

## A City's Renewal Animated by Entrepreneurial Spirit

One of my heroes growing up was Walker Percy, the Louisiana novelist whose wry philosophical depth and lightly-worn grace still awe me when I revisit my well-thumbed copies of *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*. He had a theory, which he liked to expound over bourbon and hog's head cheese, that people are at their happiest when a hurricane is about to hit. When you're mired in the everydayness of ordinary life, he explained, you're likely to be afflicted by what he called "the malaise," a free-floating despair associated with the feeling that you're not a part of the world or connected to the people in it. You are alienated, detached. But not when a hurricane is about to hit! Everyone is focused, connected, engaged. We know what we're supposed to do, and we do it! It's only after the waters recede and the earth begins to heal that the malaise and alienation creep back in.

But I think Dr. Percy may have had it wrong, at least with regard to Hurricane Katrina. Katrina has created the exception to Percy's theory: this time the malaise has not settled in again, and the everydayness of life as we knew it in New Orleans never re-formed. Five years after the storm, many in the New Orleans community look back at Katrina as the point where we realized our purpose in this world. We learned how to join together, about the nature of community, and how to play a role in something larger than ourselves. I suspect that even 50 years from now, those of us who are still around will continue to see Katrina this way.

A few days after the storm, Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco asked me to serve as vice chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority. Although surprised by the offer, I accepted, and flew from my home in Washington, D.C., to Baton Rouge to survey the damage with a team the governor had assembled. We flew by helicopter over a city still flooded, and I could see my childhood home submerged under ten feet of water. I realized then that New Orleans might never come back, that it might be the end for the city where I grew up.

Within a few weeks, people did start to come back. It should come as no surprise to those bred in New Orleans that restaurant owners were among the first group of intrepid entrepreneurs to return, bringing with them their particular

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brand of energy and magnetism. Writer Julia Reed sent out text message updates about what restaurants had reopened, and within a matter of days after the evacuation order was lifted, a group of people who had come back to New Orleans packed JoAnn Clevenger's Upperline restaurant. Only a few cooks had returned to the kitchen, but they had opened for business anyway. Another example of real caring and commitment came from Teach For America members stationed in New Orleans. Before Katrina hit, they had been given the option of transferring to another city in the region, like Houston or Baton Rouge, but of the 245 Teach For America members in New Orleans, 245 stayed, doing what they could to help without any guarantee of pay.

Since those early post-Katrina days, I've come down to New Orleans almost every month, which has given me a sort of time-lapse view of what we've accomplished and what problems remain.

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Walking on a recent night near a wild and crowded French Quarter, I had a realization that struck me like the smell of humidity and flowers that I notice every time I arrive back in New Orleans. The city had not only come back, but in many ways it had come back better than before. And it's done so in a way that Walker Percy would have appreciated: by rising above the everyday state wherein people only care about themselves. While much work remains, the spirit of the city has been renewed. People have come together on the neutral grounds, sharing crawfish

and music and figuring out how to make things better. We have a shared memory of the disaster and reminders of what the city went through, like the plaques outside houses that indicate the number of people who died there or which National Guard unit arrived first. These markers tell us and will tell future generations how great the tragedy in New Orleans was, but also how much helping went on there. The city serves as a symbol of pulling together as a community, and we, our children, and our grandchildren will remember not only that we came back, but that we did so as a community in an unbelievably inspiring way.

The New Orleans community depends on the renewal that each generation brings, and this one has brought to the city a concept of rebuilding that centers around the entrepreneurial spirit. Novelist Michael Lewis has predicted that the entrepreneurial activity now present in the city will bring back the New Orleans of

the era around 1910, when the cotton and coffee exchanges were bubbling with entrepreneurial spirit. Given the extent of the devastation New Orleans experienced, this seemed to me a bit of wishful thinking—until I got interested in what The Idea Village and Intellectual Property are doing. I soon realized that I am watching not a brain drain but a brain magnet, as people from all generations who have an entrepreneurial spirit are coming back to help rebuild New Orleans. The lines between social and private enterprise have blurred, and entrepreneurs of both ilks who are interested in building better communities and better businesses are flocking to New Orleans.

The revamped public school system that has been created in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina exemplifies the positive impact this kind of entrepreneurship can have. The storm completely destroyed most schools in New Orleans, but those involved in rebuilding the school system saw not just devastation but a rare opportunity. Entrepreneurial initiatives like the KIPP Academies, EdisonLearning, and New Schools for New Orleans have had a chance to show what they could do and that they could attract students. They started by asking what they could do to make better schools; among the new ideas they have tried are the Edible Schoolyard, staying open until 6 p.m. instead of dumping kids onto the streets at 3 p.m., and being in session for 11 months of the year. The results of these entrepreneurial risks speak for themselves: 65 percent of the kids in New Orleans now attend charter schools. I had never seen the entrepreneurial spirit applied to a public school system before I saw it done in New Orleans, but my friend Michael Lewis's prediction has now come to pass, as the entrepreneurial spirit that drives the public school system has suffused everything in the city.

The mix of social and private entrepreneurship currently at work in New Orleans, while not new, is bubbling up in a uniquely American way. The idea of “doing well by doing good” has a long history that stretches back to Benjamin Franklin and his *Poor Richard's Almanack*, where the phrase appeared. Franklin helped to build a new country and develop the new town of Philadelphia, and he did so by exalting this notion of doing well by doing good. His message was that a person should act and think in an entrepreneurial and enterprising way for himself, his family, his community, and his country because, according to Franklin, social enterprise and private enterprise don't only overlap, they reinforce each other. In this spirit, Franklin created the library of Philadelphia as a money-making enterprise. He started an academy for the education of Philadelphia's youth, which later became the University of Pennsylvania. He created a network of riders who traveled between his print shops and promoted the free flow of ideas through-

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out the colonies; this service later became the U.S. Postal Service. All these entities, which started as both social and business enterprises, have endured, and they show the kind of promise entrepreneurial activity brings to New Orleans.

By building enterprises that make stronger communities and bring us closer together, we connect to our nation's entrepreneurial history and to the long line of people who worked for something larger than themselves. Walter Percy correctly noted that hurricanes have silver linings. Katrina made New Orleans even more remarkable, adding to its unique mystique. Each of us has our own favorite sights and tastes and sounds that evoke this mystique. For me, it's primarily the sounds: a single funky musical chord can inspire a lifetime of memories, and late at night you can hear the sound of a lion roaring in the Audubon Park zoo mingle with that of a tugboat signaling, with two short and one long blasts of its horn, that it's rounding Algiers Point.

All entrepreneurs, those with long experience and those just starting out, have the opportunity to come to New Orleans and share in this magic brew that inspires creativity. Given this unique time in a unique place, people from around the country who care about building community and building businesses are flocking to New Orleans—and those who have not yet done so should be asking themselves why not.