REFLECTIONS ON DISPLACEMENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA

Arnold R. Isaacs

Note: This report is based on the proceedings at ACIA's conference on "Critical Incidents Analysis: Displacement as an Obstacle to Recovery," held in New Orleans, Louisiana, June 9-11, 2010. Quotations from the conference transcript have in some instances been slightly edited for greater clarity and to eliminate repetition or extraneous material.

Refugees

We were no longer citizens of the United States. We were refugees. We were herded like cattle, we had to go through checkpoints, we had to be frisked. We had to stand outside of porta-potties to guard the doors for each other. It didn't matter that we were people who worked in the hospital. We were combined with the people from the housing projects. We were all put together. So Katrina really was the great equalizer. It didn't matter that I came from an affluent African American community here in New Orleans; it didn't matter that I worked at the hospital. We were given a ration of food, we were all equal.

– Denise Johnson

We don't see Katrina as the storm. We see the government as the storm. We see FEMA as the storm….Basically I feel that I was not displaced by the storm, I was displaced by the government. I've been carrying the stresses of all the unresolved issues. I feel that the government has left too much unresolved that we, the displaced people are carrying. But we can't resolve it without what I call the therapy of justice. Because we haven't been treated justly and our situation has not been treated with caring.

– Harold Toussaint

About PTSD, they say that is very common among Katrina survivors, that we suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. But it's not post. The trauma isn't over so it's not post-traumatic stress disorder.

– Parnell Herbert

When we hear the word "refugees," Americans usually think of populations and landscapes far from the United States. We envisage blue-plastic tent cities housing Africans who have fled war or famine or Haitians displaced by an earthquake, or swirls of smoke and dust over

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slow-moving columns of overloaded trucks and oxcarts and peasants on foot escaping from violence or a flood in Pakistan. Or, from an earlier era, we might remember desperate families waving from the decks of flimsy fishing boats tossing in the South China Sea. Rarely do we connect the word with Americans or any American experience. But it is the right word for hundreds of thousands of Americans displaced from New Orleans and the surrounding territory that was struck by Hurricane Katrina in the late summer of 2005.[*]

How many people were made refugees by Katrina? Writing about the storm's effects (and those from Hurricane Rita, which slammed into the Gulf Coast just a few weeks later) the authors of a Brookings Institution report observed that "the population dispersal they induced was the largest the United States has experienced during such a brief moment in time." A U.S. government study estimated that the number of individuals aged 16 and over who left their homes because of Katrina was slightly more than 1.5 million, about three-quarters of them in Louisiana. A majority were able to return to their homes relatively quickly, in a few days or weeks. But approximately 450,000 people from the region were still displaced at the end of 2005. In the city of New Orleans alone, Census Bureau estimates in the summer of 2006 showed nearly a quarter million fewer residents than the pre-Katrina population, a decline of more than half. The surrounding suburbs showed a decline of nearly 60,000 additional residents. New Orleans had been losing population at the rate of more than 5,000 a year since the start of the decade, so not all of the missing people could be assumed to have fled because of Katrina; But clearly the great majority had left for that reason, and remained displaced nearly a year later.[1]

How many were still displaced in 2010 — and how many could still be called refugees — is difficult to measure with any precision. Pending the release of the official 2010 census results, the most recent Census Bureau estimate showed the city's population had rebounded to 355,000, almost 80 percent of the pre-Katrina level, but a significant part of the increase represented newcomers, not returning refugees.[2] Nor was there any way to know how many of those who had left because of the storm still wanted or planned to come back, and how many were permanently relocated in new communities. Both groups might still be called refugees, perhaps, in the sense that they had migrated unwillingly from their old homes. But if those in the latter group were no longer in the refugee stage of their lives, the memories and consequences and emotions of displacement still had powerful effects even while they were putting down new roots in new places. Among African American refugees, who made up a disproportionate number of the long-term displaced, one significant emotion was a lasting anger at a portrayal that unfairly painted them as predominantly looters and criminals who became a burden on the public largely because they were too ignorant or irresponsible to save themselves.

Those memories and consequences and emotions — and the role they play in the official, social, and individual response to a traumatic event — were the focus of three days of discussion in New Orleans on June 9, 10, and 11, 2010, on the theme "Displacement as an Obstacle to Recovery." Organized by the Academy for Critical Analysis at John Jay College of the City University of New York, the meeting brought together members of the New Orleans community and participants drawn from a variety of fields including mental health, emergency response management, public administration and leadership, sociology and media studies, and journalism. This was ACIA's second case conference, following its July 2009 discussions on the aftermath of the shooting rampage by a mentally ill student that took 33 lives at Virginia Tech University in April, 2007.

A critical incident, as defined by Dr. Frank M. Ochberg, the creator of the concept, "is a relatively brief occurrence involving injury, loss, conflict, discovery or change of significant

proportion, usually unscripted and unanticipated, with the potential to alter existing societal norms. Critical incidents are usually traumatic, threatening the bonds of trust that bind communities, but may be positive, initiating historic consequences." ACIA, established at John Jay College in 2009 with the support of the Dart Foundation, seeks to promote and disseminate multidisciplinary scholarly research relating to the emergence, management and consequences of critical incidents. For that purpose it sponsors scholarship and research, hosts conferences and symposia, and maintains research archives of incident information.

By definition, critical incidents involve the wider society, not only those directly affected. That makes the broader social context a crucial subject for analysis, along with the particular details of the event. In New Orleans, a poor city with a two-thirds African American majority, matters of race, poverty and social class were and remain prominent in the Katrina story — relevant to the population's experience of the storm itself, and just as relevant to the numerous and complicated post-disaster issues of rebuilding, resettlement and return, and community and individual recovery. "Katrina killed whites as much as blacks, it killed rich as much as poor," said cardiologist Keith C. Ferdinand, "but what people do not understand is that the lingering impact of Katrina is very disproportionate in the black community." Notably, the problems of long-term displacement appeared to have affected African Americans far more than whites. In the initial evacuations, whites and blacks were represented roughly in proportion to their numbers in the population, but a much higher percentage of whites managed to return to their homes during the first year after the storm, while blacks disproportionately remained displaced. A Bureau of Labor Statistics study summarized the disparity as of October 2006:

> Although the demographic composition of evacuees reflects the composition of prestorm residents of the Katrina-affected region, the probability of returning varies considerably by demographic group…. Several demographic groups, including blacks, persons who had never married, and persons with lower levels of education, were much less likely to return than were individuals in other racial, marital, or educational groups. Specifically, 54 percent of black evacuees returned to their pre-Katrina counties, compared with 82 percent of white evacuees; and 61 percent of never-married evacuees returned, compared with 78 percent of married evacuees. The differences among educational groups are less marked, but the estimates indicate that evacuees without a high school diploma were less likely to return than were those with more education.[3]

Three years later, though the city was still majority black, the percentage of African Americans in the population remained lower than before Katrina (61 percent as opposed to 68 percent before the storm). The percentage of poor people was also lower: the 2008 poverty rate of 23 percent, while well above the national average, was the lowest for New Orleans in three decades, according to a study released by the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. The study's authors noted that "Post-Katrina, the city is now home to a broader number of households from across the income spectrum, specifically a higher share of middle-class families and upper-income families than before the storm."[4] While it is not the only factor, the disproportionate continuing displacement of African Americans is clearly reflected in those demographic changes.

Racial and class divides lay not just between different groups of displaced people. They also lay between many victims of the storm and the institutions and agencies that were

responsible for dealing with their problems. In the acute phase of the disaster, these included civilian and military emergency responders, law enforcement, FEMA and military authorities, and public and private disaster relief organizations. In the aftermath, they included city and regional governments, planners, developers and other business and neighborhood interests seeking to guide and shape the rebuilding of the devastated city. To a significant extent, both during the crisis and in the reconstruction effort, a profound sense of "them and us" separated large segments of the displaced population from those who were supposed to be their rescuers from the storm or their supporters in the long process of recovery. The same sense divided many African Americans from much of the national media and others they believed, often with very good reason, had unfairly stigmatized their community with highly exaggerated or completely unfounded reports of crime and looting during the crisis. To many, the stigma reflected not just careless or unreflective racial stereotyping but also a deliberate shifting of responsibility — taking blame away from officials and agencies who botched the response to the disaster, and putting it on the victims instead.

Feelings of anger and alienation emerged frequently in the narratives of a group of survivors who told their stories during ACIA's conference. Parnell Herbert, an activist, artist and playwright, commented that "government decision-makers had as much to do with what happened in New Orleans as the storm" — a belief expressed by others as well. "The prime example," Herbert recalled, was the authorities' decision to seal off all the buildings in several major public housing projects slated for demolition. Residents were not let back in even though the structures were still standing after the flood — as the people who had lived there and in neighboring communities expected they would, since the buildings had withstood earlier disasters.

"People who lived around town would come to the projects because they knew they could stand," Herbert said. "I grew up in the projects over there and we knew." But after the Katrina flooding, "the National Guard, the city, the state police would go out to the projects" and order people away, often at gunpoint. "You were not allowed to return to your home at all to get any of your belongings. So people displaced in Houston and other places, and after having experienced all that they had went through, the trauma of the flood, the hurricane and then the trauma of getting displaced, the trauma of being in a new city where you're not welcome, they were forced to deal with the fact that their homes were going to be destroyed and that they would not be allowed to go back to get their belongings." In the end "the projects were destroyed with people's belongings still inside." Herbert's conclusion: "The government didn't want the people back."

A federal court decision in August 2010 appeared to support, at least by implication, the view that recovery efforts were skewed in favor of the affluent and against poorer residents, and thus against African Americans. Ruling that Louisiana's formula for awarding grants to repair homes damaged in Katrina was unfair to black homeowners, U.S. District Court Judge Henry H. Kennedy, Jr., declared that "statistical and anecdotal evidence" submitted in the court proceedings "leads to a strong inference that, on average, African American homeowners received awards that fell farther short of the cost of repairing their homes than did white recipients." Opinions about reconstruction efforts were also sharply divided. Five years after Katrina, according to a poll taken by the Kaiser Family Foundation, whites were much more likely than blacks to take a positive view of the city's and their own recovery. While 42 percent of African Americans reported that their lives were still disrupted by the storm, only 16 percent of whites felt that way.[5] (Of course, refugees can feel anger and alienation for reasons having

nothing to do with racial and class differences. A common consequence of any traumatizing event is an isolating feeling that other people don't understand — a feeling that can easily turn into anger. Sandy Rosenthal recalled that after she and her family were evacuated from New Orleans to Lafayette, La., she encountered "a woman who was trying to be nice to me and tell me a story that showed she had empathy for me, and she said 'yeah, I know just how you feel, two years ago, luckily nobody was home but my house got hit by a tornado, it was horrible.' My husband and I didn't say anything but we were very angry because how can you compare your house being hit by a tornado, which is insured, you know, to what we've been through. We've lost everything, entire neighborhoods. I'm starting to get emotional, but where's my son going to go to school? How am I going to earn a living? The woman she said she had to move into her mother's house because of the tornado. But in New Orleans after the levees broke, our parents' homes were flooded too! She had no idea. It is difficult, it is a challenge to get people to understand. It is difficult. And I wake up every day wondering how we can make people understand.")

Working The System

One reason why Katrina's consequences were disproportionately bad for African Americans is that they were often disadvantaged in getting assistance that should have been available. Those with less education and social status were less able to navigate the system and get benefits that could have helped them rebuild homes and lives. Cardiologist Keith C. Ferdinand, who was born and grew up in the Ninth Ward, lost his life work when the Heartbeats Life Center, which he and his wife Daphne founded and ran for 21 years in the Ninth Ward community, was ruined in the Katrina flooding. The flood also destroyed the first floor interior of their home. As devastating as those losses were, Ferdinand pointed out, with his education and means, he was better able to seek recovery from the financial loss than most people in the Lower Ninth:

There were certain monies you could get from Red Cross, FEMA. So I found out where the FEMA location was in Atlanta. I went down there. There was a guy in all black with a big military gun who was turning people away and said no more, do it online. Put your heads back to August 2005. The literacy gap in terms of computers is always wide, but back then it was even wider. You're telling these so-called refugees, evacuees, whatever you want to call them, now you gotta do it online. Well, if you have a college education or if you have the means, you can figure out how to work the system. Some of the best progress in New Orleans has been in institutions like Tulane, some of the private schools, etc., and I'll tell you why. Nothing illegal, but they're able to work the system. They're able to go into the computers, work the FEMA system, get the FEMA grants and insurance money. Many of the working class people I know were unable to access the insurance money, the government money. Basically they felt that whatever they got was whatever they got and they were happy to get it….

I'm personally fine. I know how to work the system. The insurance people, they tried to say it was all water and flood insurance and that's all they'll give you. Flood insurance capped at $250,000. I had medical equipment worth a million

> *and a half dollars. $250,000 just made me feel worse. But I'm educated, I have means. So I got an attorney and I sued and I got together documents proving that I had what I had. And I know they didn't believe me because when they put it in the computer and it says zip code 70177 which is the Ninth Ward and the lower Ninth Ward, I know they thought, this claim pops up and this guy's gotta be scheming, there's nothing down there worth that much money. So they refused my claim.*
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> *They sent in a guy from Chicago, nice suit, briefcase. Middle-aged white guy. We meet at one of these big law offices. And there's a court reporter and they're going to take my deposition. Now I know they're not interested in taking my deposition. They want to show me the fear of going against a big company and they're going to use all their powers to fight my claim. So we went through all the certifications, board certified in cardiology, internal medicine, nuclear cardiology. I do all that stuff. I was never that impressed with formal education, I just did it. But I say to him, you can take my formal deposition but I'm going to court. I know all the judges, most of the people know me and know I had what I had, and even if there wasn't flooding there was no electricity. These things were computer-based, they had chips in them, there are boards in them. I lost all my equipment so you can either pay me and if you don't pay me we'll go to court and I'll sue you and I'll win. I'll pay 30 percent to this guy and then I'm going to sue you for damages.*
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> *Guy teared up a little bit because he was sent there to try to size me up. I later found out from the justice that that was indeed why they send people for these deposition hearings, to size up the person and how serious they are about their claim. So about ten days later I got a call from a lady in their national office and she said, "I looked you up on the internet and you're really a good guy. You were really doing a lot so we're going to take care of your claim." So don't cry for me, I feel fine. But don't forget the thousands of people who died and who have suffered so much due to hurricane Katrina. And it wasn't the same for everyone, Race and class had a lot to do with that.*

Parnell Herbert, Harold Toussaint, Denise Johnson, and the Rev. Aldon Cotton were speakers on a panel organized for ACIA by D'Ann Penner and Keith Ferdinand, co-editors of a remarkable oral history collection, *Overcoming Katrina: African American Voices from the Crescent City and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2009). Fuller versions of their stories of Katrina, the evacuation and the aftermath appear in the book along with accounts of 23 others (including Ferdinand) who went through the storm and subsequent displacement.

Their presentations to the ACIA audience brought out several themes relating to the refugee experience. One could be phrased this way: *People are not just displaced from where they were. They are also displaced from who they were.* Refugees typically have lost status, as well as belongings — and the former loss can be the more painful. When you leave your home and your work and your neighborhood, you also leave behind many of the things that identify you to the rest of the world. You no longer have the networks of friends and neighbors and workmates who know who you are and what you do. You are without the job that defines how

you support yourself and spend your days, and that locates you in your society and gives a structure and purpose to your life. You still have the same knowledge and experience and qualifications, but many of those around you don't know about them.

Aldon Cotton, pastor of Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church — still in the last stage of constructing its new home, five years after the storm — described having to resume his identity as a preacher but without having the respectable clothes that would make him look like one. "It happened in Greenville, Mississippi," he related, "that I met up with another church and they wanted me to do their Bible study. So I showed up in just a T-shirt and looking kind of rough and I could see, I could feel the stares, I could tell they were thinking, `who is this guy?' And it just so happened that in the Bible study the very passage we were discussing was chapter 2 of James that says don't judge people by their clothes.[**] So I said, you all could've been judging me dressed like this, coming in from New Orleans, and from that point I taught that class every Thursday." There is, of course, a crucial difference between losing identity externally and losing it internally. As Rev. Cotton explained later, he never lost sight of who he was. "It is knowing who I am and Whose I am that keeps me focused, no matter where I am. The fact that I didn't have on a suit and tie did not mean I was not God's preacher."

Not having clothes reflecting professional status might seem a fairly trivial matter, but the sense of losing identity, of being viewed only through the lens of stereotype and as one of an undifferentiated mass, was anything but trivial for many New Orleans refugees. As D'Ann Penner pointed out that was what the refugees saw when their own experience was reflected back to them through news reports.

Penner identified "three typical storylines that emerged from the news media after New Orleans flooded." The first told of a disintegrating society, characterized by the image of "a young black man with the flat screen TV and shooting at helicopters." Only several weeks later, Penner said, did journalists begin to acknowledge "that reports of rampant crime and violence were either taken entirely out of context or were grossly exaggerated." The second storyline, she went on, "was reserved for brave and resourceful hurricane Katrina heroes, who were predominantly white if you trusted the media." And the third wave of stories after Katrina "focused on destitute black New Orleanians or so they seemed after surviving a hurricane, living without air conditioning for several days and wading through deep water with their salvageable belongings. This motif confused the working poor and lower working class blacks with the chronically unemployed and supposedly indolent underclass."

Rescuers, as well as the national TV audience, often tended to see refugees as stereotypes too. That is probably why when a National Guardsman asked Harold Toussaint to walk over and wave down a unit of passing federal troops to tell them he needed help, they never let him get close enough to pass on the message. Instead, they trained M16 rifles on him and ordered him to get back. As Toussaint recounted the incident in *Overcoming Katrina*, he felt the troops regarded him as an enemy combatant. "All these federal police saw was that I was black, and blacks are criminals. That's what I got from them when we needed them most. It was very discouraging to be treated as an enemy combatant rather than someone who needed to be rescued."

Denise Johnson was an evacuee because she had chosen to stay on her job at Charity Hospital to care for her family and her patients and not because she didn't have the means or the sense to leave, as many assumed about New Orleans refugees. Once the hospital was evacuated, though, no one knew that about her. Instead, she was just one more anonymous unit in the mass of displaced humanity — and treated that way, with no recognition of her courage or the harrowing experiences she had gone through.

"I volunteered to stay for the storm, at the time I was on staff as a nurse at Charity Hospital," Johnson (who went on after Katrina to get a clinical doctorate in medicine) told the ACIA audience. "I volunteered to stay because my husband had sickle cell anemia, so at that time he was in a lot of pain. So I said I'm willing to volunteer to stay, can you use me? And they said are you kidding? I was thinking to myself, I've ridden out every other storm, this will just be another storm and I'll be back home on Monday. And everything went well and then suddenly, I think it was late Monday night or early in the morning Tuesday, all of a sudden the water started coming up. We were standing on the balcony across from University Hospital and we could actually see the water coming up. As a matter of fact there was a gentlemen standing next to a stop sign, and we were calling to him, 'come on up to the hospital, come on in,' and he was holding on to the stop sign and said, 'I can't swim.' So he wouldn't move and the water started to rise up around him and there wasn't anything we could do because we were trying to get him to come in and within a matter of minutes this fellow drowned right in front of us just holding on to a stop sign. Because he couldn't move."

The hospital "was like a nightmare," Johnson went on. "… No running water, no lights. The stench, the bodies floating in the water." Afterward, she added, "it took a year just to get my six-year-old grandchild to take a bath because she wouldn't get in the water. She was in the hospital and she wouldn't get in the water after that. She just assumed if she took a bath she was going to die. She had to go to therapy to encourage her to get in a bathtub and it really took a year."

Four or five days into their ordeal, someone found a working cell phone. Johnson related: "I called my brother and he said 'where are you?' Because all the news networks had said that all the hospitals had been evacuated. And I said no, we're still here. And he said no you can't be there, CNN and all the networks said you're gone…. We were all so scared. They had actually taken the prisoners out, evacuated the prisoners. I don't know if you're aware of how the prison system works but they get paid for every prisoner the state has in their custody. We had watched them with these machine guns taking their prisoners out. And they said we'll come back to get y'all. So in the next days we saw helicopters landing everywhere and helicopters landing on top of buildings to rescue people. And to this day it's hard to talk about because it makes me so furious what really happened."

Johnson and other staff members who had volunteered to stay — many, like her, accompanied by family members who had also taken refuge in the hospital — struggled to take care of patients in stifling heat, with no lights, no power for the ventilators in the intensive care unit, no hot food, no running water after the first day or two. "After a point," she said with remarkable understatement, "we got tired." Along with being tired, they also grew fearful, as days passed without rescue, that nobody would ever come to get them out. When a flotilla of small craft finally appeared to evacuate the hospital, Johnson's husband, 16-year-old son, daughter and grandchildren got on the boats while she remained on duty. "I stayed in the hospital; I watched every patient get evacuated from the hospital and I stayed until the very end." When she finally left, the boat ride to waiting evacuation buses left a final chilling memory: "you could hear the bodies in the water thumping up against the side of the boat."

Rescue workers told her not to be concerned about being separated from her family. "They said don't worry about it, you'll all end up in the same place. Just get on the bus." In fact it took three days before she found the rest of the family — three days that still make Johnson angry when she remembers them. "The treatment I received from the time I got on the bus until I got to Texas was inhumane. It was just inhumane." Even after she was reunited with her husband

and other family members and given temporary shelter in a comfortable home in an affluent Houston neighborhood, more painful experiences awaited, much of the pain coming from being seen not as who she was but only as one of an undesirable group of refugees.

"The treatment that we received there was also a big disappointment. Because here we are in an affluent white community, we were black, and they were thinking, they knew why we were there, they were thinking who's paying for this black family to live in our nice gated community? The children in the neighborhood harassed my grandson, other children said they thought that all black people live in the projects and they don't belong here. And the most hateful thing of all of it was the word 'nigger' being written on my car."

"We were already down because of what we had been through. The traumatic experience of the boat as we're trying to get to the bus to get out of the city. We've already been herded like cattle and treated like refugees as we're herded out of the city. The traumatic experience of it all — and then to have the neighbors reject us because they felt like somebody was giving us a place to stay that we didn't deserve, like we were getting a handout to stay in a gated community. And that's the thing that broke my heart because I felt like we were people, and yes we were from New Orleans, but everybody in New Orleans didn't rob to get what they had. I have worked every day of my life to get what I had and to provide for my family. So to be treated like that was unbearable."

Another theme in the displacement experience could be formulated as *the abrupt, unexpected vanishing of a familiar world, the loss of one's past.* And with that loss, one of a different, haunting kind, too: *the loss of things that never happened.*

Arnessa Garrett saw Katrina's effects from the vantage point of a community that at one point harbored 40,000 displaced people — nearly a 50 percent increase over its normal population of approximately 100,000. The influx was a major story for *The Advertiser,* the local newspaper in Lafayette, La., 120 miles west of New Orleans. As senior editor of the paper, Garrett supervised much of the coverage of the refugees' experience in Lafayette. Many of the subjects of those stories, she recalled at the ACIA conference, wanted first of all "for us to know how everything in their lives changed in an instant. That phrase kept coming up in the initial stories that I saw. I thought, well, that's kind of an obvious thing but it seems really important for the evacuees to tell that side of their story. A lot of the stories had: 'I packed a bag expecting to be home in 3 days and now I've got nothing, months later I have nothing that's familiar to me.' It was things like wedding pictures and baby pictures, all of that was still in their homes. They wanted to give you the feeling that their life changed in an instant and they were left feeling uncertain. And that level of uncertainty was part of the trauma that was part of the reason they had so much anxiety. If you can't trust that your family, your friends are going to be there the next day, the world all of a sudden becomes a very scary place."

The impact of that loss "really hit home," Garrett continued, when it became possible to visit New Orleans again after the storm. "You could drive around and see the signs on schools, back to school party August 29, which obviously never happened. Or gospel mass, September 1. Events that people had planned for, that they may have gotten a new outfit for, that never happened. The idea that your life could change in an instant like that was very important." (Listening to Garrett's account, Steven M. Gorelick, professor of media studies at Hunter College in New York, recognized something from his encounters with survivors of the Holocaust and their memories. "Part of the loss is those things that never happened," Gorelick realized. "I haven't thought of it as much as I should have, but if you read a lot of accounts of survivors of genocide, of refugees, children who were never conceived come up. And they begin to loom in

memory as people. Houses that weren't built, birthdays that weren't celebrated, weddings that didn't take place. These events, when people talk about them, eventually they begin to be remembered from before they happened and now I see that when they don't happen they continue to live in some way.")

Loss of the past and the familiar can remain deeply painful even when a refugee seems to have adjusted well to a new place. Pamela Jenkins, a University of New Orleans sociologist who has studied the effects of displacement on Katrina refugees, told about a conversation with one woman who outwardly appeared to have successfully reestablished her life in Baton Rouge. The family had a new house, the husband was working, their daughter was doing well in school, and "on the surface," Jenkins said, "it would look like they were recovered." But the appearance was deceiving. "I'm more isolated," Jenkins recalled the woman telling her. "When I was in New Orleans I was very active, very outgoing, always busy, teaching at my church, working at my church. I was really busy, excited about where I was.'" She had tried to recreate that life in Baton Rouge: "I go to church every Sunday, I go to Sunday school." But she still felt isolated. "I try to work through that in my mind. I have this home but sometimes I just stay in the home and sometimes my husband will come home and he'll see the newspaper outside in the yard and he'll say, why'd you leave the newspaper outside? And I'll say I don't know, I just couldn't find my way to walk out the door."

A last theme in the stories of the displaced could be *what they missed, what they no longer belong to…* a "constant looking for home," as Pamela Jenkins put it, even if home no longer exists.

Since most people have a strong attachment to the place they think of as home, whether the place is known for a vivid, distinctive culture or not, it may not be literally true that people from New Orleans are more powerfully attached to their city and neighborhoods than other people are to theirs. It is true that compared to other cities, New Orleans has traditionally had an unusually large number of people who were born there and spent their entire lives in the same neighborhood, so it is conceivable that those ties truly are more meaningful. In any case the sense of New Orleans as an unusual, different and special place gave a particular form to the feeling of loss after Katrina — a loss felt not just by those who permanently settled elsewhere but among those who returned, too, since in significant ways the city was not and would not be the same as it had been before the storm.

Harold Toussaint, a chef and wine steward whose family roots branch back to Senegal, Martinique, Haiti, France, and Louisiana's native Houma Indians, spent many years away from New Orleans but never stopped thinking of it as a place that is different from everywhere else. "A place of unconditional growth on the soul level," he calls it. "People are allowed to express themselves, nobody gets criticized because we believe that everybody has a gift here and don't stop them or you'll squash the gift. Just let them be and they'll cultivate it. The country needs more of that. There is a rich spiritual vein in this place. I don't know what it is but we're very very fortunate…. There's something in this area, there's something and we have to keep coming back here just to get it. We're rich. We are all rich, we're very rich people down here." Before Katrina the spirit "was wide and it was everywhere," Toussaint went on, and when he came back after Katrina it was still there but "condensed," not as evident or visible as before but like a vein of precious metal under the ground:

> "It was a vein but it's like the mother lode, all you have to know is how to tap into it. And people from all over the world come here to get their soul restored. I've

often thought of it as an elephant's graveyard. You know, elephants have this certain place they go to die, when they're about to die. But they go to that place to get their spirit back. There's something about here — it's a gifted place. I hardly know anybody here who's not gifted. Even the children are gifted in the spirit. They see things that we just don't know…."

Pamela Jenkins learned from her research that displacement is not a single event. "It's a process. It doesn't end." For many Katrina refugees, the first place they reached after evacuating was by no means the last. "People would go to Houston first. And then something would happen and they would go to Atlanta. And then they would go to Jackson, and maybe they'd end up in Baton Rouge," Jenkins said. She herself lived in "nine places in 18 months," which she called "pretty average for people in this diaspora" (it's also the title of one of her chapters in a forthcoming book). In her interviews, Jenkins recalled "we asked a question, are you home here? And we would've gone through this whole interview process and they'd say, oh I'm doing fine, I got a job, I got a house. Towards the end we'd say are you home? And they'd say oh no, I'm not home. And so there's that constant looking for home…."

A Man-Made Disaster

In some disasters, it is not just people who are displaced. Trust and the connection between people and their government and other institutions of public life can be displaced too. What was widely seen as a disastrously bungled rescue effort during the Katrina crisis frayed public confidence in official agencies and national leadership, not just in the region but across the country. In New Orleans, the crisis of trust went farther, involving not just the response but the reasons the storm was so destructive in the first place. "The flooding of New Orleans was a man-made disaster and not a natural disaster," Sandy Rosenthal, founder and head of an organization "with a mission of education on the true root cause of the flooding," told the ACIA conference. "To refer to the flooding as a natural disaster protects those human beings responsible for that disaster."

Rosenthal started her organization, called Levees.org, while still temporarily living in Lafayette, La., where she and her family took refuge after the hurricane. Its mission statement declares that the flood "was due to the failure of the levees and floodwalls which should have performed as storm surge protection," and that responsibility for that failure "lies squarely with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers." In the more than four years since its founding, the organization has sought — as of this writing, still unsuccessfully — a federally ordered independent review of the levee and floodwall failures. It refers to the proposed study as the 8/29 Investigation, named for the date when Katrina passed east of the city.

Rosenthal's presentation to ACIA was a sharp example of how a critical incident may widen the gap between government and the governed — but also how a critical incident may spark increased engagement and activism from concerned citizens. Here are excerpts from her account:

Until the American people see that the flooding of New Orleans was a federal responsibility, they will never see rebuilding as a federal duty, and that extends even today…. Inexplicably, after the levees failed, no one complained when the commander of the Corps of Engineers, the organization responsible for the levees, no one complained when the commander convened an investigation of the levees. No one said you can't investigate your own work; if you investigate your own work what do you think you're going to find? The Louisiana delegation didn't complain, our mayor didn't complain, nobody thought anything was odd about the organization responsible investigating its own work….

So we put up our website. I realized, well, who's going to listen to Sandy Rosenthal? At the time I was 49 years old, I've never done any political activist work, I'm not an engineer, I'm not a lawyer, no political background, nothing, who's going to listen to me. So I thought, well, what if we have followers, get other people following us? So I came up with the idea of putting a petition on the website to the president of the United States, asking him to please fulfill his promise that he made to bring back New Orleans even better and stronger. I now know that's not how you get anything done. You don't petition the president if you want to get something done, but I didn't know that at the time. Up goes the petition on the website, we sent it to family and friends and before we knew it we had 200 supporters. Now we have membership. We have a website, we have members, we must be somebody. It was a surprise how all that worked… How we were able to go from me and my son to 25,000 supporters, is another story. I'm very proud of it but that's a story by itself. It has to do with advocacy, it has to do with focusing on the mission, working with volunteers. It has to do with my life being like the weather channel, 24 hours a day seven days a week. If you don't believe me ask my husband, but that's another whole story

The Corps spent 35 million dollars of taxpayer money blaming the levee failures on anything but itself. They blamed the topography of New Orleans, our local levee boards, they said Katrina was such a big, bad storm. Anything but itself. In January 2008, a federal judge determined that the US Army Corps of engineers squandered millions of dollars building levees that they knew by their own calculations would fail, but he had to let them off the hook. He had to hold them not liable for damages and the reason is an 80-year-old law, the Flood Control Act of 1928 that holds the Army Corps of Engineers not liable. So here we are at the mercy of the Corps' levees while they have no incentive to build them right and no financial or professional consequences when they fail. And that's where we're living now. But it's not all bad news. The corps is under the microscope now and if the new levees fail there's going to be a whole city of people who will know exactly whose fault it is. We around here know, partly through the work of Levees.org, we know exactly whose responsibility it is.

I called [Louisiana U.S. Senator Mary] *Landrieu and said we need an independent investigation of the levee failures. We can't be relying on the Corps investigating its own work. So if I get support for you, will you back calling for an*

independent investigation? We call it the 8/29 investigation. She said yes I will. This was January of 2007. And we hosted a press conference and announced to the world that we were going to push for this 8/29 investigation. It made the front page of the Washington Post. Pretty exciting. The AP picked it up. But the law never got passed. Republican opposition didn't want it, fought against it and it was ultimately dead in committee. The next year Senator Landrieu reintroduced it. Identical language. Again it didn't pass. We just couldn't get the momentum and the power that we needed to get it passed. However, pushing for legislation is a great way to educate. And pushing for education is a great way to increase your membership. Our membership skyrocketed when we started pushing for legislation. I don't regret spending all that energy pushing for it because there were a lot of benefits to pushing for it even though it didn't get passed.

Behind my back the Army Corps and its consultancy communities marginalize me. I've been called a desperate housewife. I've been asked why don't I try to work with the Corps. Well, because if I work with the Corps I can't do my job, part of which is calling them out at every turn…. I was told that I'm dismantling the federal government, I'm anti-American, that our work disparages the Army Corps of Engineers and disparages our boys and young men and women fighting in Iraq.

But we get heard. Even with the deepest pockets there are, that can't compete with a bunch of citizens all agreeing. That's another reason I did this. Because I know that nobody in town would disagree with the work we were doing. There's nobody in town who doesn't want safe levees.

Beyond Katrina

Is home still home? What I mean is that there are so many fascinating stories of people who were displaced and who come home to all sorts of different circumstances — but if you listen to these survivor narratives, it's like these people were home but they're not home. They're in a place that's almost indescribable. The institutions and influential people that existed before are gone, the landmarks are gone, so you're not really there, and the power relationships have changed. You may have had influence and you don't anymore.

– Steven M. Gorelick

At the close of her presentation, Arnessa Garrett read a quotation that she felt "really described the sense of loss" of displacement: "It's less than desirable to be driven away from your home. It's difficult when you can't go to mourn a member of your family. It's difficult when you can't go to their graves.… People would talk about homesickness and for me that was 'everything that you missed.' Now I know what it truly is. Whoever experienced that … homesickness is when you miss even the mud in your garden, even the mud."

The words were not from a Katrina evacuee. They were spoken by a 55-year-old man named Temuri who was displaced from his home in a war nearly 7,000 miles from New Orleans in a place the vast majority of Americans have never heard of: Abkhazia, at the eastern end of the Black Sea, which broke away from the Republic of Georgia in a bloody conflict that broke

out as Georgia was separating from the Soviet Union. Temuri, whose story appears with those of other South Caucasus refugees on a website called IDP Voices, maintained by the Norwegian Refugee Council,[6] was one of more than a quarter of a million ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia who fled during the war and remain displaced two decades later. (Abkhazia was only one of several territorial/ethnic conflicts that ravaged the region in the early 1990s. Altogether those wars left over a million people displaced in the three South Caucasus countries.)

Garrett, who traveled to the Caucasus in 2008 and interviewed more recent refugees from that year's Georgian-Russian war, heard echoes of New Orleans and Katrina despite the great distances in miles, culture, language, and circumstances: "I was struck at the similarities between the displaced population stories, even though they were displaced for different reasons and they were displaced from different cultures, the stories were so similar. One woman said before the war broke out, the recent war, that she had just finished remodeling her kitchen and she said wow, now everything was great, I had everything I wanted. My kitchen looked perfect. And then soldiers came in and their house was destroyed. So she really had this sense of normalcy, and then all of a sudden in an instant her life was changed. I think you can hear that from the evacuees in New Orleans, from displaced people in Haiti probably, you can hear that from displaced people all over the world."

Hearing from displaced people means hearing a lot of voices. In the week when news media were full of stories tied to the fifth anniversary of Katrina, no fewer than 8 million people were estimated to have been driven from their homes by unprecedented floods in Pakistan. A million and a half Haitians were still homeless after the devastating earthquake in January 2010. A 2009 estimate (before the Pakistan and Haiti disasters) was that worldwide, as many as 27 million people in nearly 30 countries were internally displaced as the result of conflict alone, not including natural catastrophes. Another 15 million were classed as international refugees — a meaningful legal distinction but from the human point of view, often a distinction without a difference.[7]

Those numbers represent an unimaginably immense burden of suffering. Displacement, Gerard Fromm observed at the ACIA conference, leaves "wounds of the spirit that are profound." They represent "a concussion of the spirit," in the words of sociologist Kai Erikson. Fromm, a psychoanalyst who directs the Erik Erikson Institute for Education and Research at Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, Mass., added that those wounds challenge our ability to understand and respond: "It is profoundly difficult and moving to try to speak across the gap of our vastly different experiences. And yet it's something we have to try."

Often, the gap in experience between victims and the larger society existed before the disaster, too. Typically, in cases of large-scale displacement, the disaster falls most heavily on poor and vulnerable people whose lives were already outside the mainstream self-image of a country or community. The poor tend to live in the most threatened areas, have the fewest social safeguards, and fewer means to protect themselves from a catastrophe or recover after it. And their low status frequently leads more privileged people to feel, consciously or unconsciously, that those refugees have less of a claim on the resources of the larger community, less of a right to benefits and support. The day before the five-year Katrina anniversary, a noted writer in Pakistan, Mohammed Hanif, commented that the rural poor who made up most of the victims in the disastrous August 2010 floods in that country "live lives which are almost invisible" to the rest of Pakistani society. "So there's a certain mindset," he went on, "that thinks these people have just moved to cities and they've suddenly become greedy, they want food, they want

medicine, they want shelter, they want toilets… It's horrible to say, but there are people who say 'did they have all of this before?' The truth is that they did."[8]

While Pakistan and the United States are vastly different countries, Hanif's words carried echoes of Katrina — for example, former First Lady Barbara Bush's comment after visiting evacuees sheltered in the Astrodome complex in Houston a week after Katrina hit. "So many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway," Bush told an interviewer after her tour, "so this is working very well for them." That small but emblematic footnote to the Katrina story has meaning because it was not just a moment of unthinking callousness. It captured the deep gulf in perception and understanding that separated privileged, powerful Americans from the disadvantaged New Orleans refugees.

Being invisible in the way many refugees are can add to the trauma of displacement, Fromm pointed out. If victims' experiences and their pain are obliterated from the public mind and memory, in a way that obliterates them too. Their trauma becomes one of "profound identity problems," as if they weren't just displaced by the storm but erased by it. An episode Fromm related about the sociologist Kai Erikson poignantly illustrates how place and identity are interwoven. Interviewing Katrina survivors after the storm, Fromm related, "Kai asked one young woman who spoke only Creole — she was living in New Orleans but she was from Haiti, I think — through a translator, he asked, 'where are you from?'" Listening to the translation, Erikson sensed it was more complicated than just the simple question he had asked, "so he asked the translator, 'what are the exact words you asked her?'. And she said, 'I asked her, *where are you a person?*' Which I thought was a profoundly moving statement about the link between person and location."

The experience of displacement can be made more painful by the response from the rest of society, Fromm went on. "For example, victims treated as perpetrators, citizens treated as enemies, the trauma of humiliation…. The trauma of massive disillusionment and the trauma of betrayal which Jonathan Shay says is key to the Vietnam vets' experiences of trauma.[9]" For many in the African American community of New Orleans, Fromm added, these experiences came together to create "a sense of how tenuous their citizenship was, in the context of wanting to believe something else. And so the trauma of trust in government is profound."

If being unseen and unheard makes trauma worse, a growing body of research suggests that being heard can be a meaningful help in making trauma less severe. Fromm cited one study in which researchers evaluated the emotional condition of a group of young children in New York after the September 11 attacks. The authors found that when parents "could *not* say how their children were dealing with the 9-11 disaster," the children "were 11 times more likely to show behavior disturbance in school…. The issue is, can the parents say how is my child dealing with it? If they can't, the chance that their child is going to suffer or is suffering something quite traumatic is very high. On the one hand this makes complete sense," Fromm commented. "On the other hand the scope of it is quite astonishing. Eleven times difference!" Another study, attempting to identify the sources of resilience "among really troubled kids," found that one significant factor was that "they found a relationship. They had the capacity to get the other person interested in them." And that interest from someone else, Fromm said, enabled them to reflect on and articulate their own feelings and become "active agents" in their own recovery.[10]

The message of this research is that having someone listen and pay attention to their experiences is a strong need for people trying to overcome trauma. As Fromm explained, "It creates a relational context in which the people themselves are also able to listen to themselves, sort things out, deal with their feelings and recover a sense of 'I.'"

In many cases, listening to the displaced and other disaster survivors can be difficult for the listeners, Hunter College's Steven Gorelick observed, because the survivors' stories- may remind the public of failures it would like not to remember — not just failures that caused the disaster, but failures of will, public attention, sympathy and concern that might have prevented it. It is difficult to remember now, but survivors of the Nazi slaughters in World War II kept almost complete silence for many years after the war, Gorelick reminded his audience. Most Holocaust survivors "spent almost 20 of the first post-war years not talking to anybody," Gorelick said.

"The reason is quite simple and it does apply to some of the stories you've been telling us down here. And that is those Holocaust victims in the United States — their presence was the physical manifestation of the failure of the person with whom they were speaking. They were evidence of how badly the world had botched this. So their accounts were not welcomed. A veneer of compassion was often offered," he added, but the details of what the survivors had to say were walled off.

This can happen in many situations where the survivors' narrative conflicts with the official one, or with the popular mythology of an event. As Gorelick pointed out, heroes in one story line can appear as villains in another, and vice-versa — as illustrated in Katrina by sharply differing perceptions of the National Guard and other emergency responders, heroic rescuers in their own eyes and to many in the public audience, but hostile, unhelpful invaders in the eyes of someone such as Harold Toussaint, or many others with similar memories. To the extent that survivors' accounts undermine or confuse a broadly accepted perception of an event, they meet with an unwillingness to listen, Gorelick observed: "a pressure of let's get beyond this public narrative, a sort of a hint that it's time to move on. The kind of hint that discourages a full accounting of what people have been through." There is also the question of whose perceptions shape the narrative, and the public attitudes that are revealed by, for example, the persistent exaggerations about violence and looting in New Orleans during the crisis. Gerard Fromm remembered another comment by Kai Erikson: "When we consider the narrative that takes hold around a disaster like Katrina" — or any other disaster — "the question becomes, not what does that narrative say about those involved in the disaster, but what does it say about us?"

It is not always resistance or hostility or indifference that silences survivors' stories. What feels hostile or uncaring or unsympathetic to the survivors may have been something else: incomprehension, for one. (As one writer noted about the homecoming of Vietnam veterans, the folklore of soldiers being routinely cursed or spit on when they came home "was almost certainly exaggerated. But the sense of being silenced, which *felt* a good deal like being shunned, was part of almost every soldier's experience. And the hurt was deep." The silence reflected much more confusion than hostility — the confusion left by an inconclusive, unsatisfying war that many Americans did not understand and for many years found no language to speak about, to themselves or to their returning soldiers. The same writer added: "The absence of words meant more than an absence of gratitude or sympathy or respect. Unable to speak about the war, many veterans also had no way to find a reason or purpose in what they had lived through, no way to complete their experience by telling about it and thus coming to understand it."[11]) The same lack of comprehension — an inability to speak across the gap of experience, as Fromm put it — may explain the plaintive comment of a New Zealander who fought in World War I and said seven decades later, "I went home to a father, mother and four sisters and no one ever asked me what it was like. For seventy years no one ever asked me what it was like." Incomprehension may also explain Steven Gorelick's puzzling glimpse of a small group of genocide survivors from Rwanda whom he encountered on a visit to his son in the West African country of Togo. "A few families

of Rwandan survivors that had walked all the way from Rwanda were there," Gorelick recounted, "and they were welcomed warmly and made part of extended families. But I never saw anyone ask them what happened there. Nobody asked them what happened there."

There's No Such Thing as Benign Displacement

When your home is standing in 10 feet of water or in the path of a forest fire or when artillery shells are falling nearby, of course you are better off leaving than staying. So displacement can be an unavoidable necessity. But as ACIA's discussions progressed, the thought began to emerge that even when it is necessary, displacement is inherently damaging, and emergency managers need to recognize that and consider it in planning and carrying out disaster response. Several comments convey the idea:

Ned Benton, chair of the ACIA Council: *The lesson I'm learning is that there's really no benign displacement, and that in managing an incident a basic principle should be that displacement should take place as an absolute last resort to the absolute minimal extent possible even if the conditions without displacement are worse in some respects than the possible conditions of displacement. I'm learning that displacement is very destructive and something that really should be understood by the emergency management and incident management community as an evil…. In the New Orleans case, you have the displacement that happened as a result of the flooding. But then they stacked on top of it the decision to reform the public housing, to throw people out of existing and viable public housing. They could argue that they were going to move people into better housing but of course that didn't happen. But what an awful time to do that. Whatever the benefits might theoretically be it's a horrible time to add to the displacement.*

James Hawdon of Virginia Tech University: *There is no such thing as benign displacement…. I think one thing that has really slowed the recovery of New Orleans is this massive displacement. Not only have you lost the labor of people who love this city, who are part of it, you lose that community and we know the effects of taking people away from their community. It's not good, the effects on health, mental health and well-being.*

Two Katrina survivors at the conference made the same point:

Harold Toussaint: *Immediately when we were displaced we were looking forward to the cleansing, the removal of debris, the rebuilding. We were anticipating pitching in and getting those federally mandated wages of I think 29 dollars an hour, that would've been a good safety net for the jobs we lost. So* [when that didn't happen] *we felt displaced several times on several dimensions, for a lack of a better term. You're right, it's more injurious because we weren't allowed to enter soon enough to at least participate in the community, in the healing. Proverbs 13:12* ["Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life."] *is really applicable to our displacement… this is really why so many*

> *of us are sick. We're sick in the spirit and sick in the body because of the delay of our return.*
>
> Parnell Herbert: *I entirely agree that displacement should be a last resort. If people were able to be closer to home and be a part of the rebuilding process, the opportunity was there to make New Orleans a better city. However those housing projects were demolished. That was your work force right there. A lot of these people, these were people who were unskilled and untrained who could've been trained. Who could've learned how to be a carpenter, learned trades to rebuild our city and become proud of it. The one thing I'd say is that a hopeless man is the most dangerous man in the world because he has nothing to lose. So if you're giving hope to the hopeless, you could build it back better.*
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> When students were given the option to cut short the semester and go home after the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech, Hawdon's colleague John Ryan noted, it turned out that those who left were emotionally more troubled than those who stayed on campus and went through the immediate aftermath in the company of other members of the community. Ryan commented:
>
> *The displacement was entirely voluntary and very low, the most benign kind of displacement. Why are we even talking about it? Because what we have found in our research is that even that benign displacement, which in no way compares to Katrina displacement, had effects on people. We actually have data at Virginia Tech* [and] *displacement turns out to be very important.*

Gorelick's Holocaust research led him to pose another question that has resonance for those displaced by Katrina: "Is home still home? Is home still home? What I mean is that there are so many fascinating stories of people who were displaced and who come home to all sorts of different circumstances — but if you listen to these survivor narratives, it's like these people were home but they're not home. They're in a place that's almost indescribable. The institutions and influential people that existed before are gone, the landmarks are gone, so you're not really there, and the power relationships have changed. You may have had influence and you don't anymore."

The authorities dealing with Katrina refugees made no attempt to keep together or reassemble people from the same neighborhood or community. Nor was that a consideration in any program for longer term temporary or permanent resettlement. Evacuees reached their destinations as the result of random accident, the vagaries of the evacuation or their personal circumstances. Those evacuated by the military or government agencies not only had no say in where they were sent; often, FEMA officials did not even tell passengers on evacuation flights where they were going to land. As author Jed Horne reported in his book *Breach of Faith*, this was a deliberate policy, not an accidental omission.[***]

If the idea of reconnecting members of a community ever even entered the minds of officials in FEMA or other public or private agencies involved in resettling Katrina refugees, there is no readily available evidence of it. Horne recalled being told that "Americans don't do tent cities" (although they used to, a century earlier, in disasters such as the San Francisco earthquake of 1906). Whether by design or unintentionally, the American approach fosters a

bureaucratic model for the recovery process, designed and managed by officials without community participation — because the communities are too scattered to participate. The same pattern was true of the refugees' return. Those who came back to their neighborhoods did so on their own private decisions, one by one or family by family, not as a community.

Even if Americans gave little or no thought to alternative policies, however, scattering communities and dispersing refugees across the landscape is not the only way of dealing with mass displacement. Speaking at the ACIA conference, Jed Horne described the very different approach taken by Japanese authorities to residents displaced by earthquakes and mudslides in Niigata Prefecture in 2004. Instead of scattering them across the country, as was done in the United States after Katrina, the Japanese housed refugees in the equivalent of FEMA trailers in temporary settlements that to the extent possible recreated the neighborhoods and villages that had been destroyed. That way, neighbors remained neighbors, and a recognizable form of a community's public life was able to resume. This system of "communitarian relocation," as Horne termed it, didn't only serve to avoid adding the trauma of isolation to the trauma of displacement. Because the authorities as a matter of policy built the settlements as close as possible to the destroyed areas, that meant refugees were able to be involved *as a community* in the rebuilding effort — as a work force, and also in decision-making. That too is important in recovering emotional balance: "there is no better therapy" for a disaster victim, Horne commented, than becoming an active participant in the process of recovery.

There is no reason to believe that cases of large-scale displacement will decline across the world in future years. If anything, they may become more frequent, as population grows and global warming unsettles the natural world. "I think that these issues are going to become more and more important," Arnessa Garrett declared, and it will also become more important to find effective and humane ways to respond to them — including doing a better job of seeing those victims who too often become (and already were) invisible. "Not only natural disasters but also climate change and man-made disasters that we're seeing are going to cause displacement," Garrett added. "So if we can find a way to deal with these populations and treat these populations with compassion, I think we'll be better able to deal with displacement."

The displaced will have to deal with their own memories and challenges too. For many who were victims of conflict, that includes the challenge of escaping a cycle of violence instead of perpetuating it by seeking revenge. That requires seeing beyond their own suffering — not an easy thing to do, for most people. But not impossible. After describing his own ordeal, Temuri, the Georgian refugee, added this: "No one should think that Abkhazians were happy with this conflict and all this happened to us because they were happy with it. Ask the other party too. Ask Abkhazians as well… They haven't suffered any less than we have and they haven't been damaged less either… The war has damaged everyone. It depends on how one thinks, how one perceives, who can forgive and who has enough will and intelligence to forgive these crimes."

How Community Worked

One of the things often overlooked in the media's narrative of Hurricane Katrina was that most refugees left New Orleans by their own efforts and with the support of friends and neighbors and formal and informal groups from their own communities, not through the National Guard or other organizations from outside. Oral historian D'Ann Penner found many "examples of how community worked" in the stories she collected from nearly 300 African Americans who lived through the storm:

Individuals without money for a hotel or transportation often got a ride out with neighbors, church members, extended families. In one notable case an extended family of 49 people, including many living in the Lafitte Housing development carpooled all the way to Coleman, Alabama, 370 miles away. Pete Stevenson, my narrator, arrived on what he called a wing and a prayer. He was in this caravan with just enough money for a value meal.

Church communities did an especially good job of remembering their elderly and the most vulnerable. Pastor Charles Duplessis talked about convincing 30 people to go with him, saying, "now is not the time to be proud." Community bonds of responsibility were one of the reasons that people with the means to leave before the storm, like Harold Toussaint, ended up at the Super Dome, the Convention Center and the I-10 Cloverleaf. Harold, a prize-winning wine-taster on two continents, did his best to uphold his duty as a deacon of the church to stay during the storm to help the people who could not help themselves. Willie Pitford, the owner of an elevator company, said he rescued approximately 150 people from their attics and almost certain death by dehydration. In the first five days after the storm he shared his seasoned meat and barbeque. He started with the shrimp first and shared with all of his neighbors. Shriff Hasan,, a high school drama teacher, saw the desperate look in a stranger's eyes on the I-10 overpass bridge after being rescued by boats from his Gentilly home. He took the time to work through the man's grief over having lost in a matter of hours everything he had worked his entire life for. Perhaps he stopped the man from jumping by extending the tradition of befriending strangers.

It wasn't until Thursday night, three and a half days after the hurricane, that 25 MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) were dropped from military aircraft for the thousands of people at the convention center. Huey Collins, a homeowner and a 57-year-old welder from the Lower Ninth Ward, spoke nostalgically at the beginning of the interview about the days when a person could count on catching a whipping for doing something wrong, while ruing the undisciplined nature of the youngest generation. But when the interview turned to how he and others had survived at the convention center until Friday, he gave full credit to a group of young men who he said had "looked like the wrong type, but they turned around, they got kind hearts."

The numerous acts of provisioning provided sustenance and encouragement to the survivors. This extra familial sense of connectedness and responsibility impacted storm strategies and minimized deaths from hurricane Katrina in the city. The legacies of having overcome for centuries was a source of resilience for the residents of New Orleans at the convention center and those scattered to distant shelters in Atlanta, Birmingham, Houston and beyond. The subsequent scattering of the community during the hurricane's aftermath really disabled the support networks for men, women and children who have not yet been able to return home. To lose your social networks, your job, your home, your church and your

> *community all at once is a staggering blow.*
>
> The harm, Penner added, was not only to the refugees but to their home city as well:
>
> *The contributions of the still-displaced are needed to rebuild New Orleans to its former status as a great city. Rather than being violent, poor and unskilled, many uprooted New Orleanians have urgently needed abilities. Especially across the black neighborhoods, rebuilding is at a standstill both because of the lack of funds and because of an absence of trustworthy, well-qualified builders.*

Community, Resilience, Healing, and Recovery

Of all the people whom I've interviewed in my research, nobody ever volunteered that the government helped me. No one. I've found no one who said FEMA helped me. They might have said they got FEMA money, but not that FEMA helped them. What I did hear people say was 'people on the corner helped me; people I didn't know helped me.' But they didn't see the government as help. They saw the government as a problem. And I think we really need to think about what that means.

– Pamela Jenkins

When Jenkins, a professor of sociology at the University of New Orleans, spoke about Katrina victims getting help from other people rather than from government agencies or relief organizations, she was not just drawing on information from her research subjects. She was remembering her own experience as well. She and her family were still living temporarily in Baton Rouge while waiting to rebuild their New Orleans house, Jenkins recalled, "and friends of ours came up and said don't pay to gut your house; we'll gut your house with you." From that grew a tradition of "people showing up every Sunday at my house and gutting it. And when I say gutting it I mean gutting it. We took everything out but the roof, the outside walls and the weight-bearing studs. So all our house ended up on the curb. What happened out of that was we built a community of people who came to show up on Sunday. And then Sundays at Pam and Eric's transitioned to football season where every football game was watched at our house. It turned to Treme Sunday nights. And the strength of that community of family, I have to tell you, became incredible to us."

As reflected in Jenkins' interviews, the evidence is strong that many New Orleanians did not regard government agencies as very helpful in the crisis or in its aftermath. In one poll a few months after Katrina, 24 percent of respondents in New Orleans said federal authorities handled the storm well, while nearly twice as many — 47 percent — described the government's response as poor. Another survey nearly five years later reported that only about half of the city's residents were positive about the progress that had been made on such public-sector needs as affordable housing, medical services, and public safety.

A research report by the Community and Regional Resilience Institute pointed out that the government response to Katrina was not just inadequate, but sometimes actually impeded other efforts. "'Emergent' individuals or organizations that respond to unaddressed needs are characteristic of all disaster responses," the authors wrote. "In responding to Katrina, they were

sometimes refused or poorly used by government officials." They added, echoing Jenkins' observations: "These 'shadow responders' often emerge from households, friends and family, neighborhoods, non-governmental and voluntary organizations, businesses, and industry. In New Orleans, we estimate that they provided most of the initial evacuation capacity, sheltering, feeding, health care, and rebuilding, and much of the search and rescue, cleanup, and post-Katrina funding. These individuals and organizations would have been able to do more if the tri-level system (city, state, federal) of emergency response was able to effectively use, collaborate with, and coordinate the combined public and private efforts." Emergency planners, the report concluded, should learn from Katrina that preparing that collaboration and coordination in advance of a disaster "is a central task of enhancing community resilience."[12]

If the recovery effort showed weaknesses in the "public" zone of the city's life — "the bureaucracy, government, utilities and so on," as Virginia Tech sociologist John Ryan defines it — those were also magnified because large-scale displacement weakened those other structures that are also important in rebuilding after a disaster. Ryan and his colleague James Hawdon call it the "parochial" zone: the relationships and networks formed in and among local businesses, churches, schools, neighborhood associations and other voluntary organizations, and other formal and informal groups that bring people together in social or civic activity. To a large extent, it is in the parochial zone where people develop an attachment to their community: sentiment, Ryan and Hawdon call it. "The sense of community, not the functioning of community in some practical way, but how you feel about your community," Ryan explained. "Do you feel like a true New Orleanian? Do you feel like a true Hokie, if you're at Virginia Tech?… That's extremely important for community recovery."

Sometimes, Ryan noted, "high public involvement actually suppresses parochial involvement. The public realm takes over from the local and dictates this and that and doesn't let the local act the way it might normally act. In those cases you're going to have very slow recovery like we have seen in the aftermath of Katrina. Because you don't have those local resources. The people have been moved away, the local institutions have been damaged." In that respect Katrina could be viewed as "the polar opposite" of the Virginia Tech tragedy, where displacement was not long-lasting, so the community was able to reassemble fairly swiftly, and there was little physical damage, so the need for resources and action from the public realm was not great. The result, Ryan said, in contrast to New Orleans after the hurricane, was "low public involvement and high parochial involvement — high levels of sentiment and very quick recovery, although I must say that the recovery in a situation like that may not be about space but psychologically; culturally that event is very much lodged into the identity of the community, and so on."

Obviously, some essential conditions for recovery can only be accomplished by government. "For the community to recover you have to get it functioning again," Hawdon pointed out. "You have to get the roads open, the electricity flowing" — recreating, in effect, the space in which recovery can take place. "Getting the bridges rebuilt, the electricity on, the water flowing, the houses built" has to be done in the public realm so that organizations in the parochial realm can in turn recreate themselves and resume their activities. "If you think about space, the reconstruction of space in terms of rebuilding," Hawdon continued, "this is largely a function of government for no other reason than that nobody else has the resources. The amount of money that it takes to get space reconfigured is well beyond the resources of anybody but the government. So the public realm is very important. But that's not necessarily recovery, or

community recovery, because for a community to recover you also need the sentiment. You need that sense of community. You need both of these elements to come back into play."

Their research on the aftermath of the Virginia Tech tragedy and other critical incidents led Ryan and Hawdon to conclude that "this sense of community, a sense of attachment to a community, is largely a function of the parochial realm." That happens, Hawdon said, because "the parochial realm, the local aspects of a community, is what makes a community unique." Government institutions are broadly similar in all U.S. communities, and private relationships within families and among friends or in workplaces do not ordinarily promote togetherness or community feeling in a wider population. So it is the structures in a community's parochial zone that "gives it a soul, a sense of being special. That's what builds sentiment. So the parochial realm leads to sentiment and sentiment is what leads to the recovery of the community."

For many African American New Orleanians, both those who returned after the storm and those who remain displaced, a powerful source of community sentiment has been their church. Pamela Jenkins told the ACIA conference: "The history of the black church reasserted itself in this diaspora and provided a framework for these people that I interviewed to understand what happened to them in a really powerful way. In the interviews, I never asked about God, I never asked about faith, but these interviews are filled with both faith and God." Her interview subjects, she went on, "looked for home through their connection to congregations. These were all African American congregations, mostly Baptist."

Reverend Aldon Cotton noted that the loss of familiar church ties is something he hears about often whenever he speaks with Katrina refugees. "They tell me, pastor, I just miss my church. A lot of people just miss their church. They say they miss hearing 'Amazing Grace' the way we used to sing it…. People do need something to hold on to," he added. "People need the connection, they need their church networks."

Since the storm, a number of New Orleans churches — 15, by Jenkins' count — have created permanent satellite congregations in other places where their members have resettled. The Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, for example, has rebuilt in New Orleans but also has churches in Baton Rouge and Houston serving New Orleans congregants in those cities. In the early post-disaster period, Jenkins said, many black ministers "became like 19th-century circuit riders. They'd preach in New Orleans, they'd drive up to Baton Rouge to preach, they'd preach in New Orleans, they'd take a plane and go to Houston to preach for Sunday. And the congregants followed them. They'd hear their minister in Baton Rouge in the morning and then they'd drive down to hear them again in New Orleans in the afternoon. So this looking for a home by looking for their congregations became really important to the people that I interviewed."

What people felt was important about their faith and their church, Jenkins learned, "was not the material things they got from the church. To a person it was not about rental assistance, it wasn't about clothing. It was what they got from the praying, from their relationship to their God, the sense of belonging to this community. For these folks, their search for their home church allowed them to connect to a community."

The church is one significant strand in the larger fabric of African American life and history. Katrina survivors' stories collected by D'Ann Penner evoked others, including traditions of family and personal relations, a culture of "everyday companionability" and mutual help that came down from a difficult past. One of many examples is Rev. Cotton, one of her subjects in *Overcoming Katrina* who also was a speaker at ACIA's conference. In her talk, Penner said about him: "Pastor Cotton, who you'll never forget, recalls being asked to go to the corner store

for his mother in the 1980s. He had to make three stops along the way. First he had to stop to see what everyone needed and then he'd bring them their groceries back and he'd have to turn down the obligatory 25 cents they would offer. Because he had to say and I quote, 'no ma'am, it was my pleasure.' The etiquette of neighborliness was taught to him by his parents."

Penner's interviews were a compelling reminder that there were and are other realities in New Orleans beside the poverty, high crime rate and social disorganization that dominate outsiders' image of the city. "In pre-Katrina New Orleans," she said, "people were not neglected in their last days, nor did they die in isolation in distant suburbs." The loss of social connection and support after the community was scattered by Katrina had a direct impact on people's physical and emotional well-being, Penner found — in contrast with her narrators' accounts of an earlier disaster, Hurricane Betsy, which devastated many of the same New Orleans neighborhoods 40 years earlier. Those stories, Penner said, recalled that "the Lower Ninth Ward survivors of Hurricane Betsy in 1965 were able to mourn together, clean up debris together, and rebuild their homes together… These activities enabled Lower Ninth Ward residents the capability to create a redemptive life narrative, and that is something some displaced Katrina survivors have been unable to do."

The loss is not only that people don't get help. As Danny Axsom of the Virginia Tech clinical psychology department told ACIA's 2009 conference, his research in the aftermath of the tragedy there showed that not giving help to others because one is separated from his community is also a loss. "There are a lot of benefits for the givers of help," he said. "It gives them something to do, it structures their experience in the aftermath. It's similar to formal rituals like wakes and funerals and memorials. Giving help is one way of addressing the existential threat that's represented by attacks like 4-16 or 9-11. It highlights the better angels of our nature, as Lincoln said. It can be a way of reasserting control over the meaning of the event." Helping someone else, Axsom added, can also make it easier to get help, since reciprocal support creates less of the feeling of indebtedness that often keeps people from seeking assistance.

Axsom's and other post-shooting studies at Virginia Tech indicate that social contacts — having a community and participating in its relationships and ritual gatherings — played a significant role in overcoming the trauma of the event. Ryan's and Hawdon's work concluded that picnics, vigils, and other communal events seemed to have more therapeutic value for the campus community than the self-appointed trauma therapists who flocked there after the shootings. Steven Hyman, a Harvard neuropsychiatrist, suggested something similar to *New Yorker* writer Jerome Groopman. "The way we respond to individual or mass trauma," Hyman told Groopman, should be guided by how we behave after the loss of a loved one. "What happens when someone in your family dies?" he said. "People make sure you take care of yourself, get enough sleep, don't drink too much, have food." Hyman pointed out the different rituals that various cultures have developed — shiva among Jews, for instance, and wakes among Catholics—which successfully support people through grief…. The traumatized person should share what he wants with people he knows well: close friends, relatives, familiar clergy. "It's so commonsensical," Hyman said. "But the power of our social networks — they are what help people create a sense of meaning and safety in their lives."[13]

But as the experience of many Katrina refugees shows, when those networks are splintered, that mutual support is gone, and the stronger feeling of comfort and security it creates. Being cut off from their communities can be particularly damaging for the most vulnerable, elderly or frail who became "fragile and disconnected individuals," as Penner called them, in new and unfamiliar places. "At a time when they most need to work through these multiple

losses," she said, "they are most isolated from the people who understand where they came from and what they have been through…. In being torn from their communities, they lost their opportunities to comfort each other's emotional wounds."

Five years after the storm, two-thirds of New Orleans residents say their lives are back or almost back to normal, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation survey.[14] But there are still great unmet needs. One of them, Penner noted, is for more attention and more resources for the continuing mental health problems caused by displacement — problems for which many refugees have gotten no help at all. Penner's other suggestions included a reexamination of FEMA's and the military's handling of the New Orleans evacuation, and why their actions were so widely seen by black residents as hostile and threatening rather than helpful. The review, Penner said, should help formulate training programs for National Guard or regular military units that may be involved in rescue operations. It should also develop recommendations for emergency planners so that in any future evacuation, the use of shelters and transfer arenas will not "replicate what happened in the Superdome and the Convention Center and the I-10 cloverleaf" during the Katrina crisis.

Learning from Katrina is all the more important because, as Arnessa Garrett reminded ACIA's participants, large-scale displacement will continue to occur and may well happen more frequently in the years and decades to come, for both natural and man-made reasons. ACIA's discussions of the Katrina experience and the testimony it heard from survivors suggest one important lesson for the future: if communities are uprooted by a disaster, rescue and resettlement policies should avoid unnecessarily scattering the displaced or prolonging their displacement. The emotional harm of losing homes and normal life and, for many, loved ones, may not have been avoidable, at least once the storm hit and the levees broke (whether that failure was avoidable is, of course, a different question). But much of the further harm of being dispersed and isolated clearly could have been avoided, if the responsible authorities had tried to do so.

The story of New Orleans Katrina refugees makes clear that they were not just displaced from their homes and past lives. Far too many were displaced from each other, displaced from the opportunity to help rebuild their city, and displaced from participating in decisions about the city's and their own future. The attitudes, policies and practices that produced those results didn't only deepen the emotional wounds of the displaced. They wounded the city as well. In future disasters, if official policies are more mindful of the need to preserve community and its networks of mutual support, they will better serve the refugees they are meant to help — and reconstruction and recovery efforts will be better served, too.

Notes

[*] The passage says: "For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?"

[**] The United Nations and other international agencies limit the word "refugee" to those who have crossed an international boundary — persons who have left their home country and seek refuge in another. Those who flee violence or disaster but remain in their own country are known

as IDPs, or internally displaced persons. In the international context, the distinction is necessary because it affects a range of legal questions including the right to protection, issues of asylum and return, and the status and obligations of international aid groups. None of those issues has any relevance to the Katrina disaster or those it displaced, however, and rather than the cumbersome, bloodless and bureaucratic label IDP, this paper will refer to them as refugees in the traditional, non-legal sense of that word.

[***] Jed Horne, *Breach of Faith,* New York: Random House, p. 185.

[1] William H. Frey and Audrey Singer, Katrina and Rita Impacts on Gulf Coast Populations: First Census Findings, The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C.: June 2006; Jeffrey A. Groen and Anne E. Polivka, "Hurricane Katrina evacuees: who they are, where they are, and how they are faring," Monthly Labor Review, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Washington, D.C.: March 2008; "Hurricane Katrina Impact," News Release, Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, New Orleans: April 15, 2010.

[2] "Census Population Estimates 2000-2009 for New Orleans MSA," from U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, *County total population and estimated components of population change: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2009*, compiled by the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (http://www.gnocdc.org/census_pop_estimates.html)\

[3] "Hurricane Katrina evacuees" p. 41

[4] Amy Liu and Allison Plyer, "An Overview of Greater New Orleans: From Recovery to Transformation," in The New Orleans Index at Five. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution and Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, August 2010, p. 5; https://gnocdc.s3.amazonaws.com/NOIat5/Overview.pdf

[5] "New Orleans Five Years After the Storm: A New Disaster Amid Recovery," Kaiser Family Foundation, Menlo Park, CA, 2010, p. 14

[6] See http://www.idpvoices.org. The direct link to Temuri's account is: http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/idpvoices.nsf/%28httpLifeStories%29/4BB98DF05971314AC125740C0057073F. The Norwegian Refugee Council is one of the world's leading refugee relief organizations.

[7] Worldwide IDP and refugee statistics from "Global IDP estimates (1990-2009)", Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Norwegian Refugee Council.

[8] "Floods Head for the Sea Over Pakistan Farmlands," Weekend Edition Saturday, National Public Radio, August 28, 2010.

[9] See Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam,* New York: Atheneum, 1994.

[10] See Susan W. Coates, Daniel S. Schechter, and Elsa First, "Brief Interventions with Traumatized Children and Families After September 11," in Susan W. Coates, Jane Rosenthal

and Daniel S. Schechter, eds.,_*September 11: Trauma and Human Bonds,* The Analytic Press, Hillside NJ, 2003, p. 32.

Joseph P. Allen, and Eve Golden, *Out of the Woods: Tales of Resilient Teens*, *Harvard University Press,* Cambridge MA: 2006, pp. 276-280

[11] Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp.10-11.

[12] C. E. Colten, R. W. Kates, and S. B. Laska, Community Resilience: Lessons From New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina. Community and Regional Resilience Initiative, Oak Ridge TN: September 2008, p. 22

[13] Jerome Groopman, “The Grief Industry,” *The New Yorker,* January 26, 2004

[14] Kaiser Family Foundation. *New Orleans five years after the storm: A new disaster amid recovery*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010.