

Reasons to Continue Caring about Katrina Survivors

Americans are tired of thinking about Katrina. We are tuned out or fed up — tired of staggering ineptitude and corruption at every level of government, tired of the money that leaves our treasury and appears to land in a bottomless sinkhole, tired of the crime and violence in New Orleans. Two years after the storm, there is so much trouble with all things Katrina, the topic has become an abstract tangle of environmental, structural, economic, political and human issues we don't know how to fix. The problem feels so foreign, so "other."

The "otherness" of New Orleans contributes to our sense of distance from Katrina survivors. We don't quite empathize with people bound to a Creole place where African, Latin, and Native American influences show up in racial flexibility and gumbo filé. Here is a place where street parades celebrate the dead, voodoo is practiced, jazz was invented, families stay rooted and vice operates in the open. As long as the good times rolled, we consumed it as outsiders. Katrina took away the fun that connected us to this amazingly complex and exuberant city.

Another factor shapes our weariness with Katrina. We are a society that believes in triumph over mighty odds, and there is no such ending on the horizon for New Orleans or for a great many of its residents.

Our fetish for happy endings is not trivial. It is, in fact, tied to a distinctive American morality that rises from ideas about self-reliance and the work ethic and the power these traits carry to help us prevail over the most challenging circumstances.

Many of us are also tired of thinking about Katrina because we believe that we have done everything we can — sent donations, volunteers and federal dollars to the survivors, to help rebuild levees, homes and infrastructure.

For all these reasons, we distance ourselves. As a white, female professor and anthropologist, I see the disconnect between the grueling realities of post-Katrina life and the facile perceptions of this life among outsiders. If we don't feel connected, we don't have to care. But there is reason to care deeply.

Since the storm, I have had the honor of getting to know the only people who can honestly claim Katrina fatigue: the survivors. Shortly after the broken levees drowned New Orleans, I began a collaborative project with a gifted filmmaker to document the post-Katrina lives of a large African American family from St. Bernard Parish, just outside the city. Over the next 20 months, Ginny Martin and I worked to capture the process of recovery as it unfolded. (Our film, *Still Waiting: Life After Katrina* is airing on PBS stations in August, September and October).

This two-year commitment has been the most humbling experience of my life. I have learned how much ordinarily self-reliant Americans — people who have done everything

right — can be made dependent on bureaucracies that hold their futures inside complex and unresponsive mazes.

The 150 individuals in this close-knit family network were homeowners, they had jobs and remain devout Baptists and Catholics. Our work exposed us to their hardships and to their character in ways that outsiders rarely glimpse — their grief and sadness, their dislocation and culture shock in Dallas, their ritual gatherings to share each other's home-cooked food, their optimism and resolve to return home, their brave acceptance of the devastation, chaos and unending heaps of paperwork to which they returned, their patience with the system that promised them what it has not delivered.

The reality of this family's self-reliance, their patience during a time of prolonged stress and difficulty, is a model of American fortitude. Yet in my Colorado neighborhood, in my Missouri hometown, and in my adopted home in Texas where the concern for self-reliance is enthusiastically promoted, few people I know recognize the philosophical and moral kinship they share with families like this. Many people of goodwill and intelligence instead confess to me their weariness with the Katrina story. I believe this Katrina fatigue exists because we allow ourselves to deny our connection to the people who are still suffering.

I ask those who doubt the need to care to look harder and look deeper: the people hurt by Katrina are just like us. It is the distance we create that allows us to avoid this critical truth.

If we are to speak about American values and hold ourselves up as a hardworking, self-reliant people, we cannot in good faith ignore those who have lived by this code and who are still struggling to rebuild their lives in the midst of one of this country's greatest betrayals. For our self respect, we all need them to succeed.

Kate Browne is professor of anthropology at Colorado State University. *Still Waiting: Life After Katrina* is airing on PBS stations around the country in August, September and October. For more information, visit www.stillwaiting.colostate.edu