

A Valentine from New Orleans

Feb. 14, 2006

By Starhawk

Saturday Night, we went down to the French Quarter and saw the first walking parade of the Mardi Gras season. The parades are sponsored and carried out by groups called Krewes, and Krewe de Vieux is known for its irreverence and satire. The theme this year was Katrina, and the satire was lively. Most memorable float—probably the last one, Mandatory Ejaculation, with a giant vagina on the cart and lots of people carrying sperm on sticks, white balls with long wiggly tails, behind.

I went down with Sue and Juniper, and Scotty who promised to desert us in favor of some of his younger friends. It was great to see the streets filled with people, to be crushed in the crowd and to hear the drums and follow the parade. The French Quarter is a perfect setting, with its narrow streets and high balconies that turn the whole city into a stage. If I ever get to design a city, I will be thinking about how to make it work for parades and processions, demonstrations and insurrections, with maybe a few hidden bowers for lovers here and there. At last I got to hear jazz, with band after band parading through the streets, trumpets and trombones and drummers with those lively, syncopated rhythms that make your feet dance. You can't help but feel happy when that music is playing. After huge traumas and great sorrows, music knits the world together again, and that's what the jazz musicians and the singers of blues know how to do.

After the parade, eight of us went out to dinner. Somehow, once we squeezed past the crowded, smoky bar, the restaurant was quiet, the food was delicious—gumbo and shrimp creole and good wine. Melissa, who was born and raised here, was in her element—at last our whole workaholic cluster had relaxed enough to go out to dinner and experience a bit of the culture she loves.

Monday we saw another face of New Orleans. It was the day that FEMA hotel vouchers ran out, and people were being evicted. Common Ground set up a demonstration at City Hall, prepared to put up a tent city if local residents requested it. I stayed there much of the morning, while we waited to here if an injunction would be issued to stave off the evictions. The injunction was denied. I heard some of the sad tales of FEMA incompetence and bureaucratic nightmares: the woman who had a job in New Orleans but no housing, who was offered a shelter in Shreveport by FEMA but then would lose her job, and who wanted to stay together with her family. The woman whose sign for the demonstration was a board from her house, who had a voucher from FEMA for a hotel room up until March 1, but couldn't find an hotel in town that would accept the voucher. Later, Sue came home from a long day with the sad tale of the man who was evicted from his hotel. FEMA wouldn't pay for a room but, in the only incidence of

efficiency I've ever heard attributed to them. Immediately issued him a plane ticket to Illinois where he had family. It might seem that they were eager to get people out of town, were it not for their unwillingness to issue him a cab voucher or give him any help to get to the airport. Sue drove him, helping him sort out all of his worldly possessions, which were in clear, plastic bags, and fit what he could into a suitcase.

Today, Valentine's Day, I spent taking samples of soil from some of the most toxic sites in New Orleans—a romantic occupation if ever there was one! The EPA tested most of the neighborhoods here, but is refusing to go back and retest, a pretty standard procedure, saying that access is too difficult. Juniper and Jen combed through the EPA data to actually identify twenty or so of the most toxic sites, and trained a group of us to take the samples. The sites are street corners, peoples' back yards, schoolyards.

We wear protective boots and carefully keep the soil we scoop up from getting contaminated and record all the necessary data. I am the photographer and recorder on our team. Mark, the driver and chief sampler, is an experienced biologist who has done this before, so it goes quickly. The samples will be sent back to Washington DC, where the National Resource Defense Council will at some point hold a press conference and present the samples to the EPA.

I am overwhelmed at the scope of the destruction I've seen. We go into areas I haven't visited, and I hadn't realized what vast sections of the city are still deserted, still in ruins, still fully of collapsed homes and sediment covered yards. Miles and miles of desolation stretch out from the city's core. Block after block of public housing, still standing but boarded up and shuttered. Someone went to a lot of trouble to board each door and window—I can't help but wonder why they didn't spend the same energy to fix the places up and bring people home. Street after street is still empty. Here and there a FEMA trailer sits in a yard, but most are deserted, at least during the week while their owners are elsewhere trying to hold down a job, coming into the city on weekends to work on gutting the house. Vast stretches of strip mall leading out of town are in ruins. And the lower Ninth Ward is a shambles of wrecked homes and cars. Little has changed since we drove through in October, except that now a huge mound of garbage sits on the streets in front of every house still standing: the whole contents of a family's life mixed with the broken sticks of their structure. Stir with mold and let sit for weeks: a recipe for despair.

2-16-06

Yesterday we spent looking at sites to bioremediate and making our plans. A surreal day.

We all went down to the lower Ninth Ward and together looked at the building that will house women and children. It's a small, brick, single family home that somehow survived the onslaught of the waters when the levee broke, even while many of its neighbors were washed away. Common Ground teams have gutted it, and sprayed it with EM, the preparation of beneficial microbes that eat mold more effectively—and with less toxicity—than bleach. The yard is covered with thick, cracked sediment, but in some areas weeds, wild geraniums and clovers and others I don't recognize, poke through the mud. Alongside, someone has carefully laid out what is left of the family's possessions: a few pieces of unbroken china, some soaked and molding pictures, an

antique washbowl edged in green. It's a small house, but someone lived in it, cared for it, made it nice, carefully arranged these broken china birds and flowers, fed their children off these plates. It reminds me a lot of the modest house my aunt and uncle lived in, with their treasures on the sideboard and their neat hedges bordering the walkway. Or like the apartments and houses I grew up in. It's reminding me of my mother's final illness and death, how taking apart her house was like taking apart her identity, her life. I can still walk through that house in my memory, tell you clearly which pottery bowl was on the mantle and which was on the bookcase. A child's face stares up at me from a molding photo album, a baby of about eighteen months, café-au-lait skin and dark eyes. Someone who loved that child would treasure that picture, but I don't know what to do to save it.

Down the street the Common Ground center in the lower Ninth sits like a small blue beacon amidst a sea of rubble and sticks. They've fixed up one small house to serve as a distribution and welcome center for people coming back. They are providing resources for the community to organize and fight the city's plans to bulldoze the entire area. The city, in turn, has not removed any of the debris and garbage, for the five months that have now elapsed since the hurricane. They are not making it easy for people to come home.

From the women's house, a carload of us head down to the neighborhood near the Murphy's Oil Spill, where 25,000 gallons of crude oil spilled from a tank during the flood. This neighborhood is surreal in a different way. At first, it looks like any optimistic new suburban development, bright new houses a little too big for the empty lots they stand on. But look a little closer, and it resembles a ghost town. The houses are empty, not because they are models waiting for people to move in, but because they are covered with a thick, black, goo. Doors stand open, gutted interiors revealed. Here and there someone has scraped away the caked ooze and revealed bare soil. In one or two yards, FEMA trailers stand, but no one is home.

We drive back, past miles of gutted and abandoned strip malls, the kind of soulless places that are horrible even when they are functioning. In ruin, they achieve a kind of stark beauty, as if some giant conceptual artist had installed them all, a huge, open-air exhibition of the end of the world.

And then somehow we are uptown, winding our way through an enclave of beautiful, huge old homes with green lawns and landscaping, untouched by the flood, or by poverty, or seemingly, by any of the ills and disasters that plague life. Lovely old architecture, gracious, arching trees, quiet streets, and on the avenues, cafes and open stores and lights. Here, you could believe the flood never happened—or if it did, that all is being dealt with efficiently, expertly. Here all is well.

The houses border a golf course and a poor neighborhood of modest homes, where we are headed because some of the highest concentrations of arsenic have been reported from these small lawns. We wonder if it comes from the golf course, from all the weed killers they use on their grass. Here again, no one is home. We see some workers at one house, an older woman just now moving into her FEMA trailer who is too overwhelmed to think about bioremediating her yard. Another man tells us, "It hasn't killed me yet," and shrugs us off. We decide that this will be a longer term project, and

head back for our meeting.

I once heard Amory Lovins, the designer and architect, speak about how he approaches a project, how important it is to ask the right questions. He was talking about Curitiba, a city in Brazil where they began with the question, "How do we love all the children?" I don't know what questions the city government, the state and Federal officials, the huge relief agencies, have asked themselves. But it is clear to me what they have not asked:

"How do we bring all the people home again?"

There are good people in all these systems, but they're working against the odds. And with all the awesome and amazing work being done, by Common Ground and the other relief workers here, But our efforts are so small, so slight, measured against this oceanic need.

Starhawk is an activist, organizer, and author of *The Earth Path*, *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and other books on feminism, politics and earth-based spirituality. She teaches [Earth Activist Trainings](#) that combine permaculture design and activist skills, www.earthactivisttraining.org and works with the RANT trainer's collective, www.rantcollective.net that offers training and support for mobilizations around global justice and peace issues.

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