



LOUISIANA DISASTER RECOVERY FOUNDATION

Louisiana's Fund for Louisiana's People

**RESTORING HOPE:
THE URGENCY OF HEALING AND
RECONCILIATION**

BY

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RESTORING HOPE: THE URGENCY OF HEALING AND RECONCILIATION
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A conversation about the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita should not be allowed to conclude without a consideration of how best to restore hope, how best to provide for healing and how best to promote reconciliation. I want, thus to say a word first about the distinction between optimism and hope and conclude with some observations about the importance of renewal, reconciliation and restitution

When Maya Angelou, the great poet, author and playwright, reflected on the tragedies in her early life, she wrote that the spring of hope is often immersed in the winter of despair. “You see a young boy, fourteen, fifteen years old, semiliterate. Maybe third generation on welfare... But he walks down the street as if he has oil wells in his backyard. If I had come from Mars or Pluto, I would look at people on the planet like him, and I would say, ‘Who are these people?’ Who are they? How dare they hope, with their history?’ There is something so irresistible about the hope they embody.”

I was born in the bayou country in this state where I studied from hand-me-down books in hand-me-down buildings, picked cotton from sun up to sun down and walked miles past the white school to the colored school on the other side of town. I am sure that others looking at me from another planet would have said how dare you hope with your history. But they probably could not understand Louisiana’s people. There is something so irresistible about the hope we embody.

People around the world who have watched the documentaries and read the essays commemorating Katrina and Rita look at what remains to be done and ask “how dare you hope with your history.” I have seen great tragedies and great triumphs over the years and the one thing I have learned is that out of struggle can come great hope, great glory, great dignity and even great victory.

Hope and history provide good metaphors for what I would like to say to you this afternoon. When we look back a year, hope at first glance seems inadequate and unrealistic, particularly when we are still surrounded by so many evidences of human failure. But hope is not optimism based on what you see. Hope allows us to see beyond what is and to imagine what can and what ought to be. It is not so much an act of memory as it is an act of imagination and courage. It is an acknowledgement that what you can imagine you can probably create.

In his 1997 book *Restoring Hope*, Cornel West wrote that optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Hope, on the other hand, enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles against the evidence in order to make things better.

Personal Renewal

So what must we do to restore hope? I would begin with your role as community leaders, the relationship between hope and renewal. Steven Covey, the leadership guru, tells the story of a man walking in the woods who comes up a man cutting down trees. He stops and asks the logger how his work is going and the man replies “Not so well. I can not seem to cut down nearly as many trees as I did this morning.” The passerby responds, “Maybe you need to stop and sharpen the saw.” The logger looks at him in amazement as he says, “Oh I can’t do that. I have far too many trees still to cut.”

We need for the health of our organizations and the effectiveness of our work to provide time to sharpen the saw. Time out for renewal is not selfish indulgence. It is

preparation to do our work better, to enhance our capacity to serve the ends we seek more effectively. I have encountered over the years far too many people who burn themselves out and become less productive because they refuse to stop and sharpen the saw. I hope I can persuade those of you on the frontlines of post-Katrina New Orleans and post-Rita South Louisiana to stop occasionally and sharpen the saw. To the representatives of foundations, I would add that it is not easy to raise money for personal renewal, but it may be that one of the most strategic forms of philanthropy in which private donors can engage is to provide an opportunity for some of the hard working nonprofit leaders here today to step back, reflect and renew themselves.

I am as guilty as anyone else of sometimes neglecting this critical dimension of effectiveness, but in preparing to teach a course on leadership at the University of Cape Town several years ago, I rediscovered a wonderful little book by Marcus Aurelius called *Meditations*. You may remember it from your own studies or you may have caught a glimpse of Marcus Aurelius sitting in a tent and writing by candlelight in the movie “*The Gladiator*.” Although he ruled a vast empire, this Roman emperor and philosopher used a few moments at the end of each day to try and better understand who he was and how he should work and live. He kept a journal that he called “*To Himself*,” but which centuries later was re-titled “*Meditations*.”

I recall it today because there are three points worth making about renewal from the example Marcus Aurelius set. The first is the need for moments of serenity when we slow down, step back, withdraw and reflect. Marcus Aurelius reminds us of the hazards of over-immersion, the danger of losing ourselves and our bearings in the performance of busy tasks. If the movie “*The Gladiator*” had probed more deeply into his insights, he might well have asked his generals, his senators, and his judges whether they had somewhere in their lives the counterpart of his tent, with its candle and plain table. He would have in mind not so much a physical location, but moments when they could reflect and renew themselves. So my first message of renewal is that each of us needs to create a space of quiet, make some time that is genuinely our own not to hide from life, but to renew ourselves that we can live better.

The second message is that Marcus Aurelius used those moments of serenity to learn from others. In the first chapter of “*Meditations*,” Marcus expresses gratitude one by one to more than a dozen people who influenced his life. We learn that to prepare for the challenge of the next day he worked hard to discern what values and insights he could distil from the lives of people he knew and respected. He searched for standards that were validated in every life and values that were forged in the crucible of life.

The third and final example we should draw from Marcus Aurelius is the fact that he sought to place his day-to-day concerns in the context of his whole life, and his whole life in the context of eternity. Part of the reason for the enduring value of Marcus Aurelius advice to himself is its sense of the eternal juxtaposed against the need to live in the moment, to learn from the moment but to understand what it means to be part of something larger and more enduring. While we seek transcendence through a variety of religious traditions and call our god by different names, it may be our common search rather than our different answer that provide the basis of our unity.

Reconciliation

While the first plank in the platform for restoring hope is renewal, what you must do for yourselves as leaders, the second plank is reconciliation, what you must do as

leaders for the community. For more than a decade, I have been living full or part time in South Africa where I have encountered many people who are still hurting and in need of healing, but I have been stunned and energized at the same time by their capacity for reconciliation. In the book *No Future without Forgiveness*, former Archbishop Desmond Tutu argues that true reconciliation cannot be achieved by denying the past. But nor is it easy to reconcile when you live daily with a reminder of what has caused the alienation. We speak of reconciliation then as not simply the restoration of broken relations, but as the restoration of humanity, as a prerequisite for personal and social healing. So the first step toward healing is a rebalancing of the self. Bringing back into balance in South Africa is described as negotiating with one's memory and deciding which is to have the last word. I can remember helping to organize the civil rights movement in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and the rage I started to feel every time I heard George Wallace on television spouting hatred and inciting violence. I came soon to realize that the hostility, bitterness and resentment I felt was causing the kind of stress that impaired not just my thinking, but my own physical and mental health. Clinical psychologists now tell us that unless we find ways to reduce the stress that comes from anger and the loss of something we greatly value, we impair our neurological function and increase our chances of an even more serious physical or mental disorder.

Researchers speak of two kinds of healing. The first is decisional, a commitment to move on, just letting go. Confucius put it best when he said, "If you devote your life to holding grievances, dig two graves." That is why the South Africans say that the most selfish thing you can do for yourself is to forgive those who have wronged you, to let go of what has alienated you. The second form of healing is spiritual or cosmic, the state of ease and relief that comes from outside the self, the belief that one is part of something bigger and more mysterious than the self. It is this latter form of healing that reminds us why all the great religions understand faith as the older sibling of hope.

If the first step toward healing and reconciliation is individual, rebalancing the self, the second is communal, facilitating and supporting the natural urge toward community and bonding. The South Africans have a word for this form of community. They call it "ubuntu" and it is best reflected by a saying of the Xhosa tribe in Southern Africa "People are people through other people." It follows that to deny the dignity or damage the humanity of another person is to damage one's own. It is this notion of ubuntu that led the early warring tribes in Southern Africa to appoint "war-healers," individuals on each side who sought after a conflict to engage the other in the construction of a relationship that recognized the dignity and humanity of the former adversary.

Communal reconciliation is also about communication, careful listening and creating space for people to hear one another and engage each other in mutual healing.

Restitution

The final plank in the platform for restoring hope goes beyond the clinical and the spiritual to include the social and economic. It involves more than a theory or even a set of values. It is about restitution. Since completing his work as head of the Truth and Reconciliation, Desmond Tutu has regularly reminded South Africans that the whole process of reconciliation is placed in very considerable jeopardy by the continuing disparities between the rich and the poor. To quote again the Archbishop, who is affectionately referred to as The Arch, "Unless houses replace the hovels and shacks in

which most blacks live, unless blacks gain access to clean water, electricity, affordable health care, decent education, good jobs and a safe environment – things which a vast majority of whites have – we can just as well kiss reconciliation good bye.”

These are not the words we tend to hear about South Africa from those seeking reconciliation in the United States. The emphasis is on forgiveness from those who have been the victims while very little is said about reparations from those who have benefited and what form of reparations is morally defensible and politically feasible.

Many Americans ask me what can we learn from South Africa. I like to point out that in South Africa race is now on the table. In the United States, it is under the table, if it is any where in the room. In the United States, we may need to first reconcile conflicting images of the present. Too many people were shocked by the pre-existing conditions exposed by Katrina.

Finally, it is important to remind ourselves that healing is as much about re-establishing community as it is about restoring the quality of life that makes us all productive and useful citizens. There is the sense of community we share in crisis and the sense of community we need when the crisis is over. After 9/11, pollsters and pundits suggested that we were more united as a people than at almost any time in our history. However, I worried then, as I do now that we may have been lulled into a sense of community that was not sustainable. We were clearly united in our pain and grief and we were both healed and bound together by our many acts of generosity toward those who were the victims in New York and Washington. But we were so busy celebrating the new spirit of community that we did not think much about how we sustain it.

In this post Katrina era, I am reminded of the caution offered some years ago by the psychiatrist and writer Scott Peck who wrote that we build community out of crisis and we build community by accident, but we do not know how to build community by design. He went on to suggest that the problem with building community out of crisis is that once the crisis is over, so usually is the spirit of community.

The question leaders in all sectors of our region must now address is how do we build community by design. How do we sustain the sense of community we shared at the moment of crisis when the intensity of the crisis has diminished? How do we build community by design? It is has been my experience that when neighbors help neighbors, and even when strangers help strangers, both those who help and those who are helped are not only transformed, but they experience a new sense of connectedness. Getting involved in the needs of the neighbor provides a new perspective, a new way of seeing ourselves, a new understanding of the purpose of the human journey. When that which was “their” problem becomes “our” problem, the transaction transforms a mere association into a relationship that has the potential for new communities of meaning and belonging.

In other words, doing something for someone else – what John Winthrop called making the condition of others our own – is a powerful force in building community. When you experience the problems of the poor or troubled, when you help someone to find cultural meaning in a museum or creative expression in a painting, when you help to dispel prejudices or fight bigotry directed at your neighbors, you are far more likely to find common ground, and you are likely to find that in serving others you discover the genesis of community.

Finally, building community by design requires that we commit ourselves to the principle the black mystic, poet and theologian Howard Thurman had in mind when he wrote “I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you.” Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say “I want to be an American without making it difficult for Arabs to be Arabs, Africans to be Africans and Asians to be Asians?” Can you imagine how different our communities would be if more Christians were able to say “I want to be a Christian without making it difficult for a Jew to be a Jew, a Muslim to be a Muslim, a Buddhist to be a Buddhist or a Hindu to be a Hindu?”

The Greek mathematician Archimedes is reported to have said “Give me a lever long enough and I can move the world.” Those of you in this room have been in many ways given the lever; I hope you will use it not simply to move New Orleans, but to help move the world.

(The Honorable James A. Joseph served as President Clinton’s Ambassador to South Africa from 1996-2000. He was the first and only American Ambassador to present his credentials to President Nelson Mandela. Thabo Mbeki, Nelson Mandela’s successor, presented Ambassador Joseph with the Order of Good Hope, the highest honor the government of South Africa bestows on the citizen of another country)