

Testimony

DANILLE K. TAYLOR

Katrina and the Destruction of New Orleans

At the Fall 2005 ASA Convention in Washington, a whole afternoon was dedicated to Hurricane Katrina. On this occasion I met Danille Taylor, Dean of Dillard, New Orleans, one of the speakers. The common cry of anguish of those living and working in the New Orleans Universities was the fear that the city's multiculturalism would not revive, that the diaspora caused by the hurricane would prevent students and teachers from going back to New Orleans. By now, many efforts have been made, and some universities have been re-opened: many students have not yet gone back. At the end of the afternoon, something else was very clear: nobody thought the Federal Government was really going to help. But the speakers, all of them, trusted what they were doing: self-reliance was the word. Whatever has been done from the moment hurricane Katrina destroyed a city and a culture has been achieved by people like Dean Danille Taylor, who did not give up, and managed to re-open their schools. - Rosella Mamoli Zorzi

Sat. 27 Aug. - Strolling through Whole Foods after an exhilarating hot yoga class I received the call "We're evacuating students." "What are you talking about?" was my response. Thus began my sojourn, this journey through the twilight zone. Hurricane Katrina, such a harmless sounding name, lyrical, feminine, that tells you nothing about the fury of this woman. Having lived in New Orleans for only two years I loved it immediately: the saints and sinners, marvelous food, distinct rhythms, second lines, parade and festivals for every occasion and the warm loving people. It is also a city with grinding poverty, a serious urban environment, a horrific public school system and endemic corruption... a politi-

cal system that is a growth industry. While New Orleans is aggravating it is a funky town you either love or hate. I went to begin a new chapter in my life dedicated to education. I joined Dillard University as Dean of Humanities. I became part of the network, a family of historically Black colleges and universities where there is no doubt that Black children can learn. That may sound like a simple premise but in my long career and personal experience that assumption has been the exception rather than the rule. And ironically, in New Orleans where the majority of the population is African American there are three HBCU's (Xavier, Dillard and Southern University New Orleans): the legacy of the plantation system still exists. We are a significant weapon against ignorance and a key to social and economic mobility. The majority of our students are from New Orleans and Louisiana, the Deep South. "We're evacuating the students."

After securing the sites of instruction, primarily equipment in Cook center where the performing and visual arts are taught, I conferred with a few senior administrators; the evacuation was well in hand. I then sought to pull my personal affairs together. Calls to friends, "Are you leaving?" The responses were mixed; I began to plan because responses were 50-50. "Watch the weather, watch the news." If you live in a hurricane zone you discover that there are protocols you follow: identify evacuation routes, have a packet of important papers in a plastic bag, a change of clothes, prepare property for high winds and watch the news. Katrina came so fast, fueled by the hot tub waters of the Gulf of Mexico, 90 degrees F. Too hot, rocket fuel. Katrina hit the Gulf Fri. and barreled towards New Orleans. A weekend, the end of the month, not much time to think it out. My previous experience with Ivan taught me to find a kennel to board my dogs, I can sleep anywhere but shelter for animals is harder to secure. Atlanta, Atlanta was east of the path and has a 24/7 kennel for animals. Airport Park and Bark, perfect, I made reservations for my two dogs and cat. My intuition told me to take the cat despite the fact he does not travel well, my twenty-five pound "big boned" Maine coon cat. We left the city 5 a.m. Sun. morning headed for Atlanta. I grabbed a duffel bag, my computer, camera and plenty of animal supplies. This was to be a two or three day long-weekend giving me a chance

to reunite with a college roommate and her family; I stayed there for 6 weeks. I am homeless.

29 August - Mon. The magnitude of the storm and the number of people left in the city made officials open the Superdome to the general public. I entered Fox/CNN land watching the nightmare unfold. People waited in the rain desperate to be admitted. The storm hit and the wind damage was immediate, a hole was ripped in the dome. Communicating with a dear friend who waited for his son to return from work then secured their property and decided it was too late to cross the waters. There is no way into or out of New Orleans except across water. My last conversation for two weeks with him was over the fury of the winds, "This isn't pretty," he said. I watched the storm with the rest of the world in awe.

30 August - Tues. Talking to another friend who was caught in town riding it out Tues. morning the worst seemed to be over. Then I saw it. The levees were collapsing. I called back on phone lines that were jammed. "Leave, leave now!" We were entering the twilight zone, a hell from which we have not emerged. New Orleans survived the winds but not the flood.

Dillard University has a long distinguished history. 1869: the United Church of Christ (Association of the Congregational Church at the time) and the United Methodist founded Straight College and the subsequent New Orleans University. Gilbert Academy was a secondary school affiliated with New Orleans University, which also began a medical department with a school of pharmacy and nursing as well as a hospital. Straight College had a law department. While all the programs did not survive, the founders clearly had a vision for the educational needs of African Americans. In 1930, Straight College and New Orleans University merged and under the name Dillard University relocated to its present location in the Gentilly neighborhood. A local businessman, Edgar Stern, who was a son in law of the philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, heavily financed the new campus. Xavier University, another private univer-

sity, is the only Black college affiliated with the Catholic Church. 1869-2005, one hundred thirty six years of tradition and an intimate relationship with the African American community of New Orleans. New Orleans — the most African of American cities.

As I watched the incompetence of the local government, confusion of the state and indifference of the federal my heart broke. The media was there, why wasn't help? The people of New Orleans were demonized: unforgivable. Law and order was more important than saving lives and alleviating the suffering. The memories of African enslavement "rememory": the hulls of slave ships, the separation of families, the armed guards with weapons aimed, the traveling to unknown destinations. Most are working people, the heart and soul of the city. They are the spice, the beat that makes New Orleans New Orleans. What will we be without them? Who will protect their rights, who have up to now? Where will they live? Where will their children go to school? How can Rumsfeld, i.e. Halliburton, in charge of the city's recovery comfort anyone? Why aren't local businesses and workers benefiting from the feeding frenzy? Where will I live?

What happens to us, Dillard, Xavier, and SUNO? As tuition driven institutions how do we retain and attract students to a city whose infrastructure is demolished? How do we suddenly trust the "largess" of other well-endowed schools that yesterday ignored us? How do we continue to achieve our mission with less than before? How can we afford not to succeed? Will the community give up hope about the integrity of its restoration if we do not? Is New Orleans to become a Las Vegas or Disneyland? How do we heal from so much trauma... not alone.

On a personal note I have a million questions with few answers. I can't answer the queries of my faculty, staff and students. I try to keep us together, provide a network of intimacy to link us as human beings. I have lost a great deal and the losses are personal, professional, communal. As I was told in Brazil, this is not a physical but a spiritual battle. I am grateful for all I do have. I pray I can serve my university and city with selflessness and wisdom.