



**REMEMBERING NEW ORLEANS:
BEYOND CHANGING CHANNELS AND MOVING ON**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Perhaps, it is the signature sign of our time, the unwillingness, even inability, to engage in deep or even minimally due reflection on important issues, and thus the tendency to turn to tv, the internet or other technology for quick renderings, resolution and relief. So whether it's the horrific human tragedies in Haiti, Congo or those in New Orleans and the Gulf, the tendency is to watch the news clips and specials and then surrender to the persistent urge to change channels and move on.

To speak of media is to speak of constantly converting everything into spectacle, which quickly passes in parade across the stage and screen and then makes way for something new and more sensational. To rightfully remember New Orleans on this 5th anniversary of the Katrina disaster and to seriously understand and address the continuing presence and effects of disaster and trauma in New Orleans, then, we must move away from the media conception and presentation of it. We must regain control of how the narrative is defined, constructed and presented and correct the historical record in respect of those who have passed and those who are still present, and to remind ourselves and the country that the suffering still exists, that the people have not all returned home, rebuilt, been healed or become whole. This means respecting and rebuilding the lives of the people themselves, not imagining or rebuilding the city without them and their interests in the forefront, or cleaning up and clearing away in the interests of developers, high-end townhomes, condos and tourists.

For in spite of the short-hand reference to this great tragedy and trauma as Katrina, this is not the story of a storm or hurricane. It is rather a narrative and definitive

portrait of a people, African Americans, devastated and disadvantaged, not so much by nature and natural forces, but by the racialized nature of society and social forces that operate in the interest of the White, wealthy and powerful. And any real and righteous remembering of the people and disaster must not forget or minimize the reality or importance of this.

The disaster of August 2005 is defined by the deaths of over 1,800 people, the severe damage and destruction of over 182,000 homes, the flooding of 80% of the city of New Orleans, and the devastation of 92,000 square miles of the Gulf coast. But in spite of the destructive role nature played in the disaster, it is equally defined by the undeserved suffering and deaths of the people caused by criminal neglect and active hostility of government officials on the local, state and national level. It is captured in the scenes of a people officially abandoned and then falsely accused and indicted by media and government of a violence and anarchy which was later accurately attributed to predatory police and White vigilantes, "cave-hollerin" and Klan-hunting for Black blood.

There were our people, thousands traumatized and trapped in flooded houses and buildings, on rooftops and overpasses, in rain, darkness and searing sun; huddled together on high ground in submerged neighborhoods or isolated on car and truck tops or whatever else was above water, screaming and holding up hastily written signs, calling for help and receiving little or no help from those officials sworn to protect, provide, serve and secure.

This portrait of a people carving out of the hard rock of reality of gross suffering and abandonment, with little and no assis-

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tance, space for sacrifice, cooperation and mutual support, contrasted starkly with the racist stereotypes and rumor-mongering of most of the media. For demonizing a traumatized and suffering people, the media had manufactured lurid lies of rapes, robbery, marauding, mayhem, looting, and violence and killing of various kinds among the people.

Also, we must remember and recount, in setting the record straight, narratives, notes, images and reports of the injured and wounded who walked thru high, unsanitary and unsafe waters to save others; of people sharing their meager food or drink when and if they had them; of their caring for the ill, injured, aged and infant; of their slipping past the police, turned prison guards and gate-keepers, to return to rescue others; of their sacrificing themselves to save others, and of their forming social families and communities of care, cooperation and mutual support.

The heroic and cooperative portrait of Black people dealing with tragedy and trauma, also contrasts with the government which stumbled toward its obligations in New Orleans like a drunk or drugged person, trying to determine what was to be done. Having come late to consciousness, the Bush administration began figuring out ways, not so much it seemed to help the people, but to help its corporate allies, friends and funders to enrich themselves from the disaster.

In this remembering and recounting, let us also give rightful praise to the millions of volunteers who have come to the city to aid and support, to bring things needed and necessary – the activists, the religious groups, the college and high

school students for spring break and other seasons. But it is not just what they bring or give, but also that they are there, themselves, present, standing in active solidarity with the people, co-witnesses and co-workers in the critical struggle for justice.

It is important in any remembering and recounting that we always praise the resiliency and resistance of our people. But we must be careful not to give them characteristics that cause us to overlook or minimize their suffering and hardship, their vulnerabilities and their need for all the assistance and support they can get to rebuild their lives. It is again, the people themselves who must take the lead in rebuilding their lives. And it is good news to hear reports that there is increased social and political engagement and activism and that the people are struggling daily around issues of education, employment, housing, the environment, the right to return and government support to achieve this, relations with new immigrants, maintaining the historic and cultural character of the city, and bringing justice for all.

The struggle to rebuild the lives of the people of New Orleans, to open the way for those 100,000 still absent to return home and to achieve justice for wrong done and injuries incurred, is a focal point and place to test our capacity as a people to resist the forgetfulness, “channel changing and moving on” so characteristic of the larger society. And we cannot turn away from our obligation in this struggle without turning away from an important, even vital, understanding of our history and ourselves.

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