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OFFERING

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Abstract

Steering away from the more obvious concern with the breakdown of social order following Hurricane Katrina, this article draws on weblogs and bulletin boards to highlight acts of generosity and hospitality provoked by the disaster and poses some questions about what disasters might tell us about the emergence of the “social.”

Keywords

New Orleans; Hurricane Katrina; generosity; hospitality; disaster

The disaster is an upheaval of thought, as well as of bodies, lives and dwellings, as Maurice Blanchot reminded us. I take this as meaning that the disaster calls for something more than the airlifting in of ideas or concepts we already hold dear. Of course, Katrina calls for all the provisions of critical thought: the acts of civic neglect and negligence are too blatant, the mapping of social stratification onto suffering too glaring for it to be otherwise. But are there other calls that ‘thought’ might respond to, other ways we might strain for some fidelity to the disaster?

The breakdown of social order is fearfully easily to convey in media images, meshing snugly as it does with both popular anxieties and critical positions on the current state of American political and economic life. Less spectacular are the more generous responses to the crisis, the many small engagements and gestures which now seem to be regenerating the ‘social’.

‘...obviously anyone way outside who has never been a part of it couldn't possibly understand what you're going through. But I think you're probably going to have to make allowances for a new breed: people who woke up and sensed something about the place they had to be a part of: a sort of inexplicable yearning solidarity vaguely akin, but greater than, falling in love. Some of us want to indefinitely "hep yew" because we want to help ourselves, or at least our own hearts reflected on the rising waters.

Maybe not so much a new breed, as a fresh manifestation of the venerable act of offering hospitality: that susceptibility some have to letting the needs of others derail them from the normal course of their lives. Like so many of those who helped narrate Katrina from ground level, the weblogger above offers an intimation of sensibilities that offer a counter-current to the flow of mediated images of this disaster, not to mention to broader picture some of us have of the last superpower.

*I have an extra bedroom and couches that I would be honored to let someone use.
Please email Kathy Ross*

My wife and I have 2 spare bedrooms available for Katrina victims. We want to help any way we can. Nothing is expected and nothing will be accepted. We all need help some time or another. Please let us help. - wpsmith@cabletvonline.net

I AM A SINGLE 30 YEAR OLD WOMEN WITH A 2 YEAR OLD DAUGHTER AND I DON'T HAVE MUCH BUT I VCAN OFFER A PLACE TO LIVE FOOD COMPUTER USAGE A WARM PLACE TO SLEEP PRIVATE BATHING AND A SHOULDER TO CRY ON. I AM OFFERING HOUSING TO ANY SINGLE WOMEN AND CHILD EDERLY AND OR A COUPLE. I AM AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN BUT IT DOESNT MATTER. EMAIL ME AT (msdeanneg@yahoo.com) call 24hrs 713-271-1595

And so on, screenful after screenful. I want to read this not simply as evidence of 'another America', but as an alterative angle on the social, a view refracted through the disaster and the responses it elicits. There is a tendency to look at disasters in terms of what they 'reveal' about a society, to ask what social forces helped shape them, to observe how society responds to the challenge they pose. This, however, assumes the givenness of the social, as if some normal state of society inevitably precedes the disaster. For sure, the disaster tears existing social bonds apart. But in setting bodies in motion, sending them careering, colliding, congealing, does it not also precipitate new bonds? And who can tell which is the more primal event?

So, what if we were to view the incoming and welcoming of the stranger - the invention of the other - not so much as an accident, an anomaly, an afterthought but as the very condition of the social, as the moment when the possibility of a shared world opens up?

In talking to relatives who had to bail ahead of Rita, they found he same kind of rolling community that we discovered ahead of Katrina. It's a bitch when you're forced to be on the road, but it's pretty cool in some ways too. By and large, folks show their best sides and not their worst.

The disaster is a differentiating force, setting those who lived through it apart from those who did not, dividing those who are in need from those with something to offer. First there is an opening, singular and without expectation of return, a meeting across a divide. And then a traversing of this gulf, the stirring of reciprocity, the beginnings of a blurring of difference and sameness: the precondition of the social contract.

Weird ...how the refugees are now becoming the helpers and the helpers are now becoming the refugees.

Here in Dallas, we're seeing Houston/Galveston folks now streaming in. Best course of action, seems to me, is for those of us who had to get out of New Orleans to now find a way to help the new arrivals. We've got some recent experience and, frankly, plenty of time to kill anyway. Besides -- we share an affinity for rice, I-10, skanky water and iffy football teams ...We'll be looking for you. Good luck in your travels.

Is there not a sense in which every one of us has already endured catastrophes large and small, a sense in which every one us is a self, a social being only by way of the generosity we have received from others? In this way, I take the disaster as an incitement not to presume the social, but to approach it as an emergent property. Right now, in a nation all too easy to condemn, millions of small acts of hospitality and generosity are unfolding, generating forms of sociability whose ultimate shape and texture remain unknowable.

I'm not moving away in the near future. I'm really very interested to see how the city recreates itself. There are a million social and economic variables at work. It might just be fun to be a part of.

Might 'thought' also respond in ways that respect the disaster's secrets, its surprises, its possibilities?

Nothing is expected...