

# Hurricane Katrina

## AMERICA'S UNNATURAL DISASTER

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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AND

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## ONE

### Letters from a Native Son

Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?

MITCHELL F. CRUSTO

*The following is a journal of a native son's experiences and reflections as he and his family evacuated the City of New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina. It also chronicles his reaction to the news of the devastation and the government's mishandling of the situation in the months, albeit now years, following the hurricane. Mitchell F. Crusto keeps his journal as if writing letters to his mother. But in this instance, his "mother" is the City of New Orleans herself.*

Letter One, Katrina the Natural Disaster, Evacuation, and  
Dodging the Bullet, the Morning of August 29, 2005

Dearest Mother Dear (City of New Orleans),

Friday, August 26, 2005, three days before Katrina hit you, Mother Dear New Orleans, and changed our lives forever, Cousin Nakia called today and asked where we were going to evacuate. I asked her why we were evacuating this time. She said Hurricane Katrina is in the Gulf, and the news said it is projected to hit New Orleans.

On Saturday, August 27, 2005, Lisa and I gathered our daughter

Theresa and some things, thinking this would be another brief holiday away from work, as had been the other evacuations each fall over the last several years. We didn't board up the windows. We didn't move previous personal belongings to higher levels on the second floor. We didn't even take our precious cat Autumn, as we would certainly be back in a week at the latest.

We called Honey, my mother, and told her to pack a bag, that she was coming with us. She said that would mean she would miss an important social engagement: the fiftieth anniversary party for one of her dearest friends. We told her to call them and apologize and blame her overprotective son for her missing the special event. We called Sister Deborah, who said she was boarding her house and would catch up. We called Brother Al, who said he might leave. We called Brother Rene, who said that he was going to ride it out in New Orleans. (Sister Kathy and her family were living in Arlington, Texas, and were ready as usual to greet unannounced visitors escaping pending disasters.)

So we packed the Suburban, thank God for a black man with a good job, and the family, and some gas, and some food, and armed with some cash and credit cards we ventured to face our Katrina destiny. We picked up Honey on the way and drove along the back roads outside the city to avoid the traffic jams. The newscasters were telling everyone to travel west along Interstate 10 toward Houston; we decided that it would be better to head north along Interstate 55, first to Jackson and then to Memphis. Eventually, we concluded our evacuation two days later with a visit to my children Eve and Mia, who were living with their mother in St. Louis.

So we left you, Mother Dear New Orleans, on Saturday, August 27, 2005, two days before Hurricane Katrina smashed into your lovely landscape and shattered your southern serenity. On Monday, August 29, 2005, we joined the world as we watched the Weather Channel, our steady diet for information over the last several days.

It showed scenes of the Gulf Coast and yes, you, our previous New Orleans, being battered with Category 5 winds, torrential rains, and 30-foot tidal waves. But we were greatly relieved when the news reported that you, our ancestral city of African American culture, jazz, creole cuisine, Zulu balls, and Mardi Gras Indians, had been spared as Katrina had at the last minute veered east and directly into Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, which was virtually wiped off the map. There were scenes of people cheering in the streets of New Orleans and thanking God for being spared, once again.

*Letter Two, Katrina the Un-Natural Disaster, It's the  
Levees, Stupid, the Evening of August 31, 2005*

Dearest Mother Dear,

We are here at the Culpepper's Restaurant off Olive Street in suburban St. Louis, watching the international news coverage of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. It was reported that you have been spared Katrina's direct hit, although your sister Gulf Coast cities of Pascagoula, Bay St. Louis, Biloxi, and Mobile were less fortunate. And then came the horrible news of your levees. Some say that there were explosions; that the levees were intentionally dynamited to relieve damage to the more affluent, tourist-significant sections of the city: the French Quarter, the Garden District, the Uptown, the Downtown, and the Tulane-Loyola University areas along the St. Charles streetcar line. The news cameras zoomed in on a street sign that, for your native sons and daughters, said it all. Flooded water reached up to the bottom of a street sign showing Frenchmen and Marigny Streets in the affluent African American neighborhood of Gentilly, which was a noted high elevation in the city. If water was at this level, the news reports were not showing and no one was saying something of greater significance. More than half of you, our beloved city, was under water! And so our

teardrops rolled down our trembling faces. This would be the first time following Katrina that we cried for you, New Orleans, but it would not be the last.

Letter Three, Battered Homes, Shattered Lives,  
September 1–December 31, 2005

Dearest Mother Dear,

The media was hailed for its coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, especially for what happened to you, my Beloved City. Some of the coverage was helpful, but most of it exploited you and your family of citizens, and did not tell the truth. The truth was that Katrina was not about a hurricane or a nature disaster. Katrina is about the failures of the levee system around you and the failed politics before, during, and after Katrina. The truth is not about the “looting” of stores for food and shelter or the apparent civil insurrection by gangs of lawless people. It is about the failure of all levels of government, local, state, and federal, to take immediate action to comfort the survivors who were negatively impacted by Katrina. Katrina survivors number over a million people and were in various distressful circumstances. Katrina survivors include the people on the rooftops or in the attics of their home, stranded in the flood. Katrina survivors include the people at the Superdome and at the Convention Center. They include the people stranded on bridges and highways, surrounded by polluted, rising waters. They are the people who were shot at by police officers on the West Bank of the city, and the people who were prevented from evacuating from the flooded parts of the East Bank. Katrina survivors included most of our family, who now live elsewhere with or without other family members in Baton Rouge, in Atlanta, in Houston, in Dallas/Fort Worth, in Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, and in every big city and small town throughout the country. Katrina

survivors include people who were herded into airplanes and buses and shipped without permission to faraway places such as Oakland and Minneapolis, where they remain stranded today and unable to return to their homes.

There were the thousands of our loved ones who did not survive. Francis Robinette, or “Nanny,” died along with hundreds of others in nursing homes that were either unprepared or negligent in their response to Katrina. And it might be easy to forget about the thousands of others who died after being evacuated from New Orleans of old age and heartbreak like Maurice Prevost. “Uncle Morris” died at the age of ninety-five in Indianapolis, where he had evacuated with his daughter Anne-Maureen.

Letter Four, the Matter of Race, September 1–December 31, 2005

Dearest Mother Dear,

All of your children, of all races, are debating whether race was a major factor in what happened to you following Katrina. Many African Americans believe that if you were a vanilla city, rather than a chocolate city, the Katrina story would have been different, less tragic. Many Anglo-American citizens of the City are offended by the notion that the disaster was about race, as if their misfortunes are less significant because they are not minorities in the traditional sense. It was apparent to me that there are seven reasons why race does not define Katrina. First, Anglo-Americans were equally impacted by Katrina. Second, President Bush is a fair-minded person and treats all American citizens equally. Third, Governor Blanco is racially blind and so is Mayor Nagin. Fourth, if race were a major factor, the media would have said so. Fifth, to say that race is a factor is contrary to our Nation’s history. Sixth, Katrina was really about ineffective levees and the environment. And seventh, it was about poverty and class, not about race.

All right, Mother New Orleans, I can lie to you; I am unconvinced that Katrina was not about race. Maybe I feel this way because my entire life had been molded by race as an African American, albeit a Fifth Ward creole, citizen of the city. Here is my take on the question of race and Katrina. First, African Americans were more likely to live in lower-lying sections of the city than Anglo-Americans because of the history of housing segregation in New Orleans. This does not mean that there were no African Americans living in the high and dry sections of the city, such as the French Quarter or the Garden District, or that no Anglo-Americans lived in low-lying and flooded-prone areas of the city, such as the Lower Ninth Ward. The greatest reality is that the entire City of New Orleans is below sea level and therefore subject to flood. The real question is whether race played a factor in the development and maintenance of the levee and water-pumping systems in New Orleans. I honestly cannot answer that question based on my current knowledge, but I can say that it would not surprise me if race played a fact in the underfunding of levees in the city over the years. Also, I am familiar with studies showing that environmental injustice in this country is connected to race and class, particularly when it comes to the level of protection against environmental harms that is afforded to African Americans and other impoverished minority communities.

Second, as to President Bush. It appears that there are many reasons to believe that President Bush does in fact like black people (contrary to Kanye West's statement). After all, he had placed many African Americans in leadership positions in his cabinet, from Colin Powell to Condoleezza Rice to Alphonse Jackson. But the question is not about personal racism. The question is, rather, are his policies racially biased against African Americans? It would appear that the evidence supports an affirmative answer. Clearly, President Bush and his party developed and promoted policies that

negatively affect African Americans. These include substantial cuts in social safety net programs. Third, as to Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin, there isn't enough ink to analyze these two players, so I won't try. Fourth, the popular broadcast media is inadequate to cover a story as big as Katrina. Apparently popular journalists did not think it in their best interest to cover Katrina through a race lens. Fifth, race has been a determinate factor throughout our Nation's history, so why not use it to define Katrina? Would the national government hesitate to provide substantial disaster relief had the city's residents been affluent, Anglo-American Republicans? I guess we will just have to see when we have the next major disaster in a different part of the country, like Sacramento, California. Sixth, was race a factor in the design, funding, construction, and maintenance of the levee system? And seventh, perhaps Katrina had more to do with poverty, class, and party politics than with race. I suspect that a comparative study of the national government's response to Katrina's effects on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, versus its response to the storm's effects on New Orleans, will reveal any differences or similarities.

Letter Five, President Bush, Governor Blanco, Mayor C. Ray Nagin,  
and the Irresponsibility of the Government at All Levels, and Federalism

Dearest Mother Dear,

The disclosure of America's Dirty Secrets, the existence of communities in distress, leads to another thought: the relationship between federalism and racial equality. I want to challenge us with a renewed vision of American federalism, one that repairs the vestiges of our nation's legacy of the enslavement of African American people and of legally treating people as property. One of the guiding principles of our nation is federalism. Most legal scholars today seem focused on the structural aspects of federalism; that is, the balance of political power between state governments and the

federal government. But “true” federalism, President Abraham Lincoln federalism, I believe, is much, much more. It is the belief in the integrity of the individual, in what today might be called human rights. It is my thesis that federalism is about the constitutional rights of every American to be guaranteed human dignity. I believe that all levels of government have the legal and moral responsibility to protect the integrity of each and every individual.

What about federalism and race? Hurricane Katrina showed the world that we have failed to remediate our past of slavery. We are continuing to live a conflicted legacy. It is a legacy of tremendous respect for the integrity of the individual’s rights, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, but unfortunately also a legacy of the enslavement of people because of their race. Our legal history of treating people as property leads us to treat people on the fringe of society as rubbish, abandoned or discarded trash.

This year is the 150th anniversary of the Dred Scott decision, wherein the United States Supreme Court pronounced that enslaved African American people were legal property of their owners and that all African Americans lacked the basic rights of American citizenship under the U.S. Constitution. Isn’t it time for us to amend our conflicted past? But I have spoken too long about too many depressing things.

What next? What hope? What dream? There is a legal movement at all levels of government to erase race from policy debate and policy considerations. Recently, the State of Michigan has joined other states in passing a referendum to erase race from public policy. In some ways this movement is commendable, as it could reflect the progress we have made as a nation. Unfortunately, removing race from policy criteria does not, and in my view will not, eradicate racism.

In order to protect the rights of all American citizens, my vision of the federalist ideal is that we must continue to support inclusion

strategies to maintain open markets and open doors. We must also engage, when we can, in greater consciousness and positive debate to challenge those who hold the view that “affirmative action” has reached its zenith. We must continue to work at all levels to protect the constitutional rights of each and every American, regardless of her or his race, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, or other social-dividing criteria. Racism of all kinds can be eradicated with courage, leadership, and example, but not by eliminating “race” as a policy criterion. Furthermore, we must become devoted to remedying the needs of our communities in distress.

Letter Six, Katrina, Communities in Distress,  
and Unveiling America’s Social Disaster

Dearest Mother Dear,

As a recent survivor of the ravages of Hurricane Katrina, I want to share some observations of what I previously referred to as “America’s Dirty Secrets.” Hurricane Katrina was a worldwide media event that unveiled these secrets to the world. What are these secrets? Before I share them with you, I want to reflect on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision, his Dream.

Has this Dream been realized? It would appear to me, after growing up in a racially segregated, impoverished New Orleans neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s, that today there are many examples to indicate that America is living “The Dream.” Our people are cabinet secretaries, governors, senators, congresswomen, and yes, presidential contenders. We are CEOs of major corporations, we lead our military forces, and we teach at the most cherished institutions of higher learning.

But The Dream is not just about opening doors for African American leadership. It is about brotherhood and sisterhood among all of God’s people, regardless of racial divides. It is my belief that in

America today there is more harmony and fellowship among our people than at any other time in our nation's history. And so there is hope. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would be proud.

So why did I mention despair, when there is cause for hope? Hurricane Katrina was more than a natural disaster; it exposed America's social disaster, or our Dirty Secrets. What are America's Dirty Secrets? The worldwide media coverage of Katrina showed that despite the successes of many African Americans, there are many among us who live in what I refer to as "communities in distress."

You know what communities in distress are, because to most of us they are no secret. Many of us, of many backgrounds, come from them, and many of us still live within them. They are not just within the City of New Orleans; they are throughout this country, in the South, the North, the West, and the East.

Communities in distress, much like my beloved New Orleans, are deceptive. On the surface, they are thriving economically and socially. Their downtowns have tall, shining, new buildings. They feature new, publicly funded stadiums and parks. They often have shiny airports that serve businesspeople and tourists. But behind the glamour, not unlike that of New Orleans, distressed communities suffer. They need our help. Not unlike abandoned Katrina survivors, the majority of residents in distressed communities are impoverished African Americans.

A recently published Harvard University study shows that African Americans, especially those who reside in urban areas, have a quality of life that is lower than all other ethnic groups nationwide. Researchers at Harvard University's Initiative for Global Health and School of Public Health examined the U.S. Census and various health studies produced between 1982 and 2001. They found that the nation is divided into "eight Americas." Not surprising, African Americans in "high risk" cities nationwide and in rural areas of the Deep South are at the bottom of the social ladder. These communities in distress suffer from high unemployment, poor schools,

chronic health effects, illicit drug abuse, inadequate housing, and high levels of crime, murder, and suicide.

Katrina represents America's social disaster as an example of the local, state, and federal governments' failure to aid people in crisis. The people of New Orleans, and all people in distressed communities, illustrate Katrina, the Social Disaster.

Letter Seven, Katrina and beyond Private  
Insurers and Federal Flood Coverage

Dearest Mother Dear,

Many of your citizens had homeowners' insurance, although a great number were renters or recipients of public housing. Even those with private homeowners' insurance did not expect the effect of the flood exemption in their homeowners' policies. These exemptions generally mean that homeowners will not be covered for property damage, content damages, and loss of use (additional living expenses) if their homes are damaged as a result of flooding. They are required to purchase federal flood insurance if they want to be compensated for flood damages. Some had flood coverage through insurance, others did not, and many who had insurance had insufficient coverage.

Letter Eight, Eulogy, Do You Know What It Means to Miss  
New Orleans? March 29, 2007 (18 Months Later)

Dearest Mother Dear,

This is my last letter to you, and it is your eulogy. Sure, some will say that your demise is greatly exaggerated and claim that you are still with us, and they present some convincing evidence. The Superdome has been renovated, but the spirit of betrayal still permeates the place. Mardi Gras is still celebrated in great splendor, but the small sizes of the public school bands tell a story of a public school

system virtually destroyed and grossly abandoned. America's port of New Orleans is still thriving as it continues to deliver goods, including oil and gas, to citizens of the world. You are still a tourist destination with rich food, jazz, and Afro-centric culture.

Yet something has died in this tale of two cities, the City That Care Forgot and the City of Mardi Gras Affluence. The latter is indeed alive and will continue to live in good health. The former, the city that I know and love, is dead and gone forever. The African American middle class that was the stabilizing feature of a city with sharp racial and economic divisions is gone. Gone too are the neighborhood-based public school system and its African American teachers' union. Gone is the upper class of African American professionals, doctors, lawyers, and professors who have found it easier to stay displaced in their new home communities than to fight to be returned to their old, damaged communities. Gone is a generation of older African Americans who did not survive the Katrina ordeal, as well as those who have chosen not to relive their memories of Katrina by returning to New Orleans.

Perhaps there will be a resurrection of the City That Care Forgot. And if the Chocolate part of New Orleans survives, perhaps it can be reconstructed better than before. Perhaps in this new city, we can eradicate poverty, erase social, economic, and racial barriers, and eliminate social ills such as AIDS. Perhaps we can build new schools and replace crumbling infrastructure. And perhaps we can beat the odds against African American political empowerment.

So what are the lessons from Katrina for all Americans? Every community in America, from Sacramento, California, to St. Louis, Missouri, to New York City, is subject to catastrophic loss due to man-made or natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, tornados, mudslides, tidal waves, levee breaches, toxic releases, or acts of terror. When it happens to you, will you feel betrayed? By incompetence or by design?