

By Dean Nelson

It looked like the end of the world. Flying over the Superdome in a private plane a few days after Hurricane Katrina, I saw the gash in the roof, debris flapping in the opening like a giant flag of surrender. The dry part of the city looked like the top of everything – trees and buildings – had been shorn off. The submerged part looked as if the missing tops from dry land were scattered and floating in the brown water.

After I landed and started driving through the evacuated New Orleans, the only real traffic was overhead, from thundering helicopters. Occasionally, heavily armed military vehicles drove by. No people on the streets, no electricity – steel beams from buildings bent over, as if they were still resisting the wind. It was like a bad Armageddon novel (pardon the redundancy).

Whatever picture I came in with after seeing the images on television got replaced immediately. This was worse. So much worse than was possible to portray through camera, keyboard or pen. It was epic in its awfulness.

I went there with Gary Morsch, the head of Heart to Heart International, a humanitarian relief agency, to get medicine, food and water to some of the worst-hit areas and to determine where the big shipments of medicine should go. Heart to Heart was coordinating tractor trailer and air shipments of insulin, antibiotics, tetanus, saline solution, pain relief medicine and critical care kits into the area. The president of Jefferson Parish, one of the devastated regions, gave Heart to Heart permission to pass through all check points and restricted areas to get supplies in.

We headed for one of the few open hospitals. The head of that hospital had told me that they had been looting local pharmacies to try to get enough drugs for the thousands of people in his facility. We passed over the freeway that had served as the city's evacuation area. Empty



HURRICANE KATRINA THE APOCALYPSE NEXT DOOR

A search and rescue squad heads into the deep water of the Ninth Ward in New Orleans.

wheelchairs and cots, shoes, clothes and garbage were scattered for miles – a rapture scene from your worst childhood fears.

Then we got lost. Our maps were useless because roads were gone. Whole sections of the city were gone. As we came over a hill on Veterans Boulevard, we encountered police officers with automatic weapons waving us down. We got out of our vehicle, not believing what we saw

OUR MAPS WERE USELESS BECAUSE ROADS WERE GONE.

through the windshield. There was no road ahead – the entire community before us was under water. Rescue boats ferried people from their homes to dry land. The rescuers knew there were still survivors in that water. They would worry about the bodies later, they said.

An elderly woman approached the uniformed men.

“Are you taking people from this neighborhood to see their homes?” she asked.

“No. Maybe in a few weeks. Right now we’re trying to get them out, not in.”

She turned to us.

“Can you take me to see my house? I want to see what’s still there before I leave forever.”

Waist deep in the water was what looked like a resident: a wiry, unbathed, unshaven Al Pacino-looking man, a cigarette in his mouth and behind each ear, dislodging his fishing boat from a tree branch.

“Can you take this lady to see her house?” we shouted to him.

He squinted at her.

“What’s your address?” After she told him, he said, “We’re neighbors. Get in the boat.”

She looked at the water – a color not found in nature – fouled with floating animals, waste, debris. Putrid. Toxic. Diseased.

“Wait there,” he told her. He slogged out of the water like a John-the-Baptist stunt double, picked her up and carried her to the boat, gently setting her in. He came back for her 60-year-old niece and set her next to her aunt. He looked us over.

“I’m not carrying you. If you want to go, get in.”

We stepped into the water and waded to the boat. We motored past, and above, Frances Smith’s church, the school her children attended, the neighborhood convenience store, which our driver circled for a few minutes, using his landing net to scoop up cartons of cigarettes floating at the rooftop.

“I guess now I’m a looter,”

he confessed.

He cut the engine a few houses from our destination, and quiet momentum

Continued on page 8

(continued from page 5)

FAITH, HOPE AND WORK

Discerning God's call and living out one's vocation is not just a challenge and hope for university students and young folk just starting out in life. All of us seek meaningful work that not only provides bodily food but also sustains the spirit. Through the Faith, Hope and Work conference, we will hear others' stories about their struggles and victories in the search for a way of life that expresses faith, hope and love.

Speakers, including well-known preacher Barbara Brown Taylor and Donald Miller, author of *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*, will help us talk about vocation. The conference also includes a jazz concert, "Jazz Like Blues," on Friday evening. There are so many interesting ways to discover how Christians participate in the ongoing creative work of God as grace shapes vocation. Please join us in this conversation!

REV. DR. BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, was rector of Grace-Calvary Episcopal Church in Clarksville, Georgia. After Baylor University listed her among the 12 most effective preachers in the English language, her reputation brought more visitors to the church than could fit into its 82 seats. She is now the Harry R. Butman Chair in Religion and Philosophy at Piedmont College in Demorest, Georgia, where she specializes in world religions and early Christianity and continues her writing life. Her books include *Speaking of Sin*, *The Preaching Life*, *When God Is Silent*, and *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion*.

DONALD MILLER

"I never liked jazz music because jazz music doesn't resolve. . . . I used to not like God because God didn't resolve. But that was before any of this happened." In Donald Miller's early years, he was vaguely familiar with a distant God. But when he came to know Jesus Christ, he pursued the Christian life with great zeal. Within a few years, he had a successful ministry that ultimately left him feeling empty, burned out, and once again, far away from God. In this intimate, soul-searching account, Miller describes his remarkable journey back to a culturally relevant, infinitely loving God.

The Faith, Hope and Work Conference is co-sponsored by the Wesleyan Center for 21st Century Studies and the Writer's Symposium by the Sea. In addition to the interviews with Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor and author Donald Miller, professors, pastors and professionals will give presentations addressing the highly relevant topic of vocation. ■

carried us the rest of the way. The bow of the boat gently bumped against her useless gutters. She had lived in this house for 79 years.

"The oak tree looks good," she said, looking at the top third – all that was visible. Who knows what childhood memories that tree held? She gazed at the house for several minutes, the way we visit headstones at cemeteries. No one made a sound.

"The roof's gone," she said, finally.

"Is there something you wish you could still get?" I asked her.

"I've got my life," she said. "There's nothing in there that I can't replace."

"We don't want to get stranded here after dark," the driver announced, starting up the motor.

On the return trip, the propeller stalled briefly after hitting a submerged vehicle. Walking back up the street, with Frances bone dry and me soaking wet, I asked her if she had cried yet.

"None of that has come out," she said. Then she whirled to look me right in the eye. "I feel like I died and woke up. That's my old life, out in that water. It's over. Now I have to move on."

When I first got to New Orleans, I thought I was witnessing the end of something. But in that moment, it dawned on me that I was seeing the beginning of something, too. I saw suffering and hope as two sides of the same coin, exposed by the kindness of a neighbor who had a boat. I saw the failure of government and the goodness of people.

I heard the same stories you heard about the terrible actions of some – people whose hearts seem set on harming others. But I also witnessed people whose inner compass points to doing good, to helping others. Many came from all over the country at their own expense, or provided services at their own expense, because the images they saw evoked questions out of their own hearts: "What can I do? How can I help?"

I saw resilience, compassion, courage, hope, the desire to help, new beginnings. It looked like the end of the world. But it felt like the beginning of a new one. ■

Dean Nelson directs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University. His new book on serving others, written with Gary Morsch of Heart to Heart International, will be released in 2006, by Berrett-Koehler of San Francisco.

Point Loma Nazarene University would like to invite you to join us in the personally relevant and intellectually challenging conversation.

Prior to February 1, 2006: \$75 • After February 1, 2006: \$95

Registration fee includes all plenary and concurrent sessions, conference meals, and scheduled conference events.

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