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The Vision Has Its Time

CULTURE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN POSTDISASTER NEW ORLEANS

Carol Bebelle

Write the vision down plainly on tablets for the vision has its time, presses on to fulfillment and will not disappoint. If it delays wait for it for it will surely come.

—Habakuk 2:2

Katrina, or, the Federal Flood

In 2005, the American phenomenon of postdisaster living was created by Hurricane Katrina. Shifting in status from category 4 to a category 5, Katrina hit the Gulf of Mexico and caused catastrophic disaster all along the Gulf Coast. In New Orleans, the hurricane was a near miss. It had been reduced in velocity to a category 4. It stalled in the gulf near the mouth of the Mississippi River, then miraculously veered east, averting the perfect formula for a maximum destructive hurricane hit to New Orleans.

We had avoided the catastrophic storm, but we were not so lucky in escaping the incompetence of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the federal agency responsible for the poorly constructed and inadequate levee system. Depending on the source referenced, five-eighths to seven-eighths of the city of New Orleans was flooded in the unprecedented occurrence of, the shutdown of, and near destruction of an American city. Adding insult
to injury, the federal government then took six days—nearly a week—to organize a supposedly effective rescue response for American citizens in New Orleans trapped in a flood caused by federal negligence.

Ironically, propaganda has it that Katrina was the culprit. The clever use of the Katrina prefix on almost everything related to the disaster makes it hard for everyday folk to hold on to the fact that it was, indeed, a federal flood that accomplished the vast destruction in New Orleans. The Corps’ intentional unwillingness to accept responsibility laid the foundation for the inhumane, callous, and unjust way in which New Orleans has been handled in the wake of this tragic event. Blaming the victim has become high sport, and New Orleans is the game.

Culture, Front and Center

Americans were glued to their television sets in horror as people died and human dignity was compromised. But they also witnessed the activation of civic engagement. While New Orleanians, herded like cattle to evacuation centers and other cities, were trying to get their bearings and, more importantly, trying to regain control of their lives, an unprecedented volunteer response began to form. Government may have been lethargic in its response, but the American people were not. Starting with religious institutions of every kind, Americans were stepping up, front and center, to help their fellow citizens.

The American landscape is a stage on which life dramas have taken place throughout our history. This disaster, however, was the worst in the annals of American history in its scale and impact. This federal flood played out in a drama of epic proportions, and the influence, theme, character, and persona of racism were given unrestricted permission to improvise everywhere.

Unfortunately, a culture exists in America that supports racism, both institutional racism and individual racist behavior. The combination of these was visible in individual behaviors. What regard and respect were given to the humanity of one person over the other? What urgency was given to taking care of business for one kind of person versus another? How did institutions attend to the needs of people of color? What considerations existed for them? What prejudgments existed? How willing were these institutions to flex, expand, or otherwise adapt to give people of color a compassionate and humanitarian quality of service? How determined was the commitment to help them?
When we look at how people survived initially after the disaster, while the government was running in circles, getting nowhere fast, and trying to figure out what it was going to do, we saw individuals stepping up to, and sometimes stepping away from, their negative values and feelings toward the people who needed help in order to answer the call of humanity. These legions were not always organized to provide this type of relief service, but they accepted the mission and responsibility of having to do it. As a part of accepting this responsibility, the notion of *not* being successful became an unacceptable outcome. And so, with their deep commitment, they succeeded, checking their personal prejudices in inspiring human displays of kindness all over the American landscape. Individuals, families, friendship circles, businesses, and organizations beat a path to the Gulf South to give a helping hand and have the backs of their fellow Americans.

The Ashé (*pronounced* ah-shay) Cultural Arts Center (CAC), founded by Douglas Redd and me in 1998 and the place where I currently serve as executive director, is an emerging cultural institution in New Orleans, led by African Americans. We refashioned ourselves to make a greater contribution to the recovery and rebuilding effort in New Orleans. Our mission calls us to combine the intentions of community and economic development with the awesome creative forces of community, culture, and art to revive and reclaim a historically significant corridor of New Orleans’ Central City community, Oretha Castle-Haley Boulevard, formerly known as Dryades Street. After Hurricane Katrina, we expanded our reach to support the recovery, revival, and rebuilding of our city and region. One of our adapted programs, our Central City Tour, became a Rebuilding Tour, and we have hosted nearly five thousand volunteers, foundations, corporations, organizations, universities, high schools, and churches on this tour over the last three years.

This role has allowed us not only to see volunteers at work, but also to hear from them about their personal reactions and motivations toward the disaster and New Orleans. Over time, we have accumulated an organic, random sampling of people, not only those who came to help but those who returned to rebuild their city.

In addition to hosting tours, briefings, and orientation meetings for volunteers, funders, and investors. We also host hundreds of meetings of community groups and sponsor dialogues between and among leaders, elected officials, and New Orleans residents about what kind of rebuilding to do and how to do it. It is in this capacity that we have been able to see and hear their passion for justice. Powerful voices, in numbers, are de-
manding more fairness and consideration for folks who are still working their way back home.

This up-close-and-personal time with thousands of people in intimate samplings has helped us to see the fire of hope burning lively among those who have returned and those who have come to help. In fact, many of those who have come to help have decided to stay for a one-to five-year term to help with the rebuilding.

Many people view this opportunity as a defining moment in their lives. Making a contribution here and now as a resident of New Orleans or a volunteer gives great meaning to their lives on a personal level. Whether they independently sent their holiday money to families in need in New Orleans or asked that gift money for anniversaries and weddings be donated to causes in the city, it is clear that individuals across our nation have been touched by our plight and moved to action.

Families were adopted in the many locations where New Orleanians evacuated. At last count, forty-eight of the fifty states received evacuees. It is interesting and important to note that religious organizations, a spiritual manifestation of culture, were some of the first to come to the aid of displaced New Orleanians. All over the country, temples, churches, synagogues, and congregations stepped up to the plate and walked the walk that their religious principles espoused. Citizens of America lived up to both the value of democracy and the standards of their spiritual beliefs. This is an important observation because if people can rally themselves to cross social barriers, then surely we can motivate and cause institutions to do the same.

Putting Things in Context

It didn’t take long for the accumulation of disaster circumstances to combine and contemporize the African Maafa (Atlantic slave trade): the water, the boats, separated families that were herded to places that had no accommodations for human needs, including no water or food. The damage done in reopening those old wounds will be observed for many years to come. But the fallout also accomplished an undeniable validation, dramatically and before the nation, that there really are two faces to America. There is the “them that got face and the them that don’t got face.” No one can seriously dispute this after the federal flood in New Orleans.

If being right were enough, then we could rest on our victory of expos-
ing to America the existence of racism. This moment of truth serves us best as an opportunity to unite and commit to building a stellar, contemporary, American city. In New Orleans it is possible, with America’s help, to create a city of neighborhoods and communities, a city that models to the world the fulfillment of the promise of democracy.

But this opportunity, this possibility, this vision is not the current reality. The city is still full of patches of wilderness, it lacks infrastructure, and resources are being withheld ostensibly to assure that there is appropriate accountability. This is the present, the real deal. New Orleanians are frustrated, dispirited, depressed, and losing hope fast. But as dire as this picture is, it is also a fertile ground for cultural healing.

When times are hard, friends and family are away, and our backs are up against the wall, it is the spirit of song, story, memory, image, and creativity that keeps us going. These are pivotal aspects of culture, which, when combined with the spiritual, have the capacity to catapult people through the worst of circumstances. This formula has worked over and over again in human society in the civil rights movement, the Native American resistance movement, and more recently in South Africa, where music is credited with having been a driving force in toppling apartheid. The spirit of culture, song, dance, story, and image creates a spiritual force that energizes and motivates us to endure, move forward, and make it through to the other side.

In a city known around the world for culture that bubbles up from the streets, we need to “catch the spirit”; we need to put the devices of culture to work for us more dramatically. We need to create images of what New Orleans will be so that people can envision something they believe is worth putting forth greater effort for. We must create opportunities for people to gather and draw strength and motivation from each other. We must tell the stories of accomplishment as well as those of difficulty and frustration. We must give ourselves permission to be joyful, to dance, and to understand that this is all fuel for a path leading to better times.

We must also give children a view of adults who are able to emerge through difficulty so that the children can feel they have a future. We must not be afraid to hope or be optimistic out of a fear of being disappointed. Rather, we have to have the courage to dream of better times. We must learn the lesson of the football runner: “If you fail, fail forward reaching for the goal.”

Sociologists and psychologists long ago taught us the lesson of the
“self-fulfilling prophecy” *if I believe it, I can make it happen*. This works for us both positively and negatively. If we expect things to get better, they do. If we expect them to get worse, they do. We have to raise a legion of cultural cheerleaders who inspire and remind us that we can overcome this tragedy in our lives. This is a hard job, but it is not an impossible one. The active practice of culture in New Orleans gives us a bounty of spirit with which to work.

Volunteers saw the promise of hope and the wonderful opportunity to make a contribution. They realized they were a part of the winning formula for New Orleans. As New Orleanians, we have to find a way to reach this light of hope as well. We have to create prayers, mantras, songs, meditations, visualizations, dances, and stories for spiritual sustenance. We have to continue to lean on each other, trust each other, and be willing to be a blessing to each other. We also have to recognize the need to build our new city with the highest of hopes, standards, and expectations.

The good news is that we are on the way. When we were frustrated and being overlooked, we got roused and angry. We recognized the importance of standing up for ourselves and showing up to represent ourselves. The high level of involvement of residents in the planning processes and town hall meetings is an indication of community organizing at work. The establishment of neighborhood organizations for every neighborhood in New Orleans, and an organizing mechanism for these community groups, is cause for celebration. These are some of the details of how we dream a new city that works for everyone. This is some of the evidence of community engagement in New Orleans at present.

**The New New Orleans**

The new New Orleans is something wonderful to ponder. Imagine all the things we thought were wrong and then fix them. That’s the opportunity we have with this rebuilding effort. We need only to have the courage to dream and then to work to make what we dream come true. This is not an easy process, but it is a doable one. Marianne Williamson, a noted author and therapist, stated:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?
This staggering irony of needing to believe in ourselves and each other more than counting on our leaders to produce a decent quality of life for us can be paralyzing. It is certainly not the most recent and accepted view of our individual circumstances in the world.

In this scenario, the job for Ashé CAC is to help call to the forefront the power within. We can encourage people to identify and bring forth a can-do mental attitude and spirit. Using the prism of history, we work to make visible the insight that struggle and a tumultuous existence have been both the cauldron and the womb of fantastic creativity.

New Orleans has been shaped by immigrant communities and the lives of their ancestors, both those who came willingly and those who were snatched up and brought here as labor to help to build New Orleans. Their lives form the foundation of New Orleans and are testimony to the life lessons that struggle and perseverance teach us.

The poor and disenfranchised left their mark on New Orleans. We still have the Irish Channel and, more recently, Little Vietnam. The Haitians and other Caribbean people and the West Africans made indelible contributions to the city’s culture and folkways. Even today New Orleans has the reputation of being the most African city in America, affectionately called the uppermost part of the Caribbean. There is a reciprocity and responsibility that should come with being the recipient of such good fortune from “a goose that lays such large and juicy golden eggs.”

It is scandalous that Mardi Gras Indians, Second Line Clubs, and the traditional folkways and rituals of this city are now up for grabs by anyone who cares to benefit from them. The culture masters and culture bearers share their gifts generously, sometimes too generously. Their style is warm and giving, and they are authentic and considerate. This includes the thousands of restaurant and hotel workers who provide warmth and special treatment to the millions of visitors to our city. Where are the considerations for them? In New Orleans, we get to know you and like you and then we invite you in closer. If you don’t watch it, soon we are calling you “Boo” and you are on your way to being like family.

More than half of what the tourism industry makes from this city derives from the ambiance and allure of New Orleans’ authentic neighborhood culture. Yet government and business entities, and many middle- and upper-class residents, don’t appreciate these contributions and definitely don’t feel a need to invest in, understand or accept the contribution that the workforce and tradition bearers make to their personal lives and prosperity. Therefore, like the federal government’s bureaucracy, they fail to
invest in the evolution and preservation of the culture and its bearers. Reciprocity is appallingly absent despite the fact that it is in the best interest of the tourism industry, one of the city’s leading economic engines. There isn’t a place for authentic culture bearers at the distribution table, but often they are a main entrée on the menu.

As a consequence, the culture makers and bearers are left to their own devices to preserve and grow the culture that inspires and supports the robust tourism economy. So imagine this: we have a golden goose, in danger of starving, that is laying big golden eggs for others. It makes you wonder, then, how the goose can create such great fortune when it is on the verge of starving. What could that goose create if it were fed?

Or, better still, imagine hotel and restaurant workers who earn livable salaries, wages and benefits that can keep a family financially stable. Imagine neighborhood studios with Mardi Gras Indians and Second Line Clubs where tourists and our young people get the opportunity to learn from the traditions that have been passed down for generations. Imagine cross-generational events and activities that allow community elders to contribute their wisdom and experience to youth and the community as a whole rather than being afraid to sit on their porches or to interact with young people in their neighborhoods.

As far as education is concerned, we were in trouble before the disaster and in deeper trouble now. Our schools are insufficient to meet the needs of our children. Lifelong learning is a necessary life skill, but we can’t even teach our youth to learn let alone teach the adults. Before the disaster, we held the distinction of having a 40 percent illiteracy rate. In a democracy where choice is the preeminent freedom, how do we assure choice for people who can’t access the information for analysis? This scandal of illiteracy is a huge compromise to the ideal and doctrine of democracy, and yet we tolerate it. Why?

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have small schoolhouses in each neighborhood while the damaged schools are being repaired or rebuilt? This could also be the answer for youth who need alternative environments and styles of learning even after the mainstream schools are restored. Imagine being close to home in a small setting where the community is welcome to help. And there could be computer centers that serve as university distance-learning stations for adults.

Imagine mentoring and tutoring programs that are plentiful in every community and service learning and mentoring programs aimed at expos-
ing young people to diverse work environments. Think about lunchtime at work as an opportunity to eat and learn in general equivalency diploma (GED) classes and community college courses on work premises. What if employees were given incentives to attend educational programs? In postdisaster New Orleans, we need to consider intimacy as a critical variable of quality service in education and many other pivotal institutional areas.

In postdisaster New Orleans, our health systems are greatly strained or absent. We have too few hospitals, hospital beds, doctors, nurses, and other health professionals. Mental health services are virtually nonexistent at a time when stress, depression, and emotional breakdowns are on an anticipated and alarming rise. We are constrained by the lack of access to mental health services and in jeopardy of more and more self-destructive behavior and the emotional blowups that often turn violent.

The job market is active, but the cost of both home ownership and renting has skyrocketed. So the jobs may be plentiful, but where are people supposed to live? We are two hundred thousand persons less, and the business landscape suffers mightily from their absence. Couldn’t we create vouchers for hotel rooms and rooming houses both to assist folks in the back-and-forth necessary to handle the business of returning home and to serve the needs of displaced New Orleanians who either are employed or would be if they had a place to live?

Our city government is on the verge of bankruptcy! Where is the investment to assure that it won’t happen? Are we reorganizing and creating competitive salary scales to entice our city workforce to return and to attract other specialists to help us out of the distress in which we find ourselves? The city cannot operate without a sufficient tax base.

Imagine our most fertile minds solving these problems and meeting the other challenges before us. Imagine us determined to create a better New Orleans, one that offers equal opportunity and a menu of services enviable throughout the world. Imagine a thriving creative and cultural economy. Imagine a startling recovery in the schools. Imagine the institutions for incarceration graduating high school and community college inmates. Imagine jobs being available to the incarcerated when they are released. Imagine our human capacities and resources being used to the maximum. Imagine a contemporary American city morally, socially, and politically meeting the democratic standard of by and for the people with liberty and justice for all.

Suppose we ponder these things and our very thoughts become small
fragments of possibility, which, when combined, create reality. Suppose this is the way it works. If this is so, then couldn’t focusing on the potential for failure indeed create failure?

Assuring Success

How do we continue to support an engaged community in times like these? Is there a surefire success formula? No, there isn’t. But there are several proven strategies for keeping the community’s attention. The first rule is obvious: use the efforts that people bring and then deliver on their work. The people have spoken in neighborhood, district and city plans. Implement them. The people must recognize that this is a “chicken or egg” process. Being involved and active generates action and change. The converse is also true: no community pressure, no change. “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.”

For individuals, the process is more spiritual and emotional. We must frame our day with possibility. We can’t look at the shape we are in every day and just wish that things were different. We must create our daily to-do lists; they are the fuel for our engines. When we complete our lists, we will see progress in our personal lives, and that progress will make us feel better. Feeling better will energize us, and our combined energy will sustain the activism. Our lists will also better prepare us to seek and receive help from engaged fellow Americans who are still looking for ways to help us out of our crisis.

One of the most important aspects of culture is its ability to adapt to people’s needs; isolate certain desires, needs, and feelings; and immortalize them in ritual. In this period of redevelopment for our city, an important role for Ashé CAC is to assist in the development of new cultural rituals, to adapt old ones, and to allow the community to influence and participate in the conversion processes. It is important for creativity to be given its freest rein in all neighborhoods in order to demonstrate what is possible and doable in destroyed and damaged neighborhoods. Seeing is believing.

The Ashé CAC should be committed to collecting resources and fueling artists and tradition bearers in their efforts to reestablish their homes and create ripple effects of creative energy to support fellow New Orleanians as they attempt to return to their neighborhoods and communities.

We should be producing and presenting an active schedule of cultural, community, and art activities and events that allow people to come to-
gether to refuel their spirits and be inspired by the success of returning evacuees. We should be listening to members of the community and immortalizing their thoughts, insights, and feelings in art. And we should be encouraging them to discover their own creative talents. Creativity is sorely needed in our efforts to rebuild our neighborhoods and heal our souls after this great tragedy.

It takes a lot of cultural energy to convert depression, despair and frustration into positive energy, and we must call forth cultural traditions that can be useful during this very trying time. Dancing, drumming, visual art, theater, poetry, music, filmmaking, and writing are all ways to help people process their experiences, generate strategies, and enliven their spirits. This is a time when we should be full of culture and creativity.

We should be redoubling our efforts to reach our youth and work to support teachers in their efforts to inspire young people to pursue an education. We should demonstrate our deep and abiding belief in the power of culture and creativity, and we should be creating and manipulating culture so that it can effectively fill its rightful role: revisioning, rethinking, and healing our community. The Ashé CAC fully embraces its role as an advocate for the community, the culture, and the right of people to be creative.

We are so steeped in the left-brain region of analysis: plans, facts, figures, projections. Well, it may sound great and it may make us feel like we are getting things done, but the irony is that with the best formula in the world the thing that makes the formula, the strategy, the plan a reality is the activists, the “somebodies,” who are willing to become emboldened with the spirit of determination to get things done. When it gets hard, not putting it down and keeping on with it is where the spiritual fortitude comes in. Culture is the pathway to that resource and energy.

Spiritual fortitude and character are usually formed by families and inspired as ideals kick into play. It’s the cultural and spiritual connections, the values our family demonstrated and taught us, that determine our ability to struggle, to live with disappointment, to find peace and joy in the worst of circumstances, and to imagine our way through hard times so that we can see our way through the dream into a new reality.

The Ashé CAC has positioned itself on the cultural and creative landscape of New Orleans. If we had our way, we’d help mamas learn lullabies again so they could take the fear out of, and the edge off, their children’s days, so they could sleep at night restfully and wake up in the morning without having to carry adult fears and worries. We’d find ways for men to learn to be sweet to their women again. We’d help to find ways to direct
and assist teachers, once again, to discover the joy of opening a door to knowledge to someone and watch them explode and leap. We’d help elders regain their rightful place of respect and love in the community. We’d bring people together to hear music and ideas that help them make it through this difficult time.

Something’s gone terribly wrong. And we keep jumping over it and around it and not getting to it. There is tension between young people and elders. It’s the tension of the young people becoming their own individual selves and not being told what to do by others and the adults in their lives wanting to be sure that the young don’t make costly mistakes. This is a natural tension. However, there is another tension at work in the community that is insidiously bad. It’s the tension caused by young people living lawless lives that are unnaturally short because they can’t count on the adults to create a world that has more to offer them. We must do something to reverse this trend.

We see the need for young people to succeed. They need encouragement and validation. We need to look at their art and their lifestyles to reinforce and validate them. They have evolved a mature, almost cynical view of life. This is due, in great part, to our failure to create a life for them that has more promise. Poor schools, no work skills, and no legitimate access to resources lead to frustration, depression, and desperate, lawless behavior.

Artists and tradition bearers are ready to use their creative spirits as healing balm in every place that needs it. They would practice their brand of trash-to-treasure conversion on neighborhoods, schools, people, and spirits. This community of artists and tradition bearers can see the brand new day, the new possibilities. This vision makes us hopeful and spirit filled. We would gladly infect the whole community given the chance.

Our greatest challenge in this rebuilding phase is the challenge of imagination, faith, and spirit. Armed with vision and committed action, we can, and we will, succeed.