

Sunshine after Floodwater: a Report from New Orleans

Oct. 12, 2005

By Starhawk

I'm sitting at the block party in front of the Algiers clinic set up by Common Ground, the grassroots organization we've come to New Orleans to support in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The clinic is set up in a storefront mosque in this black neighborhood on the West Bank (which oddly enough is on the east side of town) which escaped the flooding. At a table next to me, four people of three or four different races are playing dominoes. Across the street, kids are having their faces painted, and I'ila is helping a group paint prayer flags with their wishes and dreams. A white activist I know as a deeply serious person is intent on getting just the right composition of dish soap to make giant bubbles. Miss Beverly is dishing up red beans and rice from a big pot, and down the street Aaron is barbecuing jerked chicken. Rain is dancing with a boy of about thirteen who just plainly adores her, and a mix of medics and volunteers from all over the country are chatting, relaxing, and enjoying the sunshine.

The idyllic quality of this scene, like a poster picture of racial harmony and community, is all the more remarkable because a month ago this community was on the verge of a race riot. Immediately after Katrina, when much of the Louisiana National Guard was in Iraq and the police failed to keep order, white vigilante groups were roaming the streets, shooting at any young black man they suspected of being a looter. Black citizens were arming themselves in response, and the neighborhood was on the verge of a race riot.

Then Malik, a neighborhood organizer, Green Party member and former Black Panther, put out a call to some of his long time allies and the activist community in general, for help and allies. Scott Crow, a young white organizer from Austin, came down and sat on the porch with Malik to defend against the vigilantes. When the immediate threat eased, they turned to meeting other needs—for food distribution, water supplies, medical care. Out of that effort came the Common Ground Collective. And long before the Red Cross, FEMA, or any official aid arrived, they were distributing supplies and helping people to remain and return and resist coercive evacuation.

I duck inside the clinic for a tetanus shot. A big room is divided into screened cubicles and office spaces. The woman at the desk smiles at me, a young volunteer comes over, takes me aside, and quickly takes my vitals. He's been here for a month, and looks tired but proud. The clinic is a month old and in that time, with no federal or state assistance, has served over two thousand people, many of whom have no regular medical care because they can't afford it and there is no permanent clinic that serves this neighborhood. It's warm and friendly—in contrast to the official clinics which, when they finally did open, are under armed guard.

I can't remember when I last had a tetanus shot, and the medic and I joke about the fact that I'll surely remember this one—my Katrina shot.

There are two National Guard in camo fatigues wandering through the crowd, and Baruch tells me they are guarding us from the police, who have been systematically harassing clinic personnel along with the general citizenry. Across the river, police arrested three of the young volunteers who were helping Mama D, who is cleaning up her 7th Ward neighborhood so that when people return, they will have something to come back to. Two were white, one was black: they beat the black kid severely, kicking him viciously in the chest, and stole his money. They were in jail with lots of people who were arrested simply sitting on their own front porches. In the French Quarter, someone videotaped a group of cops viciously beating an old man, and this makes the news and provokes outrage. But there are a hundred incidents like it, every day, that no one sees.

Racism is like the black mold eating away at the long-submerged houses. It permeates everything, and it spreads, corrupting everything in its path. The police, the slow and neglectful response of officials, the differing values placed on human life according to color and class. So often, it's below the surface, lurking as spores of privilege, a deeply unconscious sense of entitlement, or lack. But the floods have wet everything down, and now it is visible, and growing. Unchecked, it destroys strong foundations and sturdy structures—and that what we've seen happen here, some of the basic structures of government, of simple human decency, collapsing.

And that's why we're here, really—to try, at least in a few places, to root it out, to save some of the beauty of the old structures and to make it possible to rebuild anew. Mold abatement.

Sunlight kills spores. Rain and Joshua are dancing, Miss Beverly presiding over her cauldron of beans and rice, the bubble mixture is finally right, and the bubbles float over the scene, iridescent spheres as ephemeral as a rainbow after a flood. And even if it's just for this moment, the sun shines down.

Hundreds of groups are collecting money to aid hurricane victims. If you want to help the efforts of these grassroots groups, you can donate directly to Common Ground at their website:

<http://www.pagancluster.org/>
<http://www.commongroundrelief.org/>

Tax deductible donations can also be sent to:

ACT
1405 Hillmount St.
Austin, Texas
78704
U.S.A.

Come join us! If you have skills to offer, particularly medical training, building skills, child care experience, counseling, or just a general willingness to clean up garbage and do what needs to be done, there is lots of work to do. Volunteers will be needed for months to come, as relief turns to rebuilding. You can come for a short time or the long term.

For more information:

An e-mail to katrina@pagancluster.org will get a response as soon as possible. If you need to call someone, you can call Juniper at 512-431-7988 or Elizabeth at 336-877-5571.

There is also useful and updated information at:

<http://www.vfpoadtrips.org/>
