina: "I saw the Red Cross trucks I went to get a meal for myself and in that truck, I saw my neighbor. I asked him what he was doing there, and he said that he volunteered . . . and I realized, 'This is what I want to do.' . . . I spent all my days on emergency vehicles." The stories and his experiences changed Bob's view of people and their potential:

But seeing people come together, volunteering . . . changed my perspective on people. . . . To know we are eight hours away to be able to go to what life was intended to be like . . . one's "stuff" is not in the way. . . . There is really something special about the human spirit. . . . We think we need more stuff to make us happy, but it takes us away from each other.

Monroe (2002, 2004) has observed that a helping identity influences the choice to act with courage. She has also noted, however,

¹ Names of interviewees have been changed to protect confidentiality.

that “interactive effects are critical parts of our own perception of ourselves” (2002, p. 116). Bob recalled that upon seeing his friend in a Red Cross vehicle, he recognized a connection between his friend’s actions and what he wanted for himself. Christakis and Fowler (2009) discuss important observations about interactive influences on the expressions of altruism. They observe that altruism tends to spread in social networks, but also that the “benefits tend to be magnified” by those social networks (p. 298). They note that in experiments involving giving in undergraduate student networks, “altruistic and selfish undergraduates each had the same number of friends, on average. But altruistic people were embedded in networks of other altruistic people” (p. 300).

Wilson (2011) has noted that “people who help others are more likely to form an image of themselves as effective, worthy people” (p. 71). Most relevant to our inquiry here is Wilson’s further assertion that narratives change how people interpret events in ways that can make it easier for them to act altruistically in the future. Bob saw his friend helping, and the subtext of his observation appears to be that he also saw his friend expressing himself in vital, active, and helpful ways during the midst of a catastrophe.

Building on Wilson’s premise that narratives can influence the ways in which we interpret events, this investigation asked if hearing stories about the courage and moral choices of others supports the development of a helping identity in the same way that witnessing courageous acts supports the emergence and development of helping behaviors (Staub, 2003). Out of the accounts of the interviewees that follow emerges a critical element of the development of a helping identity. Hearing stories of helping appears to inspire helping behaviors, but it is through action that a helping identity appears to become fully realized. Stories and altruistic social networks may also encourage the development of a helping identity. The actual act of helping appears to be influential in expanding one’s identity to include a sense of oneself as someone who helps. Hearing and telling one’s own story about how one has helped appears to solidify this view of oneself over time.

We now know that action or an “active coping strategy” (Ledroux & Gorman, 2001) is an important step in ameliorating the deleterious effects of conditional anxiety generated by traumatic memories. Stories of helping in the face of trauma may be seen as an important cognitive bridge between the expression of devastation and the imagined possibility of constructive, hopeful action.

Therefore, we see stories told about experiences of living through a catastrophe as having at least four functions. The first of these functions is as a means of expression. Narratives provide a way to express the pain, shock, and loss experienced during a catastrophe, and in turn, that pain, shock, and loss are recognized and understood by a fellow human being. Chris Rose (2007), a reporter for the *Times-Picayune* who won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on Hurricane Katrina, wrote that in the weeks after Katrina, people in New Orleans told and listened to stories over and over again:

So the guys at Hall Piano listen to the stories, as all of us—postmen, pharmacists, waitresses, barbers, UPS guys, meter readers, coffee shop clerks, real estate agents, reporters—listen to the stories. That’s all of our jobs now, because all anyone really wants—all anyone really needs here—is to have someone listen to their stories. (p. 199)

The second function of stories is to remember and reconstitute the past. With stories about the past, memories are often changed in the telling. This was beautifully expressed by Natasha Trethewey (2010), a poet and Pulitzer Prize recipient who grew up on the Mississippi Gulf Coast:

Remembering is an exercise: to keep the memory of an event alive, we must rehearse it, recall it over and over for ourselves or in stories we tell others. And yet in so doing, memory is often transformed, revised a bit each time in the telling—linked always to its conjoined twin, forgetting. . . .Outside my grandmother’s house, the hydrangea blooms again and again—the blossoms themselves like memories, each one a repetition of another, never quite the same.

The third function stories have after a catastrophic event are as a call to action, the “spark” that Melody spoke of when she stated that the stories of sharing inspired others. This can be described as an inspiration for transformative action: helping behavior that elicits more helping behaviors, once listeners sense, the enlivening effects, for both those we help, and those who receive the help.

The fourth function of stories that we observed is their role in creating a coherent view of oneself as someone who copes in the face of devastation. This function can be described as integrative, as it enables

one to see oneself as an individual who was hurt *and* as one who effectively helps others. At the conclusion of this chapter, we will note the observed effects of hearing stories of helping which appear to run parallel to these four functions.

For this section of the book, we will not divide the stories of Katrina and the actions it inspired into geographic distinctions, even though the hurricane's physical impact and the corresponding responses to it stretch across several distinct regions. Instead, in order to more fully discuss the functions of stories after traumatic events, we will divide the recollected stories into two categories. The first category, which we call "Stories of the Storm," comprises recollections of the hurricane and its aftermath. The second category of stories, called "Stories of Helping," consists of recollections of help shared. Both categories of stories represent an array of experiences of Hurricane Katrina throughout the Gulf region, from New Orleans to Florida.

Stories of the Storm

Hurricane Katrina was a contemporary catastrophe of historic proportions, and most adults spent some time in 2005 immersed in stories about it. In this section, we revisit some of those stories through the accounts of our interviewees, who shared the unique narratives they had each constructed about their experiences during and after the storm. The individuals we interviewed were all in the Gulf region, either as the storm hit, or within a few weeks after the storm. Some of our interviewees were residents of the Gulf Coast and went back home to assess the damage to their homes and neighborhoods, and some interviewees went to the region to assist early rescue efforts.

The analysis in this chapter is built on nine interviews. Five people were interviewed, and four of the interviewees were available for second interviews that focused on clarification of their original interview and dialogue about our developing analysis (consistent with our hermeneutical approach to research). In addition, three sets of previously published, first-person accounts are integrated into our data (Angers, 2008; Rose, 2007; Trethewey, 2010). Two of our interviewees, Melody and Robin, were from New Orleans; Bob was from the Mississippi Gulf Coast; Sarah was working near the Florida coast; and Roger was a first responder who was working in New Orleans for several weeks immediately after the storm.

We'll begin with a description from Robin, whose husband had worked on the Mississippi River as a tugboat captain for many years:

Friday before Katrina hit, my father said, "Where are you going?" My husband is a tugboat captain and he had to pick people up, evacuating people from the rigs. . . . He said, "I can't babysit you—where are you going to go?" My Dad said, "You can always go to Houston." And I told him that I still wasn't sure what I was going to do. He said, "Okay, please call when you do."

We packed up a few things—shorts, that kind of thing. . . . I thought I was going for the weekend. . . . My husband called and I told him that I went to Walmart. He said "What are you doing going to Walmart?" I went to our neighbor's and asked when we were leaving. She said, "My husband will not leave." Finally, we convinced him that we had to go. I said, "Sam, we have to get out of here!"

We got there at 10:00. Five of us on the road. We left her husband there. When we got to Baton Rouge, we had to go out to get supplies. . . . We picked up the baby food.

The storm came that night. We stayed up all night. We lost power. Her father brought a generator for 8 hours. It was very hot! These 8 hours could keep the fridge going. When we had a television, we could see what was happening here. Days passed. . . . I didn't know where my people were.

Bob described the first few days after Katrina hit his home in Mississippi:

My wife grew up on the Gulf Coast. She kept trying to convince me that we needed flashlights, groceries; I thought she was overreacting. So when she got back, she told me, "It took me two hours to get gas." So I wrapped up the music session and I started to watch WLOX from the coast. . . . You could see the look of urgency in the newscasters' eyes. They were saying, "This is the Big One. We've all compared hurricanes to Camille; this will be bigger than Camille." I found myself willfully suspending my disbelief.

My wife's parents lived in Socier, on the Gulf Coast, and we knew they would get some of it. . . . We begged them to come up, but they saw it as safe. . . . The family built the house together,

starting in 1994; it took them four years. . . . My father-in-law built it with my brother-in-law and they built it to Camille standards. They put their complete faith in the building and the reinforcements they put in.

. . . We had just purchased our house. Our first mortgage was coming up. . . . What we worried about was if we could make our first insurance claim before we paid our first mortgage payment.

Then it broke loose—I have never been so frightened. You could see it on TV. We had power for a little while, then we lost all power. . . . We realized the eye of the storm was heading towards Hattiesburg, our town. Our neighbors had a yard fence—it was getting ripped up and tossed. . . . Power lines were being ripped up. . . . It was like Armageddon.

It was one thing to see it on TV and another thing to experience it. The might was awesome. We were afraid for our lives. . . . You could hear the creaking of the house. We were seeing trees fall into people's houses. . . . Those sustained winds lasted for 8 hours.

Once it had blown over, you could not recognize the neighborhood. . . . People were crying, walking the streets. The sheer force of the destruction—people were finally coming to grips with it.

We went to see our neighbors to see if they were okay. . . . To that point we only knew three neighbors . . . next door and across the street. . . . But then we met everyone in the neighborhood. . . . We had to rely on everyone to survive.

Melody, who was working in public health, and her husband lived in the heart of New Orleans when Katrina hit. She spoke about her family's initial efforts to get financial help after the devastation of the storm:

My home was devastated. . . . The help we were supposed to get from the federal government was not happening. . . . We had homeowner's insurance . . . but they couldn't pay. . . . Can you imagine? They called it a man-made disaster because the levees broke. We paid on that every year, for 10 years.

We thought the federal government would be stepping up, with the Road Home program. But we received a reduced amount,

based on some formula. We would have been back already 2009. But we only received \$30,000, and that wasn't near enough to repair the damage in the house. So we built a small house in Baton Rouge and we decided to hold onto this house so we could rebuild slowly.

Chris Rose (2007) was a reporter for the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans when the hurricane struck. He and his family went to Baton Rouge to ride out the storm, but he returned by the first week in September to continue to write his column and to tell the stories of his beloved adopted city after the storm:

My colleagues who are down here are warriors. There are a half-dozen of us living in a small house on a side street. . . . We have a generator and water and military food rations and Doritos and smokes and booze. . . . Some of these guys lost their houses—everything in them. But they're here, telling our city's story. (p. 17)

Rose noted that, about a year after the storm, while most of the world heard the stories of New Orleans, many were unaware of the scope of the destruction to an entire region: “As the memory and impact of Katrina fades in the national consciousness, so, too, it seems, does the geographical and emotional scope of its damages, not to mention Rita's. From the Texas border to Mobile Bay, a huge swath of America took a grenade” (p. 217).

Bob described the Mississippi Gulf Coast this way: “All of the Gulf Coast was flattened. You go down Highway 90—you could drive down three counties; . . . there was so much life there—Now there's nothing. You do not know what town you are in.”

Roger came into New Orleans with the Red Cross two weeks after the storm:

We had been instructed. . . . These are the things to expect. . . . We were told there would be lots of insects and snakes—we needed boots higher than the ankle. . . . Everything had to be put in one bag for quick movement. . . . There were no functioning hospitals, so you had to bring enough to support yourself. In our deployment area, a guy got up and said “Ninety per cent of the people in Louisiana have never left the state A lot of people never left

their block Do not take their responses personally. Do the right thing.”

You couldn’t drive through the city—it was closed. Route 10 was closed. So we took a bridge. . . . It was three white folks, one black social worker. . . . There were no houses lit, no lights, and we went over a bridge built in the 1930s. . . . You could drive 10 miles. . . . 10 miles with no cars, deserted houses.

Roger’s story provides a segue into the many recounted stories of helping after the storm. Each interviewee had stories to share about both receiving and offering help. All described occasions of extreme and heartfelt generosity, although most of the interviewees also described incidents that ranged from civic laziness to violence.

Stories of Helping

Robin recounted her stay in Baton Rouge immediately after the storm, and how she housed and supported co-workers in her home after her return to New Orleans:

We stayed for three weeks in Baton Rouge—there was support for my family, for my neighbors, my father-in-law. . . . While I was there, I tried to help . . . to clean up the house. Before my friend went to work, she would make breakfast for everyone on the Coleman stove.

When we returned to New Orleans I called Larry from work and I told him our house was okay. I said, “If you want to come check your property with your wife, that’s okay. Bring her.” I didn’t have any food, but I had canned food. I stood in line for three hours at Walmart. I told my husband, “My people will have to stay here for awhile.” And he said, “You have to do what you have to do.”

I said to Larry before they went to check their house, “Now you’re a grown person, but you have to be ready for what you are going to find.” As soon as Larry and his wife came back, I said, “Here are your robes. Take your robes, shower.” My heart was broken for them. . . . A few days later my husband said, “They can stay as long as they want . . . we have enough beds.”

Robin was among the many neighbors and relatives who helped others with the multitude of forms required for both temporary and permanent housing. She was especially helpful to her Spanish speaking neighbors, as she is fluent in Spanish. In addition to this neighborly, informal support, Red Cross volunteers provided help negotiating the maze of insurance and bureaucratic requirements.

Melody stayed in Natchez, Mississippi for the first six months after the storm, while her temporary home was being built in Baton Rouge:

We stayed in Natchez, Mississippi, for six months . . . with my husband and my dog. Talk about altruism—they kept all of us, and they didn’t even like dogs that much. Friends and others just started sending clothes. . . . Could you imagine, all your clothes are gone? And I just started getting boxes of clothes . . . from people I didn’t really know—friends of friends.

Is There Anything You Want to Change?

Melody and her husband were only able to develop a viable plan for returning to New Orleans after she learned of the service work that teams of Mennonites were doing in the city:

A friend asked me if we were coming back . . . and I said, “We can’t afford to come back.” She said, “Let me tell you how I got back. Mennonites, they’re really master builders,” she said. “Let me give you their numbers.” I called. The person who answered said “This is Moses M. from Weaver Land Disaster Services.” They were working in New Orleans as part of a crew from a different part of the country come and they work on what they can do. He asked, “Can you wait until November?” I said, ‘I’ve been waiting since 2005, so I don’t have any problem waiting until November.”

They called before they were ready to come . . . and when they work, they are so calm and focused. . . . They build for hours, then they take a short break. They asked me, “Is there anything you want to change?” And we had a flat roof on our den that always leaked, so I said, “We could use a new roof” . . . and they built a new roof on the porch in a day. . . . And we had this spiral staircase we really hated, so they built us a new staircase in a day.

We had some brick walls we never liked and they took down those walls.

Do the Right Thing

We close this section with a few more excerpts of stories of helping by the National Guard, as relayed by two participants, Roger and Robin, as well as Chris Rose (2007), in his essays on the response to Katrina. The Guardsmen were described repeatedly as “the real heroes.” The final story is of an ordinary citizen who traveled down to New Orleans on his own with his boat. His story speaks to the transformative effects of helping.

Roger was serving with the Red Cross when Hurricane Rita came through New Orleans, right on the heels of Katrina. The region was already devastated. Shelters and rescue services were functioning at their highest capacity before Rita hit the area:

When we got word that Rita was coming through . . . there was no place to go. The 82nd Airborne was there, . . . professional soldiers. . . They all left when Rita came through. They were all business. The National Guard guys were different—they weren’t hamstrung by hierarchy. . . They did things because it was the right thing to do. . . They were regular people. . . They wanted to be there, they set up distribution sites. . . They gave out MREs, water—people would line up all day long.



Red Cross Workers in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.
Used by permission of the United States Federal Emergency Management Agency.
Photo: Andrea Booher.

The theme of “doing the right thing” echoes throughout all of the interviews. We heard it in the instructions Roger described receiving from the Red Cross and we hear it in his descriptions of the National Guard’s approach: “The National Guard were the real heroes . . . they came from Iraq and Afghanistan. . . . My neighbor’s son was in the Guard . . . and they heard people were coming to help. . . . They brought MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] and water.”

Chris Rose (2007) also talks about the National Guard: “National Guard patrol our area and have given us their MREs (the beef ravioli is to die for), and they have generally treated us with more respect, grace, and kindness than one has a right to expect under martial law (p. 36). Rose describes one particular citizen soldier:

He came down alone, as many had . . . or with one or two friends . . . to do whatever he could with a small boat in tow. I remember sitting on my front step near the end of the first week of September last year when a disheveled and seemingly disoriented guy pulled up in front of me in his pickup truck. He had Michigan plates and was pulling a boat behind him. “Which way?” he shouted. “Who is in charge here?” he shouted.

I had to laugh at that part. “No one is in charge,” I told him. But if he wanted to put that boat to good use, I said, “Keep going straight and you’ll hit the water.”

He nodded and then he started crying. “I’m sorry I took so long, man,” he told me. “I got here as fast as I could.” And he drove off. I saw him two days later on Canal Street, looking fresh and invigorated. He had been rescuing people and pets ever since I’d seen him. (p. 213)

Rose is quoted at length here largely to highlight the final observation. He noted that non-stop work in grueling conditions transformed an exhausted and weeping man into a man who was revitalized.

Loading up the Dead and Smelly Fridge

Interviewees did not want to sugarcoat the overall response to Hurricane Katrina. There were many examples of indifference, lack of civility, and direct violence, and they often made the nightly news. Sarah, in addition to describing many who helped after the storm’s devastation in Florida, also talked about “those who appeared to be not so much

engaged. . . . They sat and wallowed more—it was a part of who they were.”

Roger shared some examples of similar behavior:

That’s not to say people weren’t shot at. . . . You saw people fly off the handle . . . and you had to be careful. . . . There was just a sense that so much had to be done—you couldn’t be bothered worrying. . . . You could see the potential for problems. . . . There was this argument over a cooler: a woman in a wheelchair was yelling at me. . . . She couldn’t get her check. Her son grabbed my cooler . . . and he was not letting go. . . . His mother said “That’s his cooler,” . . . and he let go of it.

Robin talked about the more extreme violence that happened inside the Superdome and around New Orleans, which appeared to be under-reported: “A lot of people will not talk about some of the things going on there; . . . it was open season on women. . . . The government will not talk about it to this day. . . . Groups of 25 women would go together to the bathrooms.” She described an act of violence against one woman: “One local singer, . . . she could have gotten out, . . . but she stayed to help her neighbors . . . and she was raped there . . . while people were waiting to be rescued, gang members were shooting.”

Chris Rose (2007) searingly documented the general deterioration of civility in the months following the hurricane: “A small instance would be the case of the jerk who loaded his dead and smelly fridge into his pickup truck one night and drove around uptown looking for a place to get rid of it, rather than putting it on his curbside like the rest of us and taking his chances on the latest gambling craze sweeping our town, FEMA Garbage Pickup Lotto” (p. 101).

The Effects of Stories of Helping

The Chance to Move Beyond Angry

In the passage above, Rose describes one particular way in which a systemic breakdown generated further incivility. However, in many other instances the opposite response occurred: systemic breakdowns generated the transformation of neighborhood and civic groups into informal helping networks. We will examine how stories of these networks sustained and generated further efforts to help.

One group that rose up out of a systemic breakdown in the immediate aftermath of Katrina was Common Ground Relief. Rebecca Solnit (2009) interviewed one of the founders, Malik Rahim, a former Black Panther, who reported to anyone who listened that vigilantes were murdering African-American men in Algiers Point, a part of New Orleans (p. 289). He described early efforts to establish a first aid station that grew into a health clinic:

We started calling around the country to everyone we knew, and started asking them for assistance. . . . After that, here comes Veterans for Peace from Florida, and they brought up a bunch of supplies. The next thing you know, people start coming. Cindy Sheehan came. And with her came a lot of help. . . . We organized Common Ground Relief on the fifth of September, and on the ninth we organized a first-aid station. And then maybe three weeks later, we made the transition from a first-aid station to a bona fide health clinic. (p. 291)

Here is how Aislyn Colgan, a young medic, described her experience at the Common Ground Relief Clinic:

It is so rare that you get an opportunity to put into action what maybe you've sat around the coffee table and talked with someone about. When do you ever see that the powers that be are failing at their duty, and when do you ever get the chance to move beyond being angry about it and actually DO something very concrete and tangible and immediate? Like you can't provide these people with health care, but we're here and we can do it. We would get calls from the Red Cross asking if we had any gloves because they were out of gloves. . . . Here we are getting everything donated to us through all these informal networks of organization, and the National Guard was referring people to us. (Solnit, 2009, p. 294)

**Informal Networks:
Beyond Hierarchy and the Transformation of Despair**

What Do You Need, Son?

While the many stories of violence are indisputable, interviewees shared just as many stories of the ways in which both simple and complex

efforts at helping transformed a potentially violent or despairing situation. Roger described two incidents at a Southern Baptist encampment set up to help and feed those in need:

The National Guardsmen were trying to fix broken equipment. . . . The Southern Baptists were giving food to the Red Cross. The Baptists were cooking chili, and a group of Missouri Guardsmen came to get chili for themselves, and one said, ‘Chili again?’ The captain took him aside and said, ‘I’ll teach you a lesson to disrespect those helping.’ . . . But do you know what these old farts, Southern Baptists did? One came over to him and said, ‘What’s your favorite meal, son?’ And he said, ‘Fried chicken.’ And they cooked it for everyone in that 100-degree heat.

. . . We had an incident at a drop point . . . a guy walked in with a Glock—and he started shooting. . . . One of the older men—probably unstable—walked over to him and said, ‘What do you need, son?’ He said, ‘Well . . . I could use some water.’ The man said, ‘Okay, here’s some water. What else do you need?’ They brought him water and they told him to take a seat.

Melody noted that she and others had to work to respond differently to those in formal aid organizations who were dismissive or disrespectful:

You cannot treat someone in an ugly way . . . even if that is the way you’ve been treated. If you do, you have been reduced. . . . So I said, ‘Everyone has to get on the mat . . . to have a Buddhist focus on being compassionate. . . . Accept the way they are. . . . And one of the residents said, ‘I talked to a woman that residents felt had treated them harshly and displayed compassion for her. I’m glad we had that conversation.’

Roger described the experience of two working men from up north who ran a truck through the poorest, hardest hit neighborhoods, collecting lists, to deliver items the next day:

There were these groups, . . . the Gotti Boys. . . . They could be a pretty vicious group. . . . Well, these guys drove into this area, and those guys drew gun. . . . These men didn’t really know who they

were dealing with. . . . “Okay, so what are you going to do . . . kill us?” And then he said, “You’ve got your people here . . . show us your people. . . . What do you need?” Every day they would go back and ask, “What do you need?” And those guys they first met would come back . . . with lists.

“The Way It Should Be”

Bob described his interactions with neighbors after the storm as “the way it should be,” with little social stratification and time for human interaction. Again, none of our informants, nor do we, wish to downplay the violence. However, these stories of violence transformed offer an important counterpoint to the stories of the breakdown of civility. In catastrophes such as Katrina, the possibility of responding to the initiation of violence with an effectively transformative response presents itself. Additionally, in catastrophic situations where larger political systems become dangerously ineffective, or worse, violent, there is an opportunity for informal networks to step in with a sense of purposefulness that may transform individual despair. As Bob put it,

People were walking, sharing their feelings, and listening to each other’s stories. We got so involved with stuff instead of interactional relationships. . . . There was no gas, . . . no food, nowhere to buy things. No one was more wealthy or had more power. You can’t get out; . . . no gas. For the next 3 days, there we are, as neighbors and basic human beings trying to survive. . . . It was the strangest thing to see everyone in the streets. In August, it’s chokingly hot; . . . it’s like a swamp, the heat and humidity, but people were walking in the streets sharing their stories. They were asking, “Where do we go from here?”

Melody talked about the inspiration she felt from hearing other people’s stories: “Listening to other people’s stories—what they did when their homeowner’s insurance didn’t pay—but they were able to get back into their homes because someone shared. . . . You are inspired. . . . It’s almost like a spark is created.”

Roger identified an “infectiousness” in being a part of the transformation of a bad situation: “And you want to be a part of that—to take a bad situation and to turn into something of value. . . . There is an

infectiousness about that kind of presence . . . that you don't get on a daily basis.”



Rebuilding New Orleans.

Used by permission of the United States Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Photo: Marvin Nauman.

Solnit (2009) identifies the sense of “purposefulness” that occurs during disasters as neighbors help neighbors to survive. She also points out that transformative action during disasters demonstrates our highest potential, often latent in day-to-day life:

We need ties, but they along with purposefulness, immediacy and agency also give us joy—the startling sharp joy I found in accounts of disaster survivors. These accounts demonstrate the citizens of any paradise would need—the people who are brave enough, resourceful enough, and generous enough—already exist. (p. 7)

The participants we interviewed did not speak directly of joy, but they spoke repeatedly about being inspired into effective action by the loving support of family, their experiences among friends and neighbors, and the stories of helping.

As we suggested at the beginning of this chapter, stories of helping may serve as a cognitive bridge to purposeful action. Purposeful action appears to build a coherent sense of oneself as one who acts, who helps, and who is therefore not simply victimized by a catastrophe. Bob

talked about being inspired by his neighbor's work on food trucks and his mother-in-law's work at a food pantry:

My wife went into a local radio station.² It was an old-fashioned radio station, and my wife went on it to tell people that her mother had a food pantry . . . with food to help people.

I saw Red Cross trucks and I realized this was what I wanted to do. I spent all of my days on emergency vehicles. We were based in the Main Street Baptist Church. People would cook all day and we would load food on ERVs [Emergency Response Vehicles] . . . and we went to all the communities on ERVs and fed people lunch and dinner.

Robin heard about others' efforts to help immediately after the storm, and despite housing families from her workplace, she still felt frustrated about the enormity of the problems:

My husband's nephew put roofs on houses for a whole summer. . . . I said, "I feel so helpless." My husband said, "You need a project. You feel like you're doing something when you are helping others." . . . They [her co-workers] had taken out all their silver that they could find in their flooded house. We got a bucket and all the utensils. We sat on the floor and, with all the Harry Potter movies playing, polished all the silver.

Robin also began to offer more formal support to others, as well as a continued support for friends:

I helped both Hispanics and non-Hispanics. They were trying to fill out "The Road Home" forms [for a post-Katrina homeowners' assistance program]. . . . I helped them with the list of things they needed. I helped with the initial interview paperwork and with the closing.

For my friend, T—she was trying to clear up her kitchen . . . and I could see that look in her eyes. . . . I took her by the shoulder and said, "We're going to redo your kitchen . . . and I'm going to help you pick out the stove, the refrigerator."

² All radio stations were given air time to share information about shelter, propane, and meat, among other important things.

Bob described the ways in which helping and the purposeful action inspired by the stories of his neighbors and relatives enabled him to “keep going.” Stories appear to spark active helping and purposeful action, and witnessing the reception of that help by beneficiaries enabled Bob to persevere: “The thing that kept me going—if there was going to be life after this, you had to keep going; to know that you are helping someone . . . who may not be able to help themselves . . . and to see how much they appreciate it. To see that side of so many people kept me going.”

Whenever You Need a Place

A catastrophe that occurs in a society with civil protections for its citizens presents an opportunity for people to express reciprocity in an immediate fashion. The onslaught of Hurricane Gustav in 2008 presented many such opportunities. As Michele recounted, “We had a chance to house people during Hurricane Gustav. We said, ‘Wherever you need a place.’ We get our power from a generator . . . so when Baton Rouge lost its power, we were fine . . . and we had people stay with us. I said, ‘You can stay here as long as you need to.’” Reciprocity, we found, sometimes took the form of consistent appreciation or the shared appreciation of a transformed home. Robin reflected that “There is always one partner in the law firm who always says, ‘If it wasn’t for you . . .’ Children of the parents called to say thank you.”

Melody shared the following story about her interactions with Moses, who (along with a crew of people who identified as Mennonites) helped Melody and her husband rebuild their home:

I did some reading ahead of time, so I could understand their Mennonite culture. I wanted to be respectful of their culture. I told him, “Moses, my husband wants to give something back. Is there anything we can do to help you?” He said, “We are totally self-sufficient.” Mostly they are very reserved . . . but one couple, they were very demonstrative. They said, “When we come back through, we want to see you in your new home.”

Stories of Helping and a Helping Identity

Participants frequently noted that they felt compelled to help as a natural outcome of “the way we were raised.” They saw their efforts to be

in keeping with the values they were taught as children, affirming Monroe's (2004) thesis that courageous altruistic choices often grow out of an altruistic identity. It appears that the helping behaviors expressed in these stories support an altruistic identity, and that they might also offer a vehicle for the transmission of these values in very concrete terms. Melody's observation supports this notion:

It is the mentality of Haitian immigrants. . . . Relatives are always coming to stay. . . . It's also a part of the South, although that is another side to the South. In my professional career, I'm always giving back. At one point, I started to tutor Haitian children because their parents didn't know the language. They needed someone to be the director, so I came on board as the director.

Sarah noted that women helping women was an integral part of the Puerto Rican culture in which she was raised. "With B., that is how she was socialized . . . with this 'women helping' component."

Recollection: A Bridge to Healing and Action

These stories represent a specific kind of recollection. They are recollections of our ability to care for one another, even under extreme duress. They provide a narrative of hope encouraged by purposeful action. In this way, we see that stories of helping may form a cognitive bridge to purposeful action. Stories of helping may support a socially-sanctioned helping identity, and it is hypothesized here that they may also provide a pathway to the recollection of traumatic memories for those who hear them.

Roger, who told stories of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, notes that this "is a part of the natural process of healing." Rose (2007) surmised that "all anyone around here wants is someone to listen to their stories." Yet memory of the stories, of the violence, and of the terror of the flood have not been fully told. Robin noted that her daughter's children were still frightened by a heavy rain: "When there is a rain . . . they start to get worried." Michele noted that many of the children who experienced the storm "are experiencing mental health issues."

Might stories of helping provide a safer bridge to the recollections of terror and violence? If remembering traumatic memories is a natural part of healing, might stories of active care and purposeful coping provide

a holding context for the full expression of the stories related to traumatic events?

In our next chapter, we explore the perspectives of students and teachers engaged in an educational project specifically focused on stories of helping as well as links to purposeful action. The themes of stories act as a cognitive bridge to action, as support to informal networks of helping, as support for a developing helping identity, and as a “holding context” for the exploration of traumatic stores. We wonder: can the evocation of stories of generosity, courage, and perseverance allow for the exploration of terror, injustice and helplessness in a way that grounds these experiences in a context of other possible outcomes?

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