Georgia State University Law Review

Volume 32
Issue 3 *Spring 2016*

Article 2

May 2016

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Ambassador James A. Joseph

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Ambassador James A. Joseph*

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much, Madame Provost. I want to start with offering congratulations on holding this gathering, and I particularly want to commend Professor John Marshall for organizing it, and all his colleagues who organized it with him. You have no better resource about the legacy of New Orleans than John.

The luncheon speech reminds me of an experience I had when I was in the Carter administration. I was in the South Pacific to swear in the newly elected governor, and I was invited to address the joint session of the legislature. Just before I was scheduled to speak, I leaned over to the speaker of the assembly and said, "Mr. Speaker, how long do I have to speak?" He said, "Mr. Undersecretary, you are our guest, you may speak as long as you wish. However, I must caution you that in about twenty-five to thirty minutes the lights are scheduled to go off across the island."

I know that this nice new building would not have that problem, but if you lend me your ear for about twenty-five to thirty minutes, I

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want to offer a few observations that come out of my experience as a former chair of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, and as one who was born and raised in Louisiana.

Psychiatrist and writer Scott Peck once wrote, "We build community out of crisis and we build community by accident, but we do not know how to build community by design." The problem with building community out of crisis, he argued, is that once the crisis is over, so usually is the spirit of community.

Nowhere has there been a better test of this hypothesis than in the ten years since Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast; displacing over one million people, damaging more than a million homes, and taking 1800 lives. While there are many ways to consider the lessons learned, my own reflection is through the lens of three distinct responses to the disaster: relief, recovery, and reform.

I. RELIEF

The most immediate response was relief. It was the period in which the disaster was most dramatic, the public attention most pervasive, and the public response most immediate. Survival was at stake, and there was an outpouring of public support to provide relief from suffering and to maintain order. At this stage, individuals and governments from around the world contributed millions of dollars. Nonprofit organizations and charities contributed thousands of volunteers. It was also a period in which we learned much about the relationship between leadership and context. This was a stage that required strong, authoritarian leadership to bring order to the chaos.

II. RECOVERY

The next stage in the disaster response continuum was recovery, taking stock of what had happened, working together to return both private and public life to normalcy, and reinforcing the need for prevention and mitigation of future disaster. I returned to New Orleans several weeks ago along with people from around the world

to honor the lives lost, celebrate the resilience of Louisiana's people, assess the recovery efforts, and engage in dialogue about the future.

Mitch Landrieu, the mayor of New Orleans, reported that through resolve, determination, and commitment, the city had not only come back, but it was being built better and stronger than before. Many claim that New Orleans has become a national model for urban resilience. 74,000 new jobs have been created by the tourism industry alone. Nine billion dollars has been dispersed to 130,000 pre-Katrina homeowners to help rebuild their homes. And it is reported that the levies are stronger and higher with the world's largest drainage pumping station. For those who wonder about the culinary legacy, pundits are reporting that the gumbo has not lost its flavor and even the crawfish seem to taste better.

I could go on and on about the recovery data that was provided by the city of New Orleans indicating that it is one of the fastest growing cities in the country, that the economy is growing and diversifying, and that the city has become a virtual laboratory for the birth of new ideas about criminal justice reform, entrepreneurship, and more.

This is almost enough to make me want to go back home to Louisiana, but New Orleans is really the tale of two cities. There are the improvements in the quality of life that have enabled a part of the population to live better and feel better. But there is also a legacy of the recovery and its impact on the conditions that people in the other New Orleans emphasize. They are concerned about continuing racial and income disparities as well as limited access to education, jobs, and capital.

As President Clinton put it in his speech on the power of community on the fifth day of the commemoration:

> We can be happy about all that [has been accomplished], but there's a difference between being happy and being satisfied. There's a difference between being proud of having made your very best efforts and being satisfied that's all we can do now. It should not stop you from trying to erase the last

> manifestation of the color line, of the economic differences, of the education differences, of the health care differences.

The former president went on to say:

> You will not lose the history of jazz or dixieland. You can still dance your way down the street at the end of a burial. You will not lose who you are, if all of a sudden without regard to our race, we have the same chances at education, jobs, income, healthcare, and a future.

III. REFORM

So, what is the legacy of New Orleans that should be emphasized today as we consider how to build and rebuild community by design? How do we move beyond the idea of community as defined by place to the ideal of community as defined by a shared sense of belonging? These questions take us to the third response to the hurricane and the one with which I want to spend more time. It is probably best described as reform, and constitutes the central element of the unfinished agenda in New Orleans. It includes both a new paradigm for living with water and new practices for living with each other.

Following the 1927 floods, Herbert Hoover is reported to have described the reform stage as the most difficult and discouraging of all, for, as he put it, there is no longer the drama of catastrophe, the stimulation of heroism and laudable sacrifice. That has certainly been my experience in Louisiana. Private donors provided millions of dollars for relief, and the government provided billions of dollars for recovery, but neither group has been willing to provide much for reform. Scott Peck was right in this regard. Once the intensity of the crisis passed from daily drama to yesterday's emergency, so did the strong sense of community that had embraced all who shared the pain and suffering of Katrina.

It is this element of reform that is the most challenging. It is here where the emphasis on building community by design is the most timely and the most trying. New Orleans is a community of communities, a city of diverse neighborhoods rich in tradition and culture. The people of Louisiana are the original rainbow people. Few places in the world were more mixed racially and culturally than the area of southwestern Louisiana where I grew up. All of us, despite our differences in color, reflected in some way the fusion of Acadian and African culture with the equally varied cultures of the American Indians, Spaniards, French, Germans, Scots, Irish, English, Caribbean Islanders, and other Latin Americans who intermixed at various junctures to form what the local people call a cultural gumbo.

Those who seek to build community by design will need to understand that diversity need not divide, that pluralism rightly understood and rightly practiced is a benefit and not a burden, and that the fear of difference is a fear of the future.

E.J. Dionne wrote an eloquent book about our divided political heart. I am increasingly concerned about our divided civic heart. Two concepts of community traffic the streets of public memory. One emphasizes the centrality of the individual in the American narrative. The other emphasizes the centrality of community, how early Americans came together to build each other's barns and to take in the crops before the rains came. It may make us feel good to romanticize the lone ranger who conquered a hostile environment, but the sense of belonging and the feeling of obligation to a larger community had something to do with the kind of communities we built.

It is indeed odd that the tradition of community that the French visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, and others wrote about seem to have receded as an American affirmation. A primary calling of those of us in this audience as well as policymakers, opinion leaders, and those who help shape our self-image as a people is to help get the narrative right; to help bring back into balance the legitimate romance of rugged individualism with the equally legitimate effort to form

communities where individuals embrace, reaffirm, and take responsibility for supporting and promoting a common good.

It is when I look for a concept of community appropriate for metropolitan areas that are integrating and fragmenting at the same time that I think of what I learned from Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu as they sought to build a new South Africa. They were grounded in a concept of community best expressed by the Xhosa proverb, "People are people through other people," which is to say that my humanity is bound up in yours. What dehumanizes you, ultimately dehumanizes me. I belong to a greater whole, so I am diminished when others are diminished by oppression or treated as though they were less than who they are. It is not I think, therefore I am. It is I am because you are. I am fully human because I belong. I participate; I share because I am made for community. It is this notion of shared interdependence that led even early warring tribes in southern Africa to adopt what was called war healers, whose job it was to come together after a battle to initiate measures to restore both the victor and the victims into full standing in the community. It was said of some of Mandela's ancestors that they had a short memory of hate.

Many of the leaders of New Orleans, both in city hall and the neighborhoods, seem to agree that a major priority of the city going forward must be racial healing, social transformation, and sustainable reconciliation. It is not just a return to normalcy they seek. They want to rebuild New Orleans better than it was before the hurricane. And that may require both the affirmation of a set of public values and the implementation of a public process.

It was my good fortune to be in South Africa for both the early and more recent years of building a new democracy. I had a front row seat as the United States Ambassador as we worked with Nelson Mandela and other leaders to promote reconciliation. The public process they used was a truth and reconciliation commission where the emphasis was on reconciling conflicting images of the past as well as the alienation among groups. When we look in the United States at the monuments we maintain, the flags we wave, and the

history we teach, it is clear that we too will have to reconcile conflicting images of the past if we are to actively promote racial healing. Many Americans ask me whether I believe a truth and reconciliation commission would work in the United States. I do not pretend to have an answer to that question, but I like to share with them my perception on what worked and what failed in South Africa as well as the many dimensions of change that are required for sustainable transformation. And so we come to my final observation about building community by design. It is the need to understand that sustainable transformation has many dimensions, and reconciliation will need to take place on many levels, sometimes sequentially and sometimes simultaneously.

One element of emphasis in South Africa has been on the individual. Enduring reconciliation requires a kind of personal transformation that some observers call an existential rebalancing of the self. It begins with an awareness of the genesis of the alienation and includes coming to grips with historical illusions, dismantling deceptions, and eliminating misteachings. The poet William Wadsworth put it best when he wrote, that "to be mistaught is worse than to be untaught." Individual reconciliation must include, therefore, what one wise man called negotiating with one's memory and deciding which is to have the last word.

In South Africa, I heard a lot about the role of forgiveness in the reconciliation process. Both Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu argued that it is empowering to the victim of violence and often disarming to the perpetrator of violence. Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness or naiveté. It is actually a sign of strength and moral courage, the capacity to use soft power to transcend and transform even the worst forms of hard power. Nelson Mandela called it forgiveness, Martin Luther King called it respect for the humanity of the adversary, and President Barack Obama called it amazing grace. We saw this spirit in the aftermath of the shootings in Charleston, South Carolina last year where a horrendous act of violence hoping to cause a race war had just the opposite effect. The spirit of

forgiveness by the families of the victims galvanized local will and local action to heal and reform a divided community.

But while public acts of forgiveness and grace may be seductive and even disarming, they are rather limited unless they lead to a second element of reconciliation that is communal. It is about creating a public will, a public narrative, and public action that can lead to fundamental social transformation. This may require a public space for communication, providing opportunities for careful listening and deep conversations that enable people with profound differences to hear each other, respect each other, and begin the difficult work of building new relationships. But this is far more than simply agreeing to have coffee or a glass of wine together. It is an attempt to come to grips with what divides us in order to probe more deeply into what needs to be done to unify us and to develop a shared sense of interdependence.

The new pluralisms in both our metropolitan and micropolitan areas are less threatening when you understand that what most people want is the same thing you do. The black mystic, poet, and theologian Howard Thurman put it best when he said "I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you." That is it. I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you.

Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say, "I want to be an American without making it difficult for an African to be an African, an Asian to be an Asian, or a Latin American to be a Latin American?" Can you imagine how different our cities would be if more Christians were able to say "I want to be a Christian without making it difficult for a Jew to be a Jew, a Muslim to be a Muslim, or a Buddhist to be a Buddhist?"

For all of our oneness in spirit that we seek, the touchstone of human interaction begins with the human community. And that is why the third dimension of reconciliation is political. Different kinds of conflict require different forms and ways of reconciliation. Political reconciliation is not dependent on the kind of intimacy that other forms of reconciliation may demand. Rather statecraft and

constructive politics require peaceful co-existence based on respect for each other and civility toward each other. The sense of common purpose and shared obligation may come later, after the creation of confidence and the building of trust.

And so we come to the fourth or final element of building community by design. It is economic. I heard Desmond Tutu say often:

> In South Africa the whole process of reconciliation has been placed in very considerable jeopardy by the enormous disparities between the rich, mainly the whites, and the poor, mainly the blacks. The huge gap between the haves and the have-nots, which largely created and maintained by racism and apartheid, pose the greatest threat to reconciliation and stability in our country.

For those in South Africa and the United States who may be inclined to miss the meaning of Tutu's words, he goes on to say:

> Unless houses replace the hovels and shacks in which most blacks live, unless blacks gain access to clean water, electricity, affordable health care, decent education, good jobs, and a safe environment–things which the vast majority of the whites have taken for granted for so long–we can just as well kiss reconciliation good-bye.

These are not the words we tend to hear quoted from Tutu by those seeking reconciliation in the United States. There is a fascination with the ability of people of color to forgive, but very little is said about the need for economic reconciliation between the victims of past wrongs and those who have benefitted from those wrongs. Tutu has seen the political empowerment of the formerly oppressed majority outpace that of economic empowerment, so he is now

calling for a new social contract for shared prosperity. He understands that economic reconciliation remains the unfinished agenda of reconciliation.

When the founders of our nation wrote the American constitution, they recognized that their agenda was not yet finished, so they called on succeeding generations to continue their efforts to form a more perfect union. While those who wrote that constitution did not include people who look like me as full persons in their almost sacred document, they had the language right when they reminded us in the preamble that in order to form a more perfect union we would have to establish justice, and if we were to ensure domestic tranquility we would have to promote the general welfare. As I have traveled around the world, I have also learned that the best way to demonstrate the efficacy of our democratic system to critics abroad is to demonstrate that it can work equitably for all of our citizens at home.

CONCLUSION

There is much made of the resilience of the people of New Orleans, the failure of tragedy to break their spirit or diminish their resolve, the capacity to look beyond what they see and imagine alternative possibilities. Hope, for them, is not so much an act of memory as an act of imagination and faith. It is the realization that what they can imagine they can probably create. It is the kind of hope that Vaclav Havel had in mind when he said:

> I am not an optimist, because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist, because I am not sure that everything ends badly. I could not accomplish anything if I did not have hope within me, for the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.

So the ultimate lesson from Katrina may be that when you provide help you provide hope, and the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself. Thank you, and keep the faith.