



Notes from the Dismal Science:

NEW ORLEANS, TOO CLOSE

By Sherman Folland

Our family's story of the hardship of Hurricane Katrina is surely only one of millions, and many are surely more dramatic, and, unfortunately many did not end as well. But, it is our story and you might find it interesting.

My daughter, Johanna and her boyfriend, Jonathan, moved to New Orleans in early spring 2005, they worked jobs, saving money to go to school. Hanna enrolled in the University of New Orleans, and she was thrilled to be in college during the one week that she got to attend.

Then, one evening she called us to explain that there was a Category 4 hurricane heading dead on. She patiently explained: "No, Dad, this one isn't the kind of 'blow' that New Orleaners love to party through." She and Jon had no car, \$12 between them, and a tiny kitten that they had acquired stray about a month earlier. They lived in a one story house apartment in the 9th Ward. There probably weren't many people in the 9th Ward who could afford to get out of town on short notice, Michael Brown's opinions notwithstanding.

Hanna called twice more on her cell phone, which went dead in the middle of the second call. They had decided to retreat to the Green Project office building, for which Jon had a key. Its second floor was well over 20 feet above street level, it

seemed a safe bet if the water surge was less than 20 feet high. Other New Orleaners were likewise bracing for a surge, which fact provides an irony to the FEMA claim early on that the combination of hurricane and breach of the levees was unprecedented and wholly unexpected.

From my distance, I thought that the Superdome would be their best bet for safety. Hanna worried that the Superdome didn't accept pets and she had heard it would become a pretty grim place. The cell phone crackled off line, so she didn't get to hear my wisdom that 'pets come and go, but daughters are hard to come by.' The second call came two hours after Katrina passed nearly overhead. Like every New Orleaner, she believed the worst was over. Then the cell phone crackled off line again, this time for good.

For the next two days Donna and I tried to keep our cool. The CNN headlines didn't help. What helped was the old trick to remember that thinking about the two of them made more sense than to worry about yourself. A dividend of this was to remember that many young women Hanna's age, certainly including her, show a surprising capacity to handle unusual and tough situations.

Miraculously, a pay phone on their block worked. This is what had happened during the two "missing" days. They had waded through thigh level water, kitty held high, to their apartment house. The street was soaked, "calf high", but their apartment was dry and intact. (Most people in the 9th Ward weren't so lucky.) They found a drug store and a grocery store already broken wide open and took food, water, insulin (Hanna is an insulin dependent diabetic) and antibiotics.

As a diabetic, Hanna had learned how to treat skin abrasions and avoid dangerous infections. She noticed, however, that the people in her neighborhood had commonly suffered skin abrasions, and she reasoned that the fetid water would make these abrasions dangerous regardless of whether the person was diabetic. She and Jon then treated their neighbors so as to prevent infections. The charitable act had the double benefit, the medical benefit of the care itself but also the good

will it generated in their poor black neighborhood where she and Jon were the ‘odd people out’.

More people came for help, one or two with profuse bleeding, which she wrapped and treated. She explained later that during the day she worked calmly, it seemed clear that the care was needed. But in the dark apartment at night, she shivered that she may have done something wrong, that she may have violated the basic principle: ‘Above all do no harm.’ Fortunately, a friend of the family here in Romeo helped out. We got our physician friend on the phone to discuss with Hanna what was safe to do and what not. This helped a great deal.

Our two Hurricane victims had a portable radio and listened to it in the dark. I should add that on one such night (August 31st) the two lit a candle, had a glass of wine and Johanna celebrated her 22nd birthday. The radio was how they knew about the promises and failures of the various governments. With the optimism of youth, they assumed that they had plenty of food and water, and they figured that the insulin would stay potent in the 93 degree heat, and so figured they could stay as long as necessary. At least that’s what they told their parents. On the other hand they wanted to get out. They wondered why FEMA took endlessly long to respond (Once later they thought to name their kitty Feema, because he never came when you called him, either.) But, the anger then was real and deep.

On Sunday, Hanna’s cell phone was working again and she called: A military helicopter was there and everyone on their block had 1 hour to pack—no pets. Hanna and Jon quickly packed and Hanna asked the leader of the military group if “please, could I take my kitty?” “No pets!” Hanna has always been a combination of steely will and ‘oh, what a cute kitty!’ She was devastated But, as they came closer to helicopter takeoff time, a female “army guy”, who seemed to understand the situation better, moved up to her and told her to ‘just put the kitty in your bag.’ Which she successfully did.

Transported by helicopter (the kind with both ends open) to the New Orleans International Airport, they landed

as if on another planet. Here everyone, Red Cross and everyone else, wanted nothing more than to help and please the hurricane victims. Within an hour they were on a plane to El Paso. There, the justly famous Texas hospitality took over. True, the dome in El Paso also did not allow pets, but the nearby animal shelter had this lady who took care of kitty, made sure he had the right shots for his trip to Detroit, took him home with her and gave them all a ride to the airport in the morning. By the way, at the airport, the Frontier Airlines cargo lady greeted them saying, “Oh, yes, your Dad called about your kitty. Everything is ready and all the charges have been waived for his flight to Detroit.”

But, for Hanna, El Paso also meant the end of the worries that had eaten at her. The reception for evacuees included a medical workup. Hanna’s neighbors had been evacuated all together, so her “patients” were there getting their physicals. After this, and learning about Johanna’s efforts, the medical person there told her: “You did just right.”

So what did Donna and I get out of this? We got two kids and a kitty home at midnight on Tuesday September 6th. We all stayed up until four in the morning.

It is early October as I write this. What do these two want to do? They want to go back to New Orleans. Thus this writing will be like a time capsule by the time you read this in January. Will the mass of New Orleans people go back? My prediction is: Yes!

The French have promised to rebuild New Orleans should the U.S. fail to do so. The French do things for love, l’ amour. They fight wars with “élan”. History tells us that these don’t always work out. Will Americans rebuild New Orleans for love? You betcha. Many will be immune from attachment to The Big Easy, but this won’t stop the steamroller. This week The New Republic argues that to rebuild New Orleans is not realistically possible, levees will keep sinking, a bottomless pit of our resources. For most Americans, however, this will seem merely defeatist. They will say instead: “We put a man on the moon, and you’re saying that we can’t rebuild New Orleans?”

My bet here in October is that my daughter and Jon will both be back to New Orleans and back to work.

Did Jon and Johanna do wrong? They looted from a drug store and a grocery store. Yes, private property has proved itself to be an engine for economic growth for economies throughout the planet; but, it isn't a religion. The usual rules don't apply in extraordinary circumstances; and New Orleans post Katrina was certainly extraordinary.

Look at it this way. After the disaster, food and water give tremendously more utility to those who need it to survive than to the store owners who had to abandon it. The transfer to the trapped hurricane victims provides a substantial net benefit to society. Contrast a man who steals a TV set. His utility from the set is little more than the utility of the rightful owner. There is no gain to society, and the man is properly called a common thief.

Is Johanna guilty of practicing medicine without a license? Note that she wasn't reckless, in fact she took extraordinary care to consult a physician for advice. And, consider that Good Samaritan laws protect the caregiver to some degree. But, consider mainly that the impulse to help others in emergent need is of a higher order than the ethics of most laws. What would we have become if we would even hesitate to help? Would property laws then have become enemies of our humanity?