BETWEEN JOY AND LAMENTATION:
THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF HURRICANE KATRINA

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March 17, 2011

Hurricane Katrina was a disaster on many levels. It was a social, economic, and political disaster. It was a medical, environmental, and humanitarian disaster. For many of those affected by the storm in New Orleans and on the Gulf Coast, it was also a theological and ethical disaster. The Book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) begins:

> How lonely sits the city
> that was once full of people!
> How like a widow she has
> become,
> She that was a princess among
> the provinces
> has become a vassal.
>
> She weeps bitterly in the night,
> with tears on her cheeks;
> among all her lovers
> she has no one to comfort her;
> all her friends have dealt
> treacherously with her,
> they have become her
> enemies.[1]

[1] Lamentations 11:1-2, Bible, New Revised Standard Version

A Return to "Old Time" Religion

I was struck by the theological dimensions of the storm when, as a visiting lecturer on ethics at Harvard Divinity School, I began to construct a syllabus for a course titled, "Understanding Katrina: Theology, Ethics, and Praxis." After discovering my course through the magic of Google, a representative of the local ABC news station in New Orleans contacted me to do an interview about "teaching Katrina." Following the broadcast of that interview, I received an e-mail from a local judge, who wrote of the theological issues presented by the storm. He mentioned that he and a group of New Orleanians of various faiths had begun meeting at a local Jewish temple to discuss the after-effects of the storm. Specifically, he mentioned that, while he was a Christian and a Catholic, it was the portions of the Old Testament dealing with disaster and destruction, including the Book of Lamentations, many of the Psalms, and especially the Book of Job, that members of the group found especially resonant.

These Old Testament readings are classic texts in the Jewish and Christian traditions on the topic of theodicy--the branch of theology that seeks to justify God's goodness, justice, and omniscience, despite the presence of evil in the world. Evil might seem an inapt term to describe natural disasters, but disasters are routinely addressed in this way in theodical literature. Certainly, no one who experienced a storm like Katrina, last year's Haitian earthquake, or last week's tsunami in Japan could fail to see something evil in the sometimes devastating effects of the natural world that otherwise sustains us. There is a paradoxical relationship between nature's beauty and nature's wrath, especially beneath an omniscient and omnipotent God. And, insofar as Katrina was a social and political disaster as well as a natural disaster, it raised other questions of race, economic inequality, and neglect of those in the community who are often rendered invisible and unseen. Attention to social sin—or structural sin as it is called in theological ethics

--has been the purview of the Bible's prophetic literature, which, particularly in the ancient Hebrew formulations, warns society of its evils and calls society to a greater justice.

In the Katrina course that I taught at Harvard--which incidentally included two students from New Orleans and one from St. Bernard Parish--one overarching theme and task was what we referred to as "keeping theodicy and prophecy together." How could we ask the hard questions about what had happened, while also pointing to the resources that can get people through? How could we at Harvard Divinity School, in the two spring break relief trips that we took to the Gulf Coast, provide relief, while also asking questions about the social and political problems that made such relief necessary? How could we dispense charity, while also calling for justice? As relief workers, we came to think of ourselves as "standing in the gap" between the reality of the situation and our aspiration for something more. Through further reading, research, and reflection on the aftermath of Katrina, I have come to see this as the need to stand also in the middle ground not only between theodicy and prophecy and between charity and justice, but also--as I will explain further--between joy and lamentation.

Victims, Rescuers, and Bystanders

In the field of ethics, there has been increased attention in recent years to the ethics of humanitarian disasters. Globalization and twenty-four hour news cycle have brought such disasters to our attention to a greater extent than ever before and in vivid form. It is increasingly difficult to ignore the misfortunes of our neighbors near and far--and the ethical questions that these misfortunes raise. In the context of humanitarian disaster attention has focused particularly on three categories of people who are affected by and implicated in humanitarian disasters--victims, rescuers, and bystanders.

The category of victim is in some ways the most problematic. Most people do not like to think of themselves as victims--much less to be called such by others. Labeling some people "victims" tends to ignore the many ways in which we are all vulnerable to circumstances beyond our control. It also ignores the resources that even the most bona fide victims have for resilience and survival. To ignore those resources may do as much harm to victims of disaster as the disaster itself. It is with this in mind that the study of "vulnerability" has recently taken hold in fields and academic disciplines as diverse as public health, law, theology, and philosophy, to mention just a few.

The category of rescuer--or "humanitarian," as reflected in the new literature on humanitarianism--has also come under increasing scrutiny. Rescuers are heroes in situations of disaster, saving lives and providing relief, in ways that seem unequivocally good. And yet rescuers themselves report frustration, and sometimes a sense of guilt, that the relief they can provide is not enough to address the totality of the situation. This is the phenomenon known in the relief field as "compassion fatigue." The term is also used by media analysts to describe the public's desensitization to disasters after continuous broadcasts of devastation and entreaties for help. It took only a few weeks for relief workers, particularly in cities that received evacuees, to begin reporting "Katrina fatigue." A theologian with experience working in refugee camps in the African nation of Uganda, recently reported to me that at the end of the day, when his group of relief workers finished feeding the refugees, they read from the Book of Lamentations, seeking solace, before partaking of their own meals.

The category of bystander seems particularly emblematic of our era. Our increased knowledge of the desperate plight of others in the era of globalization makes the ethic of the bystander something of a global ethic for our time. How *should* we respond to the disasters of

others? How *can* we respond given the limitations of our own resources? As the great moral philosopher, Immanuel Kant, has observed, *ought* implies *can*, so our moral obligations are always conditioned by what we can do without risking harm to ourselves. In the case of Katrina, despite the delayed and in many ways deficient response of the government, many private volunteers found that they could do quite a bit, and the outpouring of response--still ongoing--from concerned citizens around the nation and the world to the plight of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast has been one of the bright lights in what for many suffering from terrorist, natural, environmental, economic, and other devastation was in many was a "decade of disaster" at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Virtue, Lamentation, and Joy

One of the leading frameworks in philosophical and theological ethics today is that of "virtue ethics." Virtue ethics has ancient origins. The Greek philosopher Aristotle listed what have come to be known as the four "cardinal virtues"--courage (or fortitude), temperance (or moderation), prudence (practical wisdom), and justice, the last of which--justice—was, for Aristotle, was the highest. The medieval philosopher and Catholic Church father, St. Thomas Aquinas, brought the Aristotelian virtues into the Christian tradition and added to them the "theological virtues" of faith, hope, and charity (or love). In the Thomistic version that has shaped the Christian virtue tradition, the theological virtues do not exist in us naturally, but are infused into us by God. Other religious and philosophical traditions have their own sets of virtues and pathways toward achieving them. A search of the internet these days turns up all manner of lists of virtues.

But virtues often seem connected too exclusively connected to *heroic* actions and things of which we are capable when we are at our best behavior. How we are to respond to and in situations beyond our control, such as natural disasters? Is it proper to speak of virtue in such situations? At a recent conference, I asked a group of panelists who had delivered a presentation on the particular vulnerability of women to physical, economic, and other threats, how to speak of virtue in the context of vulnerability, giving the particular example of communities affected by Katrina. Did demanding virtue of people in such situations hold them to too high a standard? And did the standards for assessing virtue adequately take into account the sort of cultural, familial, and other resources that enabled them to survive?

In response, I was recommended to read a then recent book by the philosopher Lisa Tessman, titled *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles.*[2] In her book, Tessman describes a kind of virtue that might be described as "making a virtue of necessity." Her account describes virtues that come at a price--that exact some cost upon and even do some harm to their bearer. Such virtues are the ones that come about when one is faced with difficult circumstances and does the best that one can in a given situation, but with the regret that one cannot do better and even a certain amount of righteous anger at the underlying circumstances themselves, which often involve a certain amount of injustice, or what Tessman calls "systemic moral bad luck." Virtues, in such circumstances, are "survivor virtues."

Tessman is equally interested not only in the virtues of victims, but also the virtues of humanitarians and bystanders. She, too, reflects on the modern, global quandary of our being presented more and more with humanitarian disasters and wondering more and more what to do in response. As a philosopher in the Aristotelian tradition, Tessman accepts the Aristotelian

[2] Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

definition of virtue as the Golden Mean between behavioral excess and deficiency, or what she terms the risks of "anguish" on the part of rescuers and "indifference" on the part of bystanders. Tessman cautions against indifference, particularly on the part of the privileged in society. But she is perhaps even more concerned about the risks of excessive anguish on the part of humanitarians. The goal of Aristotelian virtue ethics is usually described as that of "human flourishing," or simply "happiness." In this regard, the particular risk of humanitarians is that they become so immersed in and anguished by the situation of those they help, that they end up giving up too much of themselves, such that they can do no more. This is the problem described well in the children's book, *The Giving Tree,* by Shel Silverstein, in which tree provides various goods--play, shade, shelter, and building materials--to a boy over the course of his development to manhood, and is ultimately chopped down into a stump. When I read the book to my then two-year-old nephew he waved the book away proclaiming it to be "Sad! Sad!"

It is with such concerns in mind that Tessman ends up recommending that in difficult circumstances we seek "both justice and joy."[3] This struck me, when I first read it, as strikingly similar to my Katrina class' goal of "keeping theodicy and prophecy together." The quest for justice may involve, in the first instance, a certain amount of lamentation at what has been lost. Some argue that in America today, we have lost a public, cultural capacity for lamentation. As one theologian describes it, "We, in the United States, live in a time and place where grief and mourning are frequently truncated. . . .We are a culture which encourages individual therapy as a substitute for communal ritualistic expressions of grief."[4] As another theologian observes, "Public rituals of lament also help a community maintain continuity in a chaotic time of grief by integrating past experience, present circumstances, and future hope. Communal lament names

[3] Ibid., 97
[4]LeAnn Snow Flesher, "Lamentation and the Canonical Psalms," *The Living Pulpit* (October-December 2002): 36.

problems, seeks justice, and hopes for God's deliverance. It is a prelude to justice."[5] And yet we, today, so often seek the "quick fix" of speedy healing and "closure."

The process of lamentation and the quest for justice can be exhausting. For this reason, Tessman defends the "moral legitimacy of sometimes seeking joy in the very face of oppression" and the need not to refrain from "embracing the joys that assert themselves in spite of it all."[6] This struck me as very similar to the topic that my student from St. Bernard Parish took up in his Katrina class final project, in which he explored the topic of "*joie de vivre*" (joy of living) as a Southern Louisiana cultural attribute that got his community through the storm. And this brings me to a set of resources--"survivor virtues"--that seem unique to Louisiana culture. These are the virtues associated with family, culture, and place.

Family, Culture, and Place: "Survivor Virtues" of Hurricane Katrina

Some have argued that family was a source of vulnerability in the Katrina disaster. First, the noted political scientist, James Q. Wilson, commenting on instances of looting in the storm's aftermath, wrote, "We do not know who the looters were, but among black thieves, I imagine that most came from single-parent families."[7] Wilson made it clear that he was speaking of African American families. By contrast, Lillian Poats, a professor of education and racial diversity, argues that the African American family and its strengths have been rendered invisible in contemporary media and research. In her view, "There is an increasing buzz in American society about the 'collapse' of the Black family. . . . But that belief has a hard time explaining what we all saw on our televisions after Hurricane Katrina decimated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region. . . . There was very little, if any, coverage given to the challenges for families, yet

[5] Herbert Anderson, "How Rituals Heal," *Word & World* 30:1 (Winter 2010):50.
[6] Tessman, *Burdened Virtues,* 98.
[7] James Q. Wilson, "American Dilemma," *National Review* (December 19, 2005): 61-62.

it was clear to me that many of the people survived only because of the strength of the family."[8] As one Katrina evacuee quoted by Poats proclaimed, "There were four generations of us in that water."[9]

With this example in mind, it is worth asking whether family and the ideals and practices associated with family in populations affected by Katrina may also have been a source or site not only of survival, but also of virtue. These families, intact to the extent of including multiple generations, exhibited traits of love, devotion, and unity that are routinely cited as special virtues of families. Devotions to family, food, and fun--though not always in that order--are widely perceived to be aspects of the culture of the New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. So family and virtues of family, even though most families are far from perfect, can serve as an important cultural resource.

The aspect of fun, of *joie de vivre* manifests itself in a pronounced enjoyment of life and exultation of spirit--even in the face of tragedy. It, too, is a staple of local culture. The saying "*Laissez les bons temps rouler*" ("Let the good times roll") is attributed to the Cajun French who settled in the swamps west of New Orleans. But is a saying containing no small amount of irony, coming after the Cajuns' eviction by the British from their homeland in Canada. "*Laissez les bons temps rouler,"* too, is a manifestation of *joie de vivre,* but tinged with sadness and exile. Exile, of course, is another biblical theme replayed in Katrina, with so many pushed out of their homes, even out of the state.

Many observers have noted the role that local culture has played in the recovery from the storm, particularly in the New Orleans area. Local artists were joined by Hollywood stars in the rescue and recovery. Artists often played a prophetic role, expressing the people's grief in a

[8] Lillian Poats, "The Invisibility of the Black Family During Hurricane Katrina," 23:3 *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* (March 23, 2006).
[9] Ibid.

cathartic way, while also bearing witness to underlying social and political justices that heightened the storm's destruction. The musical forms of jazz and blues, for example, capture the dual and duelling imperatives of joy and lamentation that infect the local culture. At the level of popular culture and celebration, New Orleanians clung to hopes of the eventual reopening of the Superdome, even as observers in other parts of the country raised questions about the propriety of spending recovery funds on such ventures. The Saints' triumphant Super Bowl and accompanying "Lombardigras" after an almost biblical forty-four years of wandering in the desert of NFL despair--while sadly not replicated this year--seems to have put an end to such speculation. The first Mardi Gras after the storm, well-captured in director Spike Lee's documentary film, *When the Levees Broke*, was an occasion for joy but also for wry--and occasionally naughty or obscene--reflection on the storm in the form of Mardi Gras floats, parade costumes, and souvenir T-shirts. Such methods of cultural coping may have struck some in the wider American society as dysfunctional, fatalistic, or even pathological in the less spontaneously celebratory regions of our county—but insofar as such cultural attributes enabled a community to survive, they may represent virtues of a joyful sort.

There always a risk that culture can become a trap. Some lists of virtues include traits that can be remarkably ambivalent. The virtue of being able to accept things that one cannot control can give rise to passivity, insularity, and resistance to change or self-reflective critique. Such passivity may preclude ambition to rise above the status quo or the sense of defiance necessary to overcome injustice. It can impede the discernment needed to determine when change is necessary and the discipline and flexibility to carry it out. And yet the joyfulness, spontaneity, and often darkly ironic humor that infects the "carnival" culture of the New Orleans area also has a distinctly ethical dimension—and one that aims at justice. The concept of

carnival in its pre-Christian origins was tied to agricultural harvest and the turning of the seasons, and it was a time when social hierarchies and even the divisions between the living and the "carnivalesque" subverts and critiques the prevailing high culture through features of humor and chaos.[10] The iconic New Orleans jazz funerals that still take place in African American communities, far from being a purely sad and somber occasions, incorporate in their raucous "second lines" important elements of the carnivalesque.[11] Following the first line of grieving friends and family, the second line invites the general public to supplement the funeral lamentation with playful but potent critiques of the injustices faced by the deceased and his or her in life and with actions that demonstrate a lively defiance of death. This propensity for spontaneous, humorous, and joyful outburst embodies the local culture and its virtues of resilience.

Of course, perhaps the most profound resilience was required by those who suffered the most from the storm—those who were displaced. A significant theme in some of the coverage of those affected by Katrina was the significance of place for residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.[12] Striking numbers of residents reported never having left their homes state, in some cases their hometown. The determination to return and rebuild, even and perhaps especially by those who relocated to host communities as far-flung as Massachusetts and Utah was noted by many. (Having had three students from Utah in my Katrina class and service trips and knowing something of the state's squeaky clean culture and rather bland cuisine, I have to say that it is harder to imagine a place more different from New Orleans than Salt Lake City!) And yet some

[10] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics,* Caryl Emerson, trans. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
[11] I am indebted to Harvard Divinity School student, Emily Stirba, for reminding me of the tradition of the "second line."
[12] See Falk, William W., Matthew O. Hunt, and Larry L. Hunt. "Hurricane Katrina and New Orleanians' Sense of Place: Return and Reconstitution or 'Gone with the Wind'?" *DuBois Review* 3 (2006): 115-28. See also Robert D. Bullard and Bestsy Wright, eds. *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009).

did not see the sense in rebuilding in an area likely to suffer the same fate again through the meteorological effects of climate change. Harvard economist Edward Glaeser floated a novel proposal shortly after the storm to an audience of visiting architects from Tulane University. Taking into account the city's endemic poverty and failed infrastructure, Glaeser proposed that the government simply give those displaced by Katrina $200,000 to resettle elsewhere rather than spend $200 billion to rebuild the city.[13] The argument, with its seemingly inexorable economic logic, was that the government should ensure people and not places. The residents' attachment to the place they called home was not a factor in the calculus. Place was thought to be fungible, interchangeable, and something from which to move on. And yet a cursory read through the Old Testament finds the Hebrew people constantly erecting monuments and memorials--even if only a good-sized rock or two--to places where they stopped on their journey as a people. To paraphrase the philosopher Cornel West, from a theological perspective, "Place matters."

That New Orleans has yet to recapture its full pre-Katrina population shows the short-term futility of this hope of rebuilding--and yet it remains the aspiration of many. In today's global economy in which people regularly migrate and relocate around the country, and in some cases the world to make a living, this strong attachment to place may have struck some as anachronistic and dysfunctional. An appreciation for place, grounded in virtues of beauty and loyalty, seems to have served as a virtue of survival and resilience for those who were displaced --even the ones who have not yet returned.

[13] Edward L. Glaeser, "Should the Government Rebuild New Orleans, or Just Give Residents Checks?" *The Economist's Voice* 2:4 (2005): 1-6.

Conclusion

That is where I will conclude my remarks on theological and ethical dimensions of Hurricane Katrina, before opening it up to a conversation with all of you. We are living in times when people, places, and culture are all under deep pressures from economic and other circumstances. The arts, sciences, humanities, in the "coastal conversations" that you are having here play crucial roles in building and maintaining social virtues and social resilience necessary for "recovery, rebuilding, and rebirth."