

...And some things they didn't

By Dean Nelson

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I saw the same images you did: rooftops barely exposed above water, bodies floating in rivers, the Superdome overrun with people and trash, the crush of humanity trying to escape the floods and the shelters. Looters, soldiers, politicians, residents and journalists reaching their boiling points, all on television.

On the one hand, it was the news media at their best. We're good at showing disaster, damage, grief, loss, rage and broken levees. We show measurable consequences. The end of things.

Other dimensions of this story, though, are harder to capture. When I got to New Orleans a few days after Hurricane Katrina blew through, telephone poles looked like mangled fingers from an underground monster. Tops of trees were shorn off. Steel beams from unfinished structures bent as if they were still resisting the wind. I was in an RV with the head of Heart to Heart International, a humanitarian relief agency, some volunteers, and Dennis Moore, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Kansas. We stopped at emergency operations centers to find out where shipments of medicine and mobile medical clinics needed to go. We delivered cartons of food. The few other vehicles on the road were emergency or military, all heavily armed. The only real traffic was in the sky. Helicopters by the hundreds. No electricity, no inhabitants. It felt like the end of the world.

On our way to the West Jefferson hospital, one of the three in the Parish that was open, we got lost. Maps were useless because roads were gone. Checkpoint guards made us turn around. As we came over a hill on Veterans Boulevard, we encountered police officers with automatic weapons waving us down. We got out, not believing what we saw through the windshield. There was no road ahead -- the entire community before us was under water. Rescue boats were ferrying 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?"

She told him.

"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, picked her up like a drenched fireman 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 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."

Cameras capture what's awful. The end of things. It's harder for them to capture resilience, compassion, courage, hope, the desire to help, new beginnings.

All of us have a primal nature to flee and fight, to find provisions wherever we can, to protect ourselves and our loved ones, to lash out at incompetence and lies. Some also seem to have it in their nature to harm others. That comes across well on camera and in print.

But another part of our primal nature is to help one another. To relieve suffering. To open our hearts. To carry each other to and from the boat. To walk away from our old, submerged lives, and step forward on dry ground. That's harder to show.

To paraphrase the philosopher Joseph Campbell, the news media in the hurricane aftermath showed us how thin the levees of civilization really are. Sometimes the levees give way without much resistance.

Sometimes, though, the levees hold their ground, and become the foundation for something new. That's part of the story, too. That's what I want to watch.

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