

A Pagan Response to Katrina

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By Starhawk

As Pagans, as worshippers of nature, how do we respond to an event like Hurricane Katrina, one of the most destructive natural disasters in the history of the United States? What does it mean to 'worship' something that, with one breath, can wipe out a major city? Do we see this as punishment, retribution for some Pagan sin? As an object lesson in the reality of climate change and global warming? As an overheated Goddess batting away some of the oil rigs contributing to her fever?

Of course, no one can speak for all Pagans. There is no overall Council of Pagan Theology to hand down an official dogma. But here is my own answer, as a priestess, teacher, writer, activist and theologian.

Pagan religions are not punishment systems. We don't worship Gods of retribution, but a Goddess—or Gods and Goddesses-- of mystery, in many aspects. The Goddess has immense power, both creative and destructive: the power that pushes a root out from a tiny seed and sends its shoot reaching for the sky, the power of the earthquake and the volcano, the rain that feeds the crops and the hurricane. We respond to that power with awe, wonder, amazement and gratitude, not fear.

The great powers of nature have an intelligence, a consciousness, albeit different in magnitude and kind from our own. Everything in nature is alive and speaking: the deep, crystalline intelligence of the rock heart of the planet, the fungal threads that link the roots of trees into the nerve-net of the forests, the chattering birds and the biochemistry of plants and mushrooms are all communicating. Our spiritual practice, the practice of magic, is about opening our eyes, ears and hearts to be able to hear, understand, and communicate back. And those powers want us to communicate with them. The Goddess is not omnipotent—she is co-creative with human beings. She needs human help to create fertility and regeneration. The elements, the ancestors, the spirit beings that surround us want to work with us to protect and heal the earth, but they need our invitation.

Nature is also human nature. Our human intelligence, our particular, sharp-pointed ability to analyze, think, draw conclusions and act, our esthetic/emotional capacity to thrill at a beautiful sunset, our deep bonds with those we love and our empathy and compassion for others, are all aspects of the Goddess Herself. Indeed, she evolved us complicated, contradictory big-brained creatures precisely to experience some of those aspects. Or to put it simply, she gave us brains and she expects us to use them.

As a Witch, as a priestess of the Goddess, I make daily time to meditate and listen, ideally in some place where I have direct contact with nature. I rarely use an indoor altar any more—instead I sit in the woods, or at least, in my garden, quiet my thoughts, open my eyes, look and listen. And what I've been hearing lately, in company with every other person I know who is in tune with the deep powers of the earth, is anguish, distress, deep rage, and dire warnings. The processes of environmental destruction, in particular, the overheating of the earth's climate, are already underway. A few weeks ago, when we were preparing for the Free Activist Witch Camp that Reclaiming, our network of Witches, offered in Southern Oregon, I asked, "Is there any way to avert massive death and destruction." The answer I got was an unequivocal 'no'.

"The process has gone too far," was the answer. The image that came to me was river rafting and shooting the rapids.. There was a point where we as a species could have chosen a different river, or a different boat, or a different channel. But now we're in the chute. We can't turn back. We can't stop.

There's a command in river rafting, used in extreme situations: "Paddle or die." If you paddle, you have some power—not enough to change the flow of the river, but enough to steer a course and avoid crashing on the rocks. If you give up, the river will most likely flip your boat, and you will drown.

When we emerged from the woods, a little-reported item in the news media, hidden away on the back pages, informed us that vast stretches of the tundra were melting in Siberia. If we were collectively using even a minimum of our human intelligence, this news should have been trumpeted on the front page with all the alarm of a terrorist attack, for it is far more dangerous.

Global warming increases the intensity of storms. Turn up the fire under a pot of water, and the bubbles will be bigger, faster and stronger. Hurricanes draw their energy from the heat in seawater. The Gulf of Mexico is abnormally warm—and hurricanes have doubled in average intensity in the last decade and a half. Hurricane Katrina was a natural phenomenon, but Katrina's progression from a Category Two up to a Category Five as she crossed the gulf was a human-caused phenomenon, a function of our choices and decisions, our failure to steer a different course.

The forms and names we put on Goddesses, Gods, and Powers help translate those forces into terms our human minds can grasp. And so the Yoruba based traditions that originate in West Africa have given the name 'Oya' to the whirlwind, the hurricane, to those great powers of sudden change and destruction. Santeria, candomble, lucumi, voodoo, all include Oya in some form as a major orisha, a Great Power. Offerings are made to her, ceremonies done in her behalf, priestesses dance themselves into trance possession so that she can communicate with directly with the human community.

No city in the U.S. has more practitioners of these traditions than New Orleans. On the night the hurricane was due to hit, I made a ritual with a small group of friends to support the spiritual efforts that I knew were being made by priestesses of Oya all over the country. We were in Crawford, Texas, at Camp Casey, where Gold Star mother Cindy Sheehan, whose son was killed in Iraq, camped near Bush's ranch to confront Bush with the painful reality of the deaths his policies have caused. Many of the

supporters there were from New Orleans, worried about their homes, their friends and families. The overall culture of the camp was very Christian—we found no natural opening for public Pagan ritual, although a number of people did indicate to me quietly that they were ‘one of us.’ But our little group gathered by the roadside, cast a circle, chanted and prayed.

We prayed, speaking personally in the way humans do: “ Please, Mama, we know what a mess we’ve made, but if there is any way to mitigate the death and the destruction, to lessen it slightly, please do.” That same night Christians were praying and Orisha priestesses were ‘working’ Oya, and the hurricane did shift its course, slightly, and lessened its force, down to a Category Four.

And New Orleans survived. Not without loss, and death, but without the massive flooding and destruction that was feared., We all breathed a sigh of relief.

And a day later, the levees failed, and the floods came. They failed not from an Act of Goddess, but from a lack of resources. The Bush Administration had systematically cut funding for flood control and for repairing and increasing the strength of the levees. The money went to Iraq. Much of the Louisiana National Guard was also in Iraq. FEMA, the Federal Agency responsible for responding to natural disasters, had been gutted, defunded, refocused on terrorism, and its directorship given to a Bush political crony with no experience in disaster response.

Now, weeks later, New Orleans remains under martial law. Official efforts at relief have ranged from inept to brutal, and the lack of planning and concern for human life, the punitive quality of the official response, seem deeply linked to prejudice and racism which devalues the lives of the poor, especially if they’re black.

But ordinary people of all faiths have responded to this disaster with caring and compassion, with massive donations and relief efforts, and with shock and rage at a government which so completely fails to embody the values of human decency and respect for life that it claims to represent.

The Goddess does not punish us, but she also doesn’t shield us from the logical consequences of our actions. Katrina’s destructive power was a consequence of a human course that is contemptuous of nature. A Native American proverb says, “If we don’t change our direction, we’re going to wind up where we’re headed.” Katrina shows us a glimpse of that awful destination.

And she also shows us hope. We can change, and if we truly awaken to the need, maybe we will, before it is too late. The outpouring of concern and efforts to help, the hope, determination and vision of some of the citizens of New Orleans who remain, the grief we feel for the dead and the losses and the compassion that a huge tragedy evokes are the tools we need to set a different course, one that honors nature and human life, that uses our human intelligence to restore and regenerate the natural world, awakens our compassion, and kindles our passion for justice. When we set a new course, all the powers of life and growth and regeneration will be flowing with us. And when we ally with those powers, miracles can happen.

Some Pagan Resources:

The Blanket Project is an ongoing spell of compassion with the goal of providing handmade blankets to survivors, symbolizing the intention to blanket the country with compassion and caring. For information, see:

<http://www.theblanketproject.com>

or email info@theblanketproject.com.

E-Witch Pagan Auction:

www.e-witch.info/

Look for items marked NOLA PaganRelief

I will be donating an original manuscript and a limited edition, signed, numbered leather-bound 10th Anniversary Spiral Dance

Housing board for Pagan hurricane survivors and those who can offer housing:

www.ironoak.org

officersofavalon.com -- an organization of Pagan police officers and emergency service providers, they have already made one supply run to Mississippi, reports are on their webpage as well as information on how to donate.

Temple of Diana is accepting financial donations to be sent to the best organizations involved with hurricane relief efforts. Send your donations in any amount, and payable to Temple of Diana, with "hurricane relief" in the memo, and send to:

Temple of Diana

p.o. Box 6425

Monona, WI 53716

Some **general places** to send aid:

www.rebuildgreen.org -- hurricane survivors who have remained in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans are determined to remain, rebuild their city with environmental awareness and a social conscience. They have set up the first functioning medical clinic for ordinary people, and have other projects in hand. They desperately need funds.

Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children are doing intense work among the shelters and prisons with displaced youth, mostly African American. Believe me, the Red Cross and the Christian charities won't be pouring out relief to this group!

They can also use some volunteers (especially African American) and many gifts in kind. Send a check to the "FFLIC Hurricane Relief Fund" to:

920 Platt Street, Sulphur, Louisiana, 70663.

Info:

awakenprogress@yahoo.com

kd.higgs@yahoo.com

The Veterans for Peace bus that was at Camp Casey in Crawford, TX has now gone down to Covington, Louisiana to do relief work. They also need donations of money and computer equipment.

Make a donation to Veterans For Peace Chapter 116

www.vfpoadtrips.org

Tax deductible cash donations can be send to:

Veterans For Peace Chapter 116

28500 Sherwood Rd

Willits CA 95490

pjtate@sonic.net

Cell PH: 707-536-3001

Food Not Bombs will be providing food for refugees. They can use volunteers to prepare and serve food, and, of course, donations.

Web: www.foodnotbombs.net.

You can make a financial donation on line or mail checks to:

Food Not Bombs, P.O. Box 744, Tucson, AZ 85702.

Please call (1-800-884-1136) or email katrina@foodnotbombs.net if you can join them on the bus or help with gas money.
